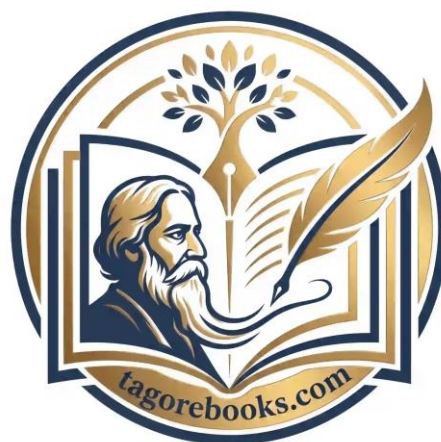


SHORT STORY

THE PROFESSOR

Rabindranath Tagore



Contents

I	2
II	3
III	6
IV	13
V	17
Notes	20

The Professor

A short story by Rabindranath Tagore

Translated from the Bengali



Among my fellow students at college I enjoyed a certain special standing. Everyone considered me a connoisseur in all matters.

The chief reason was this: right or wrong, I had an opinion on every subject. Most people cannot bring themselves to say a plain yes or no; I, on the other hand, said them very readily indeed.

Nor did I content myself with opinions alone; I composed as well — I delivered speeches, wrote verses, penned criticism — and in every way became an object of envy and reverence among my fellow students.

In this fashion I might well have come away from college with my glory quite undiminished. But in the meantime the evil star of my renown rose over the college in the shape of a new professor.

That young professor of ours has since become a man of considerable fame, so that his bright name will suffer no great harm even though I withhold it in this account of my life. In view of the manner in which he treated me, I shall in this narrative call him Bamacharan Babu.

He was not, in truth, much older than we were; he had lately come first in the M.A. examination and earned high praise from Mr. Tawney himself — but being a Brahmo, he seemed somehow altogether remote and apart, and did not strike us as belonging to our own generation at all.* Among ourselves, we band of orthodox young Hindus, we privately nicknamed him the Brahmo Ghoul.

We had a debating society of our own. In that society I was both King Vikramaditya and the Nine Gems of his court together.† There were thirty-six of us in all; of these, thirty-five might have been struck from the rolls without the smallest loss, and as

for the merits of the one who remained, the other thirty-five held precisely the same opinion of him that I did.

For the annual meeting of this society I composed a most vigorous essay in criticism of Carlyle. I was firmly persuaded that its singular brilliance would astonish every listener — and astonish them it should have, for in my essay I condemned Carlyle from beginning to end.

Bamacharan Babu presided over that meeting. When the reading of my essay was done, my devoted fellow students sat mute and enraptured, overwhelmed by the audacity of my opinions and the pure vigor of my English. Hearing that no one had anything further to say, Bamacharan Babu rose and, in a calm and grave voice, briefly explained that whatever part of my essay had been stolen from an essay by the celebrated American writer Mr. Lowell was quite excellent, and that the part which was entirely my own would have been better left out.

Had he said instead that a remarkable identity of opinion — indeed even of language — was to be observed between Lowell and this young essayist, his words would have been just as true and yet given no offense.

After this incident, a crack appeared in the once undivided faith my fellow students had held in me. Only its shadow, lengthening still, refused to leave my footsteps.† But in that reverence there was no true satisfaction; it was but an empty shadow, the beguiling gloom of a foolish devotee's heart, not the bright ray of intelligence.



Father summoned me home from the city to be married. I begged a little time. Bamacharan Babu's criticism had bred in me a certain division against myself, a rebellion of myself against myself. The critic in me was secretly wounding the writer in me. And the writer in me kept saying: I shall have my revenge for this; I shall write once more, and then we shall see whether I am the greater, or my critic.

I resolved within myself that I would take as my theme universal love, self-sacrifice for others, and forgiveness of one's enemies, and write, whether in prose or verse, something altogether of the "sublime" order; I would furnish Bengali critics with fodder for the grandest criticism.

I decided that I would settle in some beautiful and secluded spot and there accomplish the creation of this, the foremost achievement of my life. I vowed that for at least a month I would see no one at all, friend or stranger, acquaintance or otherwise.

I called Amulya and told him my plan. He was utterly astonished, as though he could already see, upon my brow, the first rosy gleam of some glory soon to dawn upon the nation. With a grave face he clasped my hand, fixed his wide eyes upon mine, and said in a low voice: "Go, brother, and return having won immortal fame and imperishable glory."

A thrill passed through my body; it seemed to me that Amulya spoke these words as the very representative of Bengal itself, proud of a glory soon to come and overcome with devotion.

Nor was Amulya's own sacrifice a small one; for his country's good he gave up entirely, for one long month, all hope of my company. With a very deep sigh, my friend boarded a tram for his lodgings in Cornwallis Street, while I set off for the garden house at Chandernagore, on the bank of the Ganges, to win my immortal fame and imperishable glory.

Lying on my back in a solitary room by the Ganges, musing on universal love, I would fall into a profound midday slumber and wake only at five in the afternoon. After that, body and mind alike remained somewhat languid; and for want of any better way to amuse myself and pass the time, I would sit quietly upon a little wooden bench by the high road at the rear of the garden, watching the bullock-carts and the passers-by.

When it grew altogether unbearable, I would go and sit at the railway station: the telegraph needle would click and clatter, the ticket-bell would ring, the crowds would gather, the red-eyed, thousand-footed iron serpent would come hissing in, give its harsh shriek, and rush away again, and the people would surge and scramble — and for a little while I found some amusement in it.

Returning home, I would take my meal and, for lack of any company, go early to bed; and since there was not the smallest need to rise early in the morning, I would linger in bed until eight or nine o'clock.

My health went to ruin, and I could not so much as find my way into any nook or cranny of universal love. Having never in my life been accustomed to solitude, the companionless bank of the Ganges came to seem to me an empty cremation ground; and Amulya proved himself such a perfect ass that he did not break his vow even for a single day.

Before this, sitting in Calcutta, I had imagined it thus: I would sit with my legs stretched out beneath the vast shade of a banyan tree, while at my feet the murmuring stream flowed on, lost in its own thoughts — and in the midst of it all, the dream-possessed poet, with his kingdom of feeling on one side and the outer world of nature on the other: flowers in the grove, birds on the bough, stars in the sky, universal love within the heart, and from the tip of the pen an unwearied, abundant stream of thought and feeling flowing forth in manifold rhythms.

But where was nature, and where was nature's poet; where was the universe, and where the lover of the universe! Not for a single day did I so much as step out into the garden. The flowers of the grove bloomed on in the grove, the stars of the sky rose in the sky, the shade of the banyan fell beneath the banyan — while I, a child of the house, remained lying within the house.

Being wholly unable to prove my own greatness, my resentment against Bamacharan only grew the more.

At that time a war of words had broken out in educated Bengali society over the question of child marriage. Bamacharan stood on the side opposed to child marriage, and it was rumoured about that he himself was bound in the noose of love to a young unmarried woman, and looked forward before long to being bound as well in the noose of marriage.

The matter struck me as exceedingly diverting; and since the great epic of universal love refused to come to me, I sat myself down instead, took Bamacharan as the model for my hero, set up an imaginary young woman named Kadamba-kali Majumdar as my heroine, and wrote a most biting farce. Once my pen had brought forth this immortal work, I began making ready to set out for Calcutta. It was just then that my departure met with an obstacle.



One afternoon, instead of going to the station, I idly wandered about, inspecting the rooms of the garden house. Having had no occasion to do so before, I had never set foot in most of them; indeed I had not the smallest curiosity or attention to spare for outward things. That day, purely to pass the time, I drifted here and there like a fallen leaf borne on the wind.

No sooner had I opened the door of a room on the north side than I found myself upon a small verandah. Directly before the verandah, close against the wall marking the garden's northern boundary, stood two great jam trees, facing one another; and through the gap between these two trees a portion of a long avenue of bakul trees, belonging to another garden, could be seen.

But all of this I took in only afterward; at that moment I had no leisure to see anything else at all — I saw only a girl of sixteen, book in hand, head bent down, pacing slowly to and fro as she read.

I was in no condition, just then, to reflect upon anything at all; but I thought afterward how Dushyanta once came mounted upon his chariot, great bow in hand, to hunt in the forest — and the deer was never slain, yet by some chance, standing ten minutes behind a tree, what he saw and heard there became the finest thing he ever saw or heard in the whole of his life. § I too had set out, pencil and pen and notebook at the ready, upon a hunt for poetry; poor universal love made good its escape, while I, from behind those two jam trees, saw all that there was to see. Such a sight comes to a man, in one lifetime, but once.

There are many things in this world I have never seen. I have never sailed on a ship, never gone up in a balloon, never gone down into a coal mine — but that I myself had been utterly mistaken and ignorant regarding the very ideal my own mind had fashioned, of this I had not the least suspicion before I came to that northern verandah.

I was nearly one-and-twenty years of age, and I cannot say that my heart had not, by the power of imagination, already fashioned for itself some meditated image of womanly beauty. I had dressed that image in various costumes and set it amid various circumstances; but never, even in my furthest dreams, had I hoped or

wished to behold it with shoes upon its feet, a jacket upon its body, and a book in its hand.

But my own Lakshmi, on that late-Falgun afternoon, in a flower-garden path streaked with light and long shadow beneath the trembling, close-woven canopy of ancient trees, appeared suddenly to me from behind those two jam trees — shoes upon her feet, jacket upon her body, book in hand — and I, for my part, did not utter a single word.

She was visible for no more than two minutes. I made many an attempt to see her again through this gap and that, but all in vain. That day, as evening drew near, I sat with my legs stretched out beneath the banyan tree; before my eyes, above the dense line of trees on the farther bank, the evening star rose with a calm and gentle smile, and, even as I watched, the beauty of evening opened wide the door of her vast, lordless, and lonely bridal chamber and stood there in silence.

The book I had seen in her hand became, for me, a whole new dwelling-place of mystery. I fell to wondering what book it might be. A novel, or a work of poetry? What manner of thought might lie within it?

On that very page which lay open — the page upon which the shade and sunlight of that afternoon had fallen, upon which the rustle of the bakul leaves had fallen, upon which the eager, steady gaze of those two eyes had fallen — what portion of the story, what essence of the poetry, might have been unfolding itself?

And along with this I fell to wondering how, beneath the dark shade of that loosened net of hair, within the pavilion of that delicate brow, a manifold play of feeling must have been stirring and unfolding itself, and what wondrous realm of beauty ever-new enchantments of poetry must have been creating amid the secluded solitude of that maiden heart. For half the night I went on thinking such thoughts as these, in a manner impossible now to set down with any clearness.

But who told me that she was unmarried? The very same one who, long before he had even met her, had given assurance to my far more ancient predecessor in love, Dushyanta, concerning Shakuntala. That one is Desire itself; and Desire tells a man a great many things, some true and some false — in some cases it proves out, in others not; in the case of Dushyanta, and in mine, it proved out.

It would not have been difficult for me to learn whether this unknown neighbour of mine was married or unmarried, Brahmin or Shudra; but this I did not do. Like the silent chakor bird, I sought only, from many thousand leagues away, to circle about my moon and gaze up at her with straining throat.

The next day, at noon, I hired a small boat and set off with the tide, my eyes fixed upon the bank, having forbidden the boatmen to row.

My Shakuntala's hermitage cottage stood right upon the bank of the Ganges. It was not, to be sure, quite like Kanva's hermitage; the steps of the ghat rose up from the Ganges to the verandah of a large house, and the verandah itself lay shaded beneath a sloping wooden roof.

As my boat drifted silently up before the ghat, I saw my Shakuntala of this new age sitting upon the floor of the verandah; behind her stood a chair, and upon the chair lay a few books, and over these books her loosened hair had spilled in a great heap; she leaned back against the chair with her face turned upward, her head resting upon her raised left arm — her face was hidden from the boat, only the soft, delicate curve of her throat was to be seen; her two bare feet lay stretched out, one upon the upper step of the ghat and one upon the step below, and the black border of her sari, fallen in a curve, lay wound about those two feet.

A book had slipped from her inattentive, loosened right hand and lay fallen upon the ground. It seemed to me as though I beheld the very goddess of noontide made flesh — an image of motionless beauty and repose, set of a sudden in the very midst of the day's labours. The Ganges at her feet, the far bank in the distance before her, and above, the fiercely blazing blue sky — all seemed to gaze, in utter, silent, unwavering absorption, upon her who was the very soul embodied of them all: upon those two bare feet, that idly resting left arm, that lifted, curving line of throat.

I looked on as long as looking was possible, and with the falling of my own moist-lidded eyes I bathed, again and again, those two lotus feet.

At last, when the boat had gone some distance and a tree upon the bank had come between us, I seemed suddenly to remember some fault of mine, and, starting, said to the boatman: "Boatman, I shall not go on to Hooghly today after all — turn back for home from here."

But on the return the oars had to be pulled against the current, and at the sound of them I found myself shrinking within myself. It seemed to me that every stroke of the oar struck a blow against something living, beautiful, and delicate — something as vast as the boundless sky and yet as timid as a fawn.

As the boat drew near the ghat once more, my neighbour, hearing the sound of the oars, slowly raised her face and looked toward my boat with a faint curiosity; but a moment later, catching sight of my eager, restless gaze, she started and hurried within the house. It seemed to me that I had struck her, that somewhere within her something had been wounded.

In her haste to rise, a half-bitten, half-ripe guava fell from her lap and went rolling down to a lower step; and my whole heart grew eager for that fruit, marked by the print of her teeth and kissed by her lips — but for shame before the boatmen I went on my way, only gazing back at it from a distance. I saw the ever-encroaching tide-water, with its lapping, covetous murmur, reaching out its greedy tongue again and again to lay hold of that fruit; and, imagining that within half an hour its shameless persistence would surely be rewarded, I came, with troubled heart, to land at my own garden ghat.

Stretching out my legs beneath the banyan's shade, I dreamed away the whole day: beneath two soft lotus feet, all of nature's world lay bowed with lowered head — the sky alight, the earth thrilled with joy, the wind grown restless — and in the midst of it, two bare feet, still, motionless, and beautiful, who knew not that at the very intoxication of the dust of their touch, the ardent, youthful spring was sending its thrill of passion through every quarter of the sky.

Before this, nature had seemed to me scattered and disjointed — river, forest, and sky each a thing apart. Today, the very moment a beautiful image appeared in the midst of that vast and boundless diffuseness, it took on form and became one whole. Today nature is, to me, one and beautiful; and she pleads with me continually, in her mute way: "I am silent — give me speech; a wordless hymn is rising within my heart — take it up, in rhythm, in measure, in melody, and give it voice in your own beautiful human tongue!"

At that silent entreaty of nature, the strings of my own heart begin to sound. Again and again I hear only this song: "O beautiful one, O enchantress, O conqueror of the world, O sole flame to the moth of my heart and soul, O life without measure,

O death of infinite sweetness!" This song I cannot bring to an end, cannot draw together into one whole; I cannot give it clear shape, cannot bind it into rhythm and speak it forth; it seems to me that within my breast some ineffable, immeasurable power is gathering like the tide-water, and I cannot yet master it — but when I do, my voice shall of a sudden resound with divine music, and my brow shall shine lit with an unearthly radiance.

Just then a boat, crossing over from Naihati station on the far bank, came in to my garden ghat. With a pleated shawl draped over both shoulders and an umbrella tucked beneath his arm, Amulya stepped down, smiling. What feeling arose in my heart at the unexpected sight of my friend, I would not wish upon anyone, even toward an enemy.

Seeing me sitting beneath that banyan shade at about two in the afternoon, looking for all the world like a man quite out of his senses, a great hope sprang up in Amulya's heart. For fear that some portion of the future greatest poem in all Bengal might, startled by the sound of his footsteps, take flight into the water like a wild goose, he came forward hesitantly, with slow and gentle steps; and seeing this only made me angrier still, so that I said, somewhat impatiently: "Well, Amulya, what is the matter? Have you got a thorn in your foot?"

Amulya took this for a great joke; laughing, he came near, swept the ground beneath the tree carefully with the hem of his dhoti, took a handkerchief from his pocket, unfolded and spread it, and sat down carefully upon it, saying: "I very nearly died laughing over that farce you sent me." So saying, he began to recite passages here and there from it, and laughed so hard that he very nearly lost his breath. I felt then that even if I were to tear up, root and all, the very tree from whose wood my pen had been made, and burn that farce to ashes in some great fire, my regret would still not be satisfied.

Amulya, somewhat hesitantly, asked: "And how far has your great poem gone?" Hearing this, I burned all the more within; I thought to myself, "Such as my poem, such is your understanding of it!" Aloud I said only, "All that will come later, brother — do not trouble me needlessly about it."

Amulya was, by nature, a curious fellow, quite unable to keep himself from examining every side of a place; for fear of him I shut fast the door on the northern

side. He asked me, "What's over that way, then?" I said, "Nothing at all." Never in my life have I told so great a lie.

For two days he pierced and tormented me in one way and another; on the evening of the third day Amulya left by train. During those two days I did not go near the northern side of the garden, did not so much as let my eyes fall that way; like a miser guarding his hoard of jewels, I kept careful watch over that garden along my northern boundary.

The moment Amulya was gone, I ran and threw open the door and came out onto the northern verandah of the upstairs room. Above, in the open sky, the abundant moonlight of the early dark fortnight; below, beneath the close-woven canopy of the trees, a deep and secret dusk-shadow, flecked here and there with broken rays of light; and all of it, in every fibre, was filled with the long sighing of the rustling leaves, the heavy fragrance of bakul flowers fallen from the trees, and the hushed, restrained silence of the evening wood.

In the very midst of it, my unmarried neighbour, holding the right hand of her white-bearded old father, walked slowly to and fro, speaking some words to him; and the old man, bending a little toward her in mingled tenderness and respect, listened in silence and with full attention. There was nothing there to break in upon that pure and gentle intimacy of talk; upon the calm evening river the sound of an oar, now and again, died away in the distance, and here and there, among the countless nests in the unbroken tangle of branches, some bird would stir for a moment into a faint, sleepy murmur. It seemed to me that my own heart must surely be rent asunder, whether by joy or by sorrow I could not tell.

My very being seemed to expand and become one with that whole shadow-dappled world below; I seemed to feel, upon my own breast, the slow, scattered fall of her footsteps; I seemed to merge myself with the leaves of the trees and hear, close against my ear, their sweet and gentle murmuring. The inward suffering of this vast and mute nature seemed to echo through every bone of my body; I seemed to understand how the earth, lying always beneath her feet and yet unable to close about and hold them, aches within itself in some strange way; how the low-bending trees, able to hear her words and yet unable to understand a single one of them, long, with every branch and leaf together, to break out in some wild, breathless, murmuring lament. I too felt, in every limb, with the whole of my heart,

that immediate presence of her footsteps and her gentle talk, and yet, since I could grasp none of it in any way, I went on pining slowly, as though dying by inches.

The next day I could bear it no longer. In the morning I went to call upon my neighbour.

Bhabanath Babu was sitting at that hour with a large cup of tea set beside him, spectacles upon his nose, absorbed in the reading of an old, blue-pencil-marked volume of Hamilton. When I entered the room, he looked up at me over the top of his spectacles for a moment, quite absent-mindedly, unable in an instant to withdraw his mind from his book.

At last he started suddenly and rose in a flurry to make ready for a guest. I gave him a brief account of myself. He grew so agitated that he could not even find the case for his spectacles. He said, quite at random, "Will you take some tea?" Though I do not, in fact, drink tea, I said nonetheless, "I have no objection."

Bhabanath Babu, flustered, rose and began calling out, "Kiran! Kiran!" Near the door I heard a most sweet voice answer, "Yes, Father?" Turning, I saw that this daughter of the hermit Kanva, catching sudden sight of me, stood poised for flight like a startled doe.

Bhabanath Babu called her back, and, introducing me, said, "This is our neighbour, Mahindrakumar Babu" — and to me he said, "This is my daughter, Kiranbala." I did not know what to do; but before I could decide, Kiran had already made me a graceful, modest bow of greeting. Hastily repairing my omission, I returned it.

Bhabanath Babu said, "Dear, you must bring a cup of tea for Mahindra Babu." I shrank within myself with embarrassment, but before I could utter a word, Kiran had already left the room.

It seemed to me as though eternal Shiva, upon Kailash, had bidden his own daughter, the goddess Lakshmi herself, bring a cup of tea to a guest; to that guest it would surely prove to be nectar undiluted — and yet, was there not some attendant, some Nandi or Bhiringi, who might have been sent instead?

IV

I am now a daily guest at Bhabanath Babu's house. I used, before, to be quite afraid of tea; now, drinking it morning and evening, I have grown quite addicted to it.

For my B.A. examination I had lately been reading a new history of philosophy composed by a German scholar, and on the strength of this I pretended, for some days, that I came to Bhabanath Babu's house for the sake of philosophical discussion alone. He, I found, was still occupied with Hamilton and other such mistaken volumes of an older day, and for this I thought him an object of pity; nor did I fail to display my own new learning with the greatest possible ostentation.

Bhabanath Babu was so gentle a man, so hesitant in all things, that he accepted every word even from the mouth of so young a fellow as myself; the smallest need to contradict me threw him into agitation, for he feared always that he might give me some offence.

In the midst of all these learned discussions of ours, Kiran would rise on one pretext or another and go away. This caused me some vexation, but a certain pride as well; the abstruse erudition of our subjects was, I supposed, more than Kiran could bear — and when, in her own mind, she took the measure of my mountain of learning, how very high she must have had to look.

When I had seen Kiran only from a distance, I had known her under many strange names and guises — as Shakuntala, as Damayanti — but now, within the house, I came to know her simply as Kiran. She was no longer the shadow-form of the world's many storied heroines; now she was Kiran alone. Now she had descended from the poetic realm of a hundred centuries, had left behind the dream-heaven of the eternal youthful heart, and dwelt, an unmarried daughter, within one particular Bengali household.

She spoke to me, in my own mother tongue, of the most ordinary household matters; she laughed simply and readily at the smallest things; like any girl of our own households, she wore a pair of gold bangles on her wrists; her necklace was nothing grand, but very sweet to see; the end of her sari would sometimes curve up and encircle the crown of her braided hair, and sometimes, in the careless freedom of her father's house, slip and fall away — and all of this gave me the greatest delight. That she was no creature of fancy, that she was real, that she was

Kiran and nothing other than Kiran, nothing less and nothing more — and that, though she was not mine, she was yet one of us — for this my heart remained ever bathed in an overflowing tide of gratitude toward her.

One day, I was holding forth to Bhabanath Babu, with great animation, upon the relativity of all knowledge; no sooner had our discussion made some little progress than Kiran rose and left, and before long returned to the front verandah bearing a portable stove and cooking utensils, and, scolding her father, said: "Father, why must you go on tiring Mahindra Babu with all this difficult talk? Come, Mahindra Babu — you would be far more use to me helping with the cooking."

Bhabanath Babu was, in truth, entirely blameless, and Kiran knew it well. Yet he, with a small and rather guilty smile, said, as though truly at fault: "Ah, quite so! Well then, we shall take up that matter another day." And with this, his mind quite untroubled, he returned to his daily study.

Again, one afternoon, just as I had raised some other weighty subject and left Bhabanath Babu quite thunderstruck, Kiran came between us and said: "Mahindra Babu, this poor helpless creature needs your help. I want to train the vine up the wall, but I cannot reach — you must drive these nails in for me." I rose, delighted, and went with her, while Bhabanath Babu, no less pleased, settled back to his reading.

So it happened almost every time that, whenever I made as if to raise some weighty subject with Bhabanath Babu, Kiran would find some pretext of work and break it off. At this I would feel a secret delight within, understanding that Kiran had, in some fashion, seen through me — that she had somehow come to know that philosophical discussion with her father was not, after all, the supreme happiness of my life.

Just as, in the midst of determining the relation between external objects and our senses, I had descended into the very abyss of some abstruse mystery, Kiran would come and say: "Mahindra Babu, come, let me show you my patch of eggplants beside the kitchen."

I would be observing, perhaps, that our notion of the sky as infinite is but a supposition of our own, and that it is by no means impossible that somewhere, in some manner beyond the reach of our experience and imagination, it has its limit

— and just then Kiran would come and say: "Mahindra Babu, two mangoes have ripened; you must pull down the branch and hold it for me."

What a rescue, what a release! In an instant, from the middle of a shoreless sea, I would find myself landed upon what a beautiful shore. However tangled and impossible to unravel might be the web of doubt concerning the infinite sky and the nature of external things, in Kiran's eggplant patch, or beneath her mango tree, there was not the least trace of difficulty or doubt of any kind. In poetry or in a novel, such things are of no account; but in life they are as charming as an island set about by the sea. What comfort there is in feeling solid ground beneath one's feet is known only to one who has swum long in deep water.

Had that sea of love which I had so long fashioned in imagination proved real, I cannot say how I should ever have gone on floating there forever. There the sky is infinite and the sea is infinite; from there the bounded, manifold affairs of our daily life are utterly banished; there is not the smallest trace of anything trivial; there, feeling can only be expressed in rhythm, measure, and song — and should one try to sound its depths, no bottom is anywhere to be found. When Kiran, catching hold of this drowning wretch by the hair, drew him up out of that sea into her mango grove, her eggplant patch, I felt ground once more beneath my feet, and was saved.

I found that in sitting on the verandah cooking khichuri, in mounting a ladder to drive nails into a wall, in helping to search out green lemons among the dense dark leaves of the lemon tree, an unimaginable happiness could be won — and yet this happiness required no effort whatsoever to obtain: whatever words rose of themselves to the lips, whatever laughter of itself broke forth, however much light fell from the sky and however much shade fell from the tree, all of it was enough. Beyond all this, I had my own golden wand — my own youth in its first flowering; I had my own touchstone — my own love; I had my own imperishable wishing-tree — my own unshaken faith in myself. I was a conqueror, I was Indra himself, and I could see no obstacle in the path of my own heavenly steed.

Kiran, my Kiran — of that I had no doubt. I had not, until now, said it plainly; but that thought, again and again, in a burst of overwhelming joy, went dancing like lightning from one end of my heart to the other, dazzling my whole being in an instant. Kiran, my Kiran.

Never before had I come into close acquaintance with any woman not of my own family; of the manners and customs of those newly-educated women who, having gained learning, move about freely beyond the old seclusion, I knew nothing whatsoever; and so I could not tell, in their conduct, where the bounds of mere courtesy end and where the claims of love begin. But neither could I see why she should not love me — in what respect I might be found wanting.

When Kiran placed the cup of tea in my hand, I took, together with the tea, a full measure of Kiran's love as well; and as I drank the tea, I told myself that my receiving was fulfilled, and Kiran's giving fulfilled as well. When Kiran would say, in her simple, easy way, "Mahindra Babu, you'll come tomorrow morning, won't you?" — within it there seemed to sound, in rhythm and in melody:

What witchery is thine, dear love, what witchery is thine! None else could steal a maiden's heart as thou hast stolen mine!

I would answer, in the simplest of words, "I shall come by eight tomorrow." And within that plain answer, did Kiran too not hear something more —

Thou art the darling image of my very life, the jewel of my heart, my whole world's dearest wealth.

All my days and all my nights grew full to overflowing with nectar. Every thought and fancy of mine put forth, moment by moment, ever new branches and tendrils, twining about Kiran and binding her to me like a creeping vine. My mind grew wholly absorbed in countless plans for what I should teach Kiran, what I should have her learn, what I should read aloud to her, what I should show her, once a fitting occasion should come. I even resolved that I must teach her in such a way that even the German scholar's new history of philosophy should kindle in her mind some eagerness of interest; otherwise, I felt, she could never come to understand me altogether. I should myself lead her by the hand into the beautiful realm of English poetic literature.

I smiled to myself and said, within my own heart: "Kiran, your mango grove and your eggplant patch are, to me, a new kingdom altogether. Never even in my dreams did I know that there, besides eggplants and green mangoes brought down by the storm, so rare a fruit of nectar could be so easily had. But when the time comes, I too shall lead you into a kingdom where no eggplant grows, and yet where

the want of eggplants is never felt for a single moment — the kingdom of knowledge, the heaven of feeling."

Just as the pale evening star, dim at first upon the horizon, grows ever more clearly bright as the dusk deepens, so too did Kiran, over those days, seem to blossom from within — into joy, into grace, into the full ripeness of womanhood. It was as though she had risen to the very zenith of her home and her small world, and from there shed on every side a blessed radiance of joy; in that radiance a bright gleam of holiness fell upon her old father's white hair, and that same radiance stamped, upon every wave of my own surging sea of a heart, one shining signature — the sweet name of Kiran.

Meanwhile my leave was drawing to its end; my father's tender request that I come home to be married was fast turning into a stern command; and I could restrain Amulya no longer either — the fear grew ever stronger within me that any day now, like some wild and maddened elephant, he might come crashing his four great feet down into the very midst of my lotus grove. I fell to thinking, then, how I might, without delay, give voice to the desire of my heart and bring my love to its full flowering in marriage.

V

One day at noon I went to Bhabanath Babu's house, and found him fallen asleep, leaning back in his chair in the summer heat, while before him, on the verandah facing the Ganges, Kiran sat alone upon the steps of the ghat, reading some book.

I stole up silently behind her, and saw that it was a new anthology of poetry; the page that lay open held one of Shelley's poems, beside which a clear line had been drawn in red ink. Having read that poem, Kiran gave a small sigh, and gazed off, with eyes heavy with dreams, toward the furthest edge of the sky; it seemed to me as though she had read that one poem ten times over that very hour, and had, with a single warm sigh breathed into the sail of her heart's little boat, sent it sailing out across the boundless blue into some far and starry world.

For whom Shelley wrote that poem I do not know; that he did not write it for any young Bengali named Mahindranath, of that there can be no doubt — and yet I can say with confidence that, on this day, no one but I had any right to that song of praise. Kiran had marked this poem, beside it, with a bright red stroke drawn from

the very pencil of her innermost heart; and by the enchantment of that magic circle, the poem was, on this day, hers — and, with it, mine as well.

Restraining my thrill of delight, I asked, in an ordinary tone, "What are you reading?" It was as though a boat under full sail had suddenly run aground upon a sandbank. Kiran started, hastily shut the book, and hid it away entirely within the folds of her sari. I said, laughing, "Might I have a look at it?" Something in this seemed to wound her, for she said quickly, almost pleadingly, "No, no — never mind that book."

I sat down a little way off, upon a lower step, and raised the subject of English poetry, choosing my words in such a way that Kiran might gain something of literary instruction from them, and that, through the mouths of English poets, my own heart's meaning might find its expression too. In the deep hush of the fierce noonday heat, the small murmuring sounds of the water and the land grew as soft and as tender as a mother's lullaby.

Kiran seemed to grow restless; she said, "Father is sitting there all alone — will you not go and finish that argument of yours about the infinite sky?" I thought to myself that the infinite sky would surely go on forever, and that the argument about it would never in any age come to an end; but life is short, and a fair occasion is rare and fleeting.

Without answering Kiran's question, I said, "I have some verses of my own — I shall read them to you." Kiran said, "I shall hear them tomorrow" — and, rising at once, called toward the house, "Father, Mahindra Babu is here." Bhabanath Babu, waking, opened his simple, childlike eyes and rose in some flurry. Something struck a heavy blow, of a sudden, against my breast.

I went in to Bhabanath Babu's room and took up once more the argument about the infinite sky. Kiran, book in hand, went upstairs — to her own quiet bedchamber, I suppose — to read undisturbed.

The next morning's post brought a copy of the *Statesman*, marked here and there in red pencil, in which the results of the B.A. examination had been published. Among the very first names, in the First Division, my eye fell upon the name "Kiranbala Bandyopadhyay"; my own name appeared in no division at all — first, second, or third.

Along with the pain of my own failure, a suspicion struck me like a bolt of lightning: that this Kiranbala Bandyopadhyay might be our own Kiran after all. She had never told me that she had studied at college, or sat for any examination — and yet my suspicion only grew stronger. For, on reflection, I saw that the old father and his daughter had never once spoken of their own affairs to me at all, while I myself had been so continually occupied with telling my own story and proclaiming my own learning that I had never troubled to ask after theirs.

All those arguments about the German scholar's newly-read history of philosophy came back to my mind; and I remembered how, one day, I had said to Kiran: "If I might only have the chance, for some while, to guide you through a book or two, I could give you a clear understanding of English poetic literature." Kiranbala had taken Honours in Philosophy, and stood in the First Class in Literature. If this Kiran should be that very Kiran!

At last, giving a sharp goad to my own smouldering pride and stirring it back to flame, I said: "Let it be so, then — my own writings shall stand as my pillar of victory." And so saying, notebook in hand, I strode with firm steps, my head held higher than ever, into Bhabanath Babu's garden.

There was no one, just then, in his room. I fell to examining the old man's books with some care, and found, lying neglected in one corner, that very new history of philosophy by the German scholar; opening it, I saw its margins filled entirely with notes in Bhabanath Babu's own hand. The old man had taught his own daughter himself. I could doubt it no longer.

Bhabanath Babu came into the room with a face more radiant with happiness than I had ever seen it before, as though he had that very morning bathed in some fresh stream of glad tidings. With a sudden, harsh laugh of wounded pride, I said, "Bhabanath Babu, I have failed my examination."

I felt, in that moment, as though I had earned my place among those great men who fail their school examinations only to pass, with first-class honours, the far greater examination of life. Success in examinations, in trade, in business, in employment — such things are the mark only of the middling sort of man; it is the lowest and the highest classes of men alone who possess the rare gift of failure.

Bhabanath Babu's face grew gentle and full of pity; he could no longer bring himself to tell me the news of his own daughter's success. Yet he was somewhat astonished, too, by my strange and excessive high spirits, for in his simple honesty he could not fathom the reason for my pride.

Just then, together with Bamacharan Babu — that same young professor of our college — Kiran came into the room, her face bright with a bashful, sparkling gladness, glistening like a vine freshly washed by rain. There was nothing more for me to understand.

That night I went home, burned my notebook of collected writings, and, returning to my own village, was married.

The great poem I was to have written upon the bank of the Ganges was never written after all — but I found it, instead, within my own life.

NOTES

* *Brahmo* — a member of the Brahmo Samaj, the reformist theistic movement within nineteenth-century Hindu society that rejected image-worship and many orthodox rites; Brahmos were often regarded by more conventional Hindu families as socially and religiously apart.

† *Vikramaditya... Nine Gems* — the legendary king Vikramaditya was said to preside over a court of nine peerless scholars and poets, the *Navaratna* or "Nine Gems." The narrator's joke is that he alone filled every one of these ten roles in his own small society.

‡ A short clause appears to be missing from the original text at this point (a probable page break in the source); this translation supplies the sense implied by the surrounding sentences — likely that the "shadow" of his classmates' former faith lingered even after its substance had cracked.

§ *Dushyanta and Shakuntala* — the king and hermitage-maiden of Kalidasa's *Abhijnanashakuntalam*, whose chance meeting in the forest during a hunt is one of the most celebrated love stories in Sanskrit literature; the narrator repeatedly casts himself as a modern Dushyanta and Kiran as his Shakuntala.