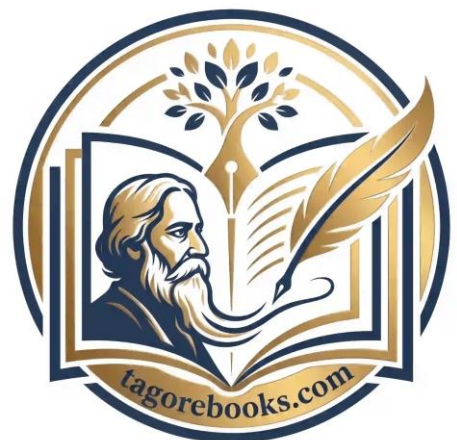


SHORT STORY

THE HOME-COMING

Rabindranath Tagore



Phatik Chakraborty, the unopposed leader of all the children in the neighbourhood, suddenly hit upon a new idea on seeing the massive log of wood lying on the banks of the river. It was decided that the log should be rolled away so that the owner, upon finding the log missing, would be perplexed. The vision of the owner's perplexed face, egged Phatik's followers and they immediately rushed forward to execute the plan.

But, before the plan could be executed, there arose an obstacle. Phatik's younger brother, Makhanlal, appeared from nowhere. He appeared to be contemplating some worldly problem. Makhanlal sat on the log and, unmindful of the others around him, engaged in some serious thinking.

Phatik's followers were in a dilemma. The log could not be rolled with Makhanlal sitting on it. A few of the followers prodded Makhanlal in order to budge him from the seat. But Makhanlal was lost in his own thoughts and did not heed the attempts to dislodge him.

Phatik came over and sounded, "Go away, else you will get a slap."

The response was undesirable. Instead of getting up, Makhanlal made himself all the more comfortable.

Now, this was an insult which Phatik should not have tolerated. Phatik should have carried out his threat and slapped Makhanlal. However, Phatik did not do so. A still better idea had clicked in his mind.

"Let us roll the log with Makhanlal sitting on it," he told the others.

The followers were all for it. Even Makhanlal decided it was a good idea as he would get a free ride. What Makhanlal did not realise was that there were inherent dangers in the plan.

Phatik and gang girded their loins and gave the log a good push.

Facilitated by its geometrical shape, the log rolled and so did Makhanlal.

Makhanlal was soon rolling on the ground. The followers were delighted.

But, soon, Makhanlal found his feet and, rushing towards Phatik, attacked him with relish. Thereafter, he turned his back and went home crying with the intention of complaining to mother.

The gravity of the situation dawned upon Phatik and he sat on an upturned boat on the banks, chewing a blade of grass while trying to figure out how he could escape his mother's wrath.

A boat arrived then and a middle-aged man with greying hair alighted.

"Which way do I go to reach the home of the Chakraborty's?" he asked Phatik.

"That way," Phatik replied without pointing towards anywhere in particular.

The stranger was confused.

"Where?" he wanted to know.

"I don't know," Phatik said.

Realising that he was unlikely to get a proper reply from the boy, the stranger sought help of other people nearby and went his way.

Who should arrive then, but Bagha who helped in the house.

"Your mother is calling you, come let us go home," Bagha told Phatik.

"I don't want to come," Phatik replied.

Bagha was a giant of a man who did not like to take a "no" for an answer. He picked up Phatik as if he were a ball of cotton and marched towards home. All that poor Phatik could do was to thrash his arms and legs in the air.

Upon laying her eyes on Phatik, his mother immediately accosted him.

"How dare you beat up Makhan again?" she asked.

"I did not beat him," Phatik answered.

"Again, you are lying!"

"I am not lying, you may ask Makhan."

Makhan stood his ground and reiterated that he had indeed been beaten by Phatik.

At this, mother gave Phatik a resounding slap.

While this scene was unfolding, a stranger, the same one who had sought directions from Phatik, entered the house and gently inquired, "What's happening?"

Upon sighting the gentleman, Phatik's mother was overjoyed.

"Oh my!" she exclaimed, "When did you arrive, Dada (elder brother)?" And so saying she touched his feet in deep respect.

Dada, or Bishambarbabu, had left home long time back to seek his fortune in the western parts of the country. In the meanwhile, Phatik's mother had given birth to her two children, they had grown big while her husband had passed away. But Dada had never come home. After many years, he had returned back to the village to meet his sister.

The next few days were like festive occasions in the Chakraborty household. Finally, only a couple of days remained before Bishambarbabu was to leave. He had settled in Kolkata. He inquired after the children's education and learnt that Phatik was not good at studies but Makhan was a gentle and obedient child.

"Phatik gives me a lot of trouble," his sister told him.

After listening to this, Bishambarbabu proposed that he would like to take Phatik with him to Kolkata and give him a good education there. The widow readily agreed to the proposal.

"What do you want to do, Phatik? Would you like to go to Kolkata with your uncle?" she asked the mischievous boy.

"I want to go," Phatik replied without a moment's hesitation.

Although the mother was willing enough to send Phatik away because she was always afraid that Phatik might cause some harm to Makhan, she was however saddened by the boy's eagerness to leave.

"When do we leave? Let us leave at once," Phatik began pestering his uncle. In his excitement, he did not sleep well that night.

In his joy, Phatik became the epitome of munificence and he gifted away his fishing rod, kite and spool to Makhan.

Phatik was introduced to his aunt when he reached Kolkata. But the aunt did not appear to be very happy with this new addition to the family. She had three children of her own and was finding it difficult to cope. Her husband, she thought to herself, had not become sensible with age.

Boys between the ages of 13 and 14 are a nuisance. They are of no use. Their company is undesirable. They tend to grow very fast without any heed to the size of their clothes. They develop a hoarseness in their voice which is no longer sweet to listen. The boy also feels that somehow he cannot fit into the society and, so, feels ashamed of himself. At the same time, he craves for love and sympathy, but no one dares love him in the belief that it would amount to undue indulgence. So his state is almost like that of a pup which has become separated from its master. Under such a situation, any home other than his mother's is like hell to the boy. The loveless environment pricks him like a thorn.

The aunt's scorn was intolerable to Phatik and to win some love from her, he would go to great extent to do her bidding. If the aunt told him to do something for her, with great enthusiasm he would overdo it. But the aunt would repress his enthusiasm by saying, "Enough, enough! You do not have to do anything more. Concentrate on your own work and go and study."

Such utter lack of sympathy made the boy feel like a prisoner within the four walls. He craved for those days when he could run around the playground trying to fly his huge kite, the incessant strolling on the banks of the river, going for a swim whenever he felt like it, his friends, and his independence.

There was no worse an inattentive student in school than Phatik. When the teacher asked him a question, he would only stare blankly. The teacher would then start caning him, and he silently tolerated the torture. During the recess when other children engaged themselves in playing games, Phatik stood by the window and stared at the rooftops of the houses in the distance.

One day he picked up enough courage to ask his uncle when he could go to meet his mother. "Let the school close for the puja festival, and then you may go," his uncle said. But there were still many months left before the vacations.

One day he lost his textbook. Feeling guilty, he however approached his aunt and told her the truth. The aunt was annoyed. "I cannot buy new books for you every

five months,” she said. Phatik said no more but the thought that he was wasting the money of others troubled him.

When Phatik returned from school that day, he had a headache and felt feverish. But he also realised that if he revealed about his illness, it would un-necessarily create a burden for his aunt. Only a mother can care for a sick child, and Phatik felt ashamed to expect care from somebody else.

Next day, Phatik was nowhere to be found. Despite searching for him everywhere in the neighbourhood, the boy was not seen. It had started raining heavily and the people, who had gone out in search of him, came back wet. Finally, Bishambarbabu felt it appropriate to call the police.

Late that evening, a police van halted near Bishambarbabu’s house and two policemen alighted while supporting Phatik between them. He was drenched, covered in mud, and had blood-shot eyes. Phatik was shivering. Bishambarbabu lifted him and carried the boy indoors.

“Why do you have to go to all this trouble for a boy who does not belong to us? Send him home,” Phatik’s aunt told her husband. Actually, she had been distressed by the boy’s disappearance, and had neglected her meals. Besides, she had a little trouble with her own children as well.

Phatik was sobbing. “I was going to mother but they brought me back,” he said.

The fever rose sharply. Phatik became delirious and kept mumbling incoherently all through the night. Bishambarbabu brought the doctor home.

Phatik stared blankly before him and mumbled, “Uncle, have my vacations begun?” Bishambarbabu wiped the tears that were blurring his vision and, taking Phatik’s burning hands in his own, sat by his side.

But, Phatik kept mumbling. “Ma, don’t beat me. I am telling you the truth, I have done nothing wrong.”

Next day, Phatik gained some consciousness and looked around as if expecting to see someone in particular. However, upon not finding the person he was looking for, Phatik turned away his face towards the wall in disappointment. Bishambarbabu realised what was troubling the boy and bringing his mouth close

to Phatik's ears, gently whispered, "Phatik I have sent someone to fetch your mother."

The next day also passed, and the doctor appeared very concerned. The boy's condition was serious, he informed. Bishambarbau constantly remained by the sick person's side and waited for the boy's mother to arrive.

Phatik became delirious once again and, this time, intoning the sailors he mumbled, "By the mark one. By the mark two." Phatik had come to Kolkata in a steamer and at that time he had heard the sailors chant in such a manner while measuring the depth of the water. Phatik too was measuring the depth, but could not find the bottom.

It was then that Phatik's mother rushed into the room, wailing. "Phatik, my precious Phatik!" she cried out inconsolably.

Phatik very simply replied, "Yes."

Mother again called out, "Oh Phatik, my darling."

Phatik very slowly turned around and, without addressing anyone in particular, gently said, "Ma, my holidays have begun. Now I am going home."