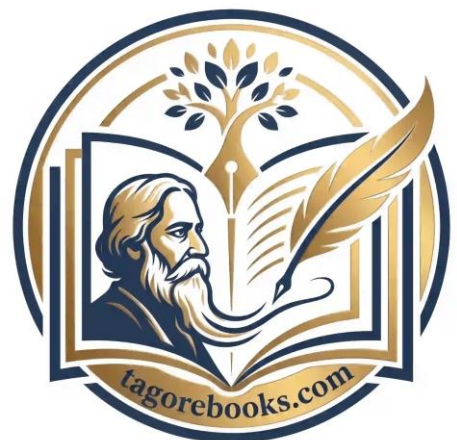


THE GUEST

SHORT STORY

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CHAPTER ONE

Motilal Babu, zamindar of Kanthalia, was travelling by boat with his whole family toward his native place. Partway along the journey, at midday, he had moored his boat near a riverside market town and was making arrangements for the cooking, when a brahmin boy came up and asked, "Babu, where are you bound?" The boy asking could not have been more than fifteen or sixteen years old.

Moti Babu answered, "Kanthalia."

The brahmin boy said, "Could you set me down at Nandigaon, on your way?"

The Babu agreed, and asked, "What is your name?"

The brahmin boy said, "My name is Tarapada."

The boy was fair-skinned and remarkably handsome to look at. In his large eyes and his smiling lips there showed a certain graceful, tender delicacy. He wore a single soiled dhoti. His uncovered body was entirely without excess of any kind — as though some sculptor had, with the greatest care, fashioned it flawless and complete. It seemed almost as though, in some former life, he had been an ascetic boy, and, through the influence of pure austerity, his body had shed away every superfluous part until only a certain refined, brahminical grace remained, fully revealed.

Motilal Babu said to him, with the greatest tenderness, "Go and bathe, my child — the meal will be ready here."

Tarapada said, "Very well," and, without the slightest hesitation, joined at once in the cooking preparations. Motilal Babu's servant was a man from Hindustan, not especially skilled at cleaning fish and the like; Tarapada took over the task himself and finished it in short order, and cooked one or two dishes besides, with the ease of long practice. Once the cooking was done, Tarapada bathed in the river, opened his small bundle, and put on a clean white cloth; taking a small wooden comb, he brushed his long hair back from his forehead over the nape of his neck, arranged his freshly washed sacred thread across his chest, and presented himself before Moti Babu on the boat.

Moti Babu took him inside the boat. There sat Moti Babu's wife and his nine-year-old daughter. Moti Babu's wife, Annapurna, seeing this beautiful boy, was overcome at once with tenderness — she thought to herself, 'Ah, whose child can this be, and where has he come from — however can his mother bear to be parted from him?'

In due course, two seats were laid side by side for Moti Babu and the boy. The boy proved no great eater; seeing how little he ate, Annapurna assumed he must be feeling shy, and pressed him, again and again, to try this dish or that — but once he had had enough, no amount of urging could persuade him further. It became clear that the boy did entirely as he himself wished, and yet did so with such natural ease that it showed no trace of stubbornness or obstinacy at all. Nor did his manner show the slightest sign of shyness either.

After the meal, Annapurna sat him down beside her and began questioning him, hoping to learn his history. She gathered no very detailed account. All that emerged, in essence, was that the boy had run away from home of his own accord, at the age of seven or eight.

Annapurna asked, "Have you no mother?"

Tarapada said, "I have one."

Annapurna asked, "Does she not love you?"

Tarapada found this question so strange that he laughed and said, "Why should she not love me?"

Annapurna asked, "Then why did you leave her?"

Tarapada said, "She has four other sons, and three daughters besides."

Annapurna, pained by this strange answer, said, "Oh, my child — what a thing to say. Does having five fingers mean one finger may be given up?"

Tarapada was young, and his history, correspondingly, was a brief one — but the boy himself was something entirely new. He was the fourth son of his parents, and had lost his father in early childhood. Even amid so many children, Tarapada had been the most beloved of all — he received boundless affection from his mother, his brothers and sisters, and everyone in the neighbourhood besides. Even his

village schoolmaster never struck him — and even when he did, everyone, kin and stranger alike, felt the sting of it on the boy's behalf. In such circumstances, there was no reason at all for him to have left home. That neglected, sickly boy who lives forever on stolen fruit and fourfold the punishment for it from angry householders remains, generally, within the bounds of his own familiar village, at the mercy of his own tormenting mother — while this same boy, the beloved darling of the whole village, joined up with some travelling troupe of actors and fled the village without the slightest regret.

Everyone searched for him and brought him back to the village. His mother clutched him to her breast and drenched him with tears; his sisters wept; his elder brother, discharging the stern duty of a male guardian, made some attempt at mild discipline, only to end, remorsefully, by granting him a great deal of indulgence and reward instead. The women of the neighbourhood called him into their homes, one after another, trying, with every possible fondness and temptation, to bind him to them. But no bond, not even the bond of love, could hold him; his very stars at birth seemed to have marked him for a homeless life. Whenever he saw a foreign boat being towed up the river, or some wandering ascetic, come from who knew what distant land, taking shelter beneath the village's great banyan tree, or gypsy tinkers settling upon the fallow riverside fields to peel bamboo strips and weave their little baskets, his heart would grow restless with longing for the loveless freedom of that unknown outer world. After two or three attempts at running away in quick succession, his family and the village people alike gave up all hope of keeping him.

At first he had joined a troupe of jatra actors. When the troupe's manager grew to love him as his very own son, and he became a favourite with everyone in the company, high and low, and even the masters of the households where the performances were held — especially the ladies of those households — began calling him in especially and showering him with attention, one day, without a word to anyone, he vanished, and no trace of him could be found.

Tarapada was as wary of bondage as a young deer — and, like a deer, just as entranced by music. It was, in fact, the singing of the jatra performers that first drew him from his own home. The melody of a song would set a tremor running through every vein of his body, and its rhythm would set his whole frame swaying. Even as a small child, at gatherings of music, he would sit self-forgetting, swaying

with a grave, composed, almost adult solemnity that older people found impossible to watch without laughing. And it was not only music — when the monsoon rains of Shravan fell upon the thick foliage of the trees, when thunder rolled across the sky, when the wind wailed through the forest like some motherless demon-child, his heart would grow wild and unruly. In the hush of noon, the distant cry of a kite far up in the sky; in a rainy evening, the chorus of frogs; in the depth of night, the howling of jackals — all of it stirred him to restlessness. Drawn by this same enchantment of music, he soon joined a troupe performing panchali recitations. The troupe leader took the greatest care in teaching him to sing and in helping him memorise the verses, and grew as fond of him as of a caged bird held close to his own heart. The bird learned a song or two — and, one morning, flew away.

His last venture was with a gymnastics troupe. From the end of Jaishtha to the close of Ashadh, various fairs — barowari melas — are held, one after another, in different places throughout that region. On these occasions, two or three troupes of jatra players, panchali singers, kobi-poets, dancing girls, and all manner of hawkers travel by boat, through the small rivers and their tributaries, from one fair to the next. The previous year, a small gymnastics troupe from Calcutta had joined this travelling circuit of amusements. Tarapada had, at first, fallen in with a boatborne vendor and taken on the task of selling paan at the fairs; later, his natural curiosity drawn to the astonishing skill of the gymnasts, he had joined their troupe instead. Tarapada had, on his own, taught himself to play the flute quite well — during the gymnastic performances he was made to play a Lucknow thumri melody at a quick tempo on his flute — this was his one and only duty.

It was from this same troupe that he made his final escape. He had heard that the zamindars of Nandigram were setting up a grand amateur jatra performance with the greatest pomp, and, hearing this, had gathered his small bundle and set out for Nandigram — and it was on this journey that he happened to meet Moti Babu.

Tarapada had, in turn, fallen in with a great many different troupes, and yet, through the natural influence of his own imaginative temperament, had never taken on the particular character of any one of them. Within himself, he remained entirely unattached and free. He had heard, in the course of his travels, a great many ugly things spoken, and had seen a great many ugly sights besides — yet none of it had ever found the slightest opportunity to settle within his mind. This boy

was, in every way, entirely without fixed habit. No bond of custom, any more than any other kind of bond, could ever hold his mind fast. He swam through this world, over its muddy waters, like a white-winged royal swan. However many times, out of curiosity, he dove down beneath the surface, his wings never grew wet, never grew soiled. And so this runaway boy's face carried, unfadingly, a certain bright, natural freshness of youth — and it was the sight of that very face that led the seasoned, worldly-wise Motilal Babu to invite him along, without a single question, without the least suspicion, with the warmest affection.

CHAPTER TWO

After the meal, the boat set off once more. Annapurna, with the greatest tenderness, went on questioning this brahmin boy about his home and his family; Tarapada answered her, each time, in the briefest possible terms, and escaped outside as soon as he could. Outside, the monsoon river, swollen to the very brim of its banks, seemed, in its own reckless, self-forgetting restlessness, almost to trouble Mother Nature herself. In the sunlight breaking free of the clouds, the half-submerged rows of kash-grass along the riverbank, and, above them, the lush, dense fields of sugarcane, and, beyond them, the horizon-kissing dark blue line of forest at the farthest edge of sight — all of it seemed to stand revealed, freshly awakened, before the silent, entranced gaze of the blue sky above, like some beauty summoned into being by the touch of a golden wand out of a fairy tale — all of it seemed alive, pulsing, radiant with vivid, exuberant light, glossy with newness, brimming with abundance.

Tarapada took shelter beneath the shade of the sail, upon the roof of the boat. One after another, sloping green meadows, flooded jute fields, the rippling dark green of the aman rice, the narrow paths leading from the ghats toward the villages, the shaded, forest-encircled villages themselves, all passed before his eyes. This water, this land, this sky; this ceaseless motion, this vitality, this murmuring life on every side; this vast expanse and variety above and below, and this untouched, distant remoteness; this immense, everlasting, unblinking, wordless universe — all of it belonged to this young boy as intimately as kin; and yet he never once tried, even for a single moment, to hold this restless human world in his own affectionate embrace. A calf ran along the riverbank, tail raised; a village pony grazed, hopping about with its two forelegs bound together by rope; a kingfisher dove, sharp and

swift, from a fisherman's net-pole into the water and caught a fish; boys splashed and shouted, playing in the water; women, laughing and chattering loudly, stood waist-deep in the river, spreading out the ends of their saris and wringing them clean with both hands; fisherwomen, saris tucked up at the waist, bought fish from the fishermen out of round baskets — all of this he watched, sitting there, with an ever-fresh, untiring curiosity; his thirst for watching was never once satisfied.

Up on the roof of the boat, Tarapada gradually fell into conversation with the boatmen and oarsmen. Now and then, as needed, he would take up the pole from a boatman's hands and push the boat along himself; when the helmsman wished to smoke his tobacco, Tarapada would go and take the helm himself — whenever the sail needed turning, in whichever direction, he saw to it all with the greatest skill.

Toward evening, Annapurna called Tarapada and asked, "What do you eat at night?"

Tarapada said, "Whatever I can get — and some days, nothing at all."

This handsome brahmin boy's indifference to receiving hospitality troubled Annapurna somewhat. She longed, more than anything, to feed and clothe this homeless, wandering boy until he was thoroughly content. But she could find no way to discover what, exactly, might satisfy him. She called the servants and set them bustling about, buying milk and sweets from the village. Tarapada ate a proper portion, but would not touch the milk. Motilal Babu, a man of few words, also urged him to drink some milk; the boy said, briefly, "I don't care for it."

Two or three days passed upon the river in this way. Tarapada took part, of his own free will and with great readiness, in every task — cooking, marketing, even steering the boat. Whatever sight came before his eyes drew his curious gaze at once; whatever work came within reach of his hands drew him in at once as well. His eyes, his hands, his mind were all in constant motion — and so, like this ever-restless Nature around him, he remained forever untroubled, indifferent, and yet forever occupied. Every human being, ordinarily, has some fixed ground of their own to stand upon; but Tarapada was a single bright, joyful wave upon this boundless, blue-sky-borne current of the universe — he held no relation whatsoever to past or future; to move ever forward was his one and only occupation.

In the course of his long association with so many different troupes, he had, in the meantime, acquired all manner of entertaining skills. Since his mind was never clouded by any brooding thought, everything imprinted itself, with astonishing ease, upon the clear tablet of his memory. Long passages of panchali, kathakata, kirtan songs, and jatra plays lived ready upon the tip of his tongue. One evening, following his usual custom, Motilal Babu was reading the Ramayana aloud to his wife and daughter; just as the story of Kusha and Lava was about to begin, Tarapada, unable to contain his own eagerness, came down from the roof of the boat and said, "Put the book aside. Let me sing you the tale of Kusha and Lava instead."

And, saying this, he began the panchali of Kusha and Lava. In a voice sweet and full as a flute, he poured out Dasharathi Ray's alliterative verses in a swift, unbroken torrent; the boatmen and oarsmen all came crowding near the doorway, leaning in to listen; through laughter, pathos, and song, an extraordinary current of feeling flowed out across that evening sky above the riverbank — the two silent shores grew curious and alert; passengers on passing boats paused, straining their ears toward the sound for a while; and when it ended, everyone, their hearts aching, let out a long sigh and thought, why did it have to end so soon.

Tears standing in her eyes, Annapurna longed to take the boy into her lap, press him to her breast, and breathe in the scent of his hair. Motilal Babu thought to himself, 'If only I could somehow keep this boy near me always, the want of a son would be filled at last.' Only in the heart of the small girl, Charushashi, did envy and resentment take root instead.

CHAPTER THREE

Charushashi was her parents' only child, sole possessor of their entire parental love. There was no end to her whims and her stubbornness. She held strong opinions of her own on eating, on dress, on the arrangement of her hair — but none of these opinions ever held steady for very long. On any day when there was an invitation somewhere, her mother lived in dread that the girl would seize upon some impossible whim about her appearance. If, by chance, her hair was not braided exactly to her liking, then no matter how many times it was undone and rebraided in ever so many different ways, nothing would satisfy her, and, in the end, a great

fit of weeping would follow. So it went in every matter. And yet, at other times, when her mood happened to be sunny, she raised not the slightest objection to anything at all — and then she would show the most extravagant affection, throwing her arms about her mother, kissing her, laughing and chattering until she wore everyone out entirely. This small girl was an utterly impenetrable riddle.

This girl now turned the full, unmanageable force of her heart toward pursuing Tarapada with the bitterest resentment. She made her parents' lives thoroughly wretched into the bargain. At mealtimes she would push away her plate on the verge of tears; the cooking never pleased her; she struck the maidservant; she found some baseless complaint in everything. The more Tarapada's various skills won admiration from her and from everyone else, the more her anger seemed to grow. Her heart refused to admit that Tarapada possessed any merit whatsoever — and yet, as the proof of it mounted, her own displeasure rose right along with it. The day Tarapada sang the tale of Kusha and Lava, Annapurna thought to herself, 'Music tames even the wild beasts of the forest — surely, today, my daughter's heart must have softened.' She asked her, "Charu, how did you find it?" The girl, without a word, shook her head with tremendous vigour. Translated into words, this gesture came to roughly this: that she had not liked it in the slightest, and never would.

Understanding that envy had taken root in Charu's heart, her mother refrained, from then on, from showing any open affection toward Tarapada in her daughter's presence. In the evenings, once Charu had eaten early and gone to bed, Annapurna would come and sit near the door of the cabin, while Moti Babu and Tarapada sat outside, and, at Annapurna's request, Tarapada would begin to sing; and when, under the spell of his singing, the sleeping village along the riverbank lay entranced and hushed beneath the vast darkness of evening, and Annapurna's own tender heart overflowed with love and the beauty of it all — just then, Charu would come rushing out from her bed, and say, in a voice both angry and tearful, "Mother, what is all this noise you're making — I can't sleep at all." That her parents should send her off to sleep alone, while they sat together, enjoying music with Tarapada, was more than she could bear.

This bright-eyed, dark-eyed girl's natural sharpness struck Tarapada as thoroughly amusing. He tried, in various ways — telling her stories, singing songs, playing his

flute — to win her over, but nothing succeeded at all. Only when Tarapada went down to bathe in the river at midday, his fair, slender body moving through the brimming water with easy, graceful strokes, looking for all the world like some young river-god — only then did the girl's curiosity prove impossible to resist; she would wait eagerly for that particular hour — though she never let anyone know of her own inward eagerness, and this untrained little actress, apparently absorbed in knitting a woollen muffler, would, now and then, cast a sidelong glance, with an air of the utmost indifference, at Tarapada's play in the water.

CHAPTER FOUR

Tarapada took no notice at all of when they passed Nandigram. At the gentlest possible pace, the great boat made its way, now under sail, now towed along, through the many branching channels of river after river; and the days of those aboard, too, flowed onward, easy and serene, through this same peaceful, beautiful, ever-varied landscape of rivers and tributaries, murmuring softly along like the water itself. No one was in the least hurry; the midday bath and meal generally took a very long while; and, no sooner had evening begun to fall than the boat would be moored beside some fine-looking village, near a ghat, at the edge of some forest ringing with crickets and glimmering with fireflies.

In this manner, after some ten days, the boat reached Kanthalia. At the zamindar's arrival, palanquins and ponies came out from the house to meet him, and a band of armed retainers, bamboo staves in hand, set off volley after volley of blank gunfire, throwing the anxious crows of the village into the most tremendous uproar.

While all this ceremony was under way and taking its time, Tarapada slipped quickly down from the boat and made a swift tour of the whole village. Calling this man brother, that one uncle, this woman sister, that one aunt, he had, within two or three hours, established bonds of friendship with the whole village. It was precisely because he held no real ties anywhere that this boy could form acquaintance with everyone, everywhere, with such astonishing ease and speed. Within a very short time, Tarapada had won over the whole heart of the village.

The reason he won hearts so easily was this: Tarapada could join in naturally with everyone, exactly on their own terms. He was bound by no particular set of fixed

habits, and yet possessed a natural aptitude for every situation, every kind of work. Among boys, he was a perfectly ordinary boy, and yet somehow set apart from them, their superior; among the elderly, he was no mere boy, and yet no elder either; among cowherds, he was a cowherd, and yet a brahmin still. In every task, with everyone, he lent a hand as naturally as some lifelong companion; sitting chatting in a sweet-shop, the confectioner would say, "Dada-thakur, sit a moment, would you, brother — I'll be right back" — and Tarapada, with a perfectly untroubled face, would sit down in the shop, take up a sal leaf, and set about fanning away the flies from the sweets. He was skilled, too, at making sweets himself; he knew something of the weaver's craft; nor was the potter's wheel entirely unfamiliar to him.

Tarapada had won over the whole village — only the envy of one particular village girl he had not yet managed to conquer. It was, perhaps, precisely because this girl so fiercely wished him banished far away that Tarapada remained tied to this village for so long.

But even in girlhood, the secret workings of a woman's heart are exceedingly hard to fathom — and Charushashi proved this true.

The brahmin priestess's daughter, Sonamoni, had been widowed at the age of five; she was Charu's own companion, of the same age. Having been unwell, she had not been able to see her returned friend for some while. The day she came, recovered, to visit, a small rift arose between the two friends, almost without cause.

Charu had begun her story with great flourish. She had meant to describe, in elaborate detail, the tale of how they had acquired their newfound treasure, this Tarapada, and thereby raise her friend's curiosity and wonder to the highest pitch. But when she heard that Tarapada was, in fact, no stranger at all to Sonamoni — that he called the priestess "aunt," and that Sonamoni herself called him "brother" — when she heard that Tarapada had not merely charmed mother and daughter alike with his kirtan tunes upon the flute, but had, at Sonamoni's own request, made her a bamboo flute with his own hands, and had, on more than one occasion, plucked her fruit from the highest branches and flowers from the thorniest ones — Charu felt as though a burning spear had pierced her very heart. Charu had believed that Tarapada belonged, in some special way, only to them — a treasure to be closely guarded, of which the common run of people might catch only the faintest

glimpse, without ever being able to lay hold of it at all; who would gaze at his charm and his talent only from a distance, and go on thanking Charushashi's own family for it. Why should this rare, extraordinary, providentially delivered brahmin boy be so easily accessible to Sonamoni? Had they not brought him here with such great care, kept him with such great care, how would the likes of Sonamoni ever even have set eyes on him? Sonamoni's own brother! Her whole body burned to hear it.

Why should such fierce anxiety arise over sole possession of the very same Tarapada whom Charu had, in her heart, been trying so hard to wound with arrows of resentment? Who could ever hope to understand it?

That very day, over some other trifling matter, a bitter quarrel broke out between Charu and Sonamoni. And Charu went to Tarapada's room, took out his prized flute, and, jumping upon it, broke it to pieces without the slightest mercy.

Just as Charu, in a fit of tremendous passion, was engaged in this act of flute-destruction, Tarapada came into the room. He was astonished at the sight of the girl in this destructive fury. He said, "Charu, why are you breaking my flute?"

Charu, eyes blazing, face flushed, cried, "Good — I'm glad I did, very glad!" and, stamping on the shattered flute two or three more times than was strictly necessary, burst into loud sobs and rushed out of the room. Tarapada picked up the flute, turned it over in his hands, and found it entirely beyond repair. Seeing his old, innocent flute meet with such a sudden, needless catastrophe, he could not help but burst out laughing. From that day forward, Charushashi became, for him, a source of the greatest curiosity every single day.

His other great field of curiosity was the collection of illustrated English books in Motilal Babu's library. He had already grown quite well acquainted with the outer world — but into this world of pictures, he could never manage to properly enter. He tried filling in the gaps with his own imagination, but his mind could never quite find satisfaction in it.

Seeing Tarapada's eagerness over the picture books, Motilal Babu one day said, "Would you like to learn English? Then you could understand what all these pictures mean." Tarapada said at once, "Yes, I would."

Moti Babu, delighted, arranged for the headmaster of the village's Entrance school, Ramratan Babu, to come every evening and take charge of the boy's English education.

CHAPTER FIVE

Tarapada threw himself into learning English with his sharp memory and undivided attention. It was as though he had set out on an expedition into some new, unfamiliar country, and cut off all connection with his old world entirely; the people of the neighbourhood no longer saw much of him; when, before evening fell, he would walk briskly back and forth along the lonely riverbank, memorising his lessons, the band of boys who once worshipped him would watch him from a distance, with a certain wounded, respectful awe, not daring to disturb his studies.

Charu, too, saw little enough of him these days. Formerly, Tarapada had gone into the inner apartments and eaten his meals under Annapurna's own tender gaze — but since this often caused some delay, he now asked Moti Babu to arrange for him to eat outside instead. Annapurna, hurt, raised an objection — but Moti Babu, delighted by the boy's enthusiasm for his studies, approved the new arrangement all the same.

At this, Charu, too, suddenly took it into her head to insist, "I want to learn English as well." Her parents, at first, took their whimsical daughter's proposal as something of a joke, and laughed indulgently — but the girl very soon washed away every trace of that laughter with an abundant flood of tears. In the end, her fond, helpless parents took the girl's proposal seriously after all. Charu was set to study alongside Tarapada, under the same master.

But steady application to study was not, by nature, in this restless girl's makeup. She learned nothing herself, and did nothing but disrupt Tarapada's own studies. She fell behind, never learned her lessons — and yet could not bear, under any circumstances, to remain behind Tarapada either. Whenever Tarapada moved ahead of her to a new lesson, she flew into a great rage, and did not stop short of weeping over it either. Whenever Tarapada finished an old book and bought a new one, she had to have the very same new book bought for her too. That Tarapada should sit quietly writing and memorising his lessons on his own, in his free time, was more than this jealous girl could bear; she took to secretly pouring ink into his

exercise book, stealing his pens, and even tearing out the very pages he needed to practise from. Tarapada bore a great many of the girl's mischiefs with amusement, and, when it became truly unbearable, would strike her — but he could never manage to properly discipline her.

By chance, one method presented itself. One day, thoroughly annoyed and quite at his wit's end, Tarapada tore up his own ink-ruined exercise book and sat there, grave and downcast. Charu, coming to the door, expected a beating that day. But her expectation went unfulfilled. Tarapada sat silent, without a single word. The girl kept circling about the room, in and out, coming so close, again and again, that Tarapada could easily have delivered a resounding slap across her back had he wished — but he did not, and remained grave and silent instead. The girl found herself in a terrible difficulty. She had never once, in her whole life, learned the art of asking forgiveness — and yet her small, remorseful heart grew utterly desperate to win back her fellow student's pardon. At last, seeing no other way, she took a torn scrap of the exercise book, sat down near Tarapada, and wrote, in the largest possible letters, "I will never spill ink on your book again." Having written this, she fidgeted about restlessly, trying every way she could to draw Tarapada's attention to it. Seeing this, Tarapada could not restrain himself, and burst out laughing. At this the girl, overcome with shame and fury, leapt up and rushed headlong out of the room. Only by erasing that scrap of paper, upon which she had, with her own hand, confessed her own humility, from all eternity and from the whole of creation itself, could the bitter anguish of her heart ever have been appeased.

Meanwhile, timid Sonamoni had, on one or two occasions, peered in at the door of the study and gone away again. She and Charu remained close in every other respect, but where Tarapada was concerned, Sonamoni regarded her friend with no small fear and suspicion. Choosing carefully the hours when Charu happened to be occupied within the inner apartments, Sonamoni would come, hesitantly, and stand near Tarapada's door. Tarapada, looking up from his book, would say fondly, "What is it, Sona? Any news? How is your mother keeping?"

Sonamoni would say, "You haven't been to see us in a long while — Mother says you must come. Her back hurts, so she can't come to see you herself."

Just then, more often than not, Charu would suddenly appear. Sonamoni would grow flustered at once, as though she had come to steal her friend's own property

in secret. Charu, raising her voice to its highest pitch, eyes rolling, would say, "What's this, Sona! You've come to disturb his studies, have you — I shall go and tell Father this instant." As though she herself were some elder, responsible guardian of Tarapada's, whose whole day and night were devoted, single-mindedly, to ensuring not the slightest interruption to his studies. But what purpose had brought her, of all people, to Tarapada's study-room at this same unlikely hour was a matter not hidden from He who dwells within all hearts — nor, indeed, from Tarapada himself. But poor Sonamoni, frightened, would at once invent some string of false excuses; and when Charu, with the greatest contempt, called her a liar to her face, she would slink away, ashamed, frightened, and defeated, her heart aching. Kind-hearted Tarapada would call after her, "Sona, I shall come to your house this evening, all right?" At this Charu would hiss like a serpent and say, "Oh, you'll go, will you! Haven't you lessons to do? Shall I go and tell the master?"

Undeterred by Charu's threats, Tarapada did, in fact, go to the priestess's house one or two evenings after that. By the third or fourth time, rather than issuing another empty threat, Charu quietly bolted Tarapada's door shut from outside one evening, and fetched the padlock from her mother's spice-box to lock it besides. She kept Tarapada thus imprisoned throughout the whole evening, and only opened the door again at mealtime. Tarapada, in anger, said not a word, and made as if to leave without eating at all. At this the remorseful, distressed girl, folding her hands, pleaded with him again and again, "I beg you, at your very feet — I shall never do such a thing again. I beg you, at your very feet — please, come and eat." Even this failed to move him, and, growing desperate, she burst into tears; Tarapada, caught in this predicament, at last relented and came back to eat.

Time and again Charu vowed, with the utmost sincerity, that she would treat Tarapada well and never trouble him again for even a moment — but whenever Sonamoni or anyone else came near him, some uncontrollable mood would seize her, and she could never restrain herself. Whenever she went on being unusually well-behaved for some days together, Tarapada would grow watchfully alert, sensing that some fierce upheaval must soon be at hand. Exactly when, on what pretext, or from what direction the attack would come, there was never any telling. Then would follow a violent storm, and after the storm, a great downpour of tears, and after that, a serene, gentle calm once more.

CHAPTER SIX

Nearly two years passed in this way. Never before, for so long a stretch of time, had Tarapada let himself be caught by anyone. Perhaps his mind had become bound, through some extraordinary attraction, to the pursuit of his studies; perhaps, as he grew older, some change had begun in his very nature, drawing his mind toward settling down and enjoying the comfortable pleasures of an ordinary domestic life; perhaps the ever-restless, mischievous beauty of his young fellow student had, quite without his own notice, begun spreading its own bonds about his heart.

Meanwhile, Charu had passed her eleventh year. Moti Babu, making inquiries, brought forward two or three excellent marriage proposals for his daughter. Knowing that his daughter had reached marriageable age, Moti Babu forbade her English lessons and her going about outside entirely. This sudden confinement stirred up a considerable storm within the household.

It was then that Annapurna one day called Moti Babu and said, "Why do you go about searching so hard for a bridegroom? That boy Tarapada is a fine one. And besides, our own daughter is fond of him."

Hearing this, Moti Babu was thoroughly astonished. He said, "How could such a thing ever be? We know nothing whatsoever of Tarapada's family or lineage. I have only the one daughter, and I mean to give her to a good household."

One day, a family from Raydanga came to view the girl. Great effort was made to dress Charu up and bring her out to be seen. She shut herself in her bedroom and refused, absolutely, to come out. Moti Babu pleaded with her from outside the door at great length, then scolded her — nothing worked at all. At last he had to go out and tell the visiting party from Raydanga, quite falsely, that his daughter had suddenly fallen very ill, and could not be shown that day. They concluded that the girl must have some hidden defect, which was why such a deception had been resorted to.

It was then that Moti Babu began to think: this boy Tarapada is, by every measure, handsome and accomplished — if only I could keep him here in my own household, I would not need to send my one and only daughter off into another family's home. He considered, too, that however forgivable his unruly, disobedient daughter's

mischief might seem to their own fond eyes, no in-laws' family would ever tolerate it.

Husband and wife, after a good deal of discussion, sent a man to Tarapada's own village to inquire into his family background. Word came back that the lineage was a good one, though poor. Moti Babu then sent a marriage proposal to the boy's mother and brother. They were so overjoyed that they gave their consent without a moment's hesitation.

At Kanthalia, Moti Babu and Annapurna began settling upon a date for the wedding, but the naturally secretive and cautious Moti Babu kept the whole matter quiet.

Charu could not be kept confined for long. Now and then, like a sudden raid of marauding cavalry, she would burst in upon Tarapada's study. Sometimes with anger, sometimes with tender affection, sometimes with sheer contrariness, she would suddenly set the peaceful hush of his studies rippling. And these days, in the mind of this otherwise detached, freedom-loving brahmin boy, there would now and then rise, for a brief moment, a strange, unfamiliar tremor of feeling, like a flash of lightning. He whose light, unburdened heart had always drifted, undisturbed, upon the crest of time's flowing current, now found himself, now and then, growing absent-minded, tangled in some strange web of daydream. Some days he would abandon his lessons entirely and go into Motilal Babu's library, turning the pages of the picture books; and the imaginary world those pictures now conjured up in his mind was quite different from before, and far more richly coloured. Watching Charu's strange behaviour, he found he could no longer tease her as naturally and easily as before; when she misbehaved, the thought of striking her no longer even crossed his mind. This subtle change within himself, this new sense of attachment and confinement, began to feel, to him, like some strange new dream.

Having settled upon an auspicious day in the month of Shravan for the wedding, Moti Babu sent for Tarapada's mother and brothers, without letting Tarapada himself know anything of it. He instructed his agent in Calcutta to engage a proper wedding band, and sent off a list of goods to be procured.

Clouds of the new monsoon gathered in the sky. The village river had, until now, run nearly dry, with water pooling here and there only in scattered ditches; small

boats lay grounded in that muddy water, and the deep, carved ruts of cart-wheels marked the dry riverbed. And then, one day, like Parvati returning to her father's house, a swift-flowing current of water came rushing, laughing, into the village's empty, waiting breast — naked children ran to the bank, dancing and shouting, leaping again and again into the water in unsated delight, as though embracing the river itself; women came out of their cottages to see their old, beloved companion once more — into the dry, lifeless village came flooding, from somewhere, a great, powerful surge of life. Boats of every size, laden with goods from far and near, began to arrive one after another; the market ghat rang out, in the evenings, with the songs of foreign boatmen. Throughout the year, the villages along both banks live out their days alone, each keeping to its own small, quiet corner and its own small domestic affairs; but in the rainy season, the great outer world comes, laden with all manner of varied merchandise, riding its ochre-sailed water-chariots, to pay a visit to these village-daughters — and then, for a while, their smallness vanishes in the proud kinship they feel with the wider world; everything grows lively, alert, animated, and the murmuring voices of far-off kingdoms come rippling through the sky above this once silent, mute countryside.

At this time, at Kurulkata, in the territory of the Nag family, a famous Rathayatra fair was to be held. One moonlit evening, Tarapada went down to the ghat and saw boats of every kind — one carrying a great Ferris-wheel, another a troupe of jatra players, another laden with goods — hurrying, in the powerful new current, toward the fair; a concert band from Calcutta had struck up a loud, quick-tempo tune; a jatra troupe was singing to the accompaniment of a violin, breaking into loud cries of "ha-ha-ha" at the close of each phrase; the boatmen of the western boats, having nothing but their mridangas and cymbals, split the sky with wild, unmelodious clamour in their sheer enthusiasm — the excitement knew no bounds. Even as he watched, dense clouds rose from the eastern horizon, spreading great black sails across the middle of the sky; the moon vanished; the east wind rose in force; cloud raced after cloud; the river's water swelled with a rippling, laughing murmur; darkness gathered thick among the swaying trees along the bank; the frogs began to call; the chirring of crickets seemed to saw through the darkness itself. It seemed, before him, as though the whole world had become one great chariot-procession — wheels turning, banners flying, the earth itself trembling; clouds flying, wind racing, the river flowing, boats sailing, songs rising — and then, all at

once, thunder rolled with a deep, rumbling roar, lightning slashed again and again across the sky, and, from the far, dark distance, came the scent of a torrential downpour on its way. Only, on one side of the river, the village of Kanthalia shut its cottage doors, put out its lamps, and slept on in silence.

The following day, Tarapada's mother and brothers arrived at Kanthalia. The day after that, three great boats laden with all manner of goods arrived from Calcutta and moored at the ghat of Kanthalia's own estate office. And the day after that, very early in the morning, Sonamoni came, fearfully, bearing a little dried mango-paste wrapped in paper and a little pickle in a leaf-cup, and stood in silence at the door of Tarapada's study — but by the next day, Tarapada was nowhere to be found. Before the conspiring bonds of love, affection, and friendship could close entirely around him from every side, this brahmin boy, having stolen the heart of the whole village, had already gone, on some dark, cloud-shrouded rainy night, back to that vast, unattached, indifferent mother of all — this wide world itself.

(Bhadra–Kartik, 1302 B.S.)