

SHORT STORY

ATONEMENT

Rabindranath Tagore



CHAPTER ONE

Between heaven and earth there lies a certain indefinable, lawless region where King Trishanku hangs forever suspended, where castles in the air grow in the greatest abundance. That wind-fortified continent bears the name "Might-Have-Been." Those who accomplish great deeds and win immortality are blessed indeed; and those, too, are blessed who, with modest powers, help their fellow men, in ordinary ways, to carry out the ordinary duties of daily life. But those who, by some blunder of fate, find themselves suddenly stranded between the two have no recourse whatsoever. They might have become something, had circumstances allowed — and it is precisely for that reason that becoming anything at all proves, for them, the most impossible thing of all.

Our Anathbandhu was just such a young man, lingering forever in that middle territory, mocked by Providence. Everyone believed that, had he only wished it, he might have succeeded at anything at all. But he never once, in his whole life, wished it, and he never once succeeded at anything — and yet everyone's faith in him remained entirely unshaken. They said he would come first in his examinations; he never sat for another examination again. Everyone was certain that, had he entered government service, he would have effortlessly risen to the very top of any department he chose; he never accepted any post whatsoever. He held ordinary people in the deepest contempt, for they were, after all, so very ordinary; yet he held not the slightest regard for extraordinary people either, for he was quite certain that, had he only troubled himself, he might easily have become more extraordinary than any of them.

The whole of Anathbandhu's fame, standing, happiness, prosperity, and good fortune lay stored away in that timeless, placeless treasury of the impossible; in the world of actual fact, Providence had granted him nothing more than a wealthy father-in-law and a virtuous wife. His wife's name was Bindhyabasini.

Anathbandhu did not care for his wife's name, nor did he consider her, in either beauty or virtue, quite worthy of himself — but in Bindhyabasini's own heart there was no limit to her pride in the good fortune of her marriage. That her husband surpassed every other woman's husband in the world, in every conceivable respect, was a matter beyond the smallest doubt in her mind; her husband himself

entertained no doubt of it either, and the general opinion of the world, too, inclined comfortably to support this belief.

Bindhyabasini lived in perpetual anxiety lest this pride in her husband should ever, in the slightest degree, be diminished. Could she only have carried this husband of hers up to the very highest peak of the towering, unshaken mountain of devotion within her own heart, and there kept him safe from every sidelong glance of a foolish, mortal world, she would have given her whole life, with an untroubled mind, to the worship of her husband. But in this material world, devotion alone cannot keep the object of one's devotion permanently aloft — and creatures who refused to accept Anathbandhu as the very model of manhood were, in this world, by no means rare. And so Bindhyabasini was made to suffer a great deal of grief.

While Anathbandhu was still attending college, he lived in his father-in-law's house. The time for his examinations came, and he did not sit them; and the following year he left college altogether. This event left Bindhyabasini deeply mortified before the world at large. That night, in a low voice, she said to Anathbandhu, "It would have been better if you had only sat the examination."

Anathbandhu laughed with contempt and said, "Does sitting an examination turn a man into some sort of paragon? Why, even our Kedar has passed his examinations!"

Bindhyabasini found comfort in this. If so many of the country's dullards and dolts could pass their examinations, what glory, after all, would Anathbandhu's own passing have added to his name? Her neighbour Kamala came, full of delight, to bring the happy news to her childhood friend Bindi that her brother Ramesh had, this time, passed his examination and won a scholarship. Hearing this, Bindhyabasini, without any real cause, decided that Kamala's joy was not entirely pure joy — that some hidden barb against her own husband lurked within it. And so, rather than sharing in her friend's delight, she took it upon herself, in a somewhat quarrelsome tone, to declare that the L.A. examination hardly counted as an examination at all — that in England, indeed, no college even recognised any examination below the B.A. It goes without saying that all this information and reasoning had been gathered by Bindhya from her own husband.

Kamala, who had come bearing happy news, found herself, at first, quite astonished to receive so unkind a blow from her own beloved bosom friend. But

she too, being a woman like any other, understood Bindhyabasini's meaning within a single moment — and, stung by this insult to her brother, a single drop of sharp poison rose at once to the tip of her own tongue as well. She said, "Well, sister, we haven't been to England, nor married an English gentleman — how should we know so much? A foolish woman like myself understands only this much — that a Bengali boy is expected to pass his L.A. at college; though of course, sister, not everyone can manage even that." Having delivered these words in the most innocent, sweet, and friendly manner, Kamala took her leave; Bindhya, no lover of quarrels, bore it in silence, went into her room, and wept quietly to herself.

Not long after, another incident occurred. A wealthy family of distant relations came to Calcutta for a time and took shelter in Bindhyabasini's father's house, and, on this account, a considerable stir arose in the household of her father, Rajkumar Babu. The son-in-law, who had until then occupied the large outer sitting room, was asked, for the sake of showing proper hospitality to the newly arrived guests, to give up that room and take shelter for a while in the room belonging to his brother-in-law instead.

At this, Anathbandhu's wounded pride swelled up at once. First, he went to his wife and denounced her father before her, reducing her to tears, thereby taking his revenge upon his father-in-law. After that, he set about expressing his injured pride through fasting and other such forceful measures. Seeing this, Bindhyabasini was overcome with the deepest shame. From the plain, natural sense of self-respect within her, she understood that there could be no more shameful self-abasement than to display such wounded pride so openly, before the eyes of the whole household. Claspings his hands and feet, weeping and pleading, she managed, with great difficulty, to bring her husband to a stop.

Bindhya was not an unreasonable woman, and so she laid no blame whatsoever upon her own parents; she understood the matter to be a trifling and entirely natural one. But it also struck her that her husband, living as he did in his father-in-law's house, was thereby deprived of the proper courtesies due to a guest.

From that day on, she began saying to her husband, every single day, "Take me to your own house — I will not stay here any longer."

Anathbandhu had a great deal of pride, but no true sense of self-respect. He could not, on any account, bring himself to return to the poverty of his own household.

His wife then, with a certain new firmness, said, "If you will not go, then I shall go alone."

Anathbandhu, privately vexed, made ready to take his wife off to their own small, thatched, mud-built house in a remote and humble village far from Calcutta. As they were leaving, Rajkumar Babu and his wife pressed their daughter, with many entreaties, to stay on a while longer in her father's house; the daughter, sitting silent, head bowed, her face grave, made it known, without a word, that this could not be.

Seeing this sudden firmness of resolve in her, her parents began to suspect that she must, without their knowing it, have somehow been wounded. Rajkumar Babu, his heart aching, asked her, "My dear, has some unwitting act of ours caused you any pain?"

Bindhyabasini turned a look of deep sorrow upon her father's face and said, "Not for a single moment. My days here have passed in the greatest happiness, in the greatest tenderness." And, saying this, she began to weep. But her resolve remained unshaken. Her father and mother sighed deeply and thought to themselves: however much love, however much tenderness you lavish in the raising of a daughter, once she is married she becomes another's altogether.

At last, taking her leave of everyone with tear-filled eyes, leaving behind the home of her whole childhood, steeped as it was in love, and all her family and companions, Bindhyabasini climbed into the palanquin.

CHAPTER TWO

There is a great difference between a wealthy household in Calcutta and a modest homestead in the countryside. But not for a single day did Bindhyabasini betray, either in manner or in conduct, the least dissatisfaction. With a cheerful heart she set herself to helping her mother-in-law with the housework. Knowing their poor circumstances, her father had sent along, at his own expense, a maidservant to accompany his daughter. The moment Bindhyabasini arrived at her husband's house, she sent the girl away. Seeing the poverty of her husband's household, she could not bear the thought that a maidservant from a rich man's house might, at every moment, be secretly wrinkling her nose in disdain.

Her mother-in-law, out of affection, tried to keep Bindhya from the more strenuous tasks of the household — but Bindhya, tireless and uncomplaining, threw herself with a cheerful face into every kind of work, and won her mother-in-law's heart entirely; and the women of the village, too, grew charmed by her many virtues.

But the result of all this was not entirely happy. For the laws that govern this world are not the simple, moral copybook maxims of some elementary primer, written in plain and virtuous prose. Some cruel, mocking devil has come in among them and tangled every thread of morality into knots. And so good deeds do not always, on the spot, produce simple and unmixed good results — quite suddenly, some complication is apt to arise instead.

Anathbandhu had two younger brothers and one elder. The elder brother earned some fifty rupees a month, working away from home, and it was on this alone that the whole household ran, and on which the two younger brothers received their education.

It goes without saying that, in these times, fifty rupees a month can scarcely allow a household to prosper — but for the swelling of pride in the elder brother's wife, Shyamashankari, that sum proved quite sufficient. Her husband laboured the whole year round, and so, she felt, his wife had earned the right to a whole year's rest in return. She did no work whatsoever, and yet carried herself as though, merely by being the wife of her one wage-earning husband, she had done the entire household the greatest possible favour.

When Bindhyabasini arrived at her husband's house and threw herself, day and night, into the household work like some veritable goddess of the hearth, something within Shyamashankari's own narrow heart seemed to draw tight and clench. The cause of it is not easy to explain. Perhaps the elder wife had decided that her younger sister-in-law, being the daughter of a wealthy house, had taken up these lowly domestic tasks purely to make a show of herself before others — and that this only served to shame her, the elder wife, before the world. Whatever the reason, the wife of a fifty-rupee-a-month husband could not, on any account, bear the presence of a wealthy man's daughter. In Bindhya's very humility, she found the unmistakable signs of unbearable pride.

Meanwhile, Anathbandhu, having come to the village, set up a library there; gathered ten or twenty schoolboys about him, made himself their president, and

took to sending telegrams to the newspapers; he even became a special correspondent for one or two English papers, to the great astonishment of the villagers. But he did not bring a single paisa into that poor household — quite the opposite, his unnecessary expenses only grew larger.

Bindhyabasini pressed him constantly to take up some post or other. He paid her no heed. He told his wife that suitable posts did exist for a man of his abilities, but that the partial English government reserved all such positions for great Englishmen, and that a Bengali, however capable, however deserving, stood no hope of ever winning one.

Shyamashankari, meanwhile, went on pouring the poison of her tongue upon her brother-in-law and her younger sister-in-law, both openly and in veiled hints. With proud flourishes of their own poverty, she would say, "We are poor people — how are we to support a rich man's daughter and a rich man's son-in-law? They were comfortable enough over there, with no hardship at all — will they really be able to bear such misery here, eating nothing but plain lentils and rice?"

Her mother-in-law was afraid of the elder daughter-in-law, and dared not speak up in defence of the weaker one. And the younger daughter-in-law, too, went on quietly swallowing, along with her plain rice and lentils bought on fifty rupees a month, the bitter spice of her sister-in-law's tongue, in complete silence.

In the meantime the elder brother came home for a short leave, and there heard, from his own wife, a great many spirited and eloquent speeches on the subject. At last, when his sleep began to be disturbed, more severely each night, he called Anathbandhu to him one day and said, calmly and with affection, "You really ought to look for some post — how am I to run this household all alone?"

Anathbandhu, roaring like a trodden serpent, cried out that he could no longer bear such reproaches heaped upon him along with two meagre, wretched meals of coarse rice each day. He resolved, at once, to take his wife back to her father's house.

But his wife would not, on any account, agree to it. In her view, a younger brother had every family right to his elder brother's food and his sister-in-law's sharp tongue both — but to take shelter, instead, with her own father-in-law's family was a matter of the greatest shame. Bindhyabasini could bear to bow her head low, in

humble poverty, in her husband's own house — but in her father's house, she wished to walk with her head held high, her own dignity intact.

It was around this time that the post of third master fell vacant at the village's Entrance school. Both Anathbandhu's elder brother and Bindhyabasini pressed him earnestly to accept the position. This, too, only made matters worse. That his own brother, and his own wedded wife besides, should think him fit for so utterly trivial a post filled him with an unconquerable wounded pride, and his aversion to all household affairs and employment grew fourfold greater than before.

His elder brother then took his hand once more, entreated him, and, with much effort, calmed him down again. Everyone agreed that there was nothing more to be gained by speaking to him further on the subject — that it would be the household's own great good fortune if he could only, by whatever means, be persuaded to stay on quietly at home.

When his leave was over, the elder brother returned to his post; Shyamashankari, choked with suppressed rage, drew her face into one great, ugly, rounded scowl and kept it there. Anathbandhu came to Bindhyabasini and said, "These days, no respectable position can be had without first going to England. I have made up my mind to go to England — you must find some pretext to raise a little money from your father."

The very mention of England struck Bindhya's head like a bolt of lightning; and, worse still, she could not imagine how she was ever to go begging money from her own father — and the very thought of it filled her with a shame that nearly killed her.

Anathbandhu's own pride would not allow him to ask his father-in-law directly for money, and yet he could not for the life of him understand why a daughter should hesitate, by fair means or foul, to draw money from her own father. Over this matter Anath grew very angry indeed, and poor, heartbroken Bindhyabasini was made to shed a great many tears. Some while passed in this manner, amid domestic want and inward suffering; and at last, in autumn, the Puja season drew near. Rajkumar Babu, with the greatest ceremony, sent conveyances to bring his daughter and son-in-law home with every honour. After a year's absence, the daughter re-entered her father's house together with her husband. The very hospitality of the wealthy relations that Anathbandhu had once found so

unbearable was now, this time, lavished upon the son-in-law in still greater measure. Bindhyabasini, too, after so long, lifted the veil from her head once more, and passed her days, night and day, swept up in the loving warmth of her family and the tide of festival rejoicing.

Today was Shashthi. Tomorrow the Saptami rites of the Puja would begin. There was no end to the bustle and the noise. Every room of the great house was filled to overflowing with relatives near and distant.

That night, thoroughly exhausted, Bindhyabasini went to bed. It was not the room in which she used to sleep before; her mother, out of special affection, had this time given up her own room to the son-in-law. Bindhya never knew what hour Anathbandhu had come to bed; she was, by then, deep in sleep.

From the earliest hours of dawn, the shehnai began to play. But weary Bindhyabasini did not stir from her sleep. Her two friends, Kamal and Bhuban, tried in vain to eavesdrop at Bindhya's bedroom door, and at last burst out laughing loudly outside in mock reproach; only then did Bindhya start awake, and, looking about, found that her husband must have risen at some hour she had not noticed at all. Ashamed, she got up from the bed and went to look — and found her mother's iron chest standing open, and her father's cash-box, which always stood beside it, gone.

Then it came back to her — the evening before, her mother's bunch of keys had gone missing, and a great commotion had arisen in the house over it. There was no doubt whatsoever that some thief, having stolen those very keys, had done this deed. A sudden fear seized her, then, that the thief might have done her husband some harm. Her heart gave a violent lurch. Searching beneath the bed, she found, at the foot of the bedstead, a letter lying pressed beneath her mother's own bunch of keys.

The letter was in her husband's own hand. Opening it, she read that her husband, with the help of some friend, had secured his passage-money for England, and that, unable to think of any other way to provide for his expenses once there, he had, the previous night, taken her father's money, climbed down the wooden staircase adjoining the veranda into the inner garden, scaled the wall, and fled. His ship had, that very morning, already set sail.

Reading the letter, the blood froze in Bindhyabasini's veins. She sank down, right where she stood, clinging to the leg of the bedstead. Within her body, in the very hollow of her ears, a sound began to rise, like the drone of crickets in the silent night of death. And over it, from the courtyard, from the neighbours' houses, and from the great houses far off, countless shehnais struck up countless melodies. The whole of Bengal, at that hour, had gone mad with joy.

The laughing, festival-bright sunlight of autumn came playfully streaming into the bedroom. Though the morning was already well advanced, seeing the door still shut fast on this day of celebration, Bhuban and Kamal, laughing loudly, began pounding upon it with mocking blows. Getting no answer even to this, they grew a little frightened, and began calling out, in raised voices, "Bindi! Bindi!"

Bindhyabasini answered in a broken, choked voice, "I'm coming — go on now, both of you."

Fearing their friend had fallen ill, they ran and fetched her mother. Her mother came and said, "Bindu, what has happened, my dear? Why is the door still shut?"

Checking her welling tears, Bindhya said, "Bring Father here, just once."

Her mother, thoroughly alarmed, hurried at once to fetch Rajkumar Babu and came with him to the door. Bindhya opened it, brought them in, and quickly shut it fast again. Then Bindhya fell to the ground, clasped her father's feet, and, her heart breaking into a hundred pieces, cried out, "Father! Forgive me — I have stolen money from your chest."

They sat down upon the bed, utterly stunned. Bindhya told them that she had done this in order to send her husband to England.

Her father asked, "Why did you not ask us for it?"

Bindhyabasini said, "For fear you would stop him going."

Rajkumar Babu grew extremely angry. Her mother wept, the daughter wept, and from every quarter of Calcutta the joyful music of the festival went on playing in a thousand different melodies.

That Bindhya who could never bring herself to ask her own father for money, that wife who would have given her very life to keep the smallest slight upon her

husband hidden even from her own dearest kin — today, in the very midst of a house full of festival guests, her wifely pride, her dignity as a daughter, her own self-respect, lay shattered and trampled like dust beneath the feet of everyone, loved and unloved, familiar and unknown alike. That Anathbandhu had, with premeditation, conspired to steal the keys, and, with his wife's own help, made off with the money in the dead of night to flee to England — this news spread through the relative-filled house like wildfire. Bhuban, Kamal, and a good many other relations, neighbours, and servants, standing near the door, had heard the whole of it. Seeing the anxious master and mistress of the house go in through the closed door of the son-in-law's room, everyone had come hurrying, eager with curiosity and alarm.

Bindhyabasini showed her face to no one. She kept the door shut and lay upon her bed the whole day without food. No one felt the smallest sympathy for her grief. Everyone marvelled instead at the wickedness of this scheming conspirator's mind. Everyone concluded that Bindhya's true character had simply never before had occasion to reveal itself. Somehow or other, the joyless household struggled through the remainder of the Puja festivities.

CHAPTER THREE

Bowed down with humiliation and exhaustion, Bindhya returned to her husband's house. There a closer bond was forged between the widowed mother-in-law, grieving the loss of her son, and the daughter-in-law, grieving the loss of her husband. Drawing near to one another, the two of them, beneath the shadow of a silent sorrow, carried out, with the deepest patience, every last trivial task of the household with their own hands. In precisely the measure that her mother-in-law drew closer to her, her own parents grew more distant. Bindhya felt, in her heart: 'My mother-in-law is poor, and I am poor; we are bound together by the same bond of sorrow. My parents are wealthy, and stand at a great distance from our condition.' Being poor alone had already set Bindhya at a great distance from them — and now, having confessed to theft besides, she had fallen even further beneath them still.

Whether the bonds of natural affection can bear so great a weight of difference, who can say. When Anathbandhu first went to England, he wrote to his wife with some regularity. But gradually his letters grew rarer, and an unmistakable note of

neglect began, imperceptibly, to creep into them. A good many Englishwomen, superior in every respect — in learning, in wit, in beauty and virtue — to his unlettered, housebound wife, received Anathbandhu with warmth, calling him a fine, clever, handsome man. In such circumstances, it is hardly surprising that Anathbandhu should no longer, in any particular, consider his own plain, veiled, single-sari-clad wife his equal.

And yet, when his funds ran short, he felt not the slightest hesitation in sending a telegram to this same helpless Bengali girl. And this same Bengali girl, keeping for herself nothing but a single pair of glass bangles upon her wrists, sold every other ornament she possessed and sent him the money. Since there was no safe place to keep such valuable jewellery in a village, all her most precious ornaments had been left, for safekeeping, at her father's house. On the pretext of visiting for one occasion or another at her husband's relations' house, Bindhyabasini managed, little by little, to have all her jewellery brought to her. At last, having sold even her hand-bangles, her silver bracelets, her Benares sari, and her shawl, she wrote to her husband, with the humblest entreaties, invoking every solemn oath she knew, every line of the letter blotted with her own tears, begging him to return home.

Her husband came back with his hair cut short, his beard shaved off, dressed in coat and trousers, a fully qualified barrister — and took a room in a hotel. To live in his father-in-law's house was out of the question — in the first place, there was no proper room for him; and in the second, a poor village householder, once he had lost his caste by crossing the sea, found himself entirely without recourse. His wife's family, being strict, orthodox Hindus, could not, for their part, offer shelter to a man who had fallen from caste either.

For want of money, he was very soon obliged to give up the hotel for a modest lodging. To that lodging he was not prepared to bring his wife. Since his return from England, he had visited his wife and mother only two or three times, briefly, in the daytime; beyond that, he saw nothing more of them at all.

The two sorrowing women had but one consolation — that Anathbandhu was, at least, in his own country, near his own relations. And, along with this, there was no limit to their pride in Anathbandhu's extraordinary distinction as a barrister. Bindhyabasini took to reproaching herself as an unworthy wife to so illustrious a husband — and, precisely because she felt herself so unworthy, felt his greatness

all the more keenly for it. She was, at once, stricken with grief and swollen with pride. She despised the ways of the foreigner, and yet, looking upon her husband, thought to herself, 'Nowadays many men go abroad and come back Englishmen — but none suits the part so well as he does — one could scarcely tell, to look at him, that he was ever a Bengali at all!'

When the money for his lodging finally ran out entirely — when Anathbandhu, in bitter resentment, concluded that talent found no recognition in this accursed land of India, and that his fellow professionals, out of pure jealousy, were secretly conspiring to block his path to advancement — when, on his dinner plate, the proportion of vegetables began steadily to outgrow the proportion of meat, and fried prawns began, more and more, to monopolise the place of honour once held by roast fowl — when the polish of his dress and the proud gleam of his freshly shaved face began to grow dull — when the taut, deep-pitched string of his life began, note by note, to sink toward some sorrowful, lower register — it was precisely at this moment that a grave misfortune befell Rajkumar Babu's family, one that brought about a great change in the beleaguered course of Anathbandhu's life.

One day, returning by boat from his maternal uncle's house on the banks of the Ganges, Rajkumar Babu's only son, Harkumar, was struck by a passing steamer and drowned, along with his wife and infant son. After this calamity, no one remained of Rajkumar's line save his daughter, Bindhyabasini.

When the first terrible force of grief had somewhat subsided, Rajkumar Babu went to Anathbandhu and begged him, "My son, you must perform your penance and be restored to caste. I have no one left in this world but you."

Anathbandhu agreed to the proposal with the greatest enthusiasm. He thought to himself that here, at last, was a way to take his revenge upon all those bar-library barristers of his own country, who envied him so, and who showed so little proper regard for his own extraordinary intellect.

Rajkumar Babu sought the ruling of the learned pandits. They declared that, provided Anathbandhu had never once eaten beef, there existed a proper means of restoring him to caste.

Though that forbidden quadruped had, indeed, numbered among his favourite foods while abroad, he felt not the slightest hesitation in denying it. He told his intimate friends, "When society itself wishes, of its own free will, to be told a comfortable lie, I see no fault in obliging it with one small word. It is the settled custom of our modern society that a tongue which has once eaten beef must be purified again with two equally unlovely substances — cow-dung, and a falsehood. I have no wish to break with that custom."

An auspicious day was fixed for the ceremony of penance, by which he was to be restored to society. In the meantime, Anathbandhu did not merely put on dhoti and shawl again — through argument and instruction, he set about blackening the face of English society on the one hand and whitewashing that of Hindu society on the other. Whoever heard him was delighted.

Bindhyabasini's tender heart, steeped in the sweet nectar of devotion, overflowed everywhere with joy and pride. She thought to herself, 'Whoever returns from England comes back a thorough Englishman through and through, quite unrecognisable as a Bengali at all. But my husband has returned entirely unchanged — indeed, his devotion to the Hindu faith has grown, if anything, even stronger than before.'

On the appointed day, Rajkumar Babu's house filled with brahmins and pandits. No expense whatsoever was spared. The arrangements for feeding and dismissing the guests were entirely fitting. Within the women's quarters, too, there was no limit to the festivity. Every room and courtyard was thrown into a happy tumult with the serving and attending of the assembled guests. In the midst of all that clamour and bustle, Bindhyabasini floated about, radiant with joy, like some light wisp of cloud borne along on the morning breeze of an autumn, sun-drenched day. Today, the central figure of the whole wide world's business was her own husband. It was as though the whole of Bengal had become a single stage, and, the curtain drawn back, was displaying Anathbandhu alone before an astonished world of onlookers. This penance was no confession of guilt — it seemed, rather, an act of gracious condescension. Anath had returned from England, entered once more into Hindu society, and, by his very entrance, brought glory upon that society itself. And that same radiance of glory, streaming out from every corner of the land in a thousand rays, cast an extraordinary light of majesty upon Bindhyabasini's own face, glowing

with love. All the sorrow and petty humiliation of her long, obscure life fell away from her; today, in her father's own house, filled once more with every relation she had, she ascended, head held high, to a seat of honour among them all. Her husband's greatness had, today, made even his unworthy wife an object of the world's respect. The ceremony was completed. Anathbandhu had been restored to caste. The assembled relations and brahmins, sitting at his side upon a single mat, had finished their meal with the greatest satisfaction. The relations sent word into the women's quarters, asking that the son-in-law be brought in to be seen. The son-in-law, in the most contented spirits, chewing a paan, a broad, pleased smile upon his face, made his leisurely way, his shawl trailing upon the ground behind him, into the inner apartments.

The meal being over, arrangements were now under way for the brahmins' customary gifts, and, in the meantime, they sat in the assembly hall, displaying their learning in a tremendous, argumentative uproar. Rajkumar Babu, the master of the house, had sat down for a moment's rest amid that noisy gathering of pandits, listening to their disputations on points of scripture, when the doorkeeper came in and handed him a card, announcing, "A memsahib belonging to some sahib has come, sir."

Rajkumar Babu was struck with astonishment. The very next moment, glancing at the card, he saw written upon it, in English: *Mrs. Anathbandhu Sarkar*. That is to say, the wife of Anathbandhu Sarkar.

Rajkumar Babu stared at this for a long while, quite unable to make any sense whatsoever of this one small phrase. At that very moment, a young Englishwoman, freshly arrived from England — her cheeks flushed rose, her hair touched with copper, her eyes dark blue, her complexion the white of milk-foam, her step as light as a deer's — walked into the assembly hall herself and stood there, looking from one face to another. But she found, among them all, no familiar, beloved face. At the sudden sight of the memsahib, every argument over the scriptures fell silent at once, and the whole assembly hall grew as still and hushed as a burial ground. It was at this very moment that Anathbandhu, sauntering leisurely along, his shawl still trailing on the ground, made his way back into the room. And in an instant the Englishwoman ran to him, threw her arms about him, and pressed, upon his betel-reddened lips, the conjugal kiss of reunion.

That day, the assembly's disputations over the scriptures could not be resumed.

(Agrahayan, 1301 B.S.)