The Postmaster

The postmaster took up his duties first in the village of Ulapur. Though the village was small, there was an indigo factory near it, and the proprietor, an Englishman, had managed to get a post office established.

Our postmaster belonged to Calcutta. He felt like a fish out of water in this remote village. His office and living-room were in a dark thatched shed, not far from a green, slimy pond, surrounded on all sides by a dense growth.

The man employed in the indigo factory had no leisure; moreover, they were hardly desirable companions for decent folk. Nor is a Calcutta boy an adept in the art of associating with others. Among strangers he appears either proud or ill at ease. At any rate, the postmaster had but little company; nor had he much work to do.

At times he tried his hand at writing verse. That the movement of the leaves and the clouds of the sky were enough to fill life with joy—such were the sentiments to which he sought to give expression. But God knows that the poor fellow would have felt it as the gift of a new life, if some genie of the Arabian Nights had in one night swept away the trees, leaves and all, and substituted for them a macadamised road, and had hidden the clouds from view with rows of tall houses.

The postmaster's salary was small. He had to cook his own meals, which he used to share with Ratan, an orphan girl of the village, who did odd jobs for him.

When in the evening, the smoke began to curl upwards from the village cow-sheds, and the cicadas chirped in every bush; when the mendicants of the Baul sect sang their shrill songs in their daily meeting place; when any poet, who had attempted to watch the movement of the leaves in the dense bamboo thickets, would have felt a ghostly shiver run down his back, the postmaster would light his little lamp, and call out 'Ratan.'

Ratan would sit outside, waiting for his call, and instead of coming in at once, would reply, ‘Did you call me sir?’

‘What are you doing?’ the postmaster would ask.

‘I must go and light the kitchen fire,’ she would reply.

And the postmaster would say: ‘Oh let the kitchen fire wait for a while; light me my pipe first.’

At last Ratan would enter, with puffed-out cheeks, vigorously blowing into a flame a live coal to light the tobacco. This would give the postmaster an opportunity of chatting with her. ‘Well, Ratan,’ perhaps he would begin, ‘do you remember anything of your mother?’ That was a fertile subject. Ratan partly remembered, and partly forgot. Her father had been fonder of her than her mother: him she recollected more vividly. He used to come home in the evening after his works, and one or two evenings stood out more clearly than others, like pictures in her memory. Ratan would sit on the floor near the postmaster’s feet as memories crowded in upon her. She called to mind a little brother that she had —and how on some bygone cloudy day she had played at fishing with him on the edge of the pond, with a twig for a fishing-rod. Such little incidents would drive out greater events from her mind. Thus, as they talked, it would often get very late, and the postmaster would feel too lazy to do any cooking at all. Ratan would then hastily light the fire, and toast some unleavened bread, which, with the cold remnants of the morning meal, was enough for their supper.

On some evenings, seated at his desk in the corner of the big empty shed, the postmaster too would call up memories of his own home, of his mother and his sister, of those for whom in his exile his heart was sad—memories which were always haunting him, but which he could not reveal to the men of the factory, though he found himself naturally recalling them aloud in the presence of the simple little girl. And so it came about that the girl would allude to his people as mother, brother, and sister, as if she had known them all her life. Indeed, she had a complete picture of each one of them painted in her heart.

One day at noon, during a break in the rains, there was a cool soft breeze blowing; the smell of the damp grass and leaves in the hot sun felt like the warm breathing on one's body of the tired earth. A persistent bird repeated all the afternoon the burden of its one complaint in Nature's audience chamber.

The postmaster had nothing to do. The shimmer of freshly washed leaves, and the banked-up remnants of the retreating rain-clouds were sights to see; and the postmaster was watching them and thinking to himself: 'Oh, if only some kindred soul were near—just one loving human being whom I could hold near my heart!' This was exactly, he went on to think, what that bird was trying to say, and it was the same feeling which the murmuring leaves were striving to express. But no one knows, or would believe, that such an idea might also take possession of an ill-paid village postmaster in the deep, silent midday interval in his work.

The postmaster sighed, and called out 'Ratan.' Ratan was then stretched at full length beneath the guava-tree, busily engaged in eating unripe guavas. At the voice of her master, she ran up breathlessly, saying: 'Did you call me, Dada?' 'I was thinking of teaching you to read,' said the postmaster. And then for the rest of the afternoon he taught her the alphabet.

Thus, in a very short time, Ratan had got as far as the double consonants.

It seemed as though the rains would never end. Canals, ditches, and hollows were all flooded with water. Day and night the patter of rain was heard and the croaking of frogs. The village roads became impassable, and marketing had to be done in punts.

One heavily clouded morning, the postmaster's little pupil had been waiting for long outside the door to be called, but as the usual summons did not come, she took up her dogeared book, and slowly entered the room. She found her master lying on his bed, and thinking he was resting, she was about to retire on tiptoe, when she suddenly heard her name—'Ratan!' She turned at once and asked: 'Were you asleep, Dada?' The postmaster in a weak voice replied: 'I am

not well. Feel my head; is it very hot?'

In the loneliness of his exile, and in the gloom of the rains, he needed a little tender nursing. He longed to call to mind the touch on his forehead of soft hands with tinkling bracelets, to imagine the presence of loving womanhood, the nearness of mother and sister. And the exile was not disappointed. Ratan ceased to be a little girl. She at once stepped into the post of mother, called in the village doctor, gave the patient his pills at the proper intervals, sat up all night by his pillow, cooked his gruel for him, and every now and then asked: 'Are you feeling a little better, Dada?'

It was some time before the postmaster, though still weak, was able to leave his sick-bed. 'No more of this,' said he with decision, 'I must apply for a transfer from this place.' He wrote off at once to Calcutta an application for a transfer, on the ground of the unhealthiness of the spot.

Relieved from her duties as nurse, Ratan again took up her former place outside the door. But she no longer heard the same old call. She would sometimes furtively peep inside to find the postmaster sitting on his chair, or stretched on his bed, and gazing absently into the air. While Ratan was awaiting her call, the postmaster was awaiting a reply to his application. The girl read her old lessons over and over again—her great fear was lest, when the call came, she might be found wanting in the double consonants. After a week's waiting, one evening her summons came. With an overflowing heart Ratan rushed into the room and cried, as she used to cry: 'Did you call me, Dada?'

The postmaster said: 'I am going away tomorrow, Ratan.'

'Where are you going, Dada?'

'I am going home.'

'When will you come back?'

'I am not coming back.'

Ratan asked no more. The postmaster, of his own accord, went on to tell her that his application for a transfer had been rejected, so he had resigned his post

and was going home.

For a long time neither of them spoke. The lamp burned dimly, and from a leak in one corner of the thatch, water dripped steadily into an earthen vessel on the floor beneath.

After a while Ratan rose, and went off to the kitchen to prepare the meal; but she was not so quick about it as before. Many new things to think of had entered her little brain. When the postmaster had finished his supper, the girl suddenly asked him ‘Dada, will you take me home with you?’

The postmaster laughed. ‘What an idea!’ said he. But he did not think it necessary to explain to the girl wherein lay the absurdity of such a course.

The whole night, awake and asleep, the postmaster’s laughing reply haunted her—‘What an idea!’

When he woke up in the morning, the postmaster found his bath ready. He had continued his Calcutta habit of bathing in water drawn and kept in pitchers, instead of taking a plunge in the river as was the custom of the village. For some reason or other, the girl could not ask him the time of his departure, she had therefore fetched the water from the river long before sunrise, so that it should be ready as soon as he might want it. After the bath came a call for Ratan. She entered without a sound, and looked silently into her master’s face for orders. The master said: ‘You need not be anxious about my going away, Ratan: I shall tell my successor to look after you.’ These words were kindly meant, no doubt but inscrutable are the ways of a woman’s heart!

Ratan had borne many a scolding from her master without complaint, but these kind words she could not bear. She burst out weeping, and said: ‘No, no, you need not tell anybody anything at all about me; I don’t want to stay here any longer.’

The postmaster was dumbfounded. He had never seen Ratan like this before.

The new man duly arrived, and the postmaster gave over charge, and prepared to depart. Just before starting he called Ratan and said: ‘Here is something for

you: I hope it will keep you for some little time.' He brought out from his pocket the whole of his month's salary, retaining only a trifle for the journey. Then Ratan fell at this feet and cried: 'O, Dada pray don't give me anything, don't in any way trouble about me,' and then she ran away out of sight.

The postmaster heaved a sigh, took up his bag, put his umbrella over his shoulder, and, accompanied by a man carrying his many-coloured tin trunk, slowly made for the boat.

When he got in and the boat was under way, and the rain-swollen river, like a stream of tears welling up from the earth, swirled and sobbed at her bows, then he felt grieved at heart; the sorrow-stricken face of a village girl seemed to represent for him the great unspoken pervading grief of Mother Earth herself. At one moment he felt an impulse to go back and bring away with him that lonely waif, forsaken of the world. But the wind had just filled the sails, the boat had got well into the middle of the turbulent current, and already the village was left behind, and its outlying burning-ground had come into sight.

So the traveller, borne on the breast of the swift-flowing river, consoled himself with philosophical reflections on the numberless meetings and partings in the world, and on death, the great parting, from which there is no return.

But Ratan had no philosophy. She was wandering about the post office with the tears streaming from her eyes. It may be that she had still a hope lurking in some corner of her heart that her Dada would return, and perhaps that is why she could not tear herself away. Alas, for our foolish human nature! Its fond mistakes are persistent. The dictates of reason take a long time to assert their sway.

The surest proofs meanwhile are disbelieved. One clings desperately to some vain hope, till a day comes when it has sucked the heart dry and then it breaks through its bonds and departs. After that comes the misery of awakening, and then once again the longing to get back into the maze of the same mistakes.