

II

PATRALEKHA'S FATHER

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The three middle-aged men who met every evening at Dolgobindo Babu's house had many shared interests, but what really held them together was their passion for silence. Men of few words, all they needed to keep going was a word here or a brief remark there. No one ever raised his voice, got excited or had an argument.

This evening, as they sat silently, someone in the house opposite began playing a *sitar*.

"There it is again", Madan Babu observed.

"Ye-es", Madhav Babu replied.

"Never mind", said Dolgobindo Babu, "It's none of our business."

The man who lived in that house had recently married for the second time. His sons from his first marriage, all grown up now, called their friends over in the evening occasionally. There was music inevitably and a lot of noise. All three men disapproved, and it was this disapproval that they expressed through those three succinct remarks.

They fell silent again. A few minutes later, the silence was broken by the sound of a bicycle bell.

"That'll be Nepal."

"Ye..es..ss."

Dolgobindo Babu's face registered faint traces of anxiety.

"He always rings his bell outside this house", said Madan Babu.

"Ye..es", Madhav Babu agreed.

Nepal balanced his cycle against the wall and came in carrying a newspaper.

"Hello, Nepal! Any interesting news?"

"Let me see."

Nepal began reading the paper with deep concentration. It surprised everyone, but no one said anything.

A couple of minutes later, two figures appeared on the veranda, shining a torch.

"Who on earth — ?" began Madan Babu.

"Oh, that's just my children, Anup and Patralekha."

"You mean Patralekha wasn't at home? That explains it!" Madan Babu swallowed. The words had slipped out in an unguarded moment. "I mean", he added quickly, "That explains why no one brought us any tea."

"Where did you go, Patralekha? It's quite late."

"We went to Nilmoni Babu's house. There was a celebration, didn't you know? His daughter's just had a baby."

Anup was clutching a box of sweets.

"Oh, and a doggie-bag, too!" Madan Babu laughed, "You're a good boy, Anup, to have taken your Didi with you. Girls aren't normally invited to such celebrations."

"All right, Kaka. I went uninvited, only because of the good food and yes, of course I am a glutton!"

"Don't get cross, dear girl", Madan Babu pleaded, "If you get annoyed with me, how do you suppose I'd ever get a cup of tea?"

Patralekha laughed. "I'll bring it right away", she said and went inside the house.

"Er ..." began Madhav Babu, "When did Nilmoni Babu's daughter get married? Wasn't it quite recently?" He had

lowered his voice for he didn't want Nepal to overhear what he was saying. It was best not to discuss such a delicate matter in the presence of a youngster. But then, Nepal was not a youngster any more. He had got a job as a typist not long ago and could, therefore, be recognised as a grown up. In fact, Dolgobindo Babu had entrusted him with a secret task the day before to prove that he thought of him as a responsible adult. But his other two friends did not know that.

"In August."

"And it is the 23rd of this month..." Madhav Babu began counting on his finger. "Drop it", said Dolgobindo Babu when he finished, "We needn't bother ourselves."

His friends knew he'd say that. Dolgobindo Babu was probably the one who most enjoyed a bit of gossip. But he never let anyone go into explicit details. "Never mind", he would always say at the right moment, waiting only long enough to allow the speaker to broach a subject that had a distinct smell of scandal.

Patralkha returned in a short while, bearing three cups of tea and a plate of crisps.

"Don't run away, Nepal da", she said, "I'll have to go back to get your tea. I have only two hands, after all." She turned to go in.

"Can you get some more crisps, Ma?"

"Very well, Kaka."

How easily his friends called his daughter 'Ma'. It was a term of endearment Dolgobindo Babu had never been able to use for her, although it would certainly have made life a lot easier if he had. 'Patralkha' was such a mouthful; but his wife wouldn't allow him or anyone else to call her by any other name. A shorter pet name was out of the question. This was so because his wife herself had a rather unattractive pet name which was widely used by family and friends. No one ever bothered to use the more acceptable proper name she

had been given. She was, therefore, understandably careful about how her daughter got addressed. Besides, as she had often pointed out, a man with a name like Dolgobindo had no right to complain about the length of other people's names.

Patralekha returned with another cup of tea and more crisps.

"Time for your studies", said her father.

"Yes, Baba", she replied and turned to go in once more. At this moment, a stout, middle-aged woman emerged from the house. Mashima! Dolgobindo Babu was surprised. He had no idea she had been visiting. Everyone in the neighbourhood called her 'Mashima' and treated her with a mixture of awe and respect. She was reputed to possess an uncanny power of ferreting out information related to every individual she knew, no matter how confidential it might be. Added to this was her ability to broadcast that information to all and sundry within ten minutes of its receipt.

"What are you men talking about?" she demanded.

"Oh, this and that, Mashima. Nothing important."

"I see. All right. I was going, anyway."

"So soon?"

"Do you have any idea what the time is? I have heaps to do."

"Wait, Mashima, you shouldn't have to go alone. Hey, Nepal, have you finished your tea? No? Hurry up, then. You can see Mashima home."

"No, no, there's no need. Nepal's not going to finish his tea in a hurry. Isn't that right, eh, Nepal? Look, I don't see why you're fussing. I went to Kashi and Vrindavan all on my own, didn't I? Why should I need an escort to take me back to my own house?"

"No, Mashima. We can't let you go alone. Nepal will go with you."

"Leave him alone, can't you? He's come all this way to

read his newspaper, and you're asking him to go out with this toothless granny. Unfair, isn't it, Nepal?"

"He finished reading that paper ages ago. Can't see why he has to analyse and memorise every word!"

"Don't ask *me*! What would I know about newspapers, anyway? I'm not a modern educated girl like Patralekha, am I?"

"Nepal, take that paper home. Mashima is getting late." This time Nepal spoke. He had to.

"All right, I've finished with the paper. Come, Mashima, let's go."

"Are you sure? You can come back again, you know."

"No, no, why would I want to do that? I'll go back to my house after I've seen you home."

Nepal did indeed seem to have made up his mind to go. He folded the newspaper neatly and casually passed it to Dolgobindo Babu, who took it without the slightest show of interest. He could guess why Nepal had handed it over to him personally. Clever boy, Nepal, well done!

"Just a minute, Mashima, before you go —" said Madan Babu, "You've seen Nilmoni Babu's grandchild, haven't you?"

"Yes, certainly. It's a boy — a lovely, healthy, full-term baby."

The question and answer were both delivered in soft tones. Brief, but no mistakes in their implication.

Mashima and Nepal left. The three men sat in silence once more. One began swinging his legs, the others went back to counting on their fingers. It had become imperative now to calculate with as much precision as possible the exact length of time for which Nilmoni Babu's daughter had been lawfully wed.

"The wedding was on the 19th of August", said Madan Babu finally. He excelled in remembering dates, so the others accepted this remark without asking questions.

"Never mind about all that."

"Ye..es."

None was willing to say anything more than that, although each knew the matter had, by no means, been concluded. Working out the date of the wedding was not the final end. It was merely the first of many means to arouse one's curiosity. Such a remark, naturally, had to be followed by a question. But who would actually voice it? It hung in the air, felt by all, but uttered by none. This unspoken suspense that charged the air was what they enjoyed the most. With admirable patience and self-control, all three men held their tongue, each waiting for the other to speak first.

Dolgobindo Babu was swinging his legs a little faster, with a hint of impatience — an unmistakable sign of agitation. Would he, then, be the one to succumb to temptation? Was he going to speak? His friends held their breath.

Dolgobindo Babu did not disappoint them. He did speak, but what he said took the others by surprise. Instead of referring to either Nilmoni Babu or his daughter, he said, "What time is it?"

Madan Babu raised an eyebrow. Madhav Babu stared. What was the matter with their friend tonight? If he wanted to know the time, it was obvious that he wanted them to leave. He asked that same question every evening at around half-past-eight, and the others took their cue immediately. Everyone knew his wife would raise merry hell if their daily meeting went beyond that time. She was a woman with a fierce personality and, within the four walls of her house, her word was law. Dolgobindo Babu's friends had to leave by eight-thirty, and she served dinner at ten. This routine did not vary. Ever.

Both men were well aware of the situation. But neither could figure out why they were being asked to leave before their usual time. Why did Dolgobindo Babu seem so preoccupied? Why was he agitated? This was certainly not the

time for Patralekha's exams. What, then, was the reason for wanting to get rid of them so soon?

Wordlessly, they rose to their feet, casting a sharp glance at their friend. Only Madan Babu could not help muttering one word as he bent down to tie his shoelaces.

"Ye..es", he said.

Alone at last, Dolgobindo Babu slowly unfolded the newspaper Nepal had given him. Yes, there it was, just as he had thought. Good lad, Nepal! How nice to have found a trustworthy ally!

There was a typewritten letter and a typed envelope within the folds of the newspaper.

Dolgobindo Babu had given him the draft of the letter for typing only last night. Nepal had been totally taken aback at first. Clearly, Dolgobindo Babu's words — particularly terms such as 'good for the community' and 'unpleasant duty' — had made no sense at all. Besides, he failed to see why Dolgobindo Babu was talking in whispers. But one look at the draft had made the whole thing crystal clear.

"Yes, of course, typing a letter isn't a problem at all", he had said, keeping his own voice low, "I can even bring the typewriter home, if you like. Don't worry about a thing! Just let me know whenever you need my help."

"It's not for myself, you understand. It is only for the welfare of others."

"Yes of course. I do appreciate that." Nepal was simply grateful for the opportunity to be of service to Patralekha's father. His day was made.

It was necessary to have the letter typed, since it was going to be sent to a senior government official, and it was going to remain anonymous. Using one of the typewriters in his own office would have been risky. Dolgobindo Babu, therefore, had had no choice but to seek Nepal's assistance.

This was not, of course, the first time he was going to send out an anonymous letter. He was, in fact, an old hand

at the game. How many had he despatched in all these years? Oh, he couldn't remember — dozens and dozens of them! Every time his conscience bothered him, he told himself that he was only doing his duty, to help other individuals. But in his heart he knew the truth: this whole business gave him a strange thrill. To listen to a piece of gossip was fun, but it was nothing compared to the excitement of writing a letter. It was not just a matter of teasing someone from a distance. It was tasting power — like Meghnad in the *Ramayana*, who hid behind clouds and threw his weapons unseen. His greatest joy lay in trying to imagine the reaction of the recipient of his letter. And if he managed to actually witness the agony he had caused his victim, so much the better.

This obsession had grown steadily over a number of years. He had begun by writing obscene remarks on the walls of the boys' toilet in school. A few years later, he began to fill placards and posters with slander and paste them on walls and lamp posts in the middle of the night. Then he discovered the magic of anonymous letters.

What he wrote on posters was there for all to see. But a letter? It was something exclusively his own. Only he could tell its effect; only he could savour its charm. Besides, the risks were fewer.

Dolgobindo Babu was always extremely cautious in this matter. He had told no one about this little pleasure he indulged in — for a long time, not even his wife. If she had found it odd that her husband kept a rather large stock of writing material and stamps, she had kept her doubts to herself. But, one day, Dolgobindo Babu needed to have a letter written by a female hand. So he was obliged to approach his wife and explain, for the first time, the task he had undertaken 'for the good of the community'. As it turned out, his wife welcomed the idea with remarkable enthusiasm and quickly wrote out the letter her husband dictated. In fact, she even joked about it. "We have never

written to each other, have we?" she said, "How could we, when I have been away only a few times to visit my father, and he lives just down the road! At least today I got the chance to write a love letter, even if it was for someone else!"

Dolgobindo Babu knew he could trust her. Among her other sterling qualities was the ability to keep her mouth shut, when required. What worried him now was whether he had done the right thing by taking Nepal into his confidence. Nepal had shown great tact and discretion today, it was true, but....

Well, there was hardly any point in brooding over it. There was such a lot to be done. This letter that Nepal had typed for him would have to be read carefully once more and stamped and sealed. Tomorrow morning, he would have to leave early to find a mail box a few miles from here. Under no circumstances could he post the letter at the local post office. Then there was this new case about Nilmoni Babu's daughter. He'd have to do something about that as well. Why did everything have to happen at the same time? But no, this was nothing new. It didn't rain, it always poured.

The sooner he sent out a letter to Nilmoni Babu, the better. Should he also write to his son-in-law? Nothing specific, of course, but just a little hint of ...? No, it could wait. It would be silly to get the whole thing going all at once. He would wait and watch and squeeze out his own malicious pleasure, drop by drop. How he longed to see the look in the eyes of his prey when he had him cornered! His hand itched to place itself on his frightened heart, to feel every tremulous beat, every nervous flutter.

Dolgobindo Babu rose to go into his bedroom. Patralekha rushed in, a book in her hand.

"Oh no! Has Nepal da gone?"

"Yes, he left with Mashima. Why?"

"He was supposed to take this book back to the library."

"No matter. You can give it to him tomorrow. Let me

have it for a moment."

"You've read it, Babu. It's a volume of the collected works of Bankim Chandra."

"No, I don't want to read it. I'm going to use it to write some letters. It's just the right size, and it's got a hard cover, too."

"Wait, I'll get you the big writing pad. You don't have to use a book to...."

"Why do you talk so much, Patralekha? Give me the book as I tell you, and go back to your studies. Or your mother will get extremely cross. Remember to read aloud. And bring me your pen."

It was better not to use one's own pen when writing a letter like this.

Patralekha returned with her pen, and a large exercise book with a flat, hard cover.

'Look, Baba', she said, "That's a book from the library. What if it gets torn? Why don't you use this exercise book instead?"

"Don't be daft. Why should the book get torn? Do you suppose I'm going to wrestle with it? Don't hang around, now, do get back to your own work. Or your mother's going to yell at me, too."

Patralekha went out of the room, looking unhappy. Perhaps he had sounded a bit harsh. He must speak to her later. Normally, he never scolded his daughter.

Dolgobindo Babu unlocked a drawer in his cupboard and took out a sheet of writing paper. The drawer was filled with paper of different sizes, envelopes, stamps, ink of various colours and other stationery.

Before starting on the letter to Nilmoni Babu, he went through the one Nepal had typed. There were a couple of typing errors, but on the whole he had done a good job. Dolgobindo Babu sealed and put a stamp on it, smiling in secret glee.

Then, with considerable relish, he began writing the letter to Nilmoni Babu, holding the pen in his left hand, so that his handwriting could not be recognised. He had done this so many times before that he could now do it almost without an effort; and the words came easily once the pen was in his hand. But today, he got stuck at the very first sentence. He began "We are not such fools. Do not think you can decieve — "and here he had to stop.

Wasn't the word 'deceive' spelt with an 'e' before the 'i'? Which meant that he had got it wrong. The dictionary was in the other room where Patralekha was studying. He didn't want to get up or disturb his daughter. He wrote 'deceive' and 'decieve' in one corner of the library book. It didn't help. He was still confused.

He began turning the pages of the book. Surely Bankim Chandra had used the word somewhere? Ah, here was 'deception' ... but no, not 'deceive'. He turned another page. A piece of paper slipped out.

A page-mark, possibly. Whoever had read the book last had probably put it in and forgotten to take it out. He glanced at it idly. A few lines had been scribbled on it. His eyes ran over them casually, then he sat up. What *was* this? Wasn't this Patralekha's handwriting? Yes, most certainly it was. But what had the girl written?

It was impossible to guess at first, for the note had not been addressed to anyone, nor was the sender's name mentioned anywhere. Clearly written in a hurry, all it said was, "I am so sorry I wasn't home this evening when you arrived. My mother made me go with Anup. I had no wish to go myself. Please don't be angry with me, sweetheart."

Dolgobindo Babu stared at the piece of paper, mesmerised. A love letter? From his own daughter? Right under his nose? His first impulse was to summon Patralekha and give her a tight slap.

He opened his mouth to shout, then closed it. He couldn't

do this. He had never ever laid a hand on the young girl, nor shouted at her. He had left all that to his wife, who always took great care to ensure Patralekha did not step out of line. Then how — ? Why — ?

All his anger directed itself against Nepal. Oh, what a villain he was! And he, Dolgobindo Babu, had gone to the extent of placing all his trust in him, quite implicitly.

Little things that had puzzled him earlier in the evening now began to make sense. All those strange comments his friends were making; and Mashima, too. Didn't she say something about Nepal taking a long time to read his newspaper and not wanting to move? It obviously meant only one thing. They all knew. Everyone knew. It was a matter for open discussion. Only he was foolish enough not to have realised it before. All those veiled remarks were meant for him, and he had sat there like an idiot ... oh God!

Nepal ought to be whipped. No doubt it was he who had taught his daughter to conceal her letters in the pages of a book. In fact, he had evidently had lots of practice already, or he wouldn't have come up with the idea of hiding the typed letter in the newspaper.

He should have the daylights beaten out of him. Yes, but who would actually confront him and give him what he deserved? Dolgobindo Babu himself was absolutely no good at this kind of thing. Challenge a man face to face? Have an argument? A violent scene? No, he was just not cut out for it. Besides, what if Nepal began talking about the letter he had typed? He had not returned the handwritten draft. So, really speaking, it was Nepal who had the upper hand. Dolgobindo Babu could not afford to antagonise him.

What was he to do? He forced himself to stay calm and think the whole thing over, from every possible angle. But it was no use. The more he thought, the more confused did he feel.

After what seemed an eternity, he finally came to a

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decision. There was only one thing he could do. There was only one thing he *wanted* to do.

Patralekha's father rose and opened his drawer once more. From it he took out a fresh sheet of paper and an old fountain pen with a broken nib. He picked it up with his left hand and dipped it in ink.

Then he began writing a new letter. An anonymous letter, addressed to Patralekha's mother.

This was going to be the very first letter he ever wrote to his wife.