

Satirical Sketches

SWARGIYA PROHOSON

Rabindranath Tagore



THE COURT OF INDRA

BRIHASPATI. O Gentle One, has not Indra's realm grown full enough already, with its three hundred and thirty million gods? Is there yet need to summon new deities to its assembly? Mark this well, O Fair of Countenance: on the mortal earth, population is regulated by the law of birth and death, but in the heavenly spheres, where death has no dominion, there exists no means of thinning the ranks of the gods. Before their numbers are further swollen, this matter deserves the most careful deliberation.

INDRA. O Chief of Sages, it is known to all that the Lord of Heaven has spared no effort in making the celestial path difficult of access.

BRIHASPATI. If the gate be so well guarded, then why of late are new and obscure deities of unknown lineage — Manasa, Sheetala, Ghetu, and their like — being installed among the divine order?

INDRA. O Best of the Twice-Born, we gods have indeed received dominion over the three worlds — but only by consent of the three worlds themselves. It is not unknown to my revered teacher that gods are, in every age, chosen by mortal men. There was a time when all the Brahmin priests of noble Aryavarta granted me the highest seat in heaven, and in that age, at every sacrificial altar along the banks of Saraswati and Drishadvati, the oblations offered ceaselessly unto me caused unbroken tears to flow from my thousand eyes amid the sacrificial smoke. Today, on earth, whatever oblation is offered goes only to sate the demon of hunger in men's bellies — and I hear that even that ghee is not pure.

BRIHASPATI. O Slayer of Vritra, that same impure and adulterated ghee, I am told, has very nearly proved fatal to the demon of hunger himself. O Enemy of Foes, the gods hold particular affection for their fellow gods; that is precisely why the sacrificial fires on earth have been extinguished — for otherwise, O Guardian of the Kitchen, all the nectar in the divine bellies would have been transformed into the sharpest of acids, the Fire-God's digestive flame would have required a change of

air, and unbearable colic would have taken up permanent residence in the immortal bowels of every deity.

INDRA. O Wisest of the Learned, the properties of that ghee are not unknown to me, for I hear constant report of it from Yama's court. Thus I have not the least craving for sacrificial offerings, and I lament, too, the disappearance of the sacred fire — but that is not my present concern. What I would say is this: as fragrance rises from the flower, so from mortal devotion does heaven's glory rise ever upward; should that flower of devotion wither, then, O Best of the Twice-Born, not even the three hundred and thirty million gods could preserve this heaven of ours, garlanded with celestial coral-trees and ringed by the groves of Nandana. For that very reason, to keep the current of communion with mortal earth unbroken, we must from time to time welcome with honour into heaven the newly chosen deities of the earthly realm. O Knower of the Three Times, such things have happened before in heaven's history.

BRIHASPATI. O Cloud-Bearer, that history is not unknown to me. But those new deities who in ages past were elevated from earth to heaven were fit to sit in the same seat as the nobly-born gods. Now, however, these deities — Ghetu and his fellows — who have come at your invitation to take refuge in heaven, have dimmed the divine radiance of the celestial assembly. O Delight of Aditi, my proposal is this: let a special charge be laid upon Vishwakarma to fashion for them a separate, lesser heaven of their own.

INDRA. O Foremost of the Wise, were that done, that lesser heaven itself would become the heaven, and our present heaven would be reduced to a mere appendage. Our heaven rests upon the Vedic mantra alone — and despite great effort by German scholars, that mantra and its meaning have been all but forgotten. But our newly invited gods and goddesses do not depend upon Sayana's commentary, nor upon the antiquarian researches of Western historians, nor upon the scientific interpretations of their Eastern disciples; they thrive, fed daily on freshly-gathered worship, and have grown many times more powerful than our ancient gods, who now sit famished and neglected. If we can win them to our side, we shall gain new strength thereby. Therefore, O Revered Teacher, let us, with glad

hearts, place the garland of godhood about their necks and welcome them into the heavenly realm.

BRIHASPATI. Alas, cruel is Fate! In their greedy hunger for mortal favour, how many an ancient lamp of the divine lineage has, one by one, cast off his own divine dignity! The Commander of the Heavenly Hosts has abandoned his warrior's garb for the finest silks, and — a shameless coquette — has taken on the guise of a lovesick dandy! The grave and dignified Lord of Obstacles has bound himself in secret wedlock to a plantain tree! And the great ascetic Maheshwara himself, maddened by hemp and datura and drink, quarrels in the foulest language with the Great Goddess, and spreads his amorous exploits among the lowest quarters of loose women! All this, one by one, I have already learned to bear — but I fear that even the spectacle of these petty deities' ascension to the divine seat may prove more than this old Brahmin's patient heart, hardened as it is, can endure.

(Enter the MOON.)

INDRA. Lord of the Stars, heaven knows no waning fortnight — yet why, today, do I see your gentle, radiant, blossoming face clouded over so?

MOON. O God of the Thousand Eyes, were there a waning fortnight in heaven, I should gladly take refuge in the shadow of the new-moon night. O King of Gods, deliver me, I pray, from the gracious gaze of the goddess Sheetalā. Since her arrival in heaven, she has shown such particular partiality toward me that I alone am unworthy of it. Were her abundant favour distributed equally among the gods in general, no injustice would be done to anyone.

INDRA. O Lord of Nectar-Rays, no doubt when joy is shared with friends, it grows all the greater — but a woman's favour is not of that nature.

MOON. O Lord, then take that joy entirely for yourself. You are chief of the gods; none but you alone can contain this flood of nectar-passion.

INDRA. Dear friend, what one receives from another is easy enough to give away to a companion — but love is not merchandise of that sort. What you have

received, you may cast aside unheeded if you wish, but you cannot give it away merely to satisfy the urgent need of even your dearest friend.

MOON. Could I but cast it aside, I should not come troubling at your door in such distress. O Lord of the Gods, there is many a fortune which, though flung far away, clings ever close at hand.

INDRA. O Marked-with-the-Hare, do you fear disgrace, then?

MOON. Friend, to speak truly, I do not fear scandal.

INDRA. O Lord of Arts, then do you dread the jealousy of your beloved, the mistress of your inner chambers?

MOON. Friend, it is not unknown to you — my inner chamber holds twenty-seven star-wives. Every one of them lies awake the whole night through, sleepless, watching my every movement — and yet to this day the constellations have caused me no unrest whatsoever. I have no fear of adding yet one more to the twenty-seven.

INDRA. Friend, how bold you are! Then what is it you fear?

(Enter a DIVINE MESSENGER, in great haste.)

MESSENGER. Victory to you! O King of Gods, Vani, the Lady of the Lute, contemplates quitting heaven altogether!

INDRA. (startled) Why? What offence have the gods committed against her?

MESSENGER. The goddesses Manasa, Sheetala, and Mangalchandi went to Saraswati's lotus-grove in search of small mud-dwelling fish called chingri. Having succeeded in their quest, they filled the folds of their garments with lotus-buds, and sitting upon the bank, cooked the fish in mustard oil with tamarind seasoning, and ate a hearty meal of it; then, having rinsed themselves in the waters of the

sacred lake, each returned to her own place. Never before this day has any god or demon used the lotus-shoots of Lake Manasarovar as food.

(The gods exchange glances. Enter MANASA and other deities of Heccu's circle.)

INDRA. (rising from his seat) Welcome, gods and goddesses! I trust our welcome falls short in nothing! Do your attendants wait diligently to fulfil your every wish? Do the heavenly gandharvas delight you nightly with their music and dance in the celestial hall? Are the milk of Kamadhenu and the nectar of ambrosia gathered before you in due season? Does the fragrant breeze of Nandana flow ever obedient to your will along the pathways of the wind? Do the coral-blossoms in your bowers of vine bloom perpetually, adorning your groves with their beauty?

(Loud laughter of the goddesses.)

MANASA. (to Heccu) What in the world is this fellow saying, sister?

HECCU. He's rattling off some incantation, like a priest at his prayers. (To Indra) Here you, aren't you the master here? If you've finished your chanting, speak a few plain words, will you.

INDRA. O Heccu! Might I—

HECCU. Heccu, is it! Am I your garden's gardener, that you address me so? I've never in all my born days met such an ill-mannered fellow! Heccu, indeed! What if I were to call you not "Indra" but "Indira"?

MANASA. That alone would settle the matter nicely!

(Loud laughter of the goddesses.)

INDRA. (attempting to laugh along, to conceal his embarrassment) O Delighter of the Kunda-flower, through long penance did I win this heavenly realm — but by what merit the sight of your smiling faces should suddenly flood this heaven with such excess of light, I still cannot fathom.

HECCU. Oh, leave off, leave off that nonsense! I can't be bothered with all these things your lackeys bring me in golden bowls. Just tell your Shachi to send me a plate of cow-dung cakes fresh-made, every day, without fail.

INDRA. So be it. In heaven we have the wish-fulfilling cow. She grants every desire. I daresay it need not be beyond her power to grant your request as well.

SHEETALA. (spotting the Moon skulking in a corner, going near him) My word! You're quite the sly one, aren't you, brother! You've given me quite a fine slip, I must say. Here I thought you were somewhere in the inner chambers. I go in, and there sit Aneesha and Megha like a nawab's daughters, staring at me quite astonished! I couldn't bear it. Said I, "Look here, you high-and-mighty ladies — since you're all so grand you can't even set foot on the ground — well I'll have none of that nonsense here!" I gave them a proper piece of my mind. Left them thoroughly put in their place, I did.

MOON. (aside, to Indra) O Lord of Shachi, you may easily imagine what dire calamity might befall should a twenty-eighth be added to the twenty-seven. (To Sheetala) O Blameless One—

SHEETALA. (laughing until she can hardly stand) Oh mother, mother, what a way you have of making one laugh! You've given me such a lovely pet name, I must say! Now, "blameless" — but what is one to do with blame, brother! I've dragged seven generations of physicians through seven ghats of water for their trouble — do you take me for that sort of woman!

HECCU. (going close to Indra, laying a hand on his back) I say, Indira-dada! Not a smile on your face! Been quarrelling with the missus this morning, tearing each other's hair out, is that it?

INDRA. (shrinking away in embarrassment, gesturing toward a distant seat) Lord, pray be seated.

HECCU. Oh, here now, there's plenty of room right here. (Seats herself beside Indra on the same cushion.) Now, brother, don't you go putting on airs with me. From today you're my elder brother, and I'm your little sister Heccu.

(She throws her arms about Indra's neck; Indra, in his embarrassment, utters an inarticulate sound of distress.)

SHEETALA. (to the Moon) Where are you off to?

MOON. Noble lady, this very day, in the inner chambers, the goddesses have, in devotion to their husbands' welfare, taken vows and remembered this humble servant in their observances; so, if permission be granted, O Doe-Eyed One—

SHEETALA. What did you call me? "Sister-in-law"? Well, brother, so be it, if that's what pleases you. Everything sounds sweet from that moon-face of yours. But since you've called me sister-in-law, you must take a proper twist of the ear for it too.

(She seats herself beside the Moon and gives his ear a sharp twist.)

INDRA. (to the Moon) O Lord Marked-with-the-Rabbit, you are indeed fortunate. The crimson blush of a young maiden's tender fingertips yet lingers, I perceive, upon the lobe of your ear from that loving touch.

SHEETALA. (glancing sidelong at Manasa, muttering to herself) Die, die, wretch! May our little Manasa burst with envy and die! I've only sat beside the Moon, and already she can't bear the sight of it. Wandering about restlessly, look at her, will you! Not an ounce of shame before all these men! The hag will go gossiping through the whole neighbourhood about this. And he's no better either. The shameless way he's carried on over that Kartik-fellow — I nearly died of shame just watching it. Poor Kartik doesn't know where to hide his face. Look at that face of hers, and the airs she puts on over it! Lord, lord, lord! (Aloud) You wretch, may you die! Prowling about shamelessly in front of the Moon like some harlot! As if you were out charming snakes with your dancing! Wasn't there room enough for you over there with Kartik, eh?

(A furious quarrel breaks out in coarse dialect between Manasa and Sheetala, in the very midst of the divine assembly.)

INDRA. (flustered, turning first to Manasa, then to Sheetala) Restrain your wrath! Restrain your wrath! O Dark-Eyed One free of all envy! O Slender-Waisted One! O Loose-Robed and Dishevelled One! O Sweet-Voiced as the Cuckoo! Bring down, I pray, your seventh-note pitch to a gentler fifth! O Wrathful One—

HECCU. (seizing Indra's shawl and pulling him back to his seat) Now why do you fuss so, brother? These two are always at it. Let them be, madam — it'll only make more of a spectacle. It's over some quarrel about food that she's gone off to bicker with Shachi.

INDRA. (in anguish) O Goddess Poulami, dweller in the bosom of the Lord of the Gods, help me!

(Manasa quits the assembly in great haste; Sheetala once more seats herself beside the Moon. Enter BEENAPANI, the Lady of the Lute.)

BEENAPANI. O King of Gods, amid this harsh clamour, my divine lute has fallen out of tune; my lotus-grove stands all but deserted. I take my leave of the heavenly realm.

(Exit.)

BRIHASPATI. I too shall follow the Mother of Speech.

(Exit. Enter ANESHA and MEGHA into the assembly.)

ANESHA and MEGHA. (seeing Sheetala seated beside the Moon) Today, in a strange and unwonted sixteenth digit, we behold the divine Moon shining forth in yet fuller splendour!

MOON. Goddesses, do not, I pray, mock this ill-fated one with such merciless irony. The demon Rahu, being male, could only conquer me for a fleeting moment — but

out of jealous spite that even so brief an eclipse was permitted, the envious Creator has fashioned a female Rahu, from whose complete devouring I have, for all my efforts, been unable to free myself.

ANESHA. O Noble Son, this fair lady but lately entered your inner chamber, and has already reviled your father-in-law's lineage, up to the fourteenth generation past, with slanders never before heard. We had taken the goddess's astonishing conduct for some outrageous trespass beyond her rightful bounds. Now it is plain to see — this fortunate lady has, through your own hand, been granted full authority to commit such indignities. And so, having witnessed our noble Son welcomed into his newer father-in-law's house, we now take our leave, to seek refuge from this constellation of stars. (To Sheetala) Gentle lady, most blessed one, may your good fortune know no end.

(Exeunt.)

(Enter SHACHI.)

INDRA. (rising from his seat in confusion) Noble lady, welcome — may your coming bring good fortune.

HECCU. (seizing Indra's shawl, forcibly seating him back down) My, my! What great ceremony indeed! I say, dada, I've seen many, many men in my day, but never such a hen-pecked one as you!

(Seeing Heccu seat herself in Shachi's designated place at Indra's left, SHACHI takes a modest seat some distance off, in a corner.)

HECCU. (approaching Shachi with a laugh) Bouthakrun, what sort of spell have you cast on my dada, I ask you! You've made an absolute slave of him at your feet! When you rise, he rises; when you sit, he sits. Come now, say something at least. (Sings) "What harm is there in speaking, O moon-faced one!"

INDRA. Lady Heccu, permit me a moment's leisure, I pray. I have a small matter to submit to the goddess.

HECCU. My word! Just look at that! Just look at that! I've barely sat down close beside you, and already you can't bear the sight of me! Such excess is quite improper! Excessive courtesy, they say, is a thief's telltale sign! — Never mind, sister, or you'll be cursing me again! You two sit together, I'll be off.

(She makes as if to seat Indra forcibly in Shachi's seat.)

INDRA. (putting Heccu gently aside) Lady, you forget yourself.

(Enter OLABIBI.)

OLABIBI. (to Shachi) And where might you be off to, may I ask! Just because some fellow's come and sat down, must you go rushing off to your husband, must you! Well, run along then, run along! I'm not afraid of your husband, not one bit!

SHACHI. (rising from her seat, to Indra) O King of Gods, I have resolved to take Jayanta with me and dwell awhile in the abode of Lakshmi, in the realm of Vishnu. It has been long since I beheld the goddess.

INDRA. Noble lady, I too intend to follow the goddess. I have long neglected her worship, and stand guilty before the Wielder of the Discus.

(Both make to depart.)

MOON. O Thousand-Eyed Lord, I too have urgent business in the realm of Vishnu — the Goddess Lakshmi — alas, in times of trouble even one's dearest friends desert one.

SHEETALA. Why do you sit there with such a long face, like a cracked pot? Keep that up, and you'll get another twist of the ear.

MOON. O Radiant Lady of the Golden Light, my business in Vishnu's realm shall not detain me long; if you would but grant leave, this servant—

SHEETALA. Another twist of the ear, is it.

(She raises her hand, poised to twist his ear again. Re-enter MANASA. A fresh quarrel breaks out at once with Sheetala. Ghetu, Ola, Mangalchandi, and the rest all join in.)

MOON. Let the rest of you exchange sweet words as long as you please — this servant wishes to take his leave in the direction of Vishnu's realm.

INDRA. You all continue your pleasant conversation, then; this servant, too, desires to set out toward the realm of Vishnu.

(Exeunt hastily, in haste.)

END