PLAY

THE FLUTE

Rabindranath Tagore

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Banshori Sarkar — a sharp-witted young woman, educated at a university abroad **Kshitish** — a novelist and writer of short stories **Sushama Sen** — daughter of the house; engaged to be married **Vibhasini** — Sushama's widowed mother **Sushima** — Sushama's young sister, eleven years old **Somshankar Singh** — Raja of Shambhugarh **Purandar** — a wandering sannyasi, and Sushama's tutor **Archana Sen** — Sushima's aunt **Leela** — Sushama's cousin, lately returned to the study of science after a first-class degree in literature **Nanda** — a friend of Sushama's **Tarak Lahiri, Shachin, Arun, Satish, Sudhangshu** — young men of the party **Shailabala (Shaila)** — a young woman of the party **Two friends**, inseparable, nicknamed *Anasuya* and *Priyambada* after the classical pair, and addressed in this translation only as **First** and **Second**, as in the original

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

Shrimati Banshori Sarkar is a young woman who took her degree at a university abroad. She is not beautiful, and yet she manages very well without it. Her nature is radiant with an electric brilliance; her form has the gleam of well-honed steel.

Kshitish is a man of letters. His looks are flawed, but his name is well known for the writing of stories. The party has gathered in the garden of the Sen household — Sushama's family.

BANSHORI. Kshitish, one might as well call you the comet of the newest fashion in letters. With the lash of your blazing tail you have gone sweeping the old manners clean out of the sky. But where I have brought you today is an Anglo-Bengali circle, a fashionable quarter. You do not know your way about here. Had they demanded your card at the gate, you would have broken into a sweat. So I brought you early. For the present, sit somewhere out of sight. When everyone has come, you may reveal your own glory. I am going now — I may not come back at all.

KSHITISH. Wait — explain yourself a little. Why bring me to a place where I do not belong?

BANSHORI. Then let me put it plainly. You have made a name for yourself in the marketplace by your books. I had hoped for something more. I had thought you would rescue your name from the marketplace and raise it so high that the common crowd would be left below, cursing you for it.

KSHITISH. Do you not admit that my name is no worn coin passed from hand to hand in the bazaar?

BANSHORI. I am not speaking of the great bazaar of literature at large — the New Market rate at which you and your kind conduct your trade is a bazaar all its own. You have not the courage to step outside it, for fear the shine should go out of your goods. And here is the proof, in this latest book of yours, which you have named *Mismatched*. The greed to win over readers cheaply is in you, whole and entire. It is the very greed that kills mediocre writers. This book of yours is modernity printed at the Bat-tala press — modernity gone cheap.

KSHITISH. I see you are somewhat provoked — the knife must have gone in, straight through the fashionable shirt-front of your circle.

BANSHORI. Heaven help us! You call that a knife! It is the wooden dagger of a travelling players' troupe, smeared over with tinfoil. Only fools are taken in by it.

KSHITISH. Very well, I grant it. But why bring me here?

BANSHORI. You practise your music by drumming on a table; I have brought you to where the real music is played, to teach you something. You keep your distance from these people, envy them, and invent your abuse of them. That circle you created under the name of Nalinaksha in your book, and made the world laugh at — do you truly know the people of that circle?

KSHITISH. Not as a witness in a court of law knows them — but well enough to invent them.

BANSHORI. To invent well, sir, requires knowing a great deal more than any witness in court. In college you learned by rote that the sentence steeped in *rasa* is poetry; now you are grown to manhood, and still you have not managed to complete the lesson — that it is the sentence steeped in *truth*, when it is also steeped in *rasa*, that deserves to be called literature.

KSHITISH. It is no trade of mine to supply flavour to a childish taste. I have come to grind the worn-out to dust and sweep it clean away.

BANSHORI. Well, well! If you would make a broom of your pen, then the rubbish-heap must be real, and the broom-twigs real, and the hand of the sweeper real besides. Here we stand, we ourselves — your Nalinaksha's own circle. We have faults enough, and yours are no fewer. I do not ask you to pardon our failings — I ask you to know us well, to render us truly. Whether the result pleases or displeases, it is no matter at all.

KSHITISH. You, at least, I have come to know, Bashi. And I daresay you catch some hint, out of the corner of your eye, of how the knowing feels to me.

BANSHORI. Listen, man of letters — even our circle keeps its own scales for what fits and what does not. Smearing one's words with treacle till they turn sticky is not the fashion here. It disgusts us. Listen, Kshitish, let me say it to you plainly once again.

KSHITISH. Your words are already so plain that they strike harder than I can make sense of.

BANSHORI. No matter, listen. You have read the story of Ashwatthama's childhood. Seeing a rich man's son drinking milk, he set up a wail, and so they mixed him rice-flour in water and gave it him to drink, and he danced with both arms raised, crying that he had drunk milk.

KSHITISH. I understand — you need say no more. You mean that in my writing I feed my child-readers rice-water and set them dancing for milk.

BANSHORI. Your writing is manufactured — written out of other books. To one who has known truth in life, such writing tastes flat.

KSHITISH. And you — have you known truth?

BANSHORI. Yes, I have — but the sorrow is that I have no power to write it. And a greater sorrow still: you have the power to write, but no truth to write of. What I want is that you learn to know things clearly, as I have known them face to face, and learn to write them true — so true that it will seem my very heart and soul are blossoming out through the point of your pen.

KSHITISH. You have told me of the knowing. What, then, is the method of it?

BANSHORI. Let the method begin with this very party today. You stand at just such a distance from this little world of ours that you may look upon the whole of it undisturbed, without attachment.

KSHITISH. Very well then — give me a plain account of this party, a synopsis.

BANSHORI. Then listen. On the one side is this house's daughter, Sushama Sen. Every man's opinion of her is the same — that there exists in the world no one worthy of her but himself. Among the more headstrong young men I catch, now and again, a certain rolling-up of the sleeves that tells me plainly enough that, but for the law courts, men would have destroyed one another over her. On the other side is Somshankar, the Raja of Shambhugarh. What the women whisper of him among themselves I will not say, for I too belong to that sex. Today's party is for the engagement of these two.

KSHITISH. So the whereabouts of two people are established. But the number two settles always into the cool domesticity of a household; it is the number three that

plays Narada, twisting the plot into knots and raising a scorching drama. Somewhere in this there must be a third person — otherwise where would be the temptation for a writer?

BANSHORI. There is a third person — he may indeed be the chief person of all. People call him Purandar the Sannyasi. No trace can be found of the name his father gave him. Some have seen him at the Kumbha Mela; some have seen him bear-hunting in the Garo hills; some say he lived long years in Europe. He taught Sushama her college lessons of his own free will, and it is he, in the end, who has brought about this match. Sushama's mother wished the ceremony conducted by someone of the Brahmo Samaj; Sushama grew stubborn and would have no one but Purandar himself. If you ask me about the weather all round, I will tell you a depression has set in, somewhere. The general drift is stormy; a squall has come down over some quarter or other, and the rainfall is likely to be above the ordinary. That is all — no more.

KSHITISH. Oh, look — there, on my *endi* shawl, a great blot of ink.

BANSHORI. Why be troubled? That very ink-stain is your distinction. You are a realist — spotlessness does not become you. You are the standard-bearer of ink. Ah, here come Anasuya and Priyambada.

KSHITISH. Meaning?

BANSHORI. Two friends, inseparable. They have earned those names in the examination-hall of friendship; everyone has forgotten their real ones.

[Both exit. Enter the two friends.]

FIRST. Today is Sushama's engagement. How strange it feels, to think of it.

SECOND. Every girl's heart misgives her at an engagement.

FIRST. Why?

SECOND. One feels as though she were walking a rope, trembling between joy and sorrow. To look at her face gives one a kind of fear.

FIRST. True enough. Today it feels as though the drop-curtain of the first act of a play had just gone up. The hero and heroine are just so — the playwright has dressed them with his own hand and sent them out upon the stage. To look at Raja

Somshankar, one would think he had stepped straight out of Tod's *Rajasthan*, two or three hundred years late.

SECOND. Didn't you see him, the very first time His Highness came! Pure medieval — shaggy hair, a warrior's ring in his ear, thick bangles on his wrist, a sandalwood mark on his brow, and his Bengali crooked as a bent stick. Then he fell into Banshori's hands, and out came a modern edition of him. The transformation happened before our eyes, so fast that no one doubted he would end up adopted whole into Banshori's own clan. His father, Prabhushankar, got wind of it and hastily hauled him out of the clutches of the modern.

FIRST. A greater master than Banshori is that Purandar the Sannyasi — he has leapt every fence and dragged the Raja's son straight into this Brahmo Samaj ring-exchange gathering. And the hardest fence of all was Banshori herself.

[Enter Bibhasini, Sushama's widowed mother. Her figure is like the sandbanks that show, here and there, along the course of a thinly flowing river in the month of Baishakh — a loosely spread frame, somewhat fleshy, yet not so overlaid but that some remnant current of her youth still shows through.]

BIBHASINI. What are you two sitting there whispering about?

FIRST. Auntie, it is nearly time for the guests to arrive — why is there no sign of Sushama?

BIBHASINI. I could not say — perhaps she is still dressing. Come along now, my dears, to the tea-table; the guests must be fed.

FIRST. We're coming, Auntie — but the sun is still full there.

BIBHASINI. I had better go and see what Sushama is about. Has neither of you seen her here?

SECOND. No, Auntie.

BIBHASINI. Someone told me she had come this way, by the pond.

FIRST. No — we ourselves have been strolling there all this while.

[Exit Bibhasini.]

SECOND. Just look, my dear, how hard your Sudhangshu is slaving away — he has bought the flowers at his own expense and dressed the table with his own hands. Yesterday he made quite a scene. Nepu Biswas twisted his mouth and said Sushama was marrying some savage of a Raja out of greed for money.

FIRST. Nepu Biswas! And why should his mouth not twist — with lockjaw raging in his own chest! These days there is a very Lanka-conflagration of heartburn among the young men, all over Sushama. That chest of Sudhangshu's has turned into something like the boiler-room of a man-of-war.

SECOND. Sudhangshu has spirit in him — no sooner did he hear what Nepu said than he flung him flat on the ground, sat astride his chest, and told him he must write a letter of apology.

FIRST. A terrible bully — for fear of him no one can even get his fill of gossip. It is a hard lot for Bengali boys.

SECOND. Don't you know, a Society of the Despairing has been founded in our neighbourhood? Those whom people call Sushama's devotees, the "Sushamite" sect as they've been dubbed, have taken for themselves the name of the Luckless Brotherhood. They have had a banner made, bearing the device of a broken winnowing-fan. Such a racket as they raise every evening! The householders of the neighbourhood are saying they will bring a motion before the council — that the law must lay hold of every one of them and grant them immediate living burial, meaning marriage, without delay. Otherwise respectable people cannot sleep of a night. A public nuisance, as they call it.

FIRST. You could lend a hand in this work of public welfare, Priya.

SECOND. O soul of compassion, your own devotion to public welfare is second to no girl's, my dear. You have a fancy, I can guess, for installing the Goddess of Fortune in the house of the luckless. Anu, do you know that man there?

FIRST. I have never seen him before.

SECOND. That is Kshitish Babu. He writes stories, and has quite a name for it. Banshori knows the market-price of costly things. When she teases him, she says — I am satisfying my craving for milk with buttermilk, taking an oyster-shell in place of the pearl.

FIRST. Come, dear, everyone has arrived. If they see the two of us together they will start teasing.

[Exeunt.]

SCENE TWO

A corner of the garden, where three casuarina trees stand in a ring, with a wooden bench beneath them. Kshitish sits alone in that retreat. Elsewhere, among the invited guests, some are talking as they stroll about the garden, some are playing tennis, and some stand eating from the food laid out upon the tables.

SHACHIN. I say, Tarak, the fellow has gone and squatted right in our territory — next he'll be claiming permanent tenancy. It'll take a criminal suit to evict him.

TARAK. Whom do you mean?

SHACHIN. That story-writer fellow, Kshitish, from the *Nababarta* paper.

TARAK. I have never read a line he has written — which is precisely why I hold him in boundless reverence.

SHACHIN. You haven't read his new book, *Mismatched*? He has wrung the foreign-varnished young Bengali dry, twist after twist.

ARUN. He sat at a safe distance and drove his pen — no fear in his mind then. Now he has come near, he shall find out that we too know how to wring a man white as bone. And after that, we can mount him on a donkey's back.

ARCHANA. You want to save yourselves from his touch — don't you see it is he who fears yours? Sitting off at a distance, hatching his eggs of ideas.

SATISH. He is a chariot-warrior of literature; we are mere foot-soldiers trudging along. By what means shall the two ever meet?

SHACHIN. There stands the match-maker herself — your own sister, Banshori. Between highbrow Darjeeling and philistine Siliguri, she is the one laying down the railway line. It is by her own scheming that Kshitish has been invited here at all.

SATISH. Is that so! Then I shall pray God for peace upon the poor wretch's soul. He does not yet know my sister.

SHAILABALA. Say what you like, but I for one feel a kind of pity for him.

SATISH. On what account?

SHAILA. On account of his looks. I have heard that as a child he fell upon his mother's vegetable-knife and hurt his forehead, and that is how he came by that great scar. I do not like it when you mock him for a flaw of the body.

SHACHIN. Miss Shaila, the Creator made you flawless, and so you can afford such compassion. But one on whose looks the wrath of the Kali age has fallen wants to collect from the world the debt of the Creator's unkindness. And if into the bargain his hand holds a finely sharpened pen, it is best to keep a hundred cubits off. Remember what the English poet Pope had to say of such men.

SHAILA. Oh, you are all going too far.

SATISH. Shaila, seeing your tenderness for him makes me want to take a knife to my own forehead. It is written in the scriptures that in a woman's heart pity and love lodge in the very same chamber, and it takes no time at all for the one to change places with the other.

SHACHIN. You need have no fear, Satish — women reserve their pity only for the unworthy.

SHAILA. Are you trying to drive me away from here?

SHACHIN. That is exactly what Satish is waiting for. He will go along with you.

SHAILA. Don't provoke me, I warn you, or I shall let out a secret or two about you as well.

SHACHIN. Take note, friends, I too have news worth the letting-out.

SATISH. Miss Bani, do you see the man's impudence? He is pushing the rumour straight toward you. Unless you can side-step it, a collision is certain.

LEELA. There is no need to warn Miss Bani. She knows well enough that to run only chases the danger in faster. So she keeps still, and lets fate decide. There's that song — how does it go — "I said I would never be caught."

SONG

She vowed she would never be caught — that was the boast the whole world heard. No hero's pride could bear such a taunt, and so the battle-flag was stirred. What

came of it after, and whose the day, what fate befell the pennant of pride — some say the triumph, some say the fall; we are but they who spread it wide.

ARCHANA. Oh, why must you all fall upon Bani so? She will be in tears in a moment. Sushima, go and fetch Kshitish Babu for tea.

LEELA. Poor fated girl! You will call him in vain — have you no eyes, can you not see!

SATISH. Why, what is there to see?

LEELA. There, on the corner of his *endi* shawl, a great blot of ink. He thinks he has hidden it, but it hangs there in plain view.

SATISH. Well, what an eye you have, I must say!

LEELA. Short of the police coming to investigate a bomb, who has the power to move him from that spot?

SATISH. But I do fear that one of these days Banshori will marry that wounded man and set up an infirmary right there in the family.

LEELA. There's no telling what you'll say next. Fear, for Banshori! Let me tell you a story about her, and your fear will break the moment you hear it. I was there myself.

SHACHIN. What foolish cards you're all wasting time on! Come here — a story about the story-writer! Begin.

LEELA. After Somshankar had slipped out of her hands, Banshori took a fancy to keeping a pet writer of her own — claws, teeth, and all. And then, all of a sudden, up turned an entire raw man of letters from I don't know where. That day, full of enthusiasm, the fellow came to read her a new piece he had written — a fresh tale about Jayadeva and Padmavati. Jayadeva loves the queen Padmavati from afar; the queen has beauty to match her rank, adornment to match her beauty, learning to match it all — in short, born in our own age, she would have been exactly you, Shaila. Jayadeva's wife, meanwhile, is village-bred to the very last anna, her speech smelling of the stagnant village pond, her manners not fit to be described in company — so hideous her propensities that even dashes and asterisks could not decently stand in for them. In the end, the writer proved in the blackest of ink that Jayadeva is a snob, Padmavati a fraud, and only Mandakini true gold. Banshori sprang up from

her chair and cried out at the top of her voice, "Masterpiece!" A blessed creature, that girl — sheer sublime affectation.

SHACHIN. The poor fellow must have shriveled up flat, I should think.

LEELA. Quite the opposite — his chest swelled up. He said, "Shrimati Banshori, I do not purify the spade that digs the earth by calling it a *khanitra* — I call a spade a spade." And Banshori cried out, "Your title ought to be the Full Moon of the New Literature, proud of his own spots." Words come pouring out of that girl like fireworks.

SHACHIN. And this too went down the poor fellow's throat without sticking?

LEELA. Not in the least. Stirring his spoon round and round in his teacup, he thought to himself, I have astonished her — now I shall overwhelm her entirely. He said, "Shrimati Banshori, I have a theory. You will see, one day it will be proved in the laboratory. There is an energy in the living cells of women that pervades the very soil of the whole earth. Without it the earth would be barren." Our chief of coquetry, the moment she heard it, opened her eyes wide as saucers and said, "Soil! What are you saying, Kshitish Babu! Do not reduce women to soil. It is man who is the soil. If woman belongs anywhere among the five elements, it is in water. Woman and water are of one kind. She enters the gross earth in her subtlest form — sometimes she comes down from the sky as rain, sometimes she rises from beneath the ground as a spring, sometimes she hardens into ice, sometimes she scatters herself as a waterfall." Say what you will, Shaila dear, but Banshori gathers her words from somewhere the way the Ganga follows Bhagiratha — she could take the very breath out of Airavata the elephant-king himself.

TARAK. You've told your tale — let me tell mine. One day I gave a hint of a joke about Kshitish's patched-up face. Banshori burst out, "Look here, Lahiri, I positively like the look of his face." Astonished, I said, "Then it must be pure modern art — quite baffling to make out." Who can hold his own against her in talk? She said, "There is boundless courage in the Creator's brush. When He wishes to make a thing good to look upon, He does not feel obliged to make it beautiful as well. He scatters His sweets only on the plates of common folk." By Jove, that was a fine stroke.

SHAILA. Have you nothing else at all to talk of? Kshitish Babu will hear you.

SATISH. No fear — the fountain is playing over there, and the wind is blowing the other way; he will not hear a word.

ARCHANA. Very well, all of you go on playing your cards, go off to your tennis — I shall go and settle accounts with that man myself.

[Archana carried a plate of refreshments to Kshitish. She is of a stouter build, somewhat careless in her dress and adornment, with a cheerful, open face, her years tilted by some one degree toward the west.]

ARCHANA. Kshitish Babu, I can well understand your sitting here in hiding from the rest of us, but what fault has the refreshment table committed, that you have made it untouchable to yourself? You gentlemen are accustomed to the formless idea — is your feasting to be formless too, then, a feast without food? We women of Bengal have been given charge of serving Bengali literature on just the one front where your digestive organs happen to lie.

KSHITISH. Goddess, we supply sentences steeped in *rasa*, and disputes arise over them; you supply substances steeped in *rasa*, and no difference of opinion ever arises over taking those within.

ARCHANA. How splendid! While I was arranging the cake and *sandesh* on the plate, you were busy turning out that phrase. Though I fasted through seven lifetimes, nothing so brilliant would ever come out of my mouth. But never mind that. We have never been introduced, yet here I am beside you — think nothing of it. I haven't much to introduce myself with. I have never even had an account of my travels from Ballygunge to Tollygunge printed in any monthly magazine. My name is Archana Sen. That unknown little girl swinging her plait about over there — I am her obscure aunt.

KSHITISH. Then perhaps now, my own introduction—

ARCHANA. What are you saying! Did you take me for a village bumpkin? Does one need a guide posted at Sealdah Station to announce, shouting, that Calcutta is the capital city? Only the day before yesterday I read your story *Mismatched*. I very nearly died laughing over it. What now! Do you still feel shy to hear yourself praised! Why have you stopped eating? Now tell me truly — surely you had someone of your own household in mind when you wrote it. Without some bond of blood, no one could invent so extraordinary a creation. That place, you know, where Mister Kishen Gupta, B.A., Cantab, drops a ring down through the gap at the back of Miss Lotika's blouse and then, roaring with laughter, demands the right to a body-search — it set off a positive uproar. All my friends read it and said, matchless — Bengali literature has nothing to strike a match against that passage, not even a burnt-

out matchstick. Your writing is dreadfully realistic, Kshitish Babu. It quite frightens one to stand before you.

KSHITISH. Which of the two of us is the more fearsome — let the Creator Himself be the judge of that.

ARCHANA. No, don't make fun of me. Finish your samosa. You are the master; I could never match you in wit. Most interesting, your book is. Such characters are not to be found anywhere else. That girl, whatever her name is, who gasps at every other word and cries, my eyes, oh god — and the shy boy who, to break through Sandal's reserve, drove his own motor-car and deliberately sent it into a ditch, meaning to lift Sandal up in his two arms and play the rescuer of the fallen — and of course it had to happen that it was Sandal's own arm that came away with a compound fracture. How dramatic, the very height of realism! Vyasa himself never dreamed of so modern a method of love-making. Only think — what a magnificent chance was thrown away on Subhadra, and Arjuna's wrist got off safe into the bargain.

KSHITISH. You are no less modern yourself. You could put even a shameless man like me to shame.

ARCHANA. For heaven's sake, Kshitish Babu, don't be modest. You, shameless! Why, the *sandesh* is hardly going down your own throat for shyness. The pen, of course, is quite another matter.

LEELA. *(from some distance)* Archana Aunty, it's time — you're wanted.

ARCHANA. *(aside)* Leela, I've left him half dead — the rest is in your hands.

[Exit Archana. Enter Leela, who has taken a first-class M.A. in literature and has now gone back to studying science. She has a slight frame, is sharp in her wit and banter, elegant in her dress, and given to appraising glances.]

LEELA. Kshitish Babu, greetings! You belong to that company of whom it is said, "honoured everywhere." Where will you hide — the worshipper will hunt you out on her own account. I have brought my autograph book. Such a chance does not come often. Let us see what you write.

"The man who is not like all the rest is beaten at the hands of all the rest." Splendid — but pathetic. Their blows are envy. Remember, for small people envy is only one idiom of their devotion; the blow itself is their worship.

KSHITISH. A true daughter of the Goddess of Speech indeed — you astonish me with your words.

LEELA. It is you gentlemen who are the true sons of the Lord of Speech. What I said was only a quotation — from a man's own writing. Your genius lies in the composition of sentences; our skill lies only in the deployment of them. Originality is on every page of your book. The other day I read that story-book of yours — brilliant. That passage where a certain woman, seeing her husband's mind turned toward another, forges a letter and proves to her husband that she herself loves their neighbour Bamandas. What an extraordinary riddle of psychology! It is hard to say whether it is a stratagem to rouse jealousy in her husband's mind, or a generosity meant to set him free.

KSHITISH. No, no, you are —

LEELA. Don't be modest. Such an original idea, such brilliant language, such characterisation — I have seen it in no other writing of yours. You have here left even your own work far behind. It has none of your usual mannerisms in it, and yet—

KSHITISH. You are mistaken. That book, *Crimson Hibiscus*, is by Jatin Ghatak.

LEELA. What are you saying! For shame, for shame, that such a mistake should happen! Why, you are the very one who curses Jatin Ghatak twice a day, morning and evening. What sort of wits do I have! Do forgive this offence I have committed in ignorance. I am sending you another cup of tea — pray do not refuse it out of anger.

[Exit Leela. Enter Raja Bahadur Somshankar. He has the build of an epic hero — tall as a sal tree, mighty of arm — his fair complexion faintly darkened by the sun, his features heavy, his face clean-shaven of beard and moustache, wearing tight white churidar pyjamas, a tight-fitting white achkan, a turban of white muslin folded in the Punjabi fashion, white curled-toe slippers; and his voice carries the same weight as his frame.]

SOMSHANKAR. Kshitish Babu, may I sit down?

KSHITISH. Certainly.

SOMSHANKAR. My name is Somshankar Singh. I have heard your name from Miss Banshori. She is a devotee of yours.

KSHITISH. That is hard to judge. At the least, her devotion is not of an unmixed kind. The flowers of it fall away, and it is the thorns that go on pricking, day and night.

SOMSHANKAR. It is my misfortune that I have not had the leisure to read your book. Still, that you have come here on this particular day of ours makes me deeply grateful. I hope that some time you will visit us at Shambhugarh. The place is well worth the seeing, for a man of letters such as yourself.

BANSHORI. *(entering from behind)* You are mistaken, Shankar — what can be seen with the eye is not what he sees. His eyes turn backward, like a ghost's feet. But never mind that. Shankar, don't trouble yourself. There was no invitation for me here today. I take it that this was no error of my stars, but an error of the hosts', and I have come to correct it. Today is your engagement day with Sushama, and that I should not be present at this gathering — that simply cannot be allowed to happen. Are you not glad that I have come uninvited?

SOMSHANKAR. I am very glad indeed — need that even be said?

BANSHORI. Sit here a moment, and say that properly. Kshitish, go and be your own sole company under that champak tree for a while. I shall not speak ill of you behind your back.

[Exit Kshitish.]

Shankar, there is not much time; let me finish this business quickly and set you free. Some old rubbish has piled up along the road of your new engagement. Clear it away, and the path will run smooth. Here, take this.

[Banshori drew from a silk pouch an emerald necklace, a diamond bracelet, and a pearl-studded brooch, showed them, put them back into the pouch, and dropped it into Somshankar's lap.]

SOMSHANKAR. Bashi, you know words do not come easily to me. What I could not say, understand the meaning of it for yourself.

BANSHORI. I know it all already; I understand the meaning well enough. Now go — it is your time.

SOMSHANKAR. Don't go yet, Bashi. Don't misjudge me. Hear my last words before you go. I am a man of the jungle. When I first came to the city, at the very

outset of my college days, I met you — that was fate's own doing. It was you who made a man of me; that debt can never be repaid. These jewels are a trifle beside it.

BANSHORI. Hear my last words too, Shankar. I was in my first youth then, and you came into that newly-wakened, rose-red horizon of mine. Whom I called out and brought into the light, whether you take her along with you or not, I had already gained her for myself. I came to know myself through it. So — the account stands settled on both sides. Now the two of us walk on, debtless, each along our own road. What more could one want?

SOMSHANKAR. Bashi, if I try to say anything more, I shall only say it like a fool. I understand now — the real thing I have to say will never be said, not ever. Very well, then, let it rest. Why do you stand there gazing at me so silently? It feels as though your two eyes might make me vanish altogether.

BANSHORI. I am looking into an age a hundred years hence. In that direction I am not there, you are not there, none of today's people are there at all. You speak of being misjudged! Over that very misjudging the chariot of Time will pass. It will turn to dust, and upon that dust your grandchildren's children will sit and play. Glory be to that untroubled dust.

SOMSHANKAR. Then there is no place left anywhere for these jewels — so let them go.

[He flung them into the pool of the fountain. Enter Sushima, Sushama's younger sister, wearing a frock, spectacles on her eyes, her plait swinging, an eleven-year-old girl who walks with quick steps.]

SUSHIMA. The sannyasi father is coming, Shankar-da. Everyone has sent for you. Won't you come too, Bashi-didi?

BANSHORI. Of course I shall come — let the time for coming arrive first.

[Exeunt Somshankar and Sushima.]

Kshitish, come here — listen. Are your eyes any use to you? Can you make out anything at all?

KSHITISH. I stand outside the stage. I catch the sound of it, but not the way through.

BANSHORI. You have opened up the road to New Market in the Bengali novel entirely by your own strength, pouring the tar yourself. And here, to find your way through a mere puppet-show, you need an official guide! People will laugh at you for it!

KSHITISH. Let them laugh. If I have not found the road, I have at least found such a guide.

BANSHORI. Flattery! A trade in cheap sweetmeats! That is not why I called you here. Learn to see truly, and you will learn to write truly. All around you there are many who are human, and many who are less than human — look carefully and you will make them out. Look, look — look well.

KSHITISH. And if I don't — what is it to you?

BANSHORI. Because I myself cannot write, Kshitish. I see with my eyes, I understand in my mind, but the voice is stopped, and it all comes to nothing. History tells us that once the thumbs of Bengali craftsmen were cut off. I too am a craftsman, and the Creator has cut off my thumb. I must make do with imported goods, and I have to test them to see whether they ring true. You writers — it is for the sake of us pen-less ones that the work of the pen falls to you.

[Enter Sushama. She strikes one with wonder at the very sight of her — her form vigorous, strong, and full-risen; her complexion the pale gold they call kanakagaur*, like a faded champak; her forehead, nose, and chin as though chiselled into shape.]**

SUSHAMA. *(bowing to Kshitish)* Bashi, why hiding away in a corner?

BANSHORI. Trying to draw a burrowed-in writer out into the open. I have some skill at putting raw gold from the mine to the polishing-wheel and bringing out its lustre — my hand has that knack already. It is the jeweller who makes the jewel precious, and always for another's enjoyment, wouldn't you say? Sushi, this is Kshitish Babu — I think you know of him.

SUSHAMA. Indeed I do. Only the other day I was reading his story *A Fool's Wisdom*. I could not understand why the papers abused it so.

KSHITISH. You mean, the book was too good to deserve such abuse?

SUSHAMA. The task of saying such sharp things is left to Banshori, and to Leela, my cousin. I am afraid to sit in judgment on the books of writers such as yourself,

for in judging them I would only be judging my own understanding. There is much I fail to grasp. By Banshori's kindness I have you here beside me now — if I need it, I shall ask you to explain.

BANSHORI. Kshitish Babu writes natural history cast in the mould of fiction. Wherever he does not know his ground, he daubs it over with a raw, glaring colour, using a thick brush. And the colour itself is imported from across the sea. Seeing this, I took pity on him. I said, if you cannot afford the expense of going into caves and caverns in search of the psychology of the beasts, at least there is no harm in peering through the bars of the Zoological Gardens.

SUSHAMA. Is that, then, why you have brought him here?

BANSHORI. How can my sinful mouth say it, but yes, that is indeed so. Kshitish Babu's hand is skilled; his raw material needs to be equally sound. I am doing the labourer's work of supplying it, to the best of my ability.

SUSHAMA. Kshitish Babu, when you find a little leisure, do come over to our side. The girls have just had your book bought, hoping to get your autograph, but they haven't the courage to come near. Bashi, why do you keep him hemmed in all alone here, gathering curses on your own head?

BANSHORI. *(laughing loudly)* That very curse is a woman's true blessing — you know that well enough yourself. In a woman's triumphal procession, the plunder she prizes most is her neighbour's envy.

SUSHAMA. Kshitish Babu, I have made my last appeal, and now I go. If you find the freedom to cross the boundary, do come over that way, once.

[Exit Sushama.]

KSHITISH. How wonderful she is to look upon. One could hardly take her for a girl of a Bengali household — she seems an Athena, a Minerva, a Brunhild.

BANSHORI. *(with a sharp laugh)* Alas, alas — however great and mighty a man may be, in every one of them there lives still the savage of the primal age. You strut about, proud of being a realist seasoned to the bone, and pretend you believe in no spell — yet one glance from a woman's eye and the spell has caught you, swept you clean away into the age of mythology. Even now that young mind of yours clings fast to fairy-tale. You have hauled it against the current for so long, and dragged it

about, that the skin over your mind has grown callous. It is only because you are weak that strength boasts so loud.

KSHITISH. That I will grant, with my head bowed. The male sex is a weak sex.

BANSHORI. And you call yourselves realists! It is women who are the true realists. However coarse and gross a thing you may be, we know you for exactly what you are. If we must keep house with a hippopotamus wallowing in the mud, we do not turn it into a romance by calling it Airavata. We do not paint colour onto your faces — we paint it onto our own. Every one of you is a fairy-tale child! A fine achievement for women, this — the fooling of you! Ours is the burnt fate! Athena! Minerva! I could die of it! O realist, those whom you have seen walking the streets, at the betel-seller's stall, whose images you have moulded out of common black clay — it is they who go about dressed up as Athena, as Minerva.

KSHITISH. Bashi, in the Vedic age it was the work of the sages to chant their spells and beguile the gods — and yet they held in reverence the very gods they beguiled. Yours is just that condition. You beguile foolish men, and yet you never fail to take the water that has washed their feet, as an offering besides. It is in just this way that you have ruined this whole race of ours.

BANSHORI. True, quite true. It is we ourselves who set those fools up upon a pedestal, who wash their mud-caked feet with our own tears, who bring our self-abasement to its very limit — and for every measure we beguile them, we ourselves are beguiled a thousand measures more.

KSHITISH. What is the remedy for this?

BANSHORI. Write, write it true, write it hard. No spell, no mythology — tear off Minerva's mask and throw it down. The very spell that your red-lipped betel-seller casts, this wondrous girl too is casting, only in a different tongue. A king came walking down her path, and she began her sorcery. For what? For money. Mark this well: money is no matter of mythology — it belongs to the bank, it falls within your own department of realism.

KSHITISH. To have an eye toward money is, after all, a mark of good sense — the heart may well be present alongside it.

BANSHORI. Oh yes, there is a heart. Look in the right place and you will find that even the betel-seller has a heart. But the profit lies in one direction, and the heart in quite another. It is only when you discover that, that your story will truly come

together. The women readers will raise a great outcry; they will say you have made light of women, that you have gone and cast doubt into fools' minds about the power of their own spell-casting. The finer sort of male reader will curse you too — what, they will say, fading the very colour of their mythology! Ruin, sheer ruin! But do not be afraid, Kshitish. When the colour has burned away and the spell lies buried, the truth will still remain standing — sharp as a spearhead, sharp as a stake.

KSHITISH. May I know the present address of Shrimati Sushama's heart?

BANSHORI. There is no need for me to tell you the address; you will see it with your own eyes, if you have eyes for it. Now come along that way. They have finished their tennis; now it is the turn of the ice-cream to be served. Why should you be left out?

[Exeunt.]

SCENE THREE

One side of the garden. Tarak, Shachin, Sudhangshu, Satish, and others sit gathered round the refreshment table.

TARAK. This business over the sannyasi is getting out of hand. Everyone knows Purandar isn't his real name. If the truth of his name ever came out, the crowd of fools around him would thin out fast enough. There's even a dispute over whether he's native or foreign. Ask him his religion, and he laughs and says religion hasn't died yet, so it can't be squeezed into the pigeon-hole of a label. The other day I saw him teaching our Himu golf. Himu's whole soul, at the very best, can just about chase after a golf ball — that's the limit of its running, and so it melts with devotion. He's got up quite a stock of mysterious paraphernalia. Today I shall expose him before everyone — just you watch.

SUDHANGSHU. You'll prove that whoever is greater than you is, in fact, smaller than you!

SATISH. Oh, Sudhangshu, why spoil the fun? He's slapping his pocket and saying he has documents. Let him bring them out — let's see what sort of article that is. There, look, the sannyasi — and all of them coming along with him.

[Enter Purandar. His brow is lofty, his two eyes ablaze, his lips holding some unspoken command; the clear complexion of his face is a pale dusky hue, washed through with a radiance breaking out from within. His beard and moustache are shaved clean, his well-shaped head close-cropped, his feet bare of any shoe, wearing a dhoti of tussore silk and a loose jacket of ochre; with him come Sushama, Somshankar, and Bibhasini.]

SHACHIN. Reverend Sannyasi, I'm almost afraid to ask, but what harm can there be in a cup of tea?

PURANDAR. None at all — provided it's good tea. Not today, though; I've only just come from a meal I was invited to.

SHACHIN. An invitation for you too? At lunch, was it? A Vaishnav's feast at the Great Eastern!

PURANDAR. The Great Eastern it had to be, yes — at Dr. Wilcox's.

SHACHIN. Dr. Wilcox! On what occasion?

PURANDAR. He's reading the *Yoga-Vashishtha*.

SHACHIN. Well I never! I say, Tarak, come along, won't you — what was it you were saying?

TARAK. This photograph — it is yours, is it not?

PURANDAR. Not the slightest doubt of it.

TARAK. Mughal dress, a hookah before you, and who is the bearded man beside you — plainly a Muslim gentleman.

PURANDAR. The Nawab of Roshenabad. Of Persian descent. His Aryan blood is purer than yours.

TARAK. But look how you appear in it!

PURANDAR. I appear like the Sultan of Turkey. The Nawab Sahib is fond of me — calls me, with affection, Mukhtiyar Miyan, and feeds me from his own plate. It was his daughter's wedding; he dressed me up in his own style of costume.

TARAK. A reading of the *Bhagavata* at his daughter's wedding, I suppose?

PURANDAR. There was a polo tournament. I played on the Nawab Sahib's own team.

TARAK. What sort of sannyasi are you, then?

PURANDAR. Exactly what a sannyasi ought to be. I hold to no single title, and so every title fits me equally well. I was born clothed in the four quarters of the sky, and I shall die clothed in the whole universe besides. Your father was Harihar Tattvaratna of Benares — the name by which he knew me has long since vanished. Your elder brother, Ramsevak Vedantabhushan, once studied Vaisheshika philosophy under me for a time. You are Tarak Lahiri; your name once was Buku; today, on your father-in-law's recommendation, you are an articled clerk in Mr. Coxhill's attorney's office. Your dress has changed, Tarak — the first letter of your name has climbed a rung higher in the alphabet along with you. I hear you're off to England soon. Do have some mercy on Vishwanath's own mount, when you get there.

TARAK. Could I possibly get a letter of introduction from Dr. Wilcox?

PURANDAR. Not impossible to get.

TARAK. Forgive me.

[He bends and touches Purandar's feet in salutation.]

BANSHORI. Have you come today to resign your post as Sushama's tutor?

PURANDAR. Why should I resign it? I have only gained one more pupil.

BANSHORI. Will you now set him to studying the primer of enchantment? If the man now drowning in enchantment should suddenly attain enlightenment, his pulse may well give out.

PURANDAR. *(looking for a while into Banshori's face)* My child, this is what is called impudence.

[Banshori turns her face away and draws back.]

BIBHASINI. The time has come. The gathering is ready within — let everyone come along.

[All go in. Banshori stops short at the very door.]

KSHITISH. Won't you go in?

BANSHORI. I have no fancy for listening to cut-rate good counsel.

KSHITISH. Good counsel!

BANSHORI. Here is your chance, then — the road of escape is closed. It will be a Jallianwala Bagh of a beating.

KSHITISH. Let me go in and see, just once.

BANSHORI. No. Listen, I have a question. Emperor of literature, has your gaze reached the very heart of the story yet?

KSHITISH. With me it is the case of the blind man and the monkey's tail — I have caught hold of the tail firmly enough, and it has tugged me along after it, but the shape of the whole beast remains unclear to me. This much I have grasped in sum:

that Sushama will marry the Raja Bahadur, and gain royal splendour by it, and that in exchange she is ready to give her hand — but not her heart.

BANSHORI. Then listen, let me tell it. Somshankar is not the chief hero — keep that in mind.

KSHITISH. Is that so. Then at least bring me down to the landing-ghat of the story. After that, whether by swimming or by ferry, I shall find my own way to the far shore.

BANSHORI. You may know already that Purandar tutors young people without pay — unmatched at getting them through their examinations. But he chooses his pupils with the strictest care. He might have had countless girl-pupils, but his method of selection is so impossibly severe that in all this time he has gained just the one — her name is Shrimati Sushama Sen.

KSHITISH. And what has become of the girl-pupils he has turned away?

BANSHORI. I have had no report of how many have taken their own lives. This much I know — many of them stand still, beaks parted, gazing upward.

KSHITISH. And have you not enrolled your own name among that flock of moon-birds?

BANSHORI. What do you think?

KSHITISH. I think you are of no moon-bird's kind at all — you are a candidate for the post of Mrs. Rahu. Whomever you seize, you will swallow whole and wipe from existence — no mere standing about with your beak parted for you.

BANSHORI. Bravo! First-rank, gold medallist, in the understanding of the natures of men and women. They say that even Woman's own Creator fails to unravel the mystery of her nature — but you, you are the very Emperor of the Grazing-Grounds of Woman's Character. My homage to you.

KSHITISH. *(folding his hands)* The invocation is finished — now let the narration begin.

BANSHORI. Have you failed to guess this much at least — that Sushama has sunk utterly, to the very last depth, into love for that sannyasi?

KSHITISH. Love, or devotion?

BANSHORI. Master of character, write this down — the love in a woman that arrives at devotion is her great departure; there is no road back from that place. The infatuated man who comes down to stand level with her on the same platform gets, poor fellow, a third-class ticket at best, an inter-class one if he is lucky — never the saloon carriage. But the man who stayed indifferent, who never surrendered to their enchantment, who rose clear above the encircling reach of their arms into the very middle of the sky, both hands lifted upward — to him, and to him alone, women bring their finest offering. Have you never seen it — wherever a sannyasi stands, what a crush, what a crowding of women there!

KSHITISH. That may be so. But I have seen the very opposite of it too. Women feel a fearful pull toward the raw, untamed savage as well. They thrill to the very harshness of his contempt, ready to follow him down, step by step, even into the underworld.

BANSHORI. That is because women are of the tribe of the *abhisarika* — the one who goes forth herself to seek her love. Their whole love belongs to the one they must go forward and desire for themselves. Their contempt falls only on him who has neither the strength to be a scoundrel, nor the austerity to make himself hard to attain.

KSHITISH. Very well, understood — Sushama loves the sannyasi. And then?

BANSHORI. What love it was! Beyond even death itself! There was no hesitation in it, for she knew it, all along, only as devotion. When Purandar went off on his own business, Sushama would wither away, her face would turn ashen. Her eyes betrayed a burning; her mind went searching, empty space after empty space, for one particular sight. Her mother grew gravely troubled in her mind. One day she asked me, "Bashi, what am I to do?" She trusted my judgment in those days. I said, "Why not give your daughter in marriage to Purandar?" She started back in horror; she said, "Can you even think of such a thing?" So I went myself to Purandar. I told him plainly: "You must surely know that Sushama loves you. Marry her, and save her from this danger." The way that man looked into my face then — the very blood in me turned to water. He said, in a grave voice, "Sushama is my pupil; the charge of her is mine — but the charge of me is not yours to take up." Never in my life, from any man, had I received so great a blow. I had always supposed that every woman's demand holds good against every man, if only she has the courage to make it without flinching. I found there was, after all, an impregnable fortress standing. It is before

that very bolted door that a woman's mortal danger lies — the call comes from just that spot, and it is just there, too, that her forehead is broken.

KSHITISH. Tell me truly, Bashi — did the sannyasi ever draw your own heart as well?

BANSHORI. Look, there is a locked room, in the innermost chamber of the finest psychology. It is best not to open a forbidden door; there is trouble enough already in the outer hall — I shall count myself fortunate if I can manage even that. As for the chapters beyond what you have heard today, you will find their account in a certain letter. I shall show it to you later.

KSHITISH. Look in through the room there, Bashi. Purandar is exchanging the rings. A line of sunlight falls from the window across Sushama's face. She sits perfectly still, her face calm, tears streaming down from both her eyes. It is like a sunset on a mountain of ice — a stream melting out of it.

BANSHORI. Look at Somshankar's face instead — is that joy or is it sorrow, is he taking on a bond or breaking one? And Purandar — he is like that very sunlight itself. His scientific truth stands a hundred thousand leagues away, with no connection at all to the conflagration now burning in that girl's heart. And yet, all unknowing, he has painted a blazing picture around himself.

KSHITISH. If the sannyasi's mind is so entirely detached from Sushama, then why did he choose her at all?

BANSHORI. Why, he is an idealist! Heaven help us — there is no creature in the world more terrible than that. The savage of Africa kills a man in order to eat him himself. These people kill in far greater numbers than that — and never eat, even when they are hungry. They offer up victims in row upon row, more ruinous by far than Genghis Khan himself.

KSHITISH. It is precisely because you secretly hold the sannyasi in reverence that your language grows so fierce.

BANSHORI. I am not one of those famished girls who cannot live unless they find someone or other to worship. If I were a queen I would twist a rope from women's own hair and hang him with it. It is not that he never touches gold and womanly beauty — he does — but only to fling it beneath the wheels of some Jagannath's chariot of his own, and let the very ribs of the breast be crushed to powder.

KSHITISH. I should like to know, then, what his idea actually is.

BANSHORI. That lies fifty-two fathoms down, beneath the water — outside your own territory altogether; your Mandakinis and Padmavatis cannot dive to such depths. I have had some hint that in some post-officeless country or other he has built a fellowship — the Fellowship of Young Ascetics — where men are being forged through all manner of trials.

KSHITISH. But — young women?

BANSHORI. In his view, woman belongs in the household — not on the open road.

KSHITISH. Then what use has he for Sushama?

BANSHORI. Why, there must be food to be had. Even if women do not bear weapons, they surely bear the ladle and the larder-key. The keys to the royal storehouse will rest in her hand alone. There — they are coming out; the ceremony must be over.

[Purandar and the others come out from the room.]

PURANDAR. *(placing Somshankar and Sushama side by side)* Let the last word of your union be spoken not within these four walls, but outside them, before the open highway. Sushama, my child, it is the bond that leads toward freedom that I hold in reverence. Whatever binds us as beasts are bound, in the fetters of nature-forged instinct, or in the chains of man-forged servitude — a curse upon that. Man performs the deed; woman gives the strength. The chariot of freedom is the deed; the strength is its charioteer. Sushama, you have no greed for wealth, and it is for that very reason that wealth is rightly yours. You are a sannyasi's disciple, and it is for that very reason that your fulfilment lies in becoming a king's consort.

[He takes Somshankar's right hand in his own.]

Tasmāt tvam uttiṣṭha yaśo labhasva, jitvā śatrūn bhuṅkṣva rājyaṃ samṛddham.

Arise, and win your glory. Conquer your foes, and enjoy the kingdom in all its abundance. My child, repeat with me now the mantra of salutation.

Namaḥ purastād atha pṛṣṭhataste namo 'stu te sarvata eva sarva; ananta-vīryāmita-vikramas tvaṃ sarvaṃ samāpnoṣi tato 'si sarvaḥ.

Salutation to you from before, salutation to you from behind; O All, salutation to you from every side. Boundless is your power, immeasurable your might; in you is everything contained, for you are all.

For a brief moment the curtain falls, and rises again at once. It is now night; stars can be seen in the sky. Sushama and her friend Nanda.

SUSHAMA. Now sing me that song, won't you, dear.

SONG

What cannot be won by wanting is won, what is given away comes back to the hand; that treasure I lost in the light of day I found again in the dark of night. You will not see it, you will not touch it — open your heart wide and keep watch toward it; its word will live on in star after star, it will open like a flower at dawn.

For its sake, whatever tears I have shed are trembling now, quivering, in the hundred petals of the lotus the goddess of music holds. In my song, in every fleeting note, they flash and catch the light, flash upon flash; the tender radiance of a quiet smile is shining now upon my eyelids.

[Enter Purandar.]

SUSHAMA. *(making full prostration)* Master, I am weak. If there is sin hidden in my heart, wash it away, wipe it clean. Let attachment depart from me; let your word be victorious.

PURANDAR. My child, do not condemn yourself, do not distrust yourself — *nātmānam avasādayet*, let none bring the self down into despair. There is no fear — none at all. Today, truth has dawned within you in the form of sweetness; tomorrow that same truth will lay bare its own world-conquering, heroic strength.

SUSHAMA. This evening, here, before your gracious gaze, my new life has begun. Let your path be my path.

PURANDAR. The time has drawn near for me to go far away from you all.

SUSHAMA. Have mercy, Master — do not forsake me. I shall not be able to bear my own burden by myself. If you go, all my strength will go with you.

PURANDAR. It is only when I have gone far away that your own strength will become firmly established within you. I opened the door of your heart, not that I myself might take my place within it. Let Him who is the Lord of my own vow take His place there instead. Let my God become your God too; have no fear of sorrow — rejoice, self-conquering, within your own self.

Let me ask you one thing: have you come, from your own heart, to recognise the greatness in Somshankar?

SUSHAMA. I have.

PURANDAR. To set a worth upon that rare greatness through your own rare service, and so to glorify it; to keep his strength turned always, joyfully, toward its highest fulfilment — this is a woman's work. Remember: let it be so that, looking toward you, he is able to hold himself in his own esteem — do not forget that.

SUSHAMA. I shall never forget it.

PURANDAR. It is woman who gives fulfilment to life, and it is for this very reason that woman has the power to make even death magnificent. This is my last word to you.

ACT TWO

SCENE ONE

The house of the Bashoris, in the Chowringhee quarter. Kshitish and Bashori.

KSHITISH. That Hindustani chauffeur of yours took to blaring the car horn again and again at dawn. I knew the sound at once — leapt out of bed in a fright.

BASHORI. At dawn? Meaning?

KSHITISH. Meaning no earlier than eight.

BASHORI. An untimely summons!

KSHITISH. I do not mind it — and yet I should like to know the reason. Even if there is none, I shan't complain.

BASHORI. Let me explain, then. When you sit down to write, and those you've dismissed as "Nalinaksha's set" come before you, I watch your spirit shrink to nothing. Inwardly you cry out to reassure yourself — *they are only decorated fools.* But the assurance never quite stills the unease. You inflate your literary pride within, and still you cannot bring yourself level with them. To spare you that disquiet, I sent for you before Nalinaksha's set has begun its day. Here, at least until nine, it is still the tail end of night. For now this house is as empty as the Sahara.

KSHITISH. Yet I see an oasis within the very bounds of this room.

BASHORI. O traveller — no oasis. Know it well, and you will find it a mirage.

KSHITISH. More comparisons come to me, Bashi — this morning your unadorned beauty is like the moon still loitering, idle, in the daylight sky.

BASHORI. For pity's sake, save that melting sentiment for the solitude of some empty room. A besotted gaze does not become you. I sent for you on business — idle talk is strictly prohibited.

KSHITISH. This proves the relativity of language. What is, to me, a matter of the heart's urgency, is to you rubbish to be swept away.

BASHORI. This morning, one last request — do not turn your conduct into a tavern frothing with fermented sentiment. You bear an artist's responsibility.

KSHITISH. Very well — I accept the responsibility.

BASHORI. My man of letters, I have grown despondent watching your indifference. You have seen with your own eyes the omen of an approaching tragedy — the serpent of fire has raised its hood — and still your pen will not stir to wakefulness. I did not sleep at all, myself, last night. Why did the Creator not give *me* the power to write such things — so that a fountain of blood-red fire might burst from every syllable? I see it with an artist's eye and cannot speak it with an artist's voice. Had Brahma himself been struck dumb, the breast of the heavens would have split with the anguish of a world uncreated.

KSHITISH. Who says you cannot give it expression, Bashi — that you are no artist! You scatter diamonds and pearls as though flinging alms to a crowd. Proof of your power spills out with every word — I confess it stirs envy in me to watch it.

BASHORI. I am a woman; my expression is a private thing. I can speak only when I have someone before me to speak to. To speak though no one is there — that speech belongs to eternity. Ours is paid out in ready coin, hand to hand, day by day. In room after room, moment by moment, such words rise up and fade away.

KSHITISH. Now you have given the male artist a fine shove. Very well — let the work begin. The other day you spoke of a letter.

BASHORI. Here is that letter. The sannyasi writes: in Love, humankind finds freedom everywhere. What the poets call love is itself a bondage — it surrounds a single person with attachment and swells that person into an intense separateness. Nature pours her coloured wine into the vessel of the body, and the intoxication that rises up fierce within is mistaken for a truth truer than sober awareness itself. Even a bird comes to love its cage, if it can be made drunk on opium. All the sorrow, all the conflict, all the distortion in this world exist only to lend that illusion the power to make chains seem desirable. If you wish to know which is true and which false, judge by this alone — which one sets free, and which one holds fast. In Love, freedom; in love, bondage.

KSHITISH. I heard the letter — and after that?

BASHORI. After that — your own head! That is, your imagination. Can you not hear it, in your own mind? He tells his disciple: love me not, nor love any other.

Undifferentiated Love, unshaken joy, self-surrender without attachment — this is the mantra of initiation.

KSHITISH. Then where, in all this, does Somshankar come in?

BASHORI. By the public highway of Love, where all have an equal claim, like the open air. You, foremost of writers, face this problem: will the open air fill Somshankar's stomach?

KSHITISH. Who can say. In the opening, at least, I see the makings of a chronicle of the Void.

BASHORI. But can anything come to rest, in the end, upon emptiness? The carriage has reached its final station — the sannyasi-charioteer has driven the chariot this far! When the day comes to change the horses, into whose hands will the reins fall? Answer me that, realist.

KSHITISH. Into the hands of that enchantress whom they call, with wrinkled noses, Nature. She takes the clumsy creature that has no wings and yet longs to fly, and drops it flat upon the ground, shattering its illusion at a stroke — and in the same instant covers it, limb by limb, in dust.

BASHORI. It is that very mockery of Nature's you must set down. Show, with a forceful pen, the true face of destiny. How cruel it is! Sita believed the godlike Ramachandra would rescue her from Ravana's hand; in the end it was Ramachandra the mere man who wished to test her in fire. *That* is what deserves to be called realism — not vulgarity. Write, write, do not delay — write in a language that tears at the very veins of the heart. Let readers start up in astonishment to see that, after so long, out of the feeble body of Bengali letters, there has burst forth a piece of writing like the furious light of sunset breaking through the heart of a storm cloud.

KSHITISH. My word — your spirit has plunged into the very belly-fire of a volcano. Let me ask you one thing: were you in their place, what would you do?

BASHORI. I would set the sannyasi's teaching down in a notebook bound in gilt. Then, with the forceful pen of instinct, I would score a line of ink through every letter of it. Nature casts her own spell by her own mantra; the sannyasi, too, wishes only to cast a counter-spell with an opposite mantra. Of the two, I would take one into my head, and every day protest against it in my heart with the other.

KSHITISH. Now let us turn to the matter at hand. There is a gap at the very start of the history. By what means did the sannyasi bring about their marriage?

BASHORI. First, that the House of Sen is Kshatriya — that its name arose from *senani*, "commander" — that in some century of the Christian era they came from some southern province, bearing the banner of a conquering army, into some particular district of Bengal — all this a Sanskrit manuscript was made to prove. A Dravidian pandit of Kashi lent it his support. The sannyasi himself journeyed to Somshankar's kingdom. The subjects stood gaping at the sight of him; they whispered among themselves that his body had been forged from some fragment of divinity, welded together. The court pandit was enchanted by his exposition of Shaiva philosophy. The Raja Bahadur's mind was pure, his body vigorous — upon it fell something of the sannyasi's mantra, and something of Nature's enchantment besides. And after that — this, what you see before you now.

KSHITISH. Alas — does the sannyasi not act as matchmaker, on behalf of gross Nature, for humble folk such as us!

BASHORI. Enough of your flippancy. I was wrong about you. When such a living ideal of creative imagination — its very pulse throbbing — stands before a true writer, can trivial words truly come out of his mouth? How am I to wake you? I see with my own eyes the prelude to a great composition; I hear its endless, dry weeping. Can you not see it — a cruel mockery of fate? Enough. My words are finished. I am going to send in your breakfast.

She makes to leave.

KSHITISH. *(rushing over, seizing her hand)* I want no breakfast. Do not go.

BASHORI. *(wresting her hand free, with a burst of laughter)* You have found in me the heroine of your own story, "Ill-Matched"! I am terribly real.

Enter Satish, in a dressing gown.

SATISH. I heard the sound of loud laughter.

BASHORI. He has been imitating the stage's Munu Babu, all this while.

SATISH. Does Kshitish Babu know how to mimic, then?

BASHORI. Of course — one has only to read his writing to see it. Sit with him a while; I am going to send in his breakfast.

KSHITISH. No need — I have work, I cannot stay.

Exit.

BASHORI. Remember — this afternoon, the cinema. Your own "Padmavati."

KSHITISH. *(from offstage)* There will be no time.

BASHORI. There will be time — two hours earlier than usual.

SATISH. Tell me, Bashi — what is it you see in that Kshitish?

BASHORI. I see the answer to the examination paper Providence set him. And in the very middle of it, I see the examiner's great stroke of the pen, crossing it out.

SATISH. What use is a thing that has so plainly failed?

BASHORI. I shall take him by the right hand and pass him with first-class honours myself.

SATISH. And afterward — do you mean to hand him the prize with your left hand as well?

BASHORI. That would be cruelty toward another's son.

SATISH. And toward the son of the house, no less. By the way — have you heard the latest from that other quarter?

BASHORI. News from that quarter doesn't reach this one. The wind blows the other way.

SATISH. It was said Sushama's wedding would be a month off; now it's been fixed for next week.

BASHORI. Whatever made them quicken the pace so suddenly?

SATISH. Their hearts have taken to trembling rather fast — they caught sight of you, all at once, got up as a warrior-queen upon the field. They mean to make their escape before your arrow is loosed, or so I guess.

BASHORI. My arrow! I don't trouble myself with half-dead creatures. Banamali — bring the car round.

Exit Bashori.

Enter Shail — two-and-twenty, though she looks no more than sixteen or eighteen. Slight of frame, dark of complexion, her eyes gentle, her face full of tenderness.

SATISH. What a wonder! I dreamed of you this very morning, Shail. You must certainly have dreamed of me too.

SHAIL. No, I did not.

SATISH. Ah, why not simply say you did? How cruel you are. My whole day would have turned sweet for it.

SHAIL. Must I fashion myself into a dream to suit your order? Why can you men not be content with us simply as we are?

SATISH. I am entirely content — here you stand before me in the flesh; what more could I want?

SHAIL. I have come to see Bashori.

SATISH. There, you see — another plain truth. I've only just risen from bed; I haven't the strength of mind to bear two whole truths in a row. Even Dharmaraj would have forgiven you, had you said you came for my sake.

SHAIL. You're a barrister, and far too literal. Because I said I wished to see Bashori, why assume that coming to you never crossed my mind?

SATISH. Merely to have something to reproach you with. Have you some matter to discuss with Bashi — a conference to fix the date of our own wedding, perhaps?

SHAIL. No, nothing of the kind. I've only grown troubled on her account. She carries a death-arrow inside her, and yet she's not a girl who will confess to it. Try to soothe her hurt and she hisses like a snake guarding the jewel in its hood. So when I have the time, I sit beside her and chatter of this and that. The day before yesterday I went to her room in the morning. She didn't hear my step. Before her lay a bundle of letters. She sat bent low over her desk, and I could see plainly — tears were falling from her eyes. Had she known I'd seen it, there would have been a scene; I think it

would have meant the end between us. I withdrew quietly. But I cannot forget that picture. Where has Bashi gone?

A khansama sets down the tea things and withdraws.

SATISH. Bashi's just this moment gone out — and a good thing too.

SHAIL. How very selfish you are.

SATISH. Extremely. What — why are you getting up? Begin making the tea.

SHAIL. I've had mine already.

SATISH. No matter — I haven't had mine. Sit and pour it for me. By the old physicians' reckoning, drinking tea alone is forbidden — it disturbs the wind-humour.

SHAIL. Why do you make such absurd demands?

SATISH. At every chance I get — plain truth like yours isn't in my nature. Pour the tea — now what have you done — you know I take no sugar in mine.

SHAIL. I'd forgotten.

SATISH. Had it been me, I should never have forgotten.

SHAIL. Ever since you dreamed of me, your temper hasn't improved in the slightest. Why must you quarrel so?

SATISH. Because the moment I turn to sweet words, it's you who picks the fight. You go and grow serious on me.

SHAIL. Very well, enough. Have you finished your tea?

SATISH. If finishing means you'll get up and go, then I haven't.

Enter a servant.

SERVANT. Harish Babu has come with the papers.

SATISH. Tell him I've no time.

Exit servant.

SHAIL. What's this — you mean to neglect your work!

SATISH. I do. It's my own affair.

SHAIL. But I shall be blamed for it.

SATISH. Without a doubt. No man neglects his work without good cause.

From offstage: **Satish-da!**

SATISH. There, now — here they come! They didn't even give me time to say I was out. *(A pack of ill omen — I saw their faces first thing this morning; the bottom of the cooking-pot will crack on the hearth for it.)*

Enter Sudhangshu, with a party of men.

SUDHANGSHU. Miss Shail — the coward has taken shelter under your wing. But we shan't let him go today.

SATISH. Why come threatening me? What do you want?

SHACHIN. The subscription for the Lakkhichhara Club. You've been in arrears since the very first day.

SATISH. What! I, a member of your club! I lodge a vigorous protest — a most forceful denial.

NAREN. Show us your proof.

SATISH. My proof stands here before you, in the flesh.

SUDHANGSHU. So this is it, Shail Devi! You give unlawful shelter to a fugitive.

SHAIL. I shelter him not at all — go on, collect your due from him.

SATISH. Shail — all your truthfulness saved up for my case alone. And before these fellows, a plain denial — you'd have them think you shelter me not at all!

SHAIL. What shelter have I given you?

SATISH. Did you not, not a moment ago, swear on your own head and sit down to pour me tea? Your own gracious hand has laid the very foundation-stone of my indigestion — and still they call me Lakkhichhara!

SHACHIN. The fellow talks only to bait us with greed. Shail Devi, hold firm, and we'll make him our life member yet.

SATISH. Very well, then, listen to my proposal. The moment you have your subscription, if you'll run straight out of the neighbourhood, I'll settle every arrear on the spot.

SHACHIN. It isn't the subscription alone. In our own houses there's no one to pour our tea, so we take it in turns to go wherever tea is poured — and carry off a little alms besides. Today we've come with our eye on Bashori Devi's own lotus hand.

SATISH. As luck would have it, that goddess — lotus hand and all — is not at home. So I give you exactly five minutes' notice, by the clock: out with you, be off.

SHAIL. Oh, what a thing to say! Why should they go unfed? Can't I manage it myself? Do sit a moment — I'll see to everything.

Exit Shail.

SATISH. But that talk of alms just now — I didn't care for it. Nor can I make out your purpose.

SUDHANGSHU. We owe a collective debt at the brocade shop. Today, by collective effort, it must be paid.

SATISH. Brocade! An offering laid out for a future Lakshmi?

SHACHIN. Exactly so.

SATISH. Remarkable foresight—

SHACHIN. No, friend — we'll prove it want of foresight, and without delay.

Enter Shail.

SHAIL. Everything is ready. Do come in, all of you.

SCENE TWO

On the veranda, Somshankar. A jeweler has opened his case, displaying ornaments; a Kashmiri merchant waits nearby with a bundle of cloth.

BASHORI. I have something to say.

Somshankar dismisses the jeweler and the Kashmiri with a gesture.

SOMSHANKAR. I had thought to come to you myself, today.

BASHORI. Let that be. Don't be afraid — I haven't come to weep. And yet, if nothing else, you once gave me the right to think of your welfare. So let me ask one thing — do you know that Sushama does not love you?

SOMSHANKAR. I know.

BASHORI. And it makes no difference to you at all?

SOMSHANKAR. None at all.

BASHORI. Then what manner of married life will this be?

SOMSHANKAR. I am not thinking of married life at all.

BASHORI. Then what are you thinking of?

SOMSHANKAR. Of Sushama alone.

BASHORI. Meaning, you're thinking of how that girl might be happy, even without loving you.

SOMSHANKAR. No, it isn't that. Sushama doesn't think of happiness — nor has she any need of love.

BASHORI. Of what does she have need, then — money?

SOMSHANKAR. That remark was unworthy of you, Bashi.

BASHORI. Very well, I was wrong. But the question stands unanswered — of what does Sushama have need?

SOMSHANKAR. She has a vow. Her whole life's need is bound up in it; to fulfil it, so far as I am able, is my own vow as well.

BASHORI. Her vow first, and yours trailing after it — that doesn't sound like a man speaking, and it certainly isn't the speech of a Kshatriya. That sannyasi has chanted his mantra over so great a man as you, clouded your reason, dimmed your sight. Well — I've heard it all now. My reverence for you is broken; my bond with you is torn away. It isn't my task to raise a grown child into manhood. I leave that charge entirely in the hands of that girl.

Enter Purandar. Somshankar bows in salutation; Bashori rises before him like a flame.

BASHORI. Don't be angry with me today — bear with me. I have a few questions.

At a sign from Purandar, Somshankar exits.

PURANDAR. Very well. Speak.

BASHORI. I ask you — do you hold Somshankar in true regard? Do you not think of him merely as a plaything?

PURANDAR. I hold him in the highest regard.

BASHORI. Then why place in his hands the charge of a girl who does not love him?

PURANDAR. Do you not see — this is a most exalted charge, at once a Kshatriya's reward and his trial. Somshankar alone is worthy to take it up.

BASHORI. And because he is worthy, you would destroy his happiness for the whole of his life?

PURANDAR. That hero can afford to disregard happiness, in the joy of his own spirit.

BASHORI. Do you not acknowledge human nature at all?

PURANDAR. I acknowledge human nature. Not the nature that lies beneath it.

BASHORI. If it has come to this — why should they marry at all?

PURANDAR. A woman who will nurture her vow without desire; a man who will carry it out without desire. Such a woman and such a man I have long searched to find together. By chance, I have found them.

BASHORI. It's only because you're a man that you cannot understand — without love, two human beings cannot truly be joined.

PURANDAR. It's only because you're a woman that you refuse to understand — in the union of love there is enchantment. In the union of Love, there is none.

BASHORI. Enchantment is what we need, sannyasi — we need it! Without enchantment, what is creation? Your own enchantment lies with your vow — and drawn on by that vow, you sit cutting and tearing at human hearts, stitching them roughly together again, never once understanding they are living matter, not made to be fitted into your design. Our enchantment is beautiful. Yours is terrible.

PURANDAR. Without enchantment there is no creation, and when enchantment breaks, there is ruin — this much I grant. But remember this too: my creation stands far above yours. And so, without mercy, I will lay your happiness to waste. Nor will I myself seek happiness; and from any who come to me seeking it, I shall turn my face away. My vow is my creation. Whatever is owed to it must be paid — however hard the cost.

BASHORI. That is precisely why your idea has no life in it, sannyasi. You know your mantras. You do not know human beings. You tear open the very knot of the heart, and there bind on the dry, wooden bandage of your idea, pasting some grand adjective over an unbearable wound. Do you call that peace? The bandage will not hold — the wound will remain. None of you are truly human — what business have you coming into the dwellings of human beings! Go to your caves, your hermitages in the mountains. Dry yourselves into stone there, to your heart's content. We are ordinary people. By what mercy do you dare snatch the water of our thirst from our own lips and scatter it on the desert sand, calling it discipline! Will the curse of a wasted life not fall on you as well? Will you refuse to the hungry what you yourself never learned to enjoy?

Enter Sushama.

Ah, Sushama — listen to me. Many a girl, driven to despair, has died on the funeral pyre, believing that in death alone lay her salvation. Do you mean, in just that way, to set fire to your own fate with your own hand, and die by inches, day after day, burning and burning? *You* want no love — but the girl who does want it hasn't turned

her woman's heart to stone. Why have you come to snatch away her lifelong joy? I tell you this today: ride your horses, hunt your game, take your mantras from your sannyasi — still, you are no man. Your days will not pass easily, married to an idea. Your nights will spread a bed of thorns beneath you.

Enter Somshankar.

SOMSHANKAR. Bashi — be calm. Come away from here.

BASHORI. Go — of course I'll go! Don't imagine I'll die of a broken heart. My life will become a burning-ground of unending fire. I've never been so shaken. Why has this madness come flooding over me today? Shame — shame — shame, to be disgraced like this before the three of you! Stop, Somshankar — don't come to pity me. I'll wipe away this disgrace; by tomorrow no trace of it will remain. This I say, and now I go.

Exit Bashori and Sushama.

PURANDAR. Somshankar — let me ask you one thing.

SOMSHANKAR. Speak.

PURANDAR. This vow you have accepted — has it become entirely your own? Does it move in step with the very breath of your life?

SOMSHANKAR. Why do you doubt it?

PURANDAR. If it is out of devotion to me alone that you took up this resolve, then cast off the burden now.

SOMSHANKAR. Why say such a thing today? Do you see some sign of weakness in me?

PURANDAR. Some say I possess a power to enchant. I am ashamed to hear it said — I am no sorcerer.

SOMSHANKAR. Those who don't believe in the working of the spirit call it, instead, the working of sorcery.

PURANDAR. The greatness of a vow lies in its freedom. If I have deceived you into this, the deception must be undone. A guru's word is poison, unless it becomes your own word besides.

SOMSHANKAR. Sannyasi — the vow I have taken now runs in my blood like pure vigour; it burns in my breast like the sacrificial fire itself. I have stood face to face with death. Where, now, is my hesitation?

PURANDAR. That is the very answer I wished to hear from your own lips. One matter remains. Some ask why I gave Sushama in marriage to you. That answer I want from you yourself.

SOMSHANKAR. Through these years of penance you kindled this woman's spirit and raised it high, like the flame of a sacrificial fire — and upon me you laid the charge of guarding that undying flame for as long as I live.

PURANDAR. My son — in guarding it faithfully, you will preserve your own self as well. There she stands, your Dharma made flesh, and she remains at your side: Dharma protects those who protect it. From my bond you are free now, and with it I too am freed from the bond of the disciple. After your wedding I must go far from here — perhaps you will never see me again. This blessing I leave you: *janatha atmanam* — know thyself, and be made whole.

Exit Purandar. Somshankar remains silent a long while.

SOMSHANKAR. Bhola — that new song—

SONG

Burn away the refuse of a wasted life; kindle the flame. In the dark of this lone night, I long for the road's light. Whose hand has struck the war-drum, and set it sounding? Deep within my breast a drum stirs, resounding — and dreams of sleeping night, both good and ill, take flight.

Wanderer bound for no known shore — was it you who called my name? If I'm not to see your face, then let it be — no matter. From deep within, you have undone all wanting and all gain, into my very thoughts you've loosed the storm-wind's strain, and in one flash of lightning-fire fused together black and white.

From offstage: **May I come in?**

SOMSHANKAR. Come, come.

Enter Tarak.

TARAK. Raja Bahadur, these days I'm almost afraid to come near you.

SOMSHANKAR. I see no reason for it.

TARAK. It's precisely because there's no reason that the fear is worse. Your wedding is the day after tomorrow, and you look as though bound for exile on some far island. Terrible solemnity.

SOMSHANKAR. A wedding is, after all, a journey from one world into another.

TARAK. Not every wedding is such, my king! I can speak from my own case. My bridegroom's procession went from Potoldanga to Chorbagan — and my heart travelled scarcely further than that. My wife's name is Pushpo. A witty friend of mine, in a verse, gave me the title Pushpo-Chor — Flower-Thief. The poem was headed "The Fifty Verses of the Thief." I asked the poet: I see only one verse of your fifty — where have the other forty-nine gone? He answered that the remaining forty-nine were circling, as forty-nine winds, through the hollow chambers of the bridegroom's heart.

SOMSHANKAR. This proves only that I have no witty friend of my own — hence this gathering solemnity.

TARAK. The fortune-forsaken lot in our neighbourhood have set up a club in some derelict, reed-fenced summerhouse in Ashok Gupta's garden. Every evening, back from the office, they raise the most tremendous racket there. To console them, we more fortunate ones are giving them a feast — and you must preside.

SOMSHANKAR. I've heard they wrote a ballad, "The Plunder of Vaikuntha," casting me as the demon who steals Lakshmi away.

TARAK. True enough. It's become necessary to cool their temperature a little.

SOMSHANKAR. I'm quite willing to cool them by lawful means.

TARAK. I had our own Komolbilash Sengupta compose an invitation, and brought it along.

SOMSHANKAR. Read it out.

TARAK. *(reads)*

Those on whom the god of love has smiled with kindly eye, and those his future arrows mark, however hard they try — let both camps convene upon the feasting-ground so free, where every tongue may revel in a feast of savoury. In the Golden Age, Lord Daksha once his solemn feast decreed, and uninvited demons came to crash it in his need — we shall make no such misstep: our dining hall today to either camp, quite without bias, hunger's debt will pay. And those who still, unfettered, strut about with swelling chest — to them we send at parting our thousand blessings, and our best; may fortune send them swiftly to some warden's watchful hand — and there our rhymes run dry, for no further ones we command.

(The original closes on a pun: having rhymed every line on the syllable -kṣa*, the poet jokes that he has exhausted the last letters of the alphabet itself — ya, ra, la, ba, ha, kṣa — and can go no further.)**

There, their party approaches.

Enter Sudhangshu, Shachin, and others.

SOMSHANKAR. For what purpose have you come?

SUDHANGSHU. To sing you a song.

SOMSHANKAR. And after that?

SUDHANGSHU. After that, a noble revenge — a most magnificent vengeance.

SOMSHANKAR. What is that on that fellow's shoulder? Not a bomb, surely?

SUDHANGSHU. All will be revealed in due course. For now, the song.

SOMSHANKAR. Whose composition is it?

SHACHIN. There's some dispute over the copyright. As to subject matter, the copyright is entirely ours; as to whoever actually supplied the words — him we don't trouble to count.

SONG

We are the fortune-forsaken band, water on the lotus-leaf of this world. Forever swaying, unsteady on our feet, our coming and our going but empty wind — no harvest ever comes of it.

We know no cause, no reason why; we know no rule, no fitting way; we heed no order, no restraint — by our own stubborn will, the whim of our own hearts, we have torn our chains apart.

Your creatures, Lakshmi, may swell and prosper, rich in wealth and sons — let them plunder the very dust beneath your feet, if they will; we, with our beggar's bundle slung across our shoulder, will wander the earth instead.

In your harbour, at your moorings, upon your golden bales, lie many jewels in many a marketplace — we alone drift on, a broken boat, its anchor torn away.

Now let us see whether, in this shoreless sea, a shore is to be found at all — whether any island rises from this ocean of existence — and if no happiness is granted us, let us see where the depths will take us down.

Let us gather the whole day long, and hold our gathering of the luckless, let us sing our songs and play our games — and if no melody comes to our throats, then let us simply make our noise.

SOMSHANKAR. Now let me see to a little refreshment for you all.

SUDHANGSHU. Let the goddess enter this house first — only after that shall we ask our reward.

SOMSHANKAR. Before that—

SUDHANGSHU. Before that, the most magnificent vengeance. *(A brocade seat emerges from the bundle.)* Upon this seat, Lakshmi shall be joined with her devotees. The ground of your household remains yours; but the seat that rests upon it is ours alone. And her lotus throne itself — that we keep within our own hearts.

SOMSHANKAR. What can I say to you. I do not know what words to say.

End of Act Two.

ACT THREE

FINAL SCENE

The house of the Bashoris. Satish sits writing at a desk. Enter Sushima, Sushama's younger sister.

SATISH. Have you come to arrange a marriage match with me? Is today the day to look over the groom?

SUSHIMA. Get away!

SATISH. Get away, indeed. It isn't so long ago — when you were five years old, ask your mother how you insisted on marrying me. I had a gold bangle made for you; it's since been melted down into a brooch.

SUSHIMA. Satish-da, what nonsense you talk.

SATISH. Very well, let it be, then — what have you come for?

SUSHIMA. I mean to give Didi a present for her wedding.

SATISH. That's a fine idea. What do you mean to give?

SUSHIMA. This little leather pouch.

SATISH. A fine thing — it tempts me myself.

SUSHIMA. I've come to see Bashi-didi.

SATISH. Did someone from over there send you?

SUSHIMA. No, I've come in secret — no one knows. I want Bashi-didi to paint something on this pouch for me.

SATISH. Who told you Bashi-didi can paint?

SUSHIMA. Shankar-dada. He has a cigarette case, a gift from Bashi-didi. She painted a pair of doves on it with her own hand. It's beautiful!

SATISH. Very well, I'll send your Bashi-didi to you.

Exit.

Enter Bashori.

BASHORI. Well, Sushi!

SUSHIMA. Has Satish-dada told you everything?

BASHORI. Yes, he has. Shall I paint a picture on your pouch, then? What shall it be?

SUSHIMA. A pair of doves — just as you painted on Shankar-dada's cigarette case.

BASHORI. Exactly so, then. But don't tell anyone that I painted it.

SUSHIMA. No one.

BASHORI. You'll have to do something for me in return, or I shan't paint it at all.

SUSHIMA. Tell me what.

BASHORI. You must bring me that cigarette case.

SUSHIMA. He keeps it in his breast pocket. He'll never give it to me.

BASHORI. Say it's in my name — say he must give it.

SUSHIMA. You gave it to him — how can you take it back again?

BASHORI. Your Shankar-dada, too, sometimes takes back what he's given.

SUSHIMA. Never.

BASHORI. Very well — just ask him, in my name.

SUSHIMA. Very well, I shall. I'm going now — but don't forget what I've asked.

BASHORI. And you mustn't forget mine either. Here, take a box of chocolates — but don't tell anyone I gave it to you.

SUSHIMA. Why not?

BASHORI. If Mother finds out, she'll be angry.

SUSHIMA. Why?

BASHORI. In case it makes you ill.

SUSHIMA. I won't tell — but I'll give some to Shankar-dada to eat too.

Exit Sushima. Bashori, notebook in hand, settles back on the sofa. Enter Lila.

BASHORI. Look here, Lila, don't come to me with that solemn face, my dear, or we shall quarrel. It looks as though you've come with some ill-conceived notion of consoling me — the clouds are gathering already. I can bear sorrow well enough; consolation I cannot bear, as you all well know. I sat down meaning to play a comic tune on the gramophone, but I've stumbled on something far more comic than that.

LILA. What do you mean, Bashi?

BASHORI. This story of Kshitish's.

LILA. *(picking up the notebook)* "The Auction of Love" — that title will sell well enough.

BASHORI. So will the goods themselves. This sort of thing has a market. Do you want to read it?

LILA. No, my dear, I've no time — I've been called to help decorate the wedding house.

BASHORI. And could I not have decorated it myself!

LILA. Far better than I could.

BASHORI. They hadn't the courage to call me! Cowards, the lot of them.

LILA. It isn't that — they were ashamed, not knowing how to ask you.

BASHORI. And by not asking, they've shamed me all the more. They imagine I've given up food and drink, shut myself behind a locked door, dying of tears. When you see them, mention it in passing — say, "Bashi was lying on her bed reading a comic story, laughing till her sides ached." Be sure to say it.

LILA. I certainly shall. Now tell me, what is this story about?

BASHORI. The hero's name is Sir Chandrashekhar. The heroine, Pankaja, has set herself, tooth and nail, to turning a millionaire's head — though it's rather more falling than turning, if you follow me. You've seen that picture of Saint Anthony's Temptation? Day after day, some fresh piece of shamelessness — not that you're especially prudish yourself, and yet every so often you'd feel the urge to run straight down to the Ganges ghat. The second heroine is dying by inches, her voice breaking, standing at the edge of some muddy pool. At last, one night in the depth of Poush, at the back-garden ghat, at the very stroke of midnight — you're thinking the poor wretch drowned herself and was saved just in time — but don't do Kshitish's imagination such an injustice — the heroine had only waded in as far as the first step. The cold water gave her a sudden shock, and off she ran, straight back to her warm bed. And here's the point of psychological debate: did the cold merely postpone her death, or did the chill put the thought of fire into her head, so that she resolved, then and there, to go on living, and torment the others with fire instead?

LILA. I simply cannot understand it — with so many others to choose from, how have you come to place such faith in Kshitish?

BASHORI. Don't be unjust to him. He has a real gift for writing. He's like the mangoes from our garden in Mymensingh — a fine breed, but however hard one tries, there's always a worm got into them somewhere. Cut the worm out, and the rest may yet serve some purpose. There — I think he's coming.

LILA. Then I'll be off.

BASHORI. Don't go altogether. The evening has to be got through somehow. And the comic story's finished now, in any case.

LILA. Am I to play the matinee of your comic story, then? Very well — I'll stay in the next room.

Enter Kshitish.

KSHITISH. How did you like it? Not one grain of melodrama did I mix in, not a scruple's worth. For those little girls who crave the watery syrup of sentimentality, it's a dry fast, plain and unrelieved. Nothing but merciless truth.

BASHORI. I'll show you exactly how I liked it. *(She tears out the pages.)*

KSHITISH. What have you done! Disaster! That was the finest thing I've ever written, and you've destroyed it?

BASHORI. Destroy the evidence, and there's no more nuisance of a masterpiece to worry about. You ought to be grateful to me.

KSHITISH. You've no power to contribute anything to literature yourself, and yet no hesitation whatever in robbing it. You'll pay for this — I won't let it go.

BASHORI. What price do you want?

KSHITISH. You.

BASHORI. Compensation as cheap as that — do you dare take it?

KSHITISH. I dare.

BASHORI. You'll not get one drop of sentiment out of me.

KSHITISH. I don't expect it.

BASHORI. A dry fast — merciless truth.

KSHITISH. Agreed.

BASHORI. Agreed, are you? Do you say it knowing what you say? This isn't a comic novel — make a mistake here, and there's no correcting the proofs; and the edition won't run out till the day you die.

KSHITISH. I'm no child — I understand that much.

BASHORI. No, sir, you understand nothing at all — you'll have to learn it day by day, moment by moment; you'll have to learn it in your very bones and marrow.

KSHITISH. That will be the greatest experience of my life.

BASHORI. Then hear me out. Women have a natural tenderness toward the simple-minded. I have a certain pity for you. And so, out of mercy, I find myself inclined to consent to this foolish proposal of your own ruin.

KSHITISH. Not to consent would be a cruelty past bearing. I should never recover from it.

BASHORI. Melodrama?

KSHITISH. No — not melodrama.

BASHORI. Won't it turn into melodrama, in time?

KSHITISH. If it does, then tear those days to pieces, just as you tore those pages.

BASHORI. *(rising)* Very well, then — I consent. *(Kshitish rushes toward her)* There, now — it's begun already! Think carefully — there's still time to turn back.

KSHITISH. *(hands folded)* Forgive me — I'm afraid you may yet change your mind.

BASHORI. When it changes, then you may be afraid. Don't stand there gazing at me like that — it doesn't become you. Go to the registry office. The wedding must take place within three or four days.

KSHITISH. And if the law won't allow the notice period to be shortened?

BASHORI. Then it won't allow the wedding either. I dare not have any delay.

KSHITISH. A ceremony?

BASHORI. No ceremony. I see you still have a leaning toward comedy. Have you still not understood — this is serious.

KSHITISH. Any guests invited?

BASHORI. No one.

KSHITISH. No one at all?

BASHORI. Very well — Somshankar.

KSHITISH. Let me draft the letter, then, something like—

BASHORI. Why a draft — I'll write it myself, straight out.

KSHITISH. In your own hand?

BASHORI. Yes, in my own hand.

KSHITISH. Today?

BASHORI. Yes — this very moment. *(writing the letter)* Here, read it.

KSHITISH *(reading aloud).* Notice is hereby given that the marriage of Srimati Bashori Sarkar to Sri Kshitishchandra Bhowmik has been arranged to take place without delay. It is not necessary to state the date — your congratulations are solicited. This letter serves as due notification; kindly excuse any deficiency therein. Yours, etc.—

BASHORI. Take this letter and put it directly into the hands of the Raja's doorman. Don't delay.

Exit Kshitish.

Lila — come and hear the news.

Enter Lila.

LILA. What news?

BASHORI. The marriage of Bashori Sarkar to Kshitish Bhowmik has been settled.

LILA. Oh — there's no telling what you'll say next.

BASHORI. After all this time, something has finally found its place.

LILA. But this is suicide.

BASHORI. And after it, the first chapter of rebirth.

LILA. What grieves me most is that what is truly a tragedy will look, to everyone, like farce.

BASHORI. The shame of tragedy will be washed away in a burst of laughter. There is no greater disgrace than shedding tears.

LILA. The brightest star has fallen from our own zodiac. If its fire had gone out, I shouldn't grieve. But it carries that fire down with it, still burning, into the dark.

BASHORI. Let it be, then — a dark heat, a black fire, one no one else will ever see. Don't grieve for me. It's the man who's about to become my companion who deserves

the grieving. — What's this? Shankar is coming. Go, my dear, step out of sight a moment.

Exit Lila. Enter Somshankar.

SOMSHANKAR. Bashi.

BASHORI. You, here!

SOMSHANKAR. I've come to invite you myself. I know the other side has not asked you. On my part, there is no hesitation at all.

BASHORI. Why should there be hesitation, or indifference?

SOMSHANKAR. What I have received from you, and what I have given you in return — this marriage cannot touch that, not in the slightest. This you surely know.

BASHORI. Then why are you going through with this marriage at all?

SOMSHANKAR. Even if you cannot understand the reason, still, have mercy on me.

BASHORI. Tell me anyway. I shall try to understand.

SOMSHANKAR. I have taken up a hard vow. One day it will be revealed — let it rest, today. My resolve is a formidable one, worthy of a Kshatriya. Some day of crisis will come, and you will understand that vow is greater even than love. It must be fulfilled, even at the cost of life itself.

BASHORI. Could you not have fulfilled it with me at your side?

SOMSHANKAR. You never deceive yourself, Bashi. You know for certain that before you, I am weak. Perhaps, one day, your love would have shaken me loose from my vow. On the difficult road the sannyasi has set me walking, with Sushama at my side, love itself is forbidden passage.

BASHORI. The sannyasi may well have understood rightly. I could never have set your vow above you yourself. That, perhaps, is precisely where the conflict would have come. Even now, my quarrel is with your vow, and no one else. Then with what courage do you come into this enemy's stronghold? Is there nothing left, today, of that power you once saw in me? Are you not afraid?

SOMSHANKAR. That power has not lessened by the smallest degree — and still I will not be afraid.

BASHORI. If I were to call you back, in just that way, could you refuse me?

SOMSHANKAR. Who can say — perhaps I could not.

BASHORI. Then?

SOMSHANKAR. I trust you. My word will never be broken by your hand. You could not bring yourself to degrade me on the very threshold of crisis. You know for certain — should my word be broken, I would not go on living. I would die, burned in a slow fire.

BASHORI. Shankar, you know how to love as only a Kshatriya can — not with mere sentiment, but with true valour. Tell me truly — do you still love me today, exactly as much as you did then?

SOMSHANKAR. Exactly as much.

BASHORI. I want nothing more than that. Let your vow be fulfilled with Sushama at your side — I shall not envy her for it.

SOMSHANKAR. One thing remains.

BASHORI. What is it? Tell me.

SOMSHANKAR. I am leaving with you some token of my love. You will not be able to return it. *(He brings out the pouch of ornaments.)*

BASHORI. What — but those went down into the water!

SOMSHANKAR. I dived down and brought them up again.

BASHORI. I had thought I'd lost everything. Now, having it back, I have it more fully than before. Put them on me yourself, with your own hand. *(Somshankar puts the ornaments on her)* My heart is a hard one. I don't recall ever having wept before you, not once — if I weep today, think nothing of it. *(She buries her head in her hands and weeps.)*

Enter a servant.

SERVANT. A letter for the Raja Bahadur.

BASHORI. *(rising)* Shankar, give that letter to me.

SOMSHANKAR. Without reading it?

BASHORI. Yes — without reading it.

SOMSHANKAR. Take it, then. *(Bashori tears up the letter.)* One more matter remains. You sent for this cigarette case. I could not understand why.

BASHORI. So that I might place it back in that very pocket of yours, once more. This is my second gift.

SOMSHANKAR. The sannyasi is coming to our house at any moment — give me leave, I must go to him.

BASHORI. Go, then — victory to the sannyasi.

Exit Somshankar. Enter Lila.

LILA. Well, my dear—

BASHORI. Sit a moment. One more letter remains to be written — and it must reach him through your own hand. *(She writes the letter and gives it to Lila.)* Read it.

THE LETTER

To the esteemed Sri Kshitishchandra Bhowmik, with blessings—

Your fortune has held good — the danger has passed, and I have swept away entirely the looming threat of our marriage. In the Auction of Love, I have received the very highest bid; your own offer could never have reached so far. If no other occasion for consolation presents itself in the meantime, write a book. I trust that, by now, you have made truth's proper acquaintance. In your next such tale, there will be no need to show Bashori any mercy — she waded but one step into the water toward suicide, and turned straight back again.

LILA. *(embracing Bashori)* Oh — you've saved us, my dear, saved every one of us. Are you no longer angry with Sushama, then?

BASHORI. Why should I be? Has she truly won over me? Lila, my dear — throw open every door, light every lamp — and go gather every flower you can find in the garden, and bring them in.

Exit Lila. Enter Purandar.

BASHORI. What is this, sannyasi — you, in my house?

PURANDAR. I am going far away. Perhaps we shall not meet again.

BASHORI. And at the hour of leaving, you remembered me?

PURANDAR. I have never forgotten you at all. You are not a woman one could forget. This I have kept in mind, always — you are needed in our work. You are rare, and hard to win, and so I have caused you pain.

BASHORI. You have not managed to give me pain. Dying is not so hard — I have had my first lesson in it. But I will say one last thing to you, sannyasi — listen. You love Sushama. Sushama knows it. She wears, strung upon the very thread of your love, the necklace of her vow about her neck — what has she left to fear? Tell me — is it true, or not?

PURANDAR. There is no purpose served in saying whether it is truth or falsehood. The two come to the same thing.

BASHORI. Sushama's fortune is a good one. But what have you given to Somshankar?

PURANDAR. He is a man; he is a Kshatriya; he is an ascetic.

BASHORI. Man though he is, Kshatriya though he is, his penance will remain incomplete without me. He has need of me.

PURANDAR. It is the very grief of being deprived that will give him strength.

BASHORI. Never — that alone will cripple his vow. There is only one woman in this whole world who can give that Kshatriya his strength.

PURANDAR. I know it.

BASHORI. And it is not Sushama.

PURANDAR. That too I know. But there is also only one woman, in this whole world, who could strip that hero of his strength.

BASHORI. Today, that woman herself grants him freedom from fear. Within her own heart, she has found her own initiation. Her bonds are loosed — she will bind him no longer.

PURANDAR. Then, today, on the day of my departure, I leave without hesitation, in her hands, the provision for Somshankar's difficult road.

BASHORI. Every reverence I have owed you, all these years, unpaid — I gather it all together now, and lay it at your feet.

PURANDAR. And I, in leaving, give you a song. Take it up in your own voice.

SONG

The bowstring of Pinaka gives its twang — deep in the ribs of the earth, a tremor of terror wakes. Across the sky a whirlwind turns, shattering creation's dam, and a thunder-dreadful roar goes up — the triumph-drum of doom.

Heaven itself rises, weeping; the council of the gods lies captive; through the deep, unbearable dark of night, the clang of chains rings out.

Taunting the demon's pride, Rudra rose up roaring, and dashed to the dust, shattered, that arrogance which pierced the very sky.

(Pinaka is Shiva's bow; Rudra, his fierce and destructive aspect. The hymn casts Purandar's departure — and Bashori's release — in the register of cosmic dissolution and renewal.)

End of the Play.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES ON TERMS

Banshori — literally "flute." The name is thematically pointed: she is the instrument through which music is made, yet cannot compose it herself — a tension she names outright in Scene Two ("I too am a craftsman, and the Creator has cut off my thumb").

Bat-tala — the old cheap-printing and bazaar-literature district of north Calcutta, a byword for sensational, lowbrow publishing.

Endi (eri) silk — a coarse, warm silk woven from the eri silkworm, associated with Assam and eastern Bengal; a shawl of it signals a certain plain, unfashionable respectability, which is why the ink-stain on Kshitish's is teased as fitting.

Rasa — in classical Indian aesthetics, the "flavour" or aesthetic emotion a work of art evokes in its audience; central to Sanskrit poetics and repeatedly invoked by Banshori as the standard Kshitish half-understands.

Chakor / chakori — a legendary bird said to live on moonbeams and gaze eternally at the moon; a standard poetic figure for the devoted, adoring lover.

Mrs. Rahu — a play on Rahu, the demon of Hindu mythology who swallows the sun or moon, causing eclipses. Kshitish's joke turns on the contrast with the chakori: Banshori does not merely gaze at what she loves, she consumes it.

Abhisarika — a classical heroine-type in Sanskrit and Bengali poetry: the woman who herself goes out, often by night, to seek her lover, rather than waiting to be sought.

Kumbha Mela — the immense periodic Hindu pilgrimage and gathering of ascetics.

Yoga-Vashishtha — a lengthy Sanskrit philosophical text on non-dual Vedanta, cast as a dialogue between the sage Vashishtha and Rama.

Vaisheshika — one of the six classical schools of Hindu philosophy, concerned with metaphysics and atomism.

Brahmo Samaj — the reformist monotheistic Hindu movement, influential among the educated Bengali middle class from which most of this party's guests come; its plainer ceremonial style is set against Sushama's insistence on being married under Purandar's own rites.

Jallianwala Bagh — site of the 1919 massacre in Amritsar; Banshori's reference is a dark, deliberately overstated figure of speech for an inescapable dressing-down.

Tod's Rajasthan — Colonel James Tod's *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (1829–32), a romanticised British account of Rajput history and chivalry, evoked here to mock Somshankar's initial old-fashioned appearance.

The Sanskrit verses spoken by Purandar in the engagement scene are drawn from the eleventh chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita* — Krishna's charge to Arjuna to rise and act (11.33), and Arjuna's hymn of salutation to Krishna's cosmic form (11.40) — repurposed here as a wedding blessing. Tagore supplies his own Bengali gloss immediately after each verse in the original; that gloss, rather than a separate scholarly rendering, is what has been translated into English above.

Kanakagaur — literally "gold-fair," a classical description of complexion, pale gold in tone.