

SHORT STORY

BRIDE AND BRIDEGROOM

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The god of marriage, it is true, never once alighted upon my brow — but once, long ago, he did alight upon the lotus of my imagination. I was sixteen at the time. And after that, the way a light sleep, once startled awake, refuses ever again to return, so it was with me. Friends of mine went on to win promotion, in the matter of taking a wife, to a second appointment, and even a third; while I sat on the last bench of bachelorhood, counting the rafters of an empty household.

I had passed my Entrance examination at fourteen. In those days neither marriage nor the Entrance examination paid the least attention to a person's age. I never once swallowed a textbook whole in my life, and so I was spared any indigestion of body or mind on that account. Just as a rat, coming upon anything it can sink its teeth into, will gnaw away at it regardless of whether the thing is fit to eat or not, so it had been my habit, from earliest childhood, that the mere sight of a printed book was enough to make me read it through. Since the world holds a great many more books not meant for study than books meant for it, in the little solar system of my reading the sun of unassigned books outshone the small earth of the school syllabus by some fourteen hundred thousand times over. And yet, despite the dire prophecies of my Sanskrit tutor, I somehow managed to pass every examination that came my way.

My father was a deputy magistrate. We were living, at that time, in Satkhira, or perhaps Jahanabad, or some such place. Let me say at the very outset: wherever, in the course of this history, some particular country, time, or person is named with any exactness, every such name is a plain and deliberate falsehood, and those readers whose curiosity outruns their sense of humour will only be cheated for their pains. My father had gone out on a tour of inspection at the time. My mother had some religious vow or other to perform, for which she required a brahmin, both for the ritual offering and for the accompanying feast. In such matters of spiritual necessity, our tutor was my mother's chief support, and for this she was deeply grateful to him — though my father's opinion of the man ran in precisely the opposite direction.

That day, after the meal, when the matter of the ritual gifts came to be settled, I too found myself entered upon the list. The gist of the discussion that followed ran thus: it was nearly time for me to go up to college in Calcutta. In such

circumstances, it would be only proper to take some sensible measure to soften the grief of parting from a son. If a little child-bride were kept close by the mother's side, then in rearing her and caring for her the mother's days might pass more easily. The tutor's own daughter, Kashishwari, was well suited to the purpose — being, after all, both a child and a well-mannered one, and, moreover, matching my own horoscope precisely according to the calculations of the marriage-arithmetic. Besides, the spiritual merit of relieving a brahmin of the burden of a daughter's marriage was itself no small temptation.

My mother's resolve wavered. No sooner had she given the faintest hint that the girl ought to be seen than the tutor announced that his "family" had, only the previous night, arrived at his lodgings with the girl in tow. My mother's approval was not long in coming, for once taste and piety are weighed together in the same scale, the balance tips very readily. My mother pronounced the girl *sulakshana* — of good omen — which is to say, though she might not be beautiful enough to satisfy every requirement, there was consolation to be had all the same.

The matter, in due course, reached my own ears. That I should be betrothed to the daughter of the very tutor whose grammar-tables I had feared all my life — this incongruity seized upon my mind, from the very first, with tremendous force. Like something out of a fairy tale, the whole dry grammatical exercise suddenly shook off every one of its diacritical marks and became, at a single stroke, a princess.

One afternoon my mother called me into her room and said, "Sanu, some mangoes and sweets have come from the tutor's lodgings — come and taste them."

My mother knew well enough that if I were given twenty-five mangoes, my sense of rhythm would not be satisfied until I had rounded the number off with twenty-five more. And so she summoned my heart by the sweet and savoury road of the palate. Kashishwari was sitting in her lap. My memory of it has grown a good deal dim, but I recall this much — her hair was bound up with tinsel, and she wore a satin jacket from some Calcutta shop, a plain riot of blue and red and lace and ribbon. As best I can remember, her complexion was dusky; her eyebrows very thick; and her eyes had the unabashed, watchful look of some tame household creature. Nothing else of her face remains with me — I suppose the workshop of Providence had not yet finished its work on her, and had only got as far as the rough

first shaping. Whatever else she may have been, she looked, at the very least, thoroughly good-natured.

Something swelled within my chest. I understood, in that moment, that this tinsel-braided, jacket-wrapped little creature was entirely mine, sixteen annas to the rupee — that I was her lord, her god. For every other precious thing in life, one must strive and labour; only for this one thing was no striving required — I need only crook my little finger, and Providence itself was courting me to accept the gift. I had, all my life, observed my mother, and from that single example I had learned all I knew of what a wife was meant to be. I had seen my father grow irritated over every other religious observance in the house, yet, whatever he might say aloud, take a certain private pleasure at the time of the Savitri vow. I knew my mother loved him; but the relish with which he savoured, with the whole force of his manhood, her evident and constant fear of provoking his anger or displeasure — that, I think, he enjoyed more than anything else. The gods, I suppose, care little for worship, since it is only their lawful due; but for a man, apparently, such devotion is unlawful gain, and it is precisely for that reason that men grow so intoxicated by it. That little girl's beauty and virtue made no impression upon me that day — but the knowledge that I myself was an object of worship fermented, even at fourteen, in the blood of my manhood. I ate the mangoes that day with unusual solemnity — indeed, I proudly left three of them unfinished upon my plate, a thing that had never once happened in my life before, and for which I spent the whole of the afternoon in quiet regret.

Kashishwari, that day, had no notion of what class our relation belonged to — but I think she must have learned of it once she was home again. From then on, whenever we chanced to meet, she would fly into a flurry and find nowhere to hide. This timidity of hers, at the mere sight of me, pleased me a great deal. That my very appearance, in some corner of the world, in some form or other, could exert so powerful an effect — this biochemical fact seemed to me altogether delightful. That someone should feel fear, or shyness, or anything at all, merely at the sight of me — this seemed a most extraordinary thing. Kashishwari, by her very flight, announced to me that in this world she belonged, in some particular, entire, and hidden way, to me alone.

To rise, in a single moment, from such long insignificance to a position of such absolute dignity — for some while afterward my head fairly rang with the blood rushing to it. Just as my father was forever making my mother anxious over some fault of duty or cooking or household arrangement, I too began, in my imagination, to trace over that same picture. Just as my mother, when carrying out some task not to my father's liking, would manage the business with careful, ingenious little stratagems, I began to picture my imaginary Kashishwari falling into exactly that same pattern. Now and then, in my fancy, I began lavishing gifts upon her without a second thought — starting with fat bundles of banknotes and working up to diamond jewellery. Some days I pictured her sitting down to her rice and unable to eat a mouthful of it, sitting instead by the window, wiping her eyes with the corner of her sari — this pathetic scene, too, I could see with my mind's eye, and I cannot honestly say it struck me as anything but thoroughly satisfying. My father had always been most particular about a boy's learning to fend for himself; I had to keep my own room in order and my own clothes put away with my own hands. But among the domestic pictures that rose up clearly before my mind, I will set down one below. It goes without saying that precisely such a scene had, in fact, once occurred in my own family history before me; there is no originality whatever in this fancy of mine. The picture is this — on a Sunday, after the midday meal, I am reclining on the bed, propped against a bolster, legs stretched out, reading the newspaper in a half-lying posture, the pipe of the hookah in my hand. In a light doze, the pipe slips from my fingers and falls to the floor. Kashishwari, sitting out on the verandah handing over the washing to the washerman, hears my call and comes running at once, and puts it back into my hand. I say to her, 'Look here — on the third shelf of the cupboard to the left of my sitting room there is a thick English book with a blue cover; bring that.' Kashi brings a blue book; I say, 'No, no, not that one — the one I mean is thicker than this, and has its name in gold letters on the spine.'

This time she brings a green book — which I fling down on the floor with a thump and get up in a rage. At this Kashi's face shrinks to nothing, and her eyes brim with tears. I go myself and find that the book is not on the third shelf at all, but on the fifth. I bring it back and lie down again on the bed in silence, but say not a word to Kashi about my own mistake. She, head bowed, goes on handing the washing to

the washerman in low spirits, quite unable to forgive herself for having, through her own stupidity, disturbed her husband's rest.

While my father was out investigating a case of dacoity, my days were passing in this fashion. Meanwhile the tutor's manner and language toward me had, in an instant, shifted from the imperative mood to something more closely resembling the passive — and a wholly benevolent passive at that.

Then, just as this was going on, the investigation into the dacoity came to an end, and my father returned home. I knew that my mother had been preparing, slowly and by careful degrees, to bring up the matter little by little, seasoning it in among my father's favourite dishes. My father despised the tutor as a grasping, money-hungry man; my mother, I am sure, meant to begin with some mild criticism of the tutor himself, while lavishing praise upon his wife and daughter. But, most unfortunately, the tutor's own delighted talkativeness had already spread the news on every side. That the marriage was as good as settled, that only the auspicious date remained to be fixed — of this he had left no one uninformed. He had even, by way of preparation, already sounded out the sub-registrar's clerk about the loan of his fine brick-built hall for the ceremony. Everyone had agreed to lend their help, so far as it lay in their power, toward so auspicious an occasion. My father's own set of court lawyers were even prepared to pool a subscription to cover the wedding expenses. The third son of Bireshwar Babu, secretary of the local Entrance school, who was then in the third class, had already composed a poem in triplet metre about the wedding, drawing on the old conceit of the moon and the water-lily. The secretary himself had taken this poem about, stopping whomever he met on the street to recite it to them. The village had, as a result, grown quite hopeful about the boy's future prospects.

And so it was that my father, on his very return, heard the glad tidings before he had even set foot indoors. What followed was my mother's weeping and refusal of food, the whole household thrown into terrified confusion, servants fined for no reason at all, cases in his court dismissed with sudden violence and punishments handed down with ferocious severity, the tutor's dismissal from his post and his disappearance, tinsel-braided Kashishwari and all; and, before my holidays were even over, my own forcible exile to Calcutta, torn from my mother's side. My spirit

collapsed like a punctured football — its leaping and bounding among the clouds, upon the very winds themselves, came to an abrupt and total stop.

2

That, then, was the very first obstacle upon the path of my marriage — and after it, time and again, the god of marriage's favour toward me came repeatedly to nothing. I have no wish to set down every detail of it; I shall leave only a brief note or two on this history of my failures.

Before I had turned twenty I had passed my M.A. examination with full marks, come out wearing spectacles, and cultivated a moustache worthy of a twirl. My father was, by then, in Rampurhat, or Noakhali, or Barasat, or some such place. So much, then, for churning the ocean of words to fetch up the jewel of a degree — now came the turn to churn the ocean of wealth. My father, casting his mind over his great patrons, found that the greatest of his supporters had gone to the next world, the next most powerful had taken his pension and gone off to England, one weaker still had been transferred to the Punjab, and of those who remained in Bengal, most gave every applicant fine assurances in their opening remarks only to withdraw them entirely by the close. In my grandfather's day, when he had been a deputy himself, the market in influential patrons had not run half so tight, and so, in that generation, employment led to pension and pension back to employment, passing from hand to hand within the same family like a ferry crossing back and forth. Times, now, had grown harder — and so, just as my father sat anxiously wondering whether his own son and heir would be forced to descend from the high perch of a government office to the lower roost of some trading firm, the notice of a wealthy brahmin's only daughter fell upon him. The brahmin in question was a contractor, and the channel of his wealth ran a good deal more freely through the invisible underworld than through the visible surface of the earth. He was, at that season, busy distributing oranges and other Christmas gifts to suitably deserving recipients, when it happened that I made my appearance in his neighbourhood. My father's lodgings stood directly opposite his house, with only a road between them. It need hardly be said that a deputy's son, freshly graduated with an M.A., is exceedingly welcome fruit indeed to a father burdened with a daughter to marry off. And so the contractor found himself, as it were, reaching out both arms toward me. I have already described how far his reach extended — at least as far as the deputy's own

heart, and with the greatest of ease. But my own heart, at that time, was lodged a good deal higher up.

For I was not yet twenty, and in those days I coveted no jewel in the world save a true and proper jewel of a wife. Nor was that all — the glow of idealism still burned bright in my mind. That is to say, the meaning I attached, in my own heart, to the word "life's companion" was not the meaning current in the marketplace. In our country today, domestic life has grown cramped on every side; and that a man should be expected to let his mind range wide and free in the field of knowledge and feeling, and yet, in the practical business of living, be forced to shrink that same mind down to the tiny measure of household affairs — this I could not bear, even in imagination. That the wife I wished to have as a companion on the path of my ideals should instead become a fetter about my feet in the prison of domesticity, clanking behind me at every step to hold me back — such a wretched fate I firmly refused to accept. The plain truth is that, fresh out of college, I had become precisely that thoroughgoing kind of "modern" young man whom our farces so love to mock. In our day there were, in fact, a good many more of that modern breed than there are now. The remarkable thing is that they genuinely believed that to submit to society was ruin, and to drag society forward by force was progress.

Such, then, was I — Sri Sanatkumar — when I found myself standing before the gaping mouth of a wealthy man's money-bag, with a daughter to marry off. My father said, "The sooner the better." I said nothing; I thought to myself that I would look, listen, and judge a little first. I kept my eyes and ears open — and saw a little, and heard a great deal. The girl was small and pretty as a doll — looking at her, one could hardly believe she had been fashioned by the ordinary laws of nature; it seemed rather as though someone had taken each hair of her head and set it carefully in place, drawn her eyebrows in with a careful hand, and moulded the whole of her by hand. She could recite hymns to the Ganges in Sanskrit. Her mother went so far as to wash even the household coal in Ganges water before cooking with it; since Mother Earth, who bears every caste and creed upon her surface, was to be touched only with the greatest reluctance, most of her dealings were with water instead — for fish, at least, are not descended from Muslims, and no onions grow in water. The chief occupation of her life was the purification and scouring of her own person, her house, her clothes, her pots and pans, her bed, her crockery — and by the time she had finished the whole round of it, it was already half past

two in the afternoon. Her daughter she had, with her own hands, purified in every particular so thoroughly that the girl was troubled by no such nuisance as an opinion or a wish of her own. However inconvenient any rule might be, she found it easy enough to observe so long as no one troubled to explain to her any reasonable cause for it. She would not wear her good clothes at mealtimes, for fear of soiling them; she had even learned to be scrupulous about shadows. Just as she bathed in the Ganges while sitting inside her palanquin, so too she moved through the world wrapped entirely within the eighteen Puranas. My own mother, too, had a great reverence for rules and observances — but that anyone else should have still greater reverence, and take secret pride in it, was more than she could bear. And so, when I said to her, "Mother, I am not the man to deserve this girl," she laughed and said, "No indeed — in this degenerate age, such a match is hard to come by!"

I said, "In that case, I shall take my leave."

My mother said, "What is this, Sanu — did you not like her? Why, she is pretty enough to look at."

I said, "Mother, a wife is not merely something to be looked at — she must have some sense as well."

My mother said, "Just listen to that. And in this short time, what proof have you had of her lack of sense?"

I said, "A person with any sense could not possibly go on living, day and night, amid such an endless round of pointless business. It would wear anyone to exhaustion."

My mother's face fell. She knew that my father had, on this matter, already given the other party his word, very nearly a final commitment. She knew, too, that my father very often forgot that other people might have troublesome wishes of their own. In truth, had my father not been quite so given to anger and force, I might, in time, have married that little painted doll of a girl after all, and gone on, in due course, to earn my own blessed release upon the banks of the Ganges through a lifetime of ritual bathing, prayer, and fasting. That is to say, had the arranging of this marriage been left in my mother's hands, she would have, in her own time, by slow and gentle degrees, whispering a word here and shedding a tear there, brought the whole matter to its proper conclusion in the end. But when my father

did nothing but rage and thunder at me, I said to him, in desperation, "From my very childhood you taught me, in eating, in sleeping, in walking, always to rely upon myself — must self-reliance alone fail me in the matter of marriage?" I have never yet seen anyone win an argument by force of pure logic, except perhaps in passing an examination in the subject. Sound reasoning, thrown upon the fire of an unreasonable quarrel, never acts like water upon it — it acts, rather, like oil. My father had convinced himself that, having given the other party his word, no further proof of the marriage's propriety was needed. And yet, had I reminded him that my mother, too, had once given her word to the tutor — and that this promise had not only wrecked my own marriage but taken the poor tutor's livelihood down along with it — it would only have provoked a criminal case between us on the spot. That purity, ritual, and observance are worth far more than sense, judgement, and taste; that their poetry runs profound and beautiful; that their devotion is of the noblest kind; that their fruits are excellent indeed; that mere symbolism is itself idealism — all this my father had, of late, taken to discussing at me, at every fit and unfit occasion. I had managed to hold my tongue, but I could not hold my thoughts in check as well. The retort that kept rising to the very tip of my tongue, and was each time swallowed back down, was this: "If you truly believe all this, then why do you keep chickens?" Another thought, too, kept returning to me — that my own father, whenever some inconvenience or loss befell him over a date, a festival, some rule or restriction, some matter of gifts and offerings, had himself rebuked my mother, in the harshest terms, for the very pedantry of such observances. My mother, on those occasions, would humbly accept her guilt, bow her head in the manner proper to the naturally foolish weaker sex, weather the storm of his displeasure, and set once more to the elaborate business of feeding brahmins. But the Creator did not cast every living soul from the same neat mould of logic. And so it does no good to try to win a person over by pointing out the inconsistency of their words or deeds — it only makes them angrier still. To invoke the authority of pure reason only sharpens the ferocity of unreason; those who put their faith in political or domestic agitation would do well to remember this. When a horse, taking against the cart behind it as an injustice, lashes out with its heels, the injustice remains exactly as it was — only now the horse has injured its own hindquarters into the bargain. In the heat of youth, venturing a little too far into argument, I met precisely that fate. I did, it is true, save the hand of that painted little Puranic doll from having

to marry me — but I lost, along with it, the shelter of my father's modern-day treasury as well. My father said, "Go, then — go and rely upon yourself."

I bowed to him and said, "As you wish."

My mother sat and wept.

My father's right hand, it is true, had turned against me, but with my mother standing between us, the postman would still, now and again, be seen delivering the odd money order. The clouds had stopped their downpour, but a secret dew still fell, quietly, in the cool of the night. On the strength of it, I set myself up in business. It began with precisely seventy-nine rupees; today, though the capital invested in that same firm is a good deal less than jealous rumour would have it, it is, all the same, no less than twenty lakh rupees.

The messengers of the god of marriage began, once more, to dog my footsteps. Doors once closed to me now stood open without a bar. I remember once, in the unquenchable folly of youth, setting my heart upon a girl of sixteen — I have softened the figure a little, out of fear of my more scrupulous readers of today — only to learn that the girl's mother's side had their sights fixed upon a member of the Civil Service; certainly nothing beneath a barrister would do for them. I fell well below the zero mark of their instrument of interest. But later, in that very same house, on another occasion, I was given not merely tea but luncheon, played whist with the young ladies after dinner, and heard, from their own lips, the very purest drawing-room English straight out of England itself. My trouble was that, having made my English out of *Rasselas*, *The Deserted Village*, and Addison and Steele, I was hardly equipped to keep pace with young ladies such as these. Exclamations like "O my," "O dear, O dear," and the like simply would not come out of my mouth in the proper tune. With the little learning I possessed, I could just about manage the plainest sort of marketplace English — but the very thought of courting in twentieth-century English drawing-room style was enough to send my ardour running for cover. And yet these same young ladies were in such famine of their own mother tongue that to attempt sweet talk with them in the genuine old Bankim-Chandra manner would only have made a fool of me for my trouble — the wages would hardly have been worth the labour. All the same, for a while, these gilded English-imitation girls seemed within my reach. But the fairyland I had glimpsed through the chink of a locked door vanished the instant the door was

thrown open, and I could no longer find my way to it at all. All I could think, then, was that just as my devout little grammar-lesson bride had once satisfied her dull little mind by endlessly circling the same pointless observances, day and night without end, so too were these girls, with precisely the same dull minds, circling every trivial requirement of English manners and etiquette, day after day, year after year, with untiring, effortless persistence. Just as the one would bristle with disapproval at the slightest lapse in ritual purity, so these bristled, in exactly the same way, at the smallest error of accent, or the least confusion between fork and knife, and grew equally suspicious of the offender's very claim to humanity. The one kind were native dolls, the other imported ones. Neither moved by any impulse of their own mind — both were wound up and driven along by the clockwork of habit. The upshot of it all was that I conceived, in my heart, a certain distrust of womankind altogether; I concluded that, being so short of understanding, women could hardly survive at all without some enormous, elaborate apparatus of bathing, prayer, and fasting to fill up their days. I have read, in some book or other, of a kind of microscopic creature that does nothing but go round and round endlessly. But a man does not merely go round — a man goes forward. Had Providence, I wondered, matched some unfortunate man's marriage to nothing more than an enlarged specimen of that very same creature?

Meanwhile, the more my age advanced, the more my hesitation over marriage grew along with it. There is a certain age at which a man may marry without needing to give the matter any thought at all. Once that age is past, marriage requires a good deal of daring. I was not one of that reckless company. Besides, I could never for the life of me imagine why any sensible girl would agree, in a single breath and without the slightest reason, to marry me. Love, they say, is blind — but here, at least, that blind archer was under no obligation to shoot. There are more eyes in the world than the two eyes of worldly calculation — and when that other kind of eye, sober and unintoxicated, turned to look at me, I could not help wondering what exactly it saw in me. I have, no doubt, a great many virtues — but they take time to reveal themselves; they cannot be grasped at a single glance. The shortness of my nose, I know, has been more than made up for by the height of my understanding — but the nose remains visible to the eye, while God, unfortunately, left the understanding quite without any visible shape at all. In any case, whenever I found some marriageable girl raising not the slightest objection to marrying me

on the shortest possible notice, my respect for women dropped a little further still. Had I been a woman myself, I daresay the long-drawn sighs of Sri Sanatkumar's own short nose would have been quite enough, on their own, to reduce every hope and vanity of his to dust.

In this way my little boat of matrimony, unburdened by any cargo, ran aground now and again upon a sandbank, but never once reached the shore. Every other item of my household increased steadily along with the growth of my business — everything, that is, except a wife. There was one thing I had forgotten to mention — my age, too, was steadily increasing. A certain incident, quite by chance, reminded me of the fact.

I had gone, on an inspection of a mica mine, to a certain town in Chota Nagpur, and there, to my surprise, found the old tutor comfortably settled in a little house beside a small river, in the shade of a sal forest. His son was employed there. My own tent had been pitched at the edge of that same forest. By this time my wealth had become well known throughout the region. The tutor told me he had always known that I would one day rise to greatness — though, remarkably, he had kept the knowledge entirely to himself all this while. Nor could I say by what sign he had known it. I suppose truly remarkable men give no hint, in their school days, of ever mastering the rules of grammar. Kashishwari, by now, was living in her husband's house, and so, without the slightest obstacle, I became once more a familiar figure in the tutor's household. He had lost his wife some years before, but now found himself surrounded by granddaughters — not all of them his own; two belonged to his late elder brother. The old man had coloured the evening of his old age with these girls in every hue imaginable. The verses of his beloved *Amarushataka*, *Aryasaptashati*, *Hamsaduta*, and *Padankaduta* went echoing, laughing, around these pebble-like girls like the foaming rush of a mountain torrent around its stones.

I said to him, laughing, "Pandit-moshai, what is all this?"

He said, "My boy, your English scriptures say that Saturn wears a ring of moons about him — well, these are my own ring of moons."

Watching this scene in that poor man's house, it suddenly struck me that I was alone. I understood, then, that I had grown weary under the weight of my own self. The tutor did not know that he had grown old, but I knew, quite plainly, that I had.

To have grown old means precisely this — to have outgrown one's own surroundings, so that all around one has grown slack and hollow. That hollowness cannot be filled with money, nor with fame. That I was drawing no true savour from the world, only gathering objects, was a failure I could, out of long habit, easily forget. But, seeing the tutor's house, I understood, all at once, that my own quarter of the sky was parched, my own nights empty. The tutor was no doubt quite certain that I was the more fortunate man of the two — and the thought made me smile. Around this world of material things there lies some invisible realm of joy. Without a living connection between our lives and that realm of joy, we hang suspended in empty space, like Trishanku. The tutor possessed that connection; I did not — that was the whole of the difference between us. I sat back in my easy chair, both feet propped up on its arms, smoking a cigarette, and fell to thinking of the four presiding deities of a man's four stages of life. In childhood, the mother; in youth, the wife; in middle age, the daughter and the daughter-in-law; in old age, the granddaughter and the grandson's wife. It is through women, in this way, that a man comes at last to his own completion. This truth took hold of me there in the murmuring sal forest. I looked ahead, in my mind, to the very furthest edge of my own approaching old age — and, seeing its utter barrenness, my heart cried out in anguish. Through what desert road was I to go on carrying this burden of profit upon my shoulders, only to fall at last upon my face and die, no one knows where! There was no more time to be lost. I had lately turned forty — and fifty already sat waiting by the roadside, ready to shake out the very last purse of my youth; I could see, even from here, the tip of its walking-stick. It was time, now, to set aside the ledger for a while and give a little thought to life itself. But that portion of life which had already lapsed could never be recovered. Even so, there was still time, perhaps, to mend the torn places.

From there, business took me on to a certain city in the west. There lived a wealthy Bengali moneylender, Biswapati Babu, with whom I had business to transact. He was an exceedingly cautious man, and so it took a great deal of time to settle any matter with him at all. One day, growing thoroughly impatient and thinking to myself, 'There is no doing business with this man' — I had even told my servant to begin packing my things — when, that very evening, Biswapati Babu came to me and said, "You must, I imagine, be acquainted with a great many people. If you

would only give the matter a little of your attention, a certain widow's fortunes might be saved."

The story, as he told it, was this.

A certain Nandakrishna Babu had first come to Bareilly as headmaster of a Bengali-English school. He had done his work extremely well. Everyone marvelled that so capable and cultivated a man should have come so far from home to take up so humble a post at so meagre a salary. He was not known only for his success in getting his pupils through examinations; he put his hand to every good cause besides. Then, somehow, it came out that his wife, though beautiful, was of no particular family — some quite lowly caste, indeed, so that even her touch, it was said, would spoil the purity of drinking water and every other subtle sacred quality besides. When people pressed him hard about it, he admitted, yes, she was of low caste, but she was, all the same, his wife. The question then arose how such a marriage could possibly be considered valid. To the man who put this question to him, Nandakrishna replied, "You yourself, I believe, have married two wives in succession, calling the household deity to witness each time, and have given ample proof, besides, that you are not entirely satisfied even with the plural number. I cannot speak for your household god, but He who dwells within all hearts knows well enough that my marriage is more lawful than yours — lawful every day, every moment of it. I have no wish to discuss the matter with you any further."

The man to whom Nandakrishna spoke these words was not pleased to hear them. He was, besides, a man of no small capacity for doing others harm. And so, under this persecution, Nandakrishna left Bareilly and came to this present town, where he took up the practice of law. He was a man of exceedingly fastidious conscience — he would not touch an unjust case even if it meant going hungry. Whatever difficulties this brought him at first, in time his practice began to prosper, for the magistrates came to trust him completely. He had built himself a house and was settling in comfortably when famine struck the country. The land was laid waste. Learning that some of those charged with the distribution of relief were embezzling it, he reported the matter to the magistrate, who said, "And where am I to find honest men?"

He said, "If you will trust me, I will take on the charge myself."

He was given the charge — and it was in carrying out that very duty that he died, one afternoon, beneath a tree in an open field. The doctor said his heart had simply stopped, and that was the cause of death.

This much of the story I had already known beforehand. In some lofty mood or other, I had once brought up his name at our club and said, "Men like this Nandakrishna, who fail at the world's business and wither quietly away, leaving behind neither name nor fortune — it is they who work as God's own partners, lifting the world upward —"

I had got no further than this when my speech, like a full-sailed boat suddenly striking a sandbank, came to a sudden halt. For among us was a certain gentleman of considerable property and influence, who had been reading the newspaper — he now looked up at me over the rim of his spectacles and said, "Hear, hear!"

Well, no matter. It seemed that Nandakrishna's widow lived, with her one daughter, in this same neighbourhood. The girl had been born on the night of Diwali, and so her father had named her Dipali. Since the widow found no place in polite society, she had raised and educated this daughter entirely alone. The girl was now past twenty-five. Her mother's health was poor, and her years, too, were not few — and once she died, the girl would have nowhere at all to turn. Biswapati begged me most earnestly: "If you could find a suitable match for her, it would be an act of the greatest merit."

I had, until then, privately held Biswapati in a certain amount of contempt, as a dry, self-interested, thoroughly practical sort of man. Seeing his concern for this widow's orphaned daughter, my heart quite melted toward him. I thought to myself: they say that from the digestive remains of some long-dead mammoth of the ancient world, a seed of grain was once recovered and planted, and that it sprouted after all — so, too, it seems, human decency refuses to die out entirely even amid the vast heap of the world's dead and buried better instincts.

I said to Biswapati, "I happen to know of a suitable match; there will be no difficulty at all. You need only settle the terms and fix a date."

"But without even seeing the girl, surely—"

"Without seeing her, it can be arranged."

"But if the young man is after her property, there is precious little of it. Once her mother dies she will have only that house, and whatever small amount besides."

"The young man has property of his own; there is no need to worry on that account."

"His name, his particulars—"

"I shall not give those just now — if it becomes known too soon, the whole match may fall through."

"But surely the girl's mother must be given some description of him."

"Tell her he is a man mixed, like any other, of faults and virtues. His faults are not so great as to cause concern; his virtues, too, are not so great as to be coveted. As far as I know, most parents with daughters to marry off are rather fond of him — though what the daughters themselves privately think of him has never been very clearly established."

Biswapati Babu grew so grateful over this business that my regard for him increased considerably in turn. In a certain transaction of ours on which we had previously failed to agree over price, I now found myself eager, even at some loss to myself, to sign the registered deed. As he left, he said, "Tell the young man this — whatever else may be said, he will never find so virtuous a girl anywhere else."

If a girl deprived of society's shelter and society's respect is given, instead, a firm place in someone's heart, will she then hold back, even in the smallest measure, from offering herself entirely in return? A girl with great expectations has expectations without end. But this little Dipali's lamp was made of plain clay — and so its flame would suffer no indignity, set in a humble earthen corner such as my own.

That evening, as I sat reading an English newspaper by lamplight, word came that a young woman had arrived to see me. There was no woman in the household at the time, and so I found myself flustered. Before I could think of any proper way to receive her, the girl had already come into the room and made her bow to me. No one, hearing this from the outside, would believe it, but I am, in truth, an exceedingly shy man. I neither looked at her face nor said a word to her. She said, "My name is Dipali."

Her voice was very sweet. Plucking up my courage, I looked at her face, and saw a face touched with a gentle intelligence. She wore no veil over her head — a plain white sari, worn in the modern fashion. I was still wondering what to say, when she spoke again: "Please make no effort to arrange my marriage."

Whatever else I had expected, I had certainly not expected such an objection from Dipali's own lips. I had imagined that the proposal of marriage would have filled her, body and soul, with gratitude.

I asked, "Will you marry no one at all, known or unknown?"

She said, "No — no one at all."

Though my experience lies more in the material world than in the workings of the mind — and a woman's heart, especially, is a good deal harder for me to parse than Bengali spelling — even so, the plain, literal meaning of her words did not strike me as the true meaning of them. I said, "The man I have chosen for you is not one to be lightly dismissed."

Dipali said, "I do not dismiss him — but I will not marry."

I said, "That man, too, holds you in the sincerest regard."

"All the same — please do not ask me to marry him."

"Very well, I shall not ask. But is there nothing at all I might do to help you?"

"If you could find me some position teaching at a girls' school, and take me from here to Calcutta, it would be the greatest kindness."

I said, "There is such a position; I can arrange it."

This was not, strictly speaking, entirely true. I knew nothing whatever about any girls' school. But then, there is no harm, surely, in founding one.

Dipali said, "Would you go to our house and discuss the matter with my mother?"

I said, "I shall go first thing tomorrow morning."

Dipali left. My reading of the newspaper came to an end. I went up onto the roof and sat in a chair. I asked the stars, 'From millions upon millions of leagues away, are you, in truth, sitting there in silence, weaving every thread of every man's work and every bond of his life?'

Just then, without the least warning, Biswapati's second son, Sripati, appeared suddenly upon the roof. The substance of the conversation that followed was this —

Sripati, in his eagerness to marry Dipali, was prepared to renounce society altogether. His father had told him that if he committed so disgraceful an act, he would disown him. Dipali, for her part, said that she was not worthy of anyone accepting so great a grief, insult, and sacrifice on her account. Besides, Sripati had been raised, from childhood, in a wealthy household; Dipali was certain he could never bear the hardship of poverty, cast out and unsheltered as he would be. This argument had gone on and on without the least sign of resolution. And it was precisely at this critical juncture that I, stepping into the middle of it all, had set up yet another suitor between them, and thereby tangled the whole affair still further. Sripati, accordingly, was now asking me to remove myself from this drama, like a deleted line struck out of a proof-sheet.

I said, "Now that I have got myself into it, I do not mean to get out again. And if I do get out, it will only be after I have first untied the knot."

The date of the wedding did not change. Only the bridegroom did. I had kept my word to Biswapati, though it did not please him in the least. I had broken my word to Dipali — but, by all appearances, that pleased her very well indeed. Whether the school position ever existed I cannot say, but the empty place of a daughter in my own household was filled at last. That I, useless fellow that I was, was not entirely without my uses — of this fact my own money furnished Sripati the proof. His household lamp came, in the end, to be lit in my own house in Calcutta. I had imagined that the marriage I had failed to arrange in season would have to be made up for, later in life, by a marriage out of season — but I found, instead, that when Providence is pleased, one may skip a class or two and win one's promotion all the same. Today, at fifty-five, my house is filled with granddaughters, and a grandson besides — though my business dealings with Biswapati Babu have long since come to an end, for the simple reason that he never did care for the bridegroom I chose.