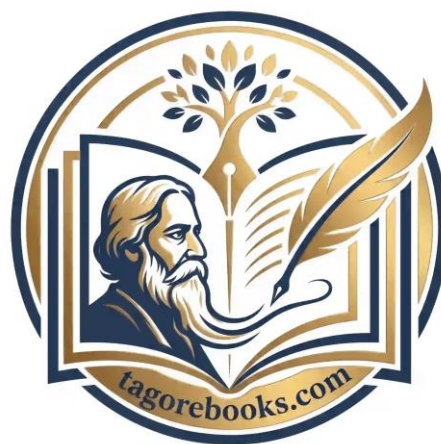


SHORT STORY

THE LOST JEWELS

Rabindranath Tagore



My boat was moored beside an old bathing _ghat_ of the river, almost in ruins. The sun had set.

On the roof of the boat the boatmen were at their evening prayer. Against the bright background of the western sky their silent worship stood out like a picture. The waning light was reflected on the still surface of river in every delicate shade of colour from gold to steel-blue.

A huge house with broken windows, tumbledown verandas, and all the appearance of old age was in front of me. I sat alone on the steps of the ghat, which were cracked by the far-reaching roots of a banyan tree. A feeling of sadness began to come over me, when suddenly I was startled to hear a voice asking: 'Sir, where have you come from?'

I looked up, and saw a man who seemed half-starved and out of fortune. His face had a dilapidated look such as is common among my countrymen who take up service away from home. His dirty coat of Assam silk was greasy and open at the front. He appeared to be just returning from his day's work, and to be taking a walk by the side of the river at a time when he should have been eating his evening meal.

The new-comer sat beside me on the steps. I said in answer to his question: 'I come from Ranchi.'

'What occupation?'

'I am a merchant.'

'What sort?'

'A dealer in cocoons and timber.'

'What name?'

After a moment's hesitation I gave a name, but it was not my own.

Still the stranger's curiosity was not satisfied. Again he questioned me: 'What have you come here for?' I replied: 'For a change of air.'

My cross-examiner seemed a little astonished. He said: 'Well, sir, I have been enjoying the air of this place for nearly six years, and with it I have taken a daily average of fifteen grains of quinine, but I have not noticed that I have benefited much.'

I replied: 'Still, you must acknowledge that, after Ranchi, I shall find the air of this place sufficient of a change.'

'Yes, indeed,' said he. 'More than you bargain for. But where will you stay here?'

Pointing to the tumble-down house above the ghat, I said: 'There.'

I think my friend had a suspicion that I had come in search of hidden treasure. However, he did not pursue the subject. He only began to describe to me what had happened in this ruined building some fifteen years before.

I found that he was the schoolmaster of the place. From beneath an enormous bald head, his two eyes shone out from their sockets with an unnatural brightness in a face that was thin with hunger and illness.

The boatmen, having finished their evening prayer, turned their attention to their cooking. As the last light of the day faded, the dark and empty house stood silent and ghostly above the deserted ghat.

The schoolmaster said: 'Nearly ten years ago, when I came to this place, Bhusan Saha used to live in this house. He was the heir to the large property and business of his uncle Durga Saha, who was childless.

'But he was modern. He had been educated, and not only spoke faultless English, but actually entered sahibs' offices with his shoes on. In addition to that he grew a beard; thus he had not the least chance of bettering himself so far as the sahibs were concerned. You had only to look at him to see that he was a modernised Bengali.

'In his own home, too, he had another drawback. His wife was beautiful. With his college education on the one hand, and on the other his beautiful wife, what chance was there of his preserving our good old traditions in his home? In fact, when he was ill, he actually called in the assistant surgeon. And his style of food, dress, and his wife's jewels were all on the same extravagant scale.

‘Sir, you are certainly a married man, so that it is hardly necessary to tell you that the ordinary female is fond of sour green mangoes, hot chillies, and a stern husband. A man need not necessarily be ugly or poor to be cheated of his wife’s love; but he is sure to lose it if he is too gentle.

‘If you ask me why this is so, I have much to say on this subject, for I have thought a good deal about it. A deer chooses a hardwood tree on which to sharpen its horns, and would get no pleasure in rubbing its horns against the soft stem of a plantain tree. From the very moment that man and woman became separate sexes, woman has been exercising all her faculties in trying by various devices to fascinate and bring man under her control. The wife of a man who is, of his own accord, submissive is altogether out of employment. All those weapons which she has inherited from her grandmothers of untold centuries are useless in her hands: the force of her tears, the fire of her anger, and the snare of her glances lie idle.

‘Under the spell of modern civilisation man has lost the God-given power of his barbaric nature, and this has loosened the conjugal ties. The unfortunate Bhusan had been turned out of the machine of modern civilisation an absolutely faultless man. He was therefore neither successful in business nor in his own home.

‘Mani was Bhusan’s wife. She used to get her caresses without asking, her Dacca muslin saris without tears, and her bangles without being able to pride herself on a victory. In this way her woman’s nature became atrophied, and with it her love for her husband. She simply accepted things without giving anything in return. Her harmless and foolish husband used to imagine that to give is the way to get. The fact was just the contrary.

‘The result of this was that Mani looked upon her husband as a mere machine for turning out her Dacca muslins and her bangles—so perfect a machine, indeed, that never for a single day did she need to oil its wheels.

‘Though Bhusan’s birthplace was Phulbere, here was his place of business, where, for the sake of his work, he spent most of his time. At his Phulbere house he had no mother, but had plenty of aunts and uncles and other relatives, from which distraction he brought away his wife to this house and kept her to himself alone. But there is this difference between a wife and one’s other possessions, that by keeping her to oneself one may lose her beyond recovery.

‘Bhusan’s wife did not talk very much, nor did she mix much with her neighbours. To feed Brahmans in obedience to a sacred vow, or to give a few pice to a religious mendicant, was not her way. In her hands nothing was ever lost; whatever she got she saved up most carefully, with the one exception of the memory of her husband’s caresses. The extraordinary thing was that she did not seem to lose the least atom of her youthful beauty. People said that whatever her age was, she never looked older than sixteen. I suppose youth is best preserved with the aid of a heart that is an ice-box.

‘But as far as work was concerned Mani was very efficient. She never kept more servants than were absolutely necessary. She thought that to pay wages to anyone to do work which she herself could do was like playing the pickpocket with her own money.

‘Not being anxious about anyone, never being distracted by love, always working and saving, she was never sick nor sorry.

‘For the majority of husbands this is quite sufficient,—not only sufficient, but fortunate. For the loving wife is a wife who makes it difficult for her husband to forget her, and the fatigue of perpetual remembrance wears out life’s bloom. It is only when a man has lumbago that he becomes conscious of his waist. And lumbago in domestic affairs is to be made conscious, by the constant imposition of love, that you have such a thing as a wife. Excessive devotion to her husband may be a merit for the wife but not comfortable for the husband,—that is my candid opinion.

‘I hope I am not tiring you, sir? I live alone, you see; I am banished from the company of my wife, and there are many important social questions which I have leisure to think about, but cannot discuss with my pupils. In course of conversation you will see how deeply I have thought of them.’

Just as he was speaking, some jackals began to howl from a neighbouring thicket. The schoolmaster stopped for a moment the torrent of his talk. When the sound had ceased, and the earth and the water relapsed into a deeper silence, he—opened his glowing eyes wide in the darkness of the night, and resumed the thread of his story.

‘Suddenly a tangle occurred in Bhusan’s complicated business. What exactly happened it is not possible for a layman like myself either to understand or to explain. Suffice it to say that, for some sudden reason, he found it difficult to get credit in the market. If only he could, by hook or by crook, raise a lakh and a half of rupees, and only for a few days rapidly flash it before the market, then his credit would be restored, and he would be able to sail fair again.

‘But the money did not come easily. If the rumour got about that he was borrowing in the market where he was known, then he feared that his business would suffer even more seriously. So he began to cast about to see whether he could not raise a loan from some stranger. But, in that case, he would be bound to give some satisfactory security.

‘The best security of all is jewelry, for that saves the signing of all sorts of complicated documents. It not only saves time but is a simple process.

‘So Bhusan went to his wife. But unfortunately he was not able to face his wife as easily as most men are. His love for his wife was of that kind which has to tread very carefully, and cannot speak out plainly what is in the mind; it is like the attraction of the sun for the earth, which is strong, yet which leaves immense space between them.

‘Still, even the hero of a high-class romance does sometimes, when hard pressed, have to mention to his beloved such things as mortgage deeds and promissory notes. But the words stick, and the tune does not seem right, and the shrinking of reluctance makes itself felt. The unfortunate Bhusan was totally powerless to say: “Look here, I am in need of money; bring out your jewels.”

‘He did broach the subject to his wife at last, but with such extreme delicacy that it only excited her opposition without bending it to his own purpose. When Mani set her face hard, and said nothing, he was deeply hurt, yet he was incapable of returning the hurt back to her. The reason was that he had not even a trace of that barbarity which is the gift of the male. If anyone had upbraided him for this, then most probably he would have expressed some such subtle sentiment as the following: “If my wife, of her own free choice, is unwilling to trust me with her jewelry, then I have no right to take them from her by force.”

‘Has God given to man such forcefulness only for him to spend his time in delicate measurement of fine-spun ideals?’

‘However this may be, Bhusan, being too proud to touch his wife’s jewels, went to Calcutta to try some other way of raising the money.’

‘As a general rule in this world, the wife knows the husband far better than the husband ever knows the wife; but extremely modern men in their subtlety of nature are altogether beyond the range of those unsophisticated instincts which womankind has acquired through ages. These men are a new race, and have become as mysterious as women themselves. Ordinary men can be divided roughly into three main classes; some of them are barbarians, some are fools, and some are blind; but these modern men do not fit into any of them.’

‘So Mani called her counsellor for consultation. Some cousin of hers was engaged as assistant steward on Bhusan’s estate. He was not the kind of man to profit himself by dint of hard work, but by help of his position in the family he was able to save his salary, and even a little more.’

‘Mani called him and told him what had happened. She ended up by asking him: “Now what is your advice?”’

‘He shook his head wisely and said: “I don’t like the look of things at all.” The fact is that wise men never like the look of things. Then he added: “Babu will never be able to raise the money, and in the end he will have to fall back upon that jewelry of yours.”’

‘From what she knew of humanity she thought that this was not only possible but likely. Her anxiety became keener than ever. She had no child to love, and though she had a husband she was almost unable to realise his very existence. So her blood froze at the very thought that her only object of love, the wealth which like a child had grown from year to year, was to be in a moment thrown into the bottomless abyss of trade. She gasped: “What, then, is to be done?”’

‘Modhu said: “Why not take your jewels and go to your father’s house?” In his heart of hearts he entertained the hope that a portion, and possibly the larger portion, of that jewelry would fall to his lot.’

‘Mani at once agreed. It was a rainy night towards the end of summer. At this very ghat a boat was moored. Mani, wrapped from head to foot in a thick shawl, stepped into the boat. The frogs croaked in the thick darkness of the cloudy dawn. Modhu, waking up from sleep, roused himself from the boat, and said: “Give me the box of jewels.”

‘Mani replied: “Not now, afterwards. Now let us start.”

‘The boat started, and floated swiftly down the current. Mani had spent the whole night in covering every part of her body with her ornaments. She was afraid that if she put her jewels into a box they might be snatched away from her hands. But if she wore them on her person, then no one could take them away without murdering her. Mani did not understand Bhusan, it is true; but there was no doubt about her understanding of Modhu.

‘Modhu had written a letter to the chief steward to the effect that he had started to take his mistress to her father’s house. The steward was an ancient retainer of Bhusan’s father. He was furiously angry, and wrote a lengthy epistle, full of misspellings, to his master. Although the letter was weak in its grammar, yet it was forcible in its language, and clearly expressed the writer’s disapproval of giving too much indulgence to womankind. Bhusan on receiving it understood what was the motive of Mani’s secret departure. What hurt him most was the fact that, in spite of his having given way to the unwillingness of his wife to part with her jewels in this time of his desperate straits, his wife should still suspect him.

‘When he ought to have been angry, Bhusan was only distressed. Man is the rod of God’s justice, to him has been entrusted the thunderbolt of the divine wrath, and if at wrong done to himself or another it does not at once break out into fury, then it is a shame. God has so arranged it that man, for the most trifling reason, will burst forth in anger like a forest fire, and woman will burst into tears like a rain-cloud for no reason at all. But the cycle seems to have changed, and this appears no longer to hold good.

‘The husband bent his head, and said to himself: “Well, if this is your judgment, let it be so. I will simply do my own duty.” Bhusan, who ought to have been born five or six centuries hence, when the world will be moved by psychic forces, was unfortunate enough not only to be born in the nineteenth century, but also to marry a woman who belonged to that primitive age which persists through all time.

He did not write a word on the subject to his wife, and determined in his mind that he would never mention it to her again. What an awful penalty!

'Ten or twelve days later, having secured the necessary loan, Bhusan returned to his home. He imagined that Mani, after completing her mission, had by this time come back from her father's house. And so he approached the door of the inner apartments, wondering whether his wife would show any signs of shame or penitence for the undeserved suspicion with which she had treated him.

'He found that the door was shut. Breaking the lock, he entered the room, and saw that it was empty.

'It seemed to him that the world was a huge cage from which the bird of love had flown away, leaving behind it all the decorations of the blood-red rubies of our hearts, and the pearl pendants of our tear-drops.

'At first Bhusan did not trouble about his wife's absence. He thought that if she wanted to come back she would do so. His old Brahman steward, however, came to him, and said: "What good will come of taking no notice of it? You ought to get some news of the mistress." Acting on this suggestion, messengers were sent to Mani's father's house. The news was brought that up to that time neither Mani nor Modhu had turned up there.

'Then a search began in every direction. Men went along both banks of the river making inquiries. The police were given a description of Modhu, but all in vain. They were unable to find out what boat they had taken, what boatman they had hired, or by what way they had gone.

'One evening, when all hope had been abandoned of ever finding his wife, Bhusan entered his deserted bedroom. It was the festival of Krishna's birth, and it had been raining incessantly from early morning. In celebration of the festival there was a fair going on in the village, and in a temporary building a theatrical performance was being given. The sound of distant singing could be heard mingling with the sound of pouring rain. Bhusan was sitting alone in the darkness at the window there which hangs loose upon its hinges. He took no notice of the damp wind, the spray of the rain, and the sound of the singing. On the wall of the room were hanging a couple of pictures of the goddesses Lakshmi and Saraswati, painted at the Art Studio; on the clothes-rack a towel, and a bodice, and a pair of saris were laid out

ready for use. On a table in one corner of the room there was a box containing betel leaves prepared by Mani's own hand, but now quite dry and uneatable. In a cupboard with a glass door all sorts of things were arranged with evident care—her china dolls of childhood's days, scent bottles, decanters of coloured glass, a sumptuous pack of cards, large brightly polished shells, and even empty soapboxes. In a niche there was a favourite little lamp with its round globe. Mani had been in the habit of lighting it with her own hands every evening. One who goes away, leaving everything empty, leaves the imprint of his living heart even on lifeless objects. Come, Mani, come back again, light your lamp, fill your room with light once more, and, standing before your mirror, put on your _sari_ which has been prepared with such care. See, all your things are waiting for you. No one will claim anything more from you, but only ask you to give a living unity once more to these scattered and lifeless things, by the mere presence of your imperishable youth and unfading beauty. Alas, the inarticulate cry of these mute and lifeless objects has made this room into a realm of things that have lost their world.

'In the dead of night, when the heavy rain had ceased, and the songs of the village opera troupe had become silent, Bhusan was sitting in the same position as before. Outside the window there was such an impenetrable darkness that it seemed to him as if the very gates of oblivion were before him reaching to the sky,—as if he had only to cry out to be able to recover sight of those things which seemed to have been lost forever.

'Just as he was thinking thus, a jingling sound as of ornaments was heard. It seemed to be advancing up the steps of the ghat. The water of the river and the darkness of the night were indistinguishable. Thrilling with excitement, Bhusan tried to pierce and push through the darkness with his eager eyes, till they ached,—but he could see nothing. The more anxious he was to see, the denser the darkness became, and the more shadowy the outer world. Nature, seeing an intruder at the door of her hall of death, seemed suddenly to have drawn a still thicker curtain of darkness.

'The sound reached the top step of the bathing ghat, and now began to come towards the house. It stopped in front of the door, which had been locked by the porter before he went to the fair. Then upon that closed door there fell a rain of jingling blows, as if with some ornaments. Bhusan was not able to sit still another

moment, but, making his way through the unlighted rooms and down the dark staircase, he stood before the closed door. It was padlocked from the outside, so he began to shake it with all his might. The force with which he shook the door and the sound which he made woke him suddenly. He found he had been asleep, and in his sleep he had made his way down to the door of the house. His whole body was wet with sweat, his hands and feet were icy cold, and his heart was fluttering like a lamp just about to go out. His dream being broken, he realised that there was no sound outside except the pattering of the rain which had commenced again.

‘Although the whole thing was a dream, Bhusan felt as if for some very small obstacle he had been cheated of the wonderful realisation of his impossible hope. The incessant patter of the rain seemed to say to him: “This awakening is a dream. This world is vain.”

‘The festival was continued on the following day, and the doorkeeper again had leave. Bhusan gave orders that the hall-door was to be left open all night, but the porter objected that there were all sorts of suspicious characters about who had come from other places to the fair, and that it would not be safe to leave the door open. But Bhusan would not listen, whereupon the porter said that he would himself stay on guard. But Bhusan refused to allow him to remain. The porter was puzzled, but did not press the point.

‘That night, having extinguished the light, Bhusan took his seat at the open window of his bedroom as before. The sky was dark with rain-clouds, and there was a silence as of something indefinite and impending. The monotonous croaking of the frogs and the sound of the distant songs were not able to break that silence, but only seemed to add an incongruity to it.

‘Late at night the frogs and the crickets and the boys of the opera party became silent, and a still deeper darkness fell upon the night. It seemed that now the time had come.

‘Just as on the night before, a clattering and jingling sound came from the ghat by the river. But this time Bhusan did not look in that direction, lest, by his over-anxiety and restlessness, his power of sight and hearing would become overwhelmed. He made a supreme effort to control himself, and sat still.

‘The sound of the ornaments gradually advanced from the ghat, and entered the open door. Then it came winding up the spiral staircase which led to the inner apartments. It became difficult for Bhusan to control himself, his heart began to thump wildly, and his throat was choking with suppressed excitement. Having reached the head of the spiral stairs, the sound came slowly along the veranda towards the door of the room, where it stopped just outside with a clanking sound. It was now only just on the other side of the threshold.

‘Bhusan could contain himself no longer, and his pent-up excitement burst forth in one wild cry of “Mani,” and he sprang up from his chair with lightning rapidity. Thus startled out of his sleep, he found that the very window-panes were rattling with the vibration of his cry. And outside he could hear the croaking of the frogs and patter of rain. ‘Bhusan struck his forehead in despair.

‘Next day the fair broke up, and the stall-keepers and the players’ party went away. Bhusan gave orders that that night no one should sleep in the house except himself. The servants came to the conclusion that their master was going to practise some mystic rites. All that day Bhusan fasted.

‘In the evening, he took his seat at the window of that empty house. That day there were breaks in the clouds, showing the stars twinkling through-the rain-washed air. The moon was late in rising, and, as the fair was over, there was not a single boat on the flooded river. The villagers, tired out by two nights’ dissipation, were sound asleep.

‘Bhusan, sitting with his head resting on the back of his chair, was gazing up at the stars. He was thinking of the time when he was only nineteen years old, and was reading in Calcutta; how in the evening he used to lie in College Square, with his hands behind his head, gazing up at those eternal stars, and thinking of the sweet face of Mani in his father-in-law’s house. The very separation from her was like an instrument whose tense-drawn strings those stars used to touch and waken into song.

‘As he watched them, the stars one by one disappeared. From the sky above, and from the earth beneath, screens of darkness met like tired eyelids upon weary eyes. Tonight Bhusan’s mind was full of peace. He felt certain that the moment had come when his heart’s desire would be fulfilled, and that Death would reveal his mysteries to his devotee.

‘The sound came from the river ghat just as on the previous nights and advanced up the steps. Bhusan closed his eyes, and sat in deep meditation. The sound reached the empty hall. It came winding up the spiral stairs. Then it crossed the long veranda, and paused for a long while at the bedroom door.

‘Bhusan’s heart beat fast; his whole body trembled. But this time he did not open his eyes. The sound crossed the threshold. It entered the room. Then it went slowly round the room, stopping before the rack where the clothes were hanging, the niche with its little lamp, the table where the dried betel leaves were lying, the _almirah_ with its various knick-knacks, and, last of all, it came and stood close to Bhusan himself.

‘Bhusan opened his eyes. He saw by the faint light of the crescent moon that there was a skeleton standing right in front of his chair. It had rings on all its fingers, bracelets on its wrists and armlets on its arms, necklaces on its neck, and a golden tiara on its head,—in fact its whole body glittered and sparkled with gold and diamonds. The ornaments hung loosely on the limbs, but did not fall off. Most dreadful of all was the fact that the two eyes which shone out from the bony face were living—two dark moist eyeballs looking out with a fixed and steady stare from between the long thick eyelashes. As he looked his blood froze in his veins. He tried hard to close his eyes but could not; they remained open, staring like those of a dead man.

‘Then the skeleton, fixing its gaze upon the face of the motionless Bhusan, silently beckoned with its outstretched hand, the diamond rings on its bony fingers glittering in the pale moonlight.

‘Bhusan stood up, as one who had lost his senses, and followed the skeleton, which left the room, its bones and ornaments rattling with a hollow sound. The skeleton crossed the veranda and, winding down the pitch-dark spiral staircase, reached the bottom of the stairs. Crossing the lower veranda, they entered the empty lampless hall and, passing through it, came out on to the brick-paved path of the garden. The bricks crunched under the tread of the bony feet. The faint moonlight struggled through the thick network of branches, and the path was difficult to discern. Making their way through the flitting fireflies, which haunted the dark shadowy path, they reached the river ghat.

‘By those very steps, up which the sound had come, the bejeweled skeleton went down step by step, with a stiff gait and hard sound. On the swift current of the river, flooded by the heavy rain, a faint streak of moonlight was visible.

‘The skeleton descended to the river, and Bhusan, following it, placed one foot in the water. The moment he touched the water he woke with a start. His guide was no longer to be seen. Only the trees on the opposite bank of the river were standing still and silent, and overhead the half moon was staring as if astonished. Starting from head to foot, Bhusan slipped and fell headlong into the river. Although he knew how to swim, he was powerless to do so, for his limbs were not under his control. From the midst of dreams he had stepped, for a moment only, into the borderland of waking life—the next moment to be plunged into eternal sleep.’

Having finished his story, the schoolmaster was silent for a little. Suddenly, the moment he stopped, I realised that except for him the whole world had become silent and still. For a long time I also remained speechless, and in the darkness he was unable to see from my face what was its expression.

At last he asked me: ‘Don’t you believe this story?’

I asked: ‘Do you?’

He said: ‘No; and I can give you one or two reasons why. In the first place, Dame Nature does not write novels, she has enough to do without——’

I interrupted him and said: ‘And, in the second place, my name happens to be Bhusan Saha.’

The schoolmaster, without the least sign of discomfiture, said: ‘I guessed as much. And what was your wife’s name?’

I answered: ‘Nitya Kali.’