

POETRY

SOMAKA AND RITVIK

Rabindranath Tagore



The shade of KING SOMAKA, faring to Heaven in a chariot, passes other shades by the roadside, among them that of RITVIK, his former high-priest.

[A VOICE](#) : Where would you go, King?

[SOMAKA](#) : Whose voice is that? This turbid air is like suffocation to the eyes; I cannot see.

[THE VOICE](#) : Come down, King! Come down from that chariot bound for Heaven.

[SOMAKA](#) : Who are you?

[THE VOICE](#) : I am Ritvik, who in my earthly life was your preceptor and the chief priest of your house.

[SOMAKA](#) : Master, all the tears of the world seem to have become vapour to create this realm of vagueness. What make you here?

[SHADES](#) : This hell lies hard by the road to Heaven, whence lights glimmer dimly, only to prove unapproachable. Day and night we listen to the heavenly chariot rumbling by with travellers for that region of bliss; it drives sleep from our eyes and forces them to watch in fruitless jealousy. Farbelow us earth's old forests rustle and her seas chant the primal hymn of creation: they sound like the wail of a memory that wanders void space in vain.

[RITVIK](#) : Come down, King!

[SHADES](#) : Stop a few moments among us. The earth's tears still cling about you, like dew on freshly culled flowers. You have brought with you the mingled odours of meadow and forest; reminiscence of children, women, and comrades; something too of the ineffable music of the seasons.

[SOMAKA](#) : Master, why are you doomed to live in this muffled stagnant world?

[RITVIK](#) : I offered up your son in the sacrificial fire: that sin has lodged my soul in this obscurity.

[SHADES](#) : King, tell us the story, we implore you; the recital of crime can still bring life's fire into our torpor.

[SOMAKA](#) : I was named Somaka, the King of Videha. After sacrificing at innumerable shrines weary year on year, a son was born to my house in my old age, love for whom, like a sudden untimely flood, swept consideration for everything else from my life. He hid me completely, as a lotus hides its stem. The neglected duties of a

king piled up in shame before my throne. One day, in my audience hall, I heard my child cry from his mother's room, and instantly rushed away, vacating my throne.

RITVIK : Just then, it chanced, I entered the hall to give him my daily benediction; in blind haste he brushed me aside and enkindled my anger. When later he came back, shame-faced, I asked him: "King, what desperate alarm could draw you at the busiest hour of the day to the women's apartments, so as to desert your dignity and duty—ambassadors come from friendly courts, the aggrieved who ask for justice, your ministers waiting to discuss matters of grave import? And even lead you to slight a Brahmin's blessing?"

SOMAKA : At first my heart flamed with anger; the next moment I trampled it down like the raised head of a snake and meekly replied: "Having only one child, I have lost my peace of mind. Forgive me this once, and I promise that in future the father's infatuation shall never usurp the King."

RITVIK : But my heart was bitter with resentment, and I said, "If you must be delivered from the curse of having only one child, I can show you the way. But so hard is it that I feel certain you will fail to follow it." This galled the King's pride and he stood up and exclaimed, "I swear, by all that is sacred, as a Kshatriya and a King, I will not shrink, but perform whatever you may ask, however hard." "Then listen," said I. "Light a sacrificial fire, offer up your son: the smoke that rises will bring you progeny, as the clouds bring rain." The King bowed his head upon his breast and remained silent: the courtiers shouted their horror, the Brahmin slapped their hands over their ears, crying, "Sin it is both to utter and listen to such words." After some moments of bewildered dismay the King calmly said, "I will abide by my promise." The day came, the fire was lit, the town was emptied of its people, the child was called for; but the attendants refused to obey, the soldiers rebelliously went off duty, throwing down their arms. Then I, who in my wisdom had soared far above all weakness of heart and to whom emotions were illusory, went myself to the apartment where, with their arms, women fenced the child like a flower surrounded by the menacing branches of a tree. He saw me and stretched out eager hands and struggled to come to me, for he longed to be free from the love that imprisoned him. Crying, "I am come to give you true deliverance," I snatched him by force from his fainting mother and his nurses wailing in despair. With quivering tongues the fire licked the sky and the King stood beside it, still and silent, like a tree struck dead by lightning. Fascinated by the godlike splendour of the

blaze, the child babbled in glee and danced in my arms, impatient to seek an unknown nurse in the free glory of those flames.

SOMAKA : Stop, no more, I pray!

SHADES : Ritvik, your presence is a disgrace to hell itself!

THE CHARIOTEER : This is no place for you, King! Nor have you deserved to be forced to listen to this recital of a deed which makes hell shudder in pity.

SOMAKA : Drive off in your chariot!—Brahmin, my place is by you in this hell. The Gods may forget my sin, but can I forget the last look of agonised surprise on my child's face when, for one terrible moment, he realised that his own father had betrayed his trust?

Enter DHARMA, the Judge of Departed Spirits

DHARMA : King, Heaven waits for you.

SOMAKA : No, not for me. I killed my own child.

DHARMA : Your sin has been swept away in the fury of pain it caused you.

RITVIK : No, King, you must never go to Heaven alone, and thus create a second hell for me, to burn both with fire and with hatred of you! Stay here!

SOMAKA : I will stay.

SHADES : And crown the despair and inglorious suffering of hell with the triumph of a soul!

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The man had no useful work, only vagaries of various kinds.

Therefore it surprised him to find himself in Paradise after a life spent perfecting trifles.

Now the guide had taken him by mistake to the wrong Paradise—one meant only for good, busy souls.

In this Paradise, our man saunters along the road only to obstruct the rush of business.

He stands aside from the path and is warned that he tramples on sown seed. Pushed, he starts up: hustled, he moves on.

A very busy girl comes to fetch water from the well. Her feet run on the pavement like rapid fingers over harp-strings. Hastily she ties a negligent knot with her hair, and loose locks on her forehead pry into the dark of her eyes.

The man says to her, "Would you lend me your pitcher?"

"My pitcher?" she asks, "to draw water?"

"No, to paint patterns on."

"I have no time to waste," the girl retorts in contempt.

Now a busy soul has no chance against one who is supremely idle.

Every day she meets him at the well, and every day he repeats the same request, till at last she yields.

Our man paints the pitcher with curious colours in a mysterious maze of lines.

The girl takes it up, turns it round and asks, "What does it mean?"

"It has no meaning," he answers.

The girl carries the pitcher home. She holds it up in different lights and tries to con its mystery.

At night she leaves her bed, lights a lamp, and gazes at it from all points of view.

This is the first time she has met with something without meaning.

On the next day the man is again near the well.

The girl asks, "What do you want?"

"To do more work for you."

"What work?" she enquires.

"Allow me to weave coloured strands into a ribbon to bind your hair."

"Is there any need?" she asks.

"None whatever," he allows.

The ribbon is made, and thence-forward she spends a great deal of time over her hair.

The even stretch of well-employed time in that Paradise begins to show irregular rents.

The elders are troubled; they meet in council.

The guide confesses his blunder, saying that he has brought the wrong man to the wrong place.

The wrong man is called. His turban, flaming with colour, shows plainly how great that blunder has been.

The chief of the elders says, "You must go back to the earth."

The man heaves a sigh of relief: "I am ready."

The girl with the ribbon round her hair chimes in: "I also!"

For the first time the chief of the elders is faced with a situation which has no sense in it.

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It is said that in the forest, near the meeting of river and lake, certain fairies live in disguise who are only recognised as fairies after they have flown away.

A Prince went to this forest, and when he came where river met lake he saw a village girl sitting on the bank ruffling the water to make the lilies dance.

He asked her in a whisper, "Tell me, what fairy art thou?"

The girl laughed at the question and the hillsides echoed her mirth.

The Prince thought she was the laughing fairy of the waterfall.

News reached the King that the Prince had married a fairy: he sent horse and men and brought them to his house.

The Queen saw the bride and turned her face away in disgust, the Prince's sister flushed red with annoyance, and the maids asked if that was how fairies dressed.

The Prince whispered, "Hush! My fairy has come to our house in disguise."

On the day of the yearly festival the Queen said to her son, "Ask your bride not to shame us before our kinsfolk who are coming to see the fairy."

And the Prince said to his bride, "For my love's sake show thy true self to my people."

Long she sat silent, then nodded her promise while tears ran down her cheeks.

The full moon shone, the Prince, dressed in a wedding robe, entered his bride's room.

No one was there, nothing but a streak of moonlight from the window aslant the bed.

The kinsfolk crowded in with the King and the Queen, the Prince's sister stood by the door.

All asked, "Where is the fairy bride?"

The Prince answered, "She has vanished for ever to make herself known to you."