

Rabindra Jayanti Special

AFTER passing his Matric examination from Mymensingh School, our Govinda came to Calcutta. His widowed mother had a few material assets, but Govinda's greatest asset was his undaunted determination. He had vowed that he would make "money" and dedicate his entire life to attaining that goal. In his speech, he always referred to wealth as "money." In other words, in his mind there was a very solid element, one which could be seen, touched, and even smelt. He was not enamored of fame. His fixation dwelt on ordinary money, the money which passed from hand to hand in the markets, became dirty and crumpled, which smelt of copper, which was the ancient symbol of great wealth, which had transformed into gold, silver, and paper over periods of history and turned the heads of people through all times.

After passing many crooks and bends, and splashing through mud and sludge, Govinda now had reached the solid banks of his money-promising river. He had established himself as the Boro Babu or manager of gunnybag business magnate, Boro Saheb McDougall. Everyone gave him the nickname of McDulal.

When Govinda's paternal cousin Mukunda died, he had already relinquished the caprices of the legal profession. He left behind a widow, a four-year old son, a house in Calcutta, and some savings. There were, however, some debts to be cleared, so the future survival of his family depended on thrifty expenditure. That is why the amenities with which Chuni had brought up could hardly match those of his neighbours.

According to Mukunda Dada's will, the entire responsibility of his family fell on Govinda. Govinda constantly drummed into his young nephew's ears the idea of making money.

The biggest obstacle in the way of molding the little boy came from his mother Satyabati. She never said anything directly, but the resistance was apparent in her behavior. Since childhood, she had an obsession with artistic pursuits. There was no end to her dabbling with flowers, leaves, paper cut-outs, fabric, mud, flour, plum juice, or sap of jasmine and shuli. She made numerous impractical, unnecessary things with boundless enthusiasm. She often got hurt in the process too. A magnetic fascination draws people towards the illogical, the emotional. The force of this attraction is like that of a sudden flood in the month of Ashar. It has the tremendous speed, but its turbulent currents wash away the functional and the utilitarian.

There had been occasions when Satyabati had completely forgotten that there was an invitation at a relative's house and spent her time diligently fiddling with a lump of clay. Relatives said she was insolent. It was difficult indeed to refute them.

Mukunda knew from his reading of books that there were grounds for critical judgement in matters of art. The very word "art" was associated with lofty notions in Mukunda's mind and inspired thrill and excitement within him. But that there could be art in his own wife's creative pursuits was something which never occurred to Mukunda. He did not have an ounce of meanness or any twisted trickery in his bones. He felt amused at his wife's hobbies — an amusement full of tender affection. If anyone in the family criticized Satyabati's activities, he would protest immediately. There was a peculiar contradiction in Mukunda's personality — he was a sage in his legal profession but he seemed to lack wisdom in family affairs. He earned a great deal of money, but its glamour never imprisoned him. That is why his heart and mind were free and he never betrayed any need to impose his wishes on those around him. His life-style was extremely simple. He never made unreasonable demands on others to promote his own interests or required special attention to his daily needs. Whenever family members insinuated Satyabati's slackness in household duties, he refused to listen to them.

Frequently on his way home from work, he made it a point to buy crayons, silk embroidery thread, and water colours from Radha Bazaar. He would carry these into the house, careful lest Satyabati saw him, and lay them out on the wooden trunk in their bed room. Sometimes he would pick up a sketch done by Satyabati

and say, "This is great!" One day he picked up the sketch of a man and held it upside down saying that his two legs resembled a bird's head. "Satu, dear, we need to have this one framed. It is a wonderful picture of a stork," he commented. Mukunda indulged with a sense of humor the childlike imagination working behind Satyabati's artistic endeavors. Satyabati too derived a great deal of joy from her husband's interest in her work. Satyabati realized her great fortune — she was fully aware that in no other family of Bangladesh could she have found so much patience and indulgence. Her artistic passion would nowhere else be supported with so much sympathy and understanding. That is why whenever her husband made one of his hyperbolic comments on her work, it became hard for Satyabati to restrain her tears.

One day this rare fortune was snatched away from Satyabati. Before his death, Mukunda had realized that he must give the responsibility of his debt-ridden family onto the shoulders of one who was astute enough in money matters to be able to navigate this leaking boat across the river. Thus Satyabati and her son fell into the hands of Govinda, who had been chosen to

she feared rebuke, but to avoid the unwanted intrusion of an eye devoid of artistic perception. Now her son, Chuni, was the only on-looker and judge of her art. He gradually became not only supportive, but even obsessed with art. It was hard to contain his enthusiasm. There was evidence all over — from the pages of his notebook to the walls. His hands face, and clothes all manifested his guilt. The god Indra did not hesitate to tempt even a little child away from the concept of money-making. But there was much pain to be borne from his uncle!

As more restrictions began to be imposed upon Chuni, Satyabati pitched in more and more to support him. When the Big Boss took Govinda away to faraway small towns and villages on business, mother and son felt an immense joy — just like little children. They created what the gods had not yet begun to create: a dog in the mould of a cat, or a fish resembling a bird — such that it was hard to discriminate among them. But alas! they could not retain these masterpieces of creation; before Govinda's return, they had to remove from sight all traces of their endeavors. Only Brahma and Rudra were accomplices in the creative

ageless as the god who creates beauty. Let me see all the pictures you've drawn so far!"

How could they show those pictures? They never kept one. The great virtuoso in the heavens above paints with an array of colours and shades and light on the vast spread of the skies.

But He nonchalantly discards His nonpareil creations in the infinite hemispheres of mist and mirage. The feat of mother and son too had disappeared into that same realm of illusion.

Rangalal made her aunt promise not to throw away any more pictures. "From now on, whatever you create, I will come and collect," he said.

Boro Babu had not yet returned. Since the morning the sky was overcast with savana clouds and it was raining. How far the day had gone by and where the hands of the clock lay they did not wish to know. Today Chuni Babu was engrossed in sketching a boat plying on a river. The waves were like a herd of sea-monsters threatening to devour the boat. The clouds above in the sky seemed to wave their banners as if cheering them on. These were no ordinary sea-monsters, tinged as they were with a child's imagination. It would, however, be somewhat of an exaggeration if one perceived the clouds to be an amorphous mass of light, fog, water and air.

For the sake of truth, however, it should be told that if ever such a boat was created, no insurance company would be willing to take its responsibility. Thus the play of creation continued. The artist in the sky did as He fancied and the wide-eyed young child in the room did likewise.

They had completely forgotten that the door was unlocked. Boro Babu came in. He thundered, "What is going on here?" The little boy trembled in fear and his face turned pale. Govinda now discovered why Chuni kept making mistakes in dates on his history exam. Meanwhile as Chuni furtively tried to hide his picture under his shirt, his guilt became even more obvious.

Govinda pulled out the picture and what he saw confounded him. What was all this? It seemed that even wrong dates on history tests were more welcome than this nonsense. He tore the picture into shreds. Chuni sobbed inconsolably.

This happened to be ekadoshi, the eleventh day of the waxing moon, when Satyabati usually spent almost all day in the worship room. She hastily came out on hearing Chuni's sobs. What had once been Chuni's marvelous sketch now lay strewn on the floor in a dozen little pieces, and Chuni too lay rolling and tossing on the floor. Govinda was busy trying to delve deep into all the root causes of wrong dates on history exams.

Never before had Satyabati uttered the slightest protest at Govinda's behaviour. She always kept in mind that her husband had trusted him with their responsibility. That is why she had borne everything in silence. But now she was weeping. In a voice shaking with reproach she asked, "Why did you tear Chuni's picture?"

Govinda said, "Isn't he supposed to study? What will become of him otherwise?" Satyabati said, "In the end, even if he turns out to be a street beggar, it is fine. But God forbid that he should ever turn out to be like you. May the gifts God has given him bring him more honor than your money. This is a mother's blessing for her child!"

Govinda replied, "I cannot abandon my responsibility. All this nonsense must stop at once. Tomorrow I will pack him off to a boarding school. I will not let you spoil him here!"

Baro Babu left to go to work. It rained heavily; the streets were filled with water.

Satyabati took her son's hand and said, "Come, dear, let's go!"

"Where are we going, Ma?" Chuni asked.

"Let's get out of here!"

There was knee-deep water in front of Rangalal's house. Satyabati entered Rangalal's room with her son. She said to her nephew, "Son, you must take this responsibility. Save my child from the lure of wealth!"

A Short Story by Rabindranath Tagore

Translated by Parveen K Elias

The Artist



take on this duty. On the very first day Govinda made it perfectly clear that money was above all else and it was only money that ever mattered. Discerning a crude baseness in this counsel, Satyabati stiffened in humiliation.

The quest for retaining money penetrated their lives in multiple forms, most blatantly in the weighing of living and eating expenses. In these matters had not been discussed openly but kept under a discreet layer, there would be no harm. Satyabati knew in her heart that such attitudes would exert a destructive influence on her son's personality, but there was no alternative other than to endure in silence. One who is noble and lofty, who has extraordinary dignity, is also the most vulnerable — it is extremely easy for one who is crude and ordinary to hurt him, to ridicule him.

Some art materials were essential for Satyabati to keep up her work. When her husband was alive, he would make sure she had these, though she never asked for them. Satyabati had never faced the embarrassment of asking someone to procure her tools. Now she was mortified and shuddered to add these so-called useless items to the list of family expenses. She curtailed her own food and bought materials for her artwork. She also worked in secrecy, behind a locked door — not because

ventures of these two; there was no interference of Vishnu.

The urge for creativity was strong in Satyabati's family. As evidence of this strain, one of Satyabati's nephews, Rangalal, who was older than her, suddenly attained fame as a painter. The art critics immediately targeted the peculiar traits of his artistic creations and flung their derision upon him. In their gatherings, Rangalal was regarded as a laughingstock and provoked a great deal of chaff and banter. Since their ideals did not tally with his, they scorned his talents. Strangely enough, amidst this ignorance, resistance, and ridicule he thrived and his fame grew. Those who tried to imitate him were also the ones who left no stone unturned to prove that he was a fake in the guise of an artist — in fact, they said, there were glaring defects in his technique.

This much-ridiculed artist came on day to visit his aunt, Satyabati, in the absence of Govinda. After banging on the door for a long time, when he finally managed to step in, he found that there was no space left on the floor. The cat was finally out of the bag.

Rangalal said, "It's a rare sight to see the creative soul emerge so fresh and pure, and flower with such spontaneity — unblemished by signs of painstaking effort. He is as young and

Sketches by Rabindranath



The mother and the child



Flowers



Woman

From Gitanjali

Here is thy footstool and there rest thy feet where live the poorest, and lowliest, and lost.

When I try to bow to thee, my obeisance cannot reach down to the depth where thy feet rest among the poorest, and lowliest, and lost.

Pride can never approach to where thou walkest in the clothes of the humble among the poorest, and lowliest, and lost.

My heart can never find its way to where thou keep-est company with the companionless among the poorest,

the lowliest, and the lost.

My heart can never find its way to where thou keep-est company with the companionless among the poorest, the lowliest, and the lost.

Thus it is that thy joy in me is so full. Thus it is that thou hast come down to me. O thou lord of all heavens, where would be thy love if I were not?

Thou hast taken me as thy partner of all this wealth. In y heart is the endless play of thy delight. In my life thy will is ever taking shape.

And for this, thou who art the King of kings hast

decked thyself in beauty to captivate my heart. And for this thy love loses itself in the love of thy lover, and there art thou seen in the perfect union of two.

Is it beyond thee to be glad with the gladness of this rhythm? to be tossed and lost and broken in the whirl of this fearful joy?

All things rush on, they stop not, they look not behind, no power can hold them back, they rush on.

Keeping steps with that restless, rapid music, seasons come dancing and pass away — colours, tunes, and perfumes pour in endless cascades in the abounding joy that scatters and gives up and dies every moment.

Last Poems of Rabindranath

Translated by Aurobindo Bose

In front stretches the ocean of Peace.
O Helmsman, sail out to the open sea.
You will be my eternal companion—
Take, O take me in your arms.
The Pole-star will shine
Lighting the path to Eternity.
O Lord of Deliverance,
Your forgiveness, your mercy
Shall be my everlasting sustenance
On my journey to the shores of Eternity.
May the bonds of earth dissolve,
The mighty Universe take me to her arms.
And I come to know fearlessly
The Great Unknown.

Death cannot swallow life, which is immortal;
It only casts its shadow like Rahu
This I know for certain.
There is no plunderer
Hiding in the secret caves of the Universe
Who can defraud love of its value—
This I know for certain.
What was the ultimate Truth for me,
Was nothing but a disguise
In which the ultimate Falsehood hid itself—
This disgrace of Existence
The law of the Universe could never bear,
This I know for certain.
Everything is driven
By the ceaseless movement of change—
This is but the low of Time.
That death is not
The ultimate expression of the changeless—
This I know for certain.
The self said: "The world is!"
That truth is verified
By the supreme truth of the 'I' within me—
This I know for certain.

O bird,
From time to time why do you forget your song?
Why do you not send out your call?
Without your songs the morning is profitless—
Do you not know that?
The first rays of early dawn touch the trees,
In the trembling of the leaves your melody awakes;
You are a friend of the morning light—
Do you not know that?
The goddess of Awakening is sitting
With robe trailed loose beside my bed—
Do you not know that?
Do not deprive her of your songs.
Into the dreams of Sorrow's night
Your morning hymns bring the message of new life—
Do you not know that?

If I can, I shall find once again
The seat in whose lap is spread
The endearing message of a far-distant land.
The dreams of the past
Will crowd together again,
And humming a dim melody
Will build anew the nest.

Calling back happy memories
It will make awakening sweet;
The flute that has become silent
Will find its melody again.

With hands outstretched she
Will linger on the balcony;
In the dark night,
Along the scented path of the Spring
Will be heard the footfall of the Great Silence.

The beloved from the far-away land,
Who with her love has spread the carpet,
Will keep for ever her message
Resounding in my ears.

She, whose language I knew not,
Who spoke only with her eyes—
Her message will echo in tender music
Through all eternity.

Now has come Man Supreme
Man after God's own heart!
The world is a — tremble with wonder
And the grass quivers.
In heaven resounds the conch,
On earth plays the drum of Victory—
The sacred moment has come
That brings the Great Birth!
The gates guarding the moonless night have fallen,
The hill of sunrise rings with the call 'Fear not'
And ushers in the dawn of a new life!
The heavens thunder the song of Victory:
'Man has come!'

To-day in the midst of my birthday
I am lost.
I want near me my friends—
The gentle touch of their hands.
I shall take with me—
Earth's ultimate love,
Life's parting gift,
Man's last blessing.
My bag is empty to-day.
All that I had to give,
I have given utterly.
The little gifts I receive daily—
Some affection, some forgiveness—
I shall take with me,
When in my little raft
I make my last crossing
To the voiceless festival of the End!