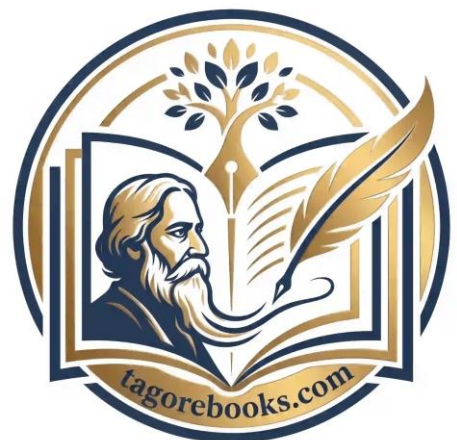


SHORT STORY

THE ACHIEVEMENT OF TARAPRASANNA

Rabindranath Tagore



True to the nature of the scribbling breed, Taraprasanna was somewhat shy and reticent. Venturing out into society was, for him, akin to courting catastrophe. Confined to his room, forever wielding his pen, his eyesight had grown dim, his back had taken on a slight stoop, and his experience of the world remained exceedingly meagre. The ready phrases of ordinary social intercourse did not come easily to his lips; and so, beyond the fortress of his own home, he never once felt secure.

The world, too, took him for something of a simpleton — and the world could hardly be blamed. Picture, for instance, a perfect stranger exclaiming at their very first meeting, "I cannot tell you, sir, in mere words, what boundless joy I feel at making your acquaintance." Taraprasanna would fall utterly silent, examining the palm of his right hand with the gravest concentration. That abrupt silence seemed to say: *That you are overjoyed is likely enough — but I am wondering how I am to utter the falsehood that I share in it.*

When some wealthy host, having invited him to a midday feast, began serving the food only as evening drew near, and fell to apologising again and again for the poverty of the fare — "This is nothing at all, a mere trifle, the broken rice of a pauper, an offering no better than Vidura's; I am only putting you to trouble, sir" — Taraprasanna would say nothing whatever, as though the statement were so self-evidently true that no reply could possibly be required.

Now and then some well-mannered gentleman would inform Taraprasanna that erudition such as his was rare indeed in the present age, and that the goddess Saraswati herself had abandoned her lotus seat to take up permanent residence upon his tongue. Taraprasanna would not offer the faintest word of protest, as though Saraswati had, quite literally, seized him by the throat. He ought to have known better: those who flatter a man to his face, and those who belittle themselves before others, both tend toward reckless exaggeration precisely because they expect to be contradicted. When the listener swallows the whole of it with an unmoved face, the speaker feels cheated of his due and grows bitterly aggrieved — for in such matters, a man is rarely sorry to be proven a liar.

Within his own household, however, Taraprasanna was an altogether different man; even his wife, Dakshayani, could not get the better of him in an exchange of words. The lady of the house would often be forced to concede, "Very well, very well — I yield. I have the household to see to." To make one's own wife confess

defeat with her own lips, in open verbal combat — how many husbands are granted such power, or such singular good fortune?

Taraprasanna's days passed pleasantly enough. It was Dakshayani's unshakeable conviction that in wit and capability her husband had no equal, and this she never hesitated to declare aloud. Hearing it, Taraprasanna would remark, "You have but the one husband — with whom, pray, could you possibly compare him?" — at which Dakshayani would take the gravest offence.

Dakshayani nursed but a single sorrow: that her husband's extraordinary powers remained unknown to the world, and that he made not the slightest effort to make them known. Whatever Taraprasanna wrote, he never published.

At her urging, Dakshayani would sometimes sit and listen to her husband's writings; and the less she understood, the more she marvelled. She had read Krittibas's *Ramayana*, Kashidas's *Mahabharata*, the *Kavikankan-Chandi*, and had sat through the recitation of the scriptures besides. All of it flowed as clear as water — even the unlettered could follow it without effort. But never before had she encountered so miraculous a gift for utter incomprehensibility as her husband possessed.

She would imagine how, once this book was printed and not a soul could make out a single syllable of it, the whole country would be struck dumb with awe. A thousand times over she urged her husband, "Have these writings printed."

Her husband would answer, "On the matter of publishing books, the revered lawgiver Manu himself has spoken: *Pravrittiresha bhutanam nivrittistu mahaphala*." It was his standing evasion — desire comes naturally to mortal creatures, he was fond of saying, but renunciation yields the greater fruit — and Dakshayani had heard it far too many times to be moved by it now.

Taraprasanna had four children, all of them daughters. Dakshayani held the fault to lie entirely in the womb that had borne them, and for this she considered herself a wretchedly unworthy wife to a husband of such genius. That a man could, with such ease, compose treatises of such impenetrable depth, while his wife's womb yielded nothing but daughters — what plainer proof of her own incompetence could there be?

When their eldest daughter had grown tall enough to reach her father's chest, Taraprasanna's peace of mind deserted him. It came to him, all at once, that all four

daughters would one day have to be married off, and that this would require a very great deal of money. The lady of the house, looking entirely unconcerned, said, "If only you would set your mind to it, even a little, there would be nothing at all to worry about."

Taraprasanna asked, with some eagerness, "Is that so? Then tell me — what must I do?"

Dakshayani answered, with perfect and untroubled certainty, "Go to Calcutta. Publish your books. Let five men of standing come to know your name — and then see for yourself whether the money does not come of its own accord."

Heartened by his wife's assurance, Taraprasanna gradually came to feel hopeful himself, and grew convinced that the sheer bulk of what he had written, sitting quietly at home all these years, would be more than enough to lift the burden of dowries from the whole neighbourhood.

A great commotion now arose over the matter of his journey to Calcutta. Dakshayani could not bear to let her helpless, unworldly, and tenderly indulged husband travel alone. Who would feed him, see that he was properly clothed, remind him of his daily habits, and shield him from the thousand nuisances of the world?

But the inexperienced husband was equally terrified of dragging wife and daughters off to an unfamiliar city, and would not hear of it. In the end, Dakshayani pressed a cunning fellow from the neighbourhood into her own office, burying him under a thousand instructions concerning her husband's daily ways, bound her husband with any number of solemn oaths, hung him about with protective amulets and talismans, and sent him off to that foreign city — only to collapse upon the floor the moment he was gone, weeping without restraint.

Once in Calcutta, Taraprasanna, with the help of his resourceful companion, published *Vedanta-Prabhakar*. The greater part of the money raised by pawning Dakshayani's jewellery was very soon spent.

He sent copies of *Vedanta-Prabhakar* to the booksellers for sale, and to every editor in the land, great and small, for review. He also sent one copy home to his wife by registered post, fearing that the postal clerks might otherwise make off with it along the way.

The day the lady of the house saw her husband's name printed upon the cover of a book, she invited every woman in the neighbourhood to a feast — and left the book, quite by design, lying exactly where the guests were to sit.

Once everyone had gathered, she called out, "Oh! Now who has left this book lying about here? Annada, dear, hand it to me — let me put it away properly." Annada, among them all, knew how to read. She set the book up on a high shelf.

A moment later, reaching as if for something else entirely, she knocked it down again — and then, turning to her eldest daughter, said, "Shashi, I daresay you'd like to read your father's book? Go on then, child, read it — there's no call to be shy." Shashi had not the smallest interest in her father's book.

A little while after, she scolded the girl soundly: "For shame, child, a father's book is not to be spoiled so — give it to your sister Kamala; she will see it safely put away on top of the almirah."

Had the book possessed even a grain of feeling, that single day's torment would have been the death of the Vedanta all over again.

One by one, the reviews began to appear in the papers, and what the lady of the house had guessed proved very largely true. Unable to make out a single letter of the text, critics up and down the country fell into utter bewilderment — and declared, with one voice, "A work of such profound substance has never before been published."

Critics who could stomach nothing weightier than the Bengali rendering of Reynolds's *Mysteries of London* wrote with the greatest enthusiasm: "Were even one or two such treatises to appear now and then, in place of the basketfuls of worthless plays and novels, Bengali letters might yet become worth the reading."

A man whose forefathers had never so much as heard the word *Vedanta* wrote: "We do not find ourselves in full agreement with Babu Taraprasanna on every point — for want of space we omit those differences here — yet, on the whole, we discover a great unity of thought between the author and ourselves." Had this been true, the book, taken as a whole, ought properly to have been burned.

The secretaries of every library in the land, whether it existed or not, sent printed appeals begging a copy of Taraprasanna's book in place of actual payment. Many

of them wrote, "This thoughtful work of yours has filled a great want in our nation." Tarapasanna could not quite make out what was meant by a "thoughtful work," but, thrilled to the very core of him, he paid the postage from his own pocket and sent *Vedanta-Prabhakar* off to every library in the country.

Just as Tarapasanna was swelling with the fullest measure of delight amid this endless shower of praise, a letter reached him: Dakshayani's fifth confinement was close at hand. Taking his guardian companion with him, he hurried at once to the booksellers to collect his earnings.

Every shopkeeper told him, to a man, that not a single copy had sold. In one shop only he learned that someone in the provinces had once sent for a copy by Value Payable Post; it had been duly dispatched, but had come back unclaimed, and the shopkeeper had been made to pay the return postage as a penalty — and so, in high resentment, he now tried at once to unload his entire remaining stock back upon the author.

Back at his lodgings, the author turned the matter over and over in his mind, and could make no sense of it at all. The more he thought about his "thoughtful work," the more his unease grew. At last, gathering up the few rupees still left to him, he set off for home without further delay.

Presenting himself before his wife, Tarapasanna put on a great show of cheerfulness. Dakshayani waited, smiling, for the glad news.

Tarapasanna then produced a copy of the *Gaur-Barta-Baha* and spread it open upon his wife's lap. Reading it, she silently prayed that its editor might be blessed with inexhaustible wealth and sons, and made a private offering of sandal-paste and flowers to his pen. Having finished it, she looked up once more into her husband's face.

Her husband next brought out the *Nababrabhat* and opened it before her. Reading it, Dakshayani was overcome with joy, and once again lifted her soft, expectant eyes to her husband's face.

Then Tarapasanna produced a copy of the *Yugantar*. And after that? After that, the *Bharat-Bhagya-Chakra*. And after that? The *Shubha-Jagaran*. Then the *Arunalok*. Then the *Sangbad-Taranga-Bhanga*. And after that — the *Asha*, the *Agamani*, the *Uchchhas*, the *Pushpamanjari*, the *Sahachari*, the *Sita-Gazette*, the

Ahalya-Library-Prakashika, the *Lalit-Samachar*, the *Kotal*, the *Bishwa-Bicharok*, the *Labanyalatika*. Through her smiles, tears of joy ran freely down the lady's face.

Wiping her eyes, she gazed once more upon her husband's face, glowing now in the light of his newfound fame. Her husband said, "There are still a good many papers left."

Dakshayani said, "I shall look at them this afternoon. Now tell me — what other news have you?"

Taraprasanna said, "While I was in Calcutta this time, I heard that the Viceroy's wife has brought out a book of her own. But she made no mention whatever of *Vedanta-Prabhakar*."

Dakshayani said, "Oh, never mind all that — tell me, what else did you bring back?"

Taraprasanna said, "There are a few letters."

Then Dakshayani asked, quite plainly, "How much money did you bring?"

Taraprasanna answered, "I borrowed five rupees from Bidhubhushan."

When Dakshayani had heard the whole of the account, her faith in the essential honesty of the world was overturned entirely. The shopkeepers, without question, had cheated her husband — and the whole reading public of Bengal must have conspired together to cheat the shopkeepers.

Presently it struck her that Bidhubhushan — the very man she had sent along as her own representative — must secretly have thrown in his lot with the booksellers. And as the day wore on she saw, with perfect clarity, that Bishwambhar Chatterjee of the next quarter, her husband's bitterest enemy, lay behind the whole affair; the entire business, beyond any doubt, was the fruit of his scheming. Why, of course — two days after her husband had set off for Calcutta, Bishwambhar had been seen standing beneath the banyan tree, talking with Kanai Pal. True, Bishwambhar and Kanai Pal were forever talking together, which was why she had thought nothing of it at the time — but now the whole matter was as clear as water.

Meanwhile Dakshayani's worldly anxieties only mounted. Now that this one easy road to fortune had come to nothing, the old guilt of having borne only daughters returned to scorch her fourfold. Bishwambhar, Bidhubhushan, the whole

population of Bengal — none of these could she hold to account for this particular failing; the entire burden of it she was forced to shoulder alone, allotting only the smallest share of blame to the daughters already born, and to the one yet to come. Day and night, she knew no peace of mind.

As her time drew near, Dakshayani's bodily condition grew so grave that it became a source of the gravest alarm to everyone about her. Tarapasanna, helpless and half out of his senses, ran to Bishwambhar and pleaded, "Brother — if I leave these fifty books here with you as security, will you lend me some money, that I might send to the city for a proper midwife?"

Bishwambhar said, "Brother, think nothing of it — I shall find whatever money is needed; take your books back home with you." So saying, he haggled long and hard with Kanai Pal and scraped together some funds between them, while Bidhubhushan himself paid the fare out of his own pocket and travelled to Calcutta to fetch the midwife.

God alone knows what passed through Dakshayani's mind, but she called her husband to her, bound him by an oath on her own life, and said, "The very moment the pains begin, do not forget to take the medicine that was shown to me in my dream. And never, on any account, take off the ascetic's amulet." And she drew a thousand such small promises from him, holding both his hands in hers. She added, too, that she had not the smallest trust left in Bidhubhushan — that he had been the ruin of her husband — or else she would have left her husband entirely in his keeping, medicine, amulet, oaths and all.

Then, having warned her guileless, Shiva-like husband over and over again against the merciless and cunning schemers of this world, she whispered at last, "Listen — if the daughter I am to bear should live, name her Vedantaprabha. After that, it will do simply to call her Prabha."

So saying, she took the dust of her husband's feet and touched it to her own head. And in her heart she said, *I came into my husband's house only to bring forth daughters. Perhaps, this time, that affliction is at an end.*

When the midwife said, "Look, mother — just once — see what a lovely girl she is," the mother turned her eyes upon the child a single time, closed them, and murmured faintly, "Vedantaprabha."

After that, she found no more time, in this mortal world, to speak another word.

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