

SHORT STORY

# THE DOWRY

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When, after five sons, a daughter was at last born, her father and mother, in their great fondness, named her Nirupama. So fashionable a name had never before been heard in that family. Almost without exception, the names in use there had been those of gods — Ganesh, Kartik, Parvati, and the like.

Now proposals of marriage were under way for Nirupama. Her father, Ramasundar Mitra, made every possible inquiry, but no match could be found to satisfy him. At last he discovered the one and only son of a family of considerable standing — the household of a certain Rai Bahadur. The ancestral wealth of this Rai Bahadur had, it is true, shrunk a good deal over the years; but the family was of old and honourable lineage.

The bridegroom's side asked for a dowry of ten thousand rupees, along with a great quantity of gifts besides. Ramasundar, without a moment's hesitation, agreed to every condition; a match of this quality was not, on any account, to be let slip.

But the money itself proved impossible to raise. By mortgaging what could be mortgaged, and selling what could be sold, after every effort some six or seven thousand rupees still remained wanting. And all the while the day of the wedding drew nearer.

At last the wedding day arrived. A man had agreed, at a punishing rate of interest, to lend the remaining sum — but when the hour came, he failed to appear. A great commotion broke out in the wedding assembly. Ramasundar clasped the Rai Bahadur's hands and feet and begged, "Let the auspicious ceremony be completed — I give you my word, I shall pay the money in full." The Rai Bahadur answered, "Until the money is in hand, the bridegroom cannot be brought into the hall."

At this calamity a great weeping arose within the women's quarters. And the root cause of all this grave misfortune sat there quietly the whole while, dressed in her wedding silk, adorned with her ornaments, sandal-paste upon her brow. It could hardly be said that any great devotion or affection for her future in-laws was taking root in her heart just then.

In the midst of this, a fortunate turn occurred. The bridegroom himself suddenly rose up in defiance of his own father. He said to him, "I know nothing of buying and selling and bargaining; I have come here to be married, and married I shall be before I leave."

The father turned to whoever stood nearest and said, "You see, sir, the manners of the young men of today." One or two elderly men present said, "There is no teaching of the scriptures left, no moral training whatever — this is the natural result."

The Rai Bahadur, witnessing with his own eyes the poisonous fruit of modern education in his own son, sat down, all the spirit gone out of him. And so the marriage was completed, after a fashion, in an atmosphere of gloom and no rejoicing at all.

When the time came for Nirupama to leave for her husband's house, her father drew her to his breast and could no longer hold back his tears. Niru asked, "Father, will they never let me come home again?" Ramasundar said, "Why should they not let you come, my darling? I shall come and bring you myself."

Ramasundar went often to see his daughter, but in his in-laws' house he carried no weight whatsoever. Even the servants there looked upon him with disdain. In some separate room outside the women's quarters he would sometimes be granted five minutes' sight of his daughter — and sometimes not granted even that.

Such humiliation, endured again and again in the house of one's own kin by marriage, could not be borne forever. Ramasundar resolved that, come what might, the money must be paid in full.

But a debt once taken upon the shoulders is no easy burden to carry. His household expenses grew impossibly strained, and to escape the eyes of his creditors he was driven, again and again, to all manner of humiliating shifts and stratagems.

Meanwhile, in her husband's house, at every turn, his daughter was made to feel the taunt of it. To hear her own father's house reviled, and then to shut herself in her room and weep, had become as much a part of her daily round as any other duty.

Her mother-in-law's rancour, above all, was never to be appeased. If anyone happened to remark, "Ah, what beauty — one's eyes are refreshed at the very sight of the young bride's face," the mother-in-law would flare up at once and say, "Beauty, indeed! Just what one would expect, from just such a family."

Even the bride's food and clothing went unattended. If some kindly neighbour ever pointed out some such neglect, the mother-in-law would say, "That is quite enough of that" — meaning, plainly, that had her father paid the dowry in full, his daughter would have received her full measure of care as well. Everyone in that house behaved as though the young bride had no rightful claim there at all, as though she had slipped in under false pretences.

It seems this news of his daughter's neglect and humiliation must, in time, have reached her father's ears. And so, at last, Ramasundar set about trying to sell the family home.

But he kept from his sons the fact that he was about to leave them without a roof over their heads. His plan was to sell the house and then rent that very same house to live in, managing the whole affair with such cunning that his sons would not learn of it until after his own death.

But the sons found out. They all came to him in tears. The three eldest, especially, were married men, and some of them already had children of their own. Their objections proved too weighty to overcome, and the sale of the house was set aside.

Ramasundar then began borrowing small sums, a little here and a little there, from various quarters, at ruinous rates of interest — until, at last, there was no longer enough even to keep the household running.

Niru understood everything from the look upon her father's face. In the old man's greying hair, his careworn face, his ever-more-diffident bearing, poverty and anxiety showed themselves plainly. When a father stands guilty before his own daughter, how can the remorse for that guilt possibly be hidden? Whenever Ramasundar, by his in-laws' leave, was granted a brief moment's sight of his daughter, one had only to see his smile to know how his heart was breaking within him.

To comfort that wounded father's heart, Niru grew altogether restless to spend a few days at her father's house. She could no longer bear to stay away, seeing her father's careworn face. One day she said to Ramasundar, "Father, take me home, just once." Ramasundar said, "Very well."

But he had no real power to make it so — the natural right a father holds over his own daughter had, it seemed, been pledged away, as surety, against the unpaid dowry. Even the sight of his own daughter he was obliged to beg for, with the greatest diffidence, and if refused, he had not the face to ask a second time.

But when the daughter herself wished to come home, how could a father not bring her? And so, before he could bring himself to lay this request before his son-in-law's father, the full history of what shame, what humiliation, what sacrifice it had cost Ramasundar to scrape together three thousand rupees is better left untold.

Wrapping the notes in a handkerchief and binding it into the corner of his shawl, Ramasundar went and sat down before his son-in-law's father. At first, smiling, he brought up the news of the neighbourhood — a great theft had taken place at Harekrishna's house, and he related the whole affair from beginning to end. He compared the two brothers, Nabinmadhab and Radhamadhab, praising Radhamadhab's intelligence and character while finding fault with Nabinmadhab's; he discussed, with much fanciful speculation, some new illness that had lately appeared in the city. At last, setting down his hookah, he remarked, as though in passing, "Ah yes, my friend — that money is still owing, is it not? I mean to bring some of it every time I come, but somehow, when the moment arrives, it slips my mind. And besides, brother, I have grown old." With this long preamble, he drew out those three notes — as though drawing out three of his own ribs — with an air of the greatest ease and unconcern. But at the mere sight of three thousand rupees in notes, the Rai Bahadur burst into loud laughter.

He said, "Let it be, my friend — I have no need of that." And, citing some common Bengali proverb, he said he had no wish to soil his hands over so trifling a sum.

After this incident, no one so much as raised the question of bringing the daughter home — until Ramasundar himself thought, "Such delicacy toward one's in-laws no longer becomes me." Sitting silent a long while, heart-stricken, he at last brought up the matter in a low voice. The Rai Bahadur, offering no reason whatsoever, simply said, "That is not possible just now," and, on the pretext of some business, left the room.

Ramasundar, without so much as seeing his daughter's face, tied the remaining notes with trembling hands into the corner of his shawl and went home again, like a thief slinking away. In his heart he vowed that he would not return to his in-laws'

house again until he could pay off the whole debt and lay claim to his daughter without shame.

A long while passed. Nirupama sent messenger after messenger, but could not obtain a sight of her father. At last, in wounded pride, she stopped sending them altogether — and this struck a heavy blow to Ramasundar's heart, and yet still he did not go.

The month of Ashvin came round. Ramasundar said, "This time, when the Puja comes, I will bring my girl home, whatever happens — or else —" and swore a very solemn oath indeed.

On the fifth or sixth day of the festival, Ramasundar once again bound a few notes into the corner of his shawl and made ready to set out. His five-year-old grandson came running to him and said, "Grandfather, are you going to buy me a carriage?" — for the boy had long dreamed of riding out to take the air in a little pushcart, though there had never yet been any way to satisfy the wish. His six-year-old granddaughter came weeping to say that she had not even one good sari to wear to the Puja festivities to which she had been invited.

Ramasundar knew all this well, and had, over many a pipe of tobacco, turned it over long and often in his mind. He had let out many a deep sigh at the thought that when the invitation to the Rai Bahadur's Puja celebrations came, his daughters-in-law would have to appear there, in their meagre ornaments, looking like poor relations living on another's charity — but all this sighing had accomplished nothing beyond etching the lines of age a little deeper into his brow.

Carrying with him the cries of a household stricken by poverty, the old man made his way into his in-laws' house. Today there was no trace left in him of his old diffidence; that quick, shy, sidelong glance toward the gatekeeper and the servants had vanished entirely — he entered as though he were entering his own home. He was told the Rai Bahadur was not in, and that he must wait a while. Unable to contain the fullness of his heart, Ramasundar went in to see his daughter. Tears of joy streamed from both their eyes. The father wept, and the daughter wept, and neither could find a single word to say. Some while passed in this way. Then Ramasundar said, "I am taking you home with me this time, my dear. There will be no more trouble now."

Just then Ramasundar's eldest son, Haramohan, suddenly entered the room with his two young sons in tow. He said to his father, "So, Father — this time you mean to cast us out into the street?"

Ramasundar, in a sudden blaze of anger, said, "Am I to be damned to hell for your sakes? Will you not even let me keep my word once given?" Ramasundar had, in fact, already sold the house, and had taken great pains to keep his sons from finding out; and finding, now, that they had learned of it after all, his anger and irritation with them broke out all at once.

His grandson clasped both arms tightly about his knees and, looking up into his face, said, "Grandfather, won't you buy me a carriage?"

Getting no answer from his crestfallen grandfather, the boy went over to Niru and said, "Auntie, will you buy me a carriage?"

Nirupama, understanding the whole of it at once, said, "Father — if you give my father-in-law so much as another paisa, you shall never see your daughter again. I say this with my hand upon you."

Ramasundar said, "For shame, my dear — you must not say such things. And besides, if I cannot pay this money, it is an insult to your father-in-law, and an insult to you as well."

Niru said, "It is only if you pay it that there is any insult at all. Has your daughter, then, no worth of her own? Am I nothing more than a purse of money, valued only so long as there is money in it? No, Father — do not use this money to insult me so. Besides, my husband himself wants none of this money."

Ramasundar said, "Then, my dear, they will not let you come home."

Nirupama said, "Then let them refuse — what is there to be done about it? And you, too, must give up wanting to take me."

With trembling hands Ramasundar lifted the shawl with its bound notes onto his shoulder, and, once more escaping every eye like a thief, made his way home.

But that Ramasundar had brought this money, and that his own daughter had forbidden him to give it, and that he had gone away again without giving it — this did not remain a secret. Some servant, given to lingering at doorways with an ear

cocked for gossip, carried the news to Niru's mother-in-law. Hearing it, her fury knew no bounds whatsoever.

For Nirupama, her husband's house now became a bed of arrows. Meanwhile her husband, not long after the wedding, had been made a deputy magistrate and gone off to a post in another district; and on the pretext that bad company might teach her unbecoming ways, all contact between Niru and her own family had lately been forbidden outright.

It was at this time that Niru fell gravely ill. But her mother-in-law cannot be held wholly to blame for it. Niru herself had grown terribly careless of her own health. In the chill of the month of Kartik she would leave the door of her room open all through the night; in the cold season she went about with hardly a wrap upon her. She kept no regular hours for her meals. When the maidservants sometimes forgot to bring her food, she would not even trouble to remind them of it. The conviction had taken firm root in her mind that she was living there only on the sufferance of servants and masters not her own, a stranger dependent on another house's charity. But even this attitude her mother-in-law could not forgive. If ever she noticed the young bride neglecting her food, she would say, "A Nawab's daughter, is she not — the food of a poor man's house does not agree with her palate." Or, at other times, "Just look at her, just look at what she has become — day by day she is turning to a mere blackened stick."

When the illness grew grave, her mother-in-law said, "It is all her own affectation." At last, one day, Niru said to her mother-in-law, with the greatest humility, "Mother, I should like to see my father, and my brothers, once more."

Her mother-in-law said, "It is only a pretext to go running back to her father's house."

No one, hearing it, would believe it — but on the very evening that Niru's breath began to fail, that was the first day a doctor was called to see her, and that same day was the last of the doctor's visits as well.

The eldest daughter-in-law of the house had died, and her funeral rites were performed with the greatest pomp. Just as the Ray Chowdhurys of the district were famous, throughout the region, for the splendour of their idol-immersion processions, so now a similar fame spread abroad regarding the Rai Bahadurs and

the funeral rites of their eldest daughter-in-law — never before had this country seen so grand a pyre of sandalwood. Such an elaborate shraddha ceremony, too, was a thing only the house of a Rai Bahadur could afford — and it is said that the expense of it left them somewhat in debt.

When they came to console Ramasundar, everyone dwelt at great length upon the magnificent splendour with which his daughter had died.

Meanwhile a letter arrived from the deputy magistrate: "I have now made all the necessary arrangements here; send my wife to me without delay." And the Rai Bahadur's own lady wrote as well: "My dear boy, I have arranged another match for you; take leave at once and come here without delay."

This time the dowry was twenty thousand rupees, paid over in full, upon the spot.