

POETRY

KARNA AND KUNTI

Rabindranath Tagore



The Pandava Queen Kunti before marriage had a son, Karna, who, in manhood, became the commander of the Kaurava host. To hide her shame she abandoned him at birth, and a charioteer, Adhiratha, brought him up as his son.

KARNA : I am Karna, the son of the charioteer, Adhiratha, and I sit here by the bank of holy Ganges to worship the setting sun. Tell me who you are.

KUNTI : I am the woman who first made you acquainted with that light you are worshipping.

KARNA : I do not understand: but your eyes melt my heart as the kiss of the morning sun melts the snow on a mountain-top, and your voice rouses a blind sadness within me of which the cause may well lie beyond the reach of my earliest memory. Tell me, strange woman, what mystery binds my birth to you?

KUNTI : Patience, my son. I will answer when the lids of darkness come down over the prying eyes of day. In the meanwhile, know that I am Kunti.

KARNA : Kunti! The mother of Arjuna?

KUNTI : Yes, indeed, the mother of Arjuna, your antagonist. But do not, therefore, hate me. I still remember the day of the trial of arms in Hastina when you, an unknown boy, boldly stepped into the arena, like the first ray of dawn among the stars of night. Ah! Who was that unhappy woman whose eyes kissed your bare, slim body through tears that blessed you, where she sat among the women of the royal household behind the arras? Why, the mother of Arjuna! Then the Brahmin, master of arms, stepped forth and said, "No youth of mean birth may challenge Arjuna to a trial of strength." You stood speechless, like a thunder-cloud at sunset flashing with an agony of suppressed light. But who was the woman whose heart caught fire from your shame and anger, and flared up in silence? The mother of Arjuna! Praised be Duryodhana, who perceived your worth, and then and there crowned you King of Anga, thus winning the Kauravas a champion. Overwhelmed at this good fortune, Adhiratha, the charioteer, broke through the crowd; you instantly rushed to him and laid your crown at his feet amid the jeering laughter of the Pandavas and their friends. But there was one woman of the Pandava house

whose heart glowed with joy at the heroic pride of such humility;—even the mother of Arjuna!

KARNA : But what brings you here alone, Mother of kings?

KUNTI : I have a boon to crave.

KARNA : Command me, and whatever manhood and my honour as a Kshatriya permit shall be offered at your feet.

KUNTI : I have come to take you.

KARNA : Where?

KUNTI : To my breast thirsting for your love, my son.

KARNA : Fortunate mother of five brave kings, where can you find place for me, a small chieftain of lowly descent?

KUNTI : Your place is before all my other sons.

KARNA : But what right have I to take it?

KUNTI : Your own God-given right to your mother's love.

KARNA : The gloom of evening spreads over the earth, silence rests on the water, and your voice leads me back to some primal world of infancy lost in twilight consciousness. However, whether this be dream, or fragment of forgotten reality, come near and place your right hand on my forehead. Rumour runs that I was deserted by my mother. Many a night she has come to me in my slumber, but when I cried: "Open your veil, show me your face!" her figure always vanished. Has this same dream come this evening while I wake? See, yonder the lamps are lighted in your son's tents across the river; and on this side behold the tent-domes of my Kauravas, like the suspended waves of a spell-arrested storm at sea. Before the din of tomorrow's battle, in the awful hush of this field where it must be fought, why should the voice of the mother of my opponent, Arjuna, bring me a message of forgotten motherhood? And why should my name take such music from her tongue as to draw my heart out to him and his brothers?

KUNTI : Then delay not, my son, come with me!

KARNA : Yes, I will come and never ask question, never doubt. My soul responds to your call; and the struggle for victory and fame and the rage of hatred have suddenly become untrue to me, as the delirious dream of a night in the serenity of the dawn. Tell me whither you mean to lead?

KUNTI : To the other bank of the river, where those lamps burn across the ghastly pallor of the sands.

KARNA : Am I there to find my lost mother forever?

KUNTI : O my son!

KARNA : Then why did you banish me—a castaway uprooted from my ancestral soil, adrift in a homeless current of indignity? Why set a bottomless chasm between Arjuna and myself, turning the natural attachment of kinship to the dread attraction of hate? You remain speechless. Your shame permeates the vast darkness and sends invisible shivers through my limbs. Leave my question unanswered! Never explain to me what made you rob your son of his mother's love! Only tell me why you have come to-day to call me back to the ruins of a heaven wrecked by your own hands?

KUNTI : I am dogged by a curse more deadly than your reproaches: for, though surrounded by five sons, my heart shrivels like that of a woman deprived of her children. Through the great rent that yawned for my deserted first-born, all my life's pleasures have run to waste. On that accursed day when I belied my motherhood you could not utter a word; to-day your recreant mother implores you for generous words. Let your forgiveness burn her heart like fire and consume its sin.

KARNA : Mother, accept my tears!

KUNTI : I did not come with the hope of winning you back to my arms, but with that of restoring your rights to you. Come and receive, as a king's son, your due among your brothers.

KARNA : I am more truly the son of a charioteer, and do not covet the glory of greater parentage.

KUNTI : Be that as it may, come and win back the kingdom, which is yours by right!

KARNA : Must you, who once refused me a mother's love, tempt me with a kingdom? The quick bond of kindred which you severed at its root is dead, and can never grow again. Shame were mine should I hasten to call the mother of kings mother, and abandon *my mother in the charioteer's house!*

KUNTI : You are great, my son! How God's punishment invisibly grows from a tiny seed to a giant life! The helpless babe disowned by his mother comes back a man through the dark maze of events to smite his brothers!

KARNA : Mother, have no fear! I know for certain that victory awaits the Pandavas. Peaceful and still though this night be, my heart is full of the music of a hopeless venture and baffled end. Ask me not to leave those who are doomed to defeat. Let

the Pandavas win the throne, since they must: I remain with the desperate and forlorn. On the night of my birth you left me naked and unnamed to disgrace: leave me once again without pity to the calm expectation of defeat and death!

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When like a flaming scimitar the hill stream has been sheathed in gloom by the evening, suddenly a flock of birds passes overhead, their loud-laughing wings hurling their flight like an arrow among stars.

It startles a passion for speed in the heart of all motionless things; the hills seem to feel in their bosom the anguish of storm-clouds, and trees long to break their rooted shackles.

For me the flight of these birds has rent a veil of stillness, and reveals an immense flutter in this deep silence.

I see these hills and forests fly across time to the unknown, and darkness thrill into fire as the stars wing by.

I feel in my own being the rush of the sea-crossing bird, cleaving a way beyond the limits of life and death, while the migrant world cries with a myriad voices, "Not here, but somewhere else, in the bosom of the Faraway."

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The crowd listens in wonder to Kashi, the young singer, whose voice, like as word in feats of skill, dances amidst hopeless tangles, cuts them to pieces, and exults.

Among the hearers sits old Rajah Pratap in weary endurance. For his own life had been nourished and encircled by Barajlal's songs, like a happy land which a river laces with beauty. His rainy evenings and the still hours of autumn days spoke to his heart through Barajlal's voice, and his festive nights trimmed their lamps and tinkled their bells to those songs.

When Kashi stopped for rest, Pratap smilingly winked at Barajlal and spoke to him in a whisper, "Master, now let us hear music and not this new-fangled singing, which mimics frisky kittens hunting paralysed mice."

The old singer with his spotlessly white turban made a deep bow to the assembly and took his seat. His thin fingers struck the strings of his instrument, his eyes closed, and in timid hesitation his song began. The hall was large, his voice feeble, and Pratap shouted "Bravo!" with ostentation, but whispered in his ear, "Just a little louder, friend!"

The crowd was restless; some yawned, some dozed, some complained of the heat. The air of the hall hummed with many-toned inattention, and the song, like a frail boat, tossed upon it in vain till it sank under the hubbub.

Suddenly the old man, stricken at heart, forgot a passage, and his voice groped in agony, like a blind man at a fair for his lost leader. He tried to fill the gap with any strain that came. But the gap still yawned: and the tortured notes refused to serve the need, suddenly changed their tune, and broke into a sob. The master laid his head on his instrument, and in place of his forgotten music, there broke from him the first cry of life that a child brings into the world.

Pratap touched him gently on his shoulder, and said, "Come away, our meeting is elsewhere. I know, my friend, that truth is widowed without love, and beauty dwells not with the many, nor in the moment."

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In the youth of the world, Himalaya, you sprang from the rent breast of the earth, and hurled your burning challenges to the sun, hill after hill. Then came the mellow time when you said to yourself, "No more, no further!" and your fiery heart, that raged for the freedom of clouds, found its limits, and stood still to salute the limitless. After this check on your passion, beauty was free to play upon your breast, and trust surrounded you with the joy of flowers and birds.

You sit in your solitude like a great reader, on whose lap lies open some ancient book with its countless pages of stone. What story is written there, I wonder?—is it the eternal wedding of the divine ascetic, Shiva, with Bhavani, the divine love?—the drama of the Terrible wooing the power of the Frail?

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I feel that my heart will leave its own colour in all your scenes, O Earth, when I bid you farewell. Some notes of mine will be added to your seasons' melody, and my thoughts will breathe unrecognised through the cycle of shadows and sunshine.

In far-distant days summer will come to the lovers' garden, but they will not know that their flowers have borrowed an added beauty from my songs, nor that their love for this world has been deepened by mine.

* * *

My eyes feel the deep peace of this sky, and there stirs through me what a tree feels when it holds out its leaves like cups to be filled with sunshine.

A thought rises in my mind, like the warm breath from grass in the sun; it mingles with the gurgle of lapping water and the sigh of weary wind in village lanes,—the thought that I have lived along with the whole life of this world and have given to it my own love and sorrows.

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I ask no reward for the songs I sang you. I shall be content if they live through the night, until Dawn, like a shepherd-maiden, calls away the stars, in alarm at the sun.

But there were moments when you sang your songs to me, and as my pride knows, my Poet, you will ever remember that I listened and lost my heart.

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In the morning, when the dew glistened upon the grass, you came and gave a push to my swing; but, sweeping from smiles to tears, I did not know you.

Then came April's noon of gorgeous light, and I think you beckoned me to follow you.

But when I sought your face, there passed between us the procession of flowers, and men and women flinging their songs to the south wind.

Daily I passed you unheeded on the road.

But on some days full of the faint smell of oleanders, when the wind was wilful among complaining palm leaves, I would stand before you wondering if you ever had been a stranger to me.

* * *

The day grew dim. The early evening star faltered near the edge of a grey lonely sky.

I looked back and felt that the road lying behind me was infinitely removed; traced through my life, it had only served for a single journey and was never to be re-travelled.

The long story of my coming hither lies there dumb, in one meandering line of dust stretching from the morning hilltop to the brink of bottomless night.

I sit alone, and wonder if this road is like an instrument waiting to give up the day's lost voices in music when touched by divine fingers at nightfall.

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Give me the supreme courage of love, this is my prayer—the courage to speak, to do, to suffer at thy will, to leave all things or be left alone. Strengthen me on errands

of danger, honour me with pain, and help me climb to that difficult mood which sacrifices daily to thee.

Give me the supreme confidence of love, this is my prayer—the confidence that belongs to life in death, to victory in defeat, to the power hidden in frailest beauty, to that dignity in pain which accepts hurt but disdains to return it.