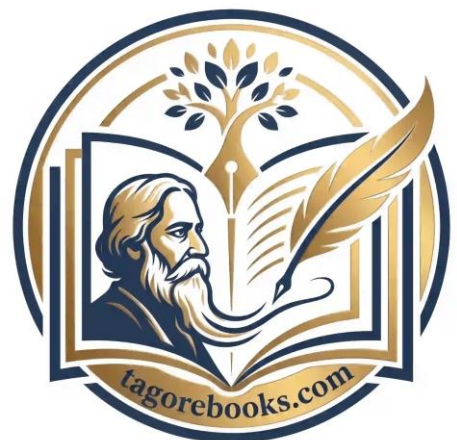


SHORT STORY

THE RESCUE

Rabindranath Tagore



Gauri was a beautiful daughter, reared with every tenderness, of an old and wealthy family. Her husband, Paresh, had lately, through his own labour, somewhat improved his once straitened circumstances; and so long as he remained poor, his parents, fearing lest their daughter-in-law suffer hardship, had not sent her to live under his own roof. Only when she had grown to a fairly mature age did Gauri come at last to make her home with her husband.

It was, I think, for reasons such as these that Paresh could never quite feel his beautiful young wife to be wholly and securely his own; and I think, too, that a suspicious temperament was, in him, very nearly a disease.

Paresh practised law in a small town up-country; there were no elders of the family about the house, and his mind remained ever uneasy over his wife left alone there. Now and again, on some sudden day, he would appear at home unannounced, at an unlikely hour, straight from the courts. At first Gauri could not rightly understand the reason for these sudden apparitions of her husband.

From time to time, for no clear reason, Paresh took to dismissing his servants one by one. No servant could hold his favour for long together. In particular, whenever Gauri, foreseeing some inconvenience, showed any special eagerness to keep a certain servant on, Paresh would not suffer that man to remain in the house another moment. And the more the proud, high-spirited Gauri felt herself wounded by this, the more restless her husband grew, until at times his conduct became altogether strange.

At last, no longer able to master himself, Paresh took to calling the maidservant aside in secret and putting to her all manner of suspicious questions — and word of this, in time, came to reach Gauri's own ears. That woman, proud and sparing of speech, wounded to the quick, began to smoulder within like a lioness struck by insult; and this frenzied jealousy fell between husband and wife like the sword of doomsday itself, cutting the two of them apart entirely.

Once his bitter suspicion had been laid bare before Gauri, and all shame between them broken through, Paresh began openly to voice his fears at every turn, and to quarrel with his wife over them daily; and the more Gauri lashed him, from head to

foot, with silent contempt and glances sharp as a whip, the more his mad intoxication of doubt only seemed to grow.

Thus turned away from all happiness in her husband, the childless young woman gave her heart to religion. She sent for the young preacher of the Hari-sabha,* the celibate Swami Paramananda,† took initiation from him, and began to sit at his feet to hear his exposition of the Bhagavata.‡ All the thwarted tenderness and love of a woman's heart gathered itself now into devotion alone, and was laid, whole, at her guru's feet.

Of Paramananda's saintly character no one, near or far, held the least doubt. All men worshipped him. And it was precisely because Paresh could not bring himself to give open voice to any suspicion of so revered a figure that it went on working, like a hidden wound, boring ever deeper toward the very core of his heart.

One day, over some trifling matter, the poison broke out at last. Speaking of Paramananda to his wife, he cursed him for a corrupt hypocrite, and said: "Touch your Shalgram§ and swear to me — swear that in your heart you do not love that heron-pious fraud."

Like a trodden serpent, Gauri reared up in an instant, and, in a fit of defiant bravado — false, yet meant to wound — said in a choked voice: "Yes, I love him! Do what you will!" Paresh at once locked the door of the room upon her and went off to court.

Gauri, in an unbearable fury, contrived somehow to have the door opened, and left the house that very instant.

Paramananda was sitting alone in his quiet room, in the emptiness of midday, reading the scriptures. Of a sudden, like a bolt of lightning without any cloud to carry it, Gauri came breaking in upon the celibate's study of the sacred texts.

The guru said, "What is this?"

The disciple said, "Master, deliver me from a household where I am shamed — take me away; I shall dedicate my life to your service and worship."

Paramananda rebuked her sternly, and sent Gauri back home. But alas, dear master — could that thread of study, so suddenly and violently broken that day, ever again be joined as it had been before?

Paresh, coming home and finding the door standing open, asked his wife, "Who has been here?"

His wife said, "No one has been here — I went to the master's house."

Paresh, for one moment, turned ashen pale, and the next flushed crimson, and said, "Why did you go?"

Gauri said, "Because I wished to."

From that day Paresh set a watch upon her, kept his wife shut up within the house, and raised such an uproar over the matter that scandal spread through the whole town.

At the news of these ugly insults and this persecution, all thought of God fled from Paramananda's mind. He felt it his duty to leave the town without delay. And yet he could not, in any way, bring himself to go far off and abandon one so cruelly wronged. What passed, through those few days and nights, within the heart of that renunciate — only the Witness within all hearts can know.

At last, still confined within her captivity, Gauri received one day a letter: *"Child — I have considered the matter, and find that many a devout and saintly woman, before this, has left the world for love of Krishna. If, through the persecutions of this household, your mind has been driven from the lotus feet of Hari, then, should you send me word, I shall, by God's help, endeavour to deliver His handmaiden and offer her up at the fearless lotus feet of the Lord. On Wednesday, the twenty-sixth of Falgun, at two in the afternoon, should you wish it, we may meet upon the bank of your tank."*

Gauri bound the letter into her hair and hid it away within the coil of her braid. At noon on the twenty-sixth of Falgun, as she was loosening her hair before her bath, she found that the letter was gone. A sudden suspicion struck her — that it might, at some moment, have slipped out and fallen upon the bed, and so come into her husband's hands.

At the thought that her husband was, at that very moment, reading the letter and burning with jealousy, Gauri felt within herself a fierce and searing kind of joy; and yet the thought that this ornament of her hair should be defiled by the touch of so

impious a hand was more than she could bear. She went at once, with hurried steps, to her husband's room.

She found her husband lying upon the floor, gasping and groaning, foam upon his lips, his eyes rolled back beneath his brow. Prising the letter from his clenched right fist, she sent at once, in haste, for the doctor.

The doctor came, and said: apoplexy¶ — and by then the patient was already dead.

That day, Paresh had had some urgent case to attend in the outlying courts. The renunciate had, by now, fallen so far that he had made himself ready to meet Gauri that very hour, on the strength of it.

The moment Gauri — now suddenly a widow — saw, from her window, her master standing at the edge of the tank like a thief, she lowered her eyes at once, as at a stroke of lightning. In that instant, as by a flash of lightning, it stood revealed within her heart from what height, to what depth, her guru had fallen.

The guru called out, "Gauri!"

Gauri answered, "I am coming, master."

When Paresh's friends, hearing the news of his death, came for the funeral rites, they found Gauri's own dead body lying beside her husband's. She had taken poison, and died.

And at so astonishing an instance, in an age like this, of a wife's dying together with her husband, all were struck dumb with wonder — awed by so rare a proof of a sati's devotion. ||

Notes

* *Hari-sabha* — literally "the assembly of Hari," a congregation devoted to the worship of Krishna (Hari), common in nineteenth-century Bengal.

† *Swami Paramananda* — "Swami" here is an honorific for a religious teacher or renunciate, not the Bengali word for "husband," with which the story elsewhere plays a silent, ironic counterpoint.

‡ *The Bhagavata* — the Bhagavata Purana, the great Sanskrit devotional text centering on the life and love of Krishna, foundational to Vaishnava worship.

§ *Shalgram* — a sacred ammonite stone worshipped as a physical form of the god Vishnu; to swear an oath with one's hand upon it was considered profoundly binding.

¶ *Apoplexy* — the nineteenth-century medical term for a sudden collapse brought on by what would now be diagnosed as a stroke or cerebral hemorrhage.

|| *Sati* — the ideal, and the now-outlawed historical practice, of a Hindu widow dying with or following her husband in death as the supreme proof of wifely devotion. The story's closing line trades on the full weight of this word: the onlookers read Gauri's death as an act of sati; the reader, who has watched her hopes collapse together with her guru's fall from grace, knows otherwise.