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D. N.

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THE WRECK



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THE WRECK

BY

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

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CHAPTER I

No one doubted for a moment that Ramesh would pass his law-examination. The Goddess of Learning, who presides over universities, had always showered petals on him from her golden lotus and had rained on him medals, and scholarships to boot.

Ramesh was supposed to be going home after the examination, but he seemed to be in no particular hurry to pack his trunk. His father had written bidding him return home at once. He had replied that he would come as soon as the results of the examination were announced.

Jogendra, son of Annada Babu, was Ramesh's fellow-student and lived next door to him. Annada Babu belonged to the Brahmo Samaj and his daughter Hemnalini had recently sat for the First Arts examination. Ramesh was a constant visitor at their house. He appeared regularly at tea-time, but tea was apparently not the only attraction as he was to be found there at other hours also.

Hemnalini used to walk up and down on the roof drying her hair after her bath and reading as she walked. Ramesh, likewise, used to sit, book in hand, by the stair-turret on the roof of

his lodgings engaged in solitary study. Such a place is certainly suitable for quiet reading, but there were considerable distractions also, as a little reflection will show.

So far there had been no talk of marriage on either side. There was some reason for Annada Babu's failure to raise the subject; a young friend of his had gone to England to read for the bar and the old gentleman had his eye on this youth as a possible son-in-law.

A lively discussion was in progress at the tea-table one afternoon. Young Akshay was not very successful in passing examinations, but he was not a whit behind more scholarly youths in his thirst for tea and for other harmless indulgences; so he too made frequent appearances at Hemnalini's tea-table. He once argued that the masculine intellect is like a sword and that even without a keen edge its weight makes it a formidable weapon, while woman's wit is like a penknife—sharpen it as you will it is capable of no serious task, and so on.

Hemnalini was ready to submit in silence to Akshay's preposterous contention, but her brother Jogendra likewise advanced arguments in depreciation of feminine intelligence. This brought Ramesh into the fray; he roused himself from his torpor and began to chant the praises of womankind.

In the ardour of his feminism Ramesh had finished two extra cups of tea when the bearer brought in a letter addressed to him in his father's handwriting. Glancing through it he was constrained to accept defeat while the argument was

still at its height and he rose hastily to go. There was a chorus of protest, and he had to explain that his father had just arrived from home.

“Ask Ramesh Babu’s father to come in,” said Hemnalini to Jogendra, “we can offer him a cup of tea.”

“Please don’t trouble,” Ramesh interposed hastily, “I had better join him at once.”

Akshay rejoiced inwardly. “The old gentleman might object to taking anything here,” he observed, in allusion to the fact that Annada Babu was a Brahmo and Ramesh’s father an orthodox Hindu.

Braja Mohan Babu, Ramesh’s father, greeted his son with the remark, “You must come home with me by the morning train to-morrow.”

Ramesh scratched his head. “Is there any special urgency?” he asked.

“Nothing in particular,” said Braja Mohan.

Ramesh looked inquiringly at his father, wondering why in these circumstances he was in such a hurry, but Braja Mohan did not think it necessary to satisfy his son’s curiosity.

In the evening, when his father had gone out to visit his Calcutta friends, Ramesh sat down to write him a letter; but after he had written the traditional form of address to an honoured parent, “To thy revered lotus foot,” his pen refused its task, although he told himself repeatedly that he was bound to Hemnalini by an unspoken vow and that it would be wrong to conceal this tacit engagement any longer from his father. He composed various drafts in various styles, but finally he tore them all up.

Braja Mohan went peacefully to sleep after supper. Ramesh ascended to the roof and prowled disconsolately up and down like some spirit of night with his eyes fixed on his neighbour's house. At nine o'clock Akshay made his belated exit, and at half-past nine the street door was locked. At ten the light in Annada Babu's sitting-room went out, and by half-past ten the whole house was buried in slumber.

Ramesh had to leave Calcutta early on the following morning. Braja Mohan Babu took care to give him no opportunity of missing the train.

CHAPTER II

WHEN Ramesh reached home he found that a bride had been chosen for him and that a day had been fixed for his marriage. In his youth Braja Mohan had fallen upon evil days, and he owed his subsequent prosperity to a pleader named Ishan, a friend of his boyhood. Ishan died before his time, and it was then discovered that he had left nothing but debts. His widow and her one child—a girl—suddenly found themselves destitute. This daughter, now of marriageable age, was the bride whom Braja Mohan had chosen for Ramesh. Some of the youth's well-wishers had protested, pointing out that according to report the girl was not good-looking. To such criticisms Braja Mohan had but one reply. "I fail to see the point," he would say. "You may judge a flower or a butterfly by its looks, but not a human being. If the girl turns out as good a wife as her mother was, Ramesh may consider himself lucky."

Ramesh's heart sank when he heard the gossips discuss his forthcoming marriage, and he took to wandering aimlessly about, trying to devise some means of escape, but none seemed feasible. At last he plucked up courage to say

to his father, "Father, I really can't marry this girl, I'm bound by a promise to some one else."

Braja Mohan. "You don't say so! Has there been a regular betrothal?"

Ramesh. "No, not exactly, but——"

Braja Mohan. "Have you spoken to the girl's people? Is it all settled?"

Ramesh. "I haven't actually spoken about it, but——"

Braja Mohan. "Oh, you haven't? Well, as you've said nothing so far you may as well keep quiet a little longer."

After a short pause Ramesh shot his last bolt. "I should be doing her a wrong if I married any other girl."

"You would be doing a still greater wrong," retorted Braja Mohan, "if you refused to marry the bride whom I have chosen for you."

Ramesh could say no more; there was just a chance, he thought, that some accident might still prevent the marriage.

According to the astrologers, the whole of the year following the date fixed for the wedding was inauspicious, and it occurred to Ramesh that once the fateful day were over he would gain a whole year's respite.

The bride lived in a distant place only accessible by river. Even by the shortest route, taking advantage of creeks that linked up the larger channels, it was a three or four days' journey. Braja Mohan left an ample margin for accident, and his party set off on a day, officially announced as auspicious, a full week before the date fixed for the wedding. The wind was favourable all the

way and it took them less than three days to reach Simulghata, so that there were still four days to elapse before the ceremony. The old gentleman had another reason for wishing to be in good time. The bride's mother was very badly off and it had long been his desire that she should leave her home and migrate to his village, where he could support her in comfort and so discharge the debt that he owed to the friend of his youth. So long as there was no tie of relationship delicacy forbade him to approach the lady with such a proposal, but now in view of the forthcoming marriage he had sought for, and obtained, her consent. Her family being reduced to this one daughter, she readily fell in with the suggestion that she should fill a mother's place beside her motherless son-in-law. She clinched the matter by saying, "Let the gossips talk if they like, my place is with my daughter and her husband."

So Braja Mohan spent the intervening days before the wedding in preparations for transferring the lady's household effects to her new home. As he desired her to accompany the wedding party on its return journey he had brought some of his womenfolk with him to render her assistance.

The wedding duly took place, but Ramesh refused to recite the sacred formula correctly, closed his eyes when the time arrived for the "auspicious look" (the privileged moment when bridegroom and bride see each other for the first time), wore a hang-dog expression, and kept his mouth shut during the jesting in the bridal

chamber, lay throughout the night with his back turned to the girl, and left the room as early as possible in the morning.

After all the ceremonies were over the party set out, the women in one boat, the older men in another, the bridegroom and younger men in a third ; the musicians who had played at the wedding were accommodated in a fourth boat and beguiled the time by striking up various ditties and random snatches of music.

It was unbearably hot all day. The sky was cloudless but a dull haze lay over the horizon. The trees on the bank had a strange livid aspect and not a leaf stirred. The rowers were bathed in sweat. While the sun was still above the horizon the boatmen announced to Braja Mohan : " We'll have to tie the boats up now, sir ; there's no place where we can moor for miles ahead."

But Braja Mohan wanted to get the journey over as quickly as possible.

" We can't stop here," he said, " there's a moon for the first half of the night ; we'll go on to Baluhata and tie up there. I'll make it worth your while."

The men rowed on accordingly. On one side were sandbanks shimmering in the heat, on the other a high crumbling bank. The moon rose through the haze, but it shone with a lurid glare like the eye of a drunken man. The sky was still cloudless, when suddenly, without warning, the stillness was broken by a hoarse rumble as of thunder. Looking back the travellers saw a column of broken branches and twigs, wisps of

grass and straw and clouds of dust and sand, raised as it were by some vast broom and sweeping down on them.

There were frantic cries of "Steady ! steady ! Hold on ! Hold on ! Mercy ! Help !"

What happened next will never be known.

A whirlwind, following as usual a narrow path of destruction, descended on the boats, uprooting and overturning everything that lay in its track ; and in a moment the hapless flotilla was blotted out of existence.

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