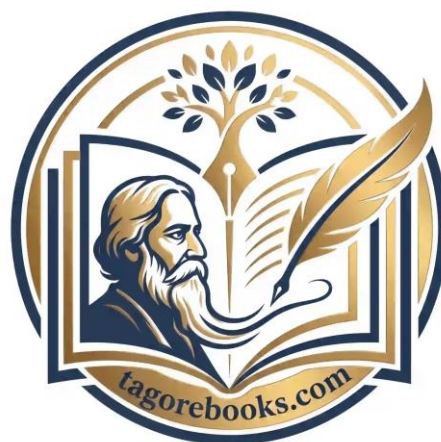


SHORT STORY

Haimanti

Rabindranath Tagore



The bride's father could have waited but the father of the groom was unwilling to tarry. In the latter's observation the girl was already past marriageable age and if any more time was wasted it would be impossible to conceal this fact from the world by means gentle or intrepid. Despite her age, the dowry was too substantial to be ignored and so the great hurry.

I was the bridegroom. Naturally my opinion was of least consequence. I had passed F.A. with distinction and my work was done. Due to this, both wings of the nuptial butterfly, that is, the bride's wing and that of the groom went into fervent activity.

In our country, a man who has been through marriage once is no longer daunted by the prospect. His attitude towards women resembles the disposition of a tiger who has once tasted human flesh. He is keen to contradict his lack of a wife the moment he loses her, without hesitation or regard for his own age or financial position. Dread and hesitation are the lot of the newcomer to the institution of marriage. As the proposals pour in, the gray hairs of his father and uncles keep looking younger thanks to black hair dye magic. And he in turn gets so worked up that his youthful mane gives indications of losing color in the first heat of matchmaking.

But to tell you the truth, I was not overcome with such trepidation. On the contrary, the prospect of getting married made me buoyant and the waving shoots of my fanciful imagination seemed to whisper amongst themselves. Such a tendency is vicious for one who must commit to memory at least five volumes of handwritten notes on Burke's exposition of the French Revolution. I would have been cautious here if there were any chances of this writing ever being approved by a textbook committee.

But what am I doing. Is this a made-up story that I should start off in the fashion of writing a novel. I least expected to begin my account in this tune. My intent was to shed the dark clouds of despair that I had piled up over the years much like how the nor'westerlies shed rain clouds on a stormy evening in the month of April. I have neither succeeded in writing textbooks for kids, since I've never studied

grammar based on knowledge of Sanskrit; nor have I had success with poetry since my knowledge of the mother tongue has not so flowered within me to enable me to express my true emotions. And so the solitary mendicant inside me mocks himself with clamorous laughter. What else would he do, for his supply of tears is spent. The month of May weeps with its scorching sunbeams, sans tears.

I do not wish to disclose the real name of the woman I had married. The issue is the least likely to induce archaeologists to engage in heated debates. But the copper plaque bearing her etched name is also the canvas of my heart. I have difficulty imagining that that canvas or the name on it will someday cease to exist. But the eternal abode where it abides is beyond the reach of historians.

In this account I need a name for her—any name. So I'll call her Sisir or drops of dew because dewdrops are reminiscent of laughter as well as tears and because in dewdrops dawn's tidings melt into the morning.

Sisir was just a couple of years younger than me despite my father being in no way opposed to marriage of pre-pubescent girls.

Grandfather was staunchly opposed to the diktats of society, he had no faith in conventional religion; for he had studied loads of English. My father is aggressively in favor of society's diktats; it would be difficult to find anything at all in our society, at home or outdoors, at the porch or by the rear door that he has difficulty coming to terms with; for he too had studied loads of English. Thus my father and grandfather came across as two completely opposite pictures of revolution as far as their opinions were concerned. Neither have been simple people or even normal. Yet the reason why father had me wed a girl past marriageable age was the dowry which was proportional to the bride's age. Sisir was the only daughter of my father-in-law. It was father's belief that everything her father owned would eventually belong to the future son-in-law.

My father-in-law was impartial in his views. He held an important post under a king in the highlands of the west. Sisir's mother died when she was a baby in arms. The man hadn't noticed that his daughter was getting a year older every year. Where they lived there was none from his own ilk to point it out to him.

Sisir turned sixteen in good time; but it was nature's sixteen, not that of society. No one advised her to watch out for her age, and she too took no special precaution.

It was during my third year at college that I got married at the age of nineteen. Let society and the social reformer shed each other's blood over the aptness of such an age; it is my opinion that the said age is no less suitable for matchmaking than it is for passing examinations.

It all started with a photograph. I was memorizing my lessons when a female relative of about my own age placed Sisir's photograph on my table and said, "Here's your new set of lessons!"

The snap had been taken by some novice photographer. She was motherless, so there wasn't anyone to tie and put up her hair in a nice bun decorated with glittering metallic threads, nor anyone to dress her up in an elaborate jacket manufactured by the Saha or Mullick companies. In short there was no one to cheat us with such eyewashes. A rather plain face with a pair of simple-looking eyes and her body draped in a simple sari. But the combined effect stirred something deep within me which I cannot express in words. She was seated on an ordinary bench with a striped mattress hanging behind her. There was a bouquet of flowers on a tripod placed on one side. Over the carpet below the meandering hemline of her sari were her two bare feet.

The girl in that picture woke up and entered my life the moment I touched her with my fancy's golden wand. Those black eyes gazed at me through my thoughts. And those bare feet beneath the meandering hemline of the sari graced the lotus-throne of my heart.

Several pages of the almanac were flipped and we missed two or three auspicious dates, yet my father-in-law could not secure leave from his office. This time-warp went on through four to five months threatening to extend my bachelorhood beyond my twentieth birthday for no good reason. I started feeling angry with my father-in-law and his employer.

Anyway, the danger was barely averted and our marriage date was fixed. I can recall each and every melody the clarinet played. I had experienced each and every moment of that auspicious day with all my consciousness. May that age of nineteen years remain ever resplendent in my memory.

In that assemblage and amid the din the delicate hand of the bride was placed on mine. What can be more surprising than this! My mind sang out to me, "I have received, I have received! She is mine!"

And who is she? She is hard to get. She is a woman. Her secrets are boundless.

My father-in-law was named Gaurishankar. He was a friend of the hills where he lived. Over his demureness he wore a constant sparkling smile. In his heart was a fountain of love and those who knew this refused to let go of him.

Before he went back to his place of work my father-in-law took me aside and said to me, "My dear young man, I have known my daughter for seventeen years and I've known you for just these few days. Yet I leave her in your hands. I hope you will understand the true value of this treasure. There is nothing greater that I can wish for you."

And my parents repeatedly assured him saying, "Do not worry brother-in-law. Just as your daughter has taken leave of you to come here she has gained a father and a mother in the two of us."

Then my father-in-law smiled and said to my wife, "Farewell child. You have only one father. From now on do not blame me if something belonging to him is lost or stolen."

In reply she said, "How can that be? If my father incurs any loss you will be required to compensate for it."

Finally she reminded her father repeatedly of all the things he habitually forgot. He was not sufficiently reserved in his food habits; he was easily tempted by what he was not supposed to consume. It had been his daughter's constant job to keep him away from those. Therefore she took his hand in hers and said, "You will keep my word, won't you?"

He smiled and said, "People make promises only to break them. It is safest not to promise."

When my father-in-law left the doors closed and no one knows what followed.

The women in my family had observed the tearless leave-taking of the father and daughter. They expressed surprise. What upcountry culture! Not a drop of tear!

Bonomali, a friend of my father-in-law had played our matchmaker. He was also known to my family. Bonomali had advised him, “This daughter is all you have in all the wide world. Why not buy a house near hers and spend the rest of your life here?”

He had replied, “What I have given away, I’ve given away for good. Why look back? I’d rather not make a mockery of my gift.”

My father-in-law had asked me in isolation, “My daughter likes to read. She also likes to invite people and cook for them. I don’t wish to trouble your father for this. I’ll send you money from time to time. Will this anger your father?”

I had been somewhat surprised to hear this question. My father had never been so ill-tempered as to be angered by gifts of money arriving from any direction.

Before taking leave of me, my father-in-law tucked a hundred-rupee note into my hands as if he were bribing me and left in a hurry. He did not even wait for me to touch his feet. And now he took his handkerchief out as I could see from behind.

I sat down and started thinking. These are people of an entirely different kind.

I’ve observed many of my friends getting married. Past the vows, they cease the first opportunity to feast on their wives. Consequently, what reaches the stomach starts producing its various effects frequently causing internal tensions. But nothing strange happens on the way. I had however realized on the day of my marriage that the incantation of beneficence with which wedlock is sealed however suitable for the world at large leaves much wanting. I suspect that most men merely wed their wives, they never win their hearts, and they never find out; nor does the wife find this out in all their lives for as long as they live. But she was the realization of all my prayers; she was not my property, she was my wealth!

Sisir—no I mustn’t use this name any more. On the one hand this isn’t her name, on the other it isn’t her true identity. She is constant like the sun; she is not the parting teardrop of the short-lived morning sun. It is not worth hiding that her real name was Haimanti.