



fiction

DOWRY

By Rabindranath Tagore

Translated by Shaikat Hussain

WHEN a daughter was born after five sons the parents lovingly named her Nirupoma, the incomparable. Such a fancy name was never before

heard in this family. It was common to name children after gods and goddesses, with names like Ganesh, Kartik, and Parbati.

Now there was talk about Nirupoma's marriage. Her father Ramsundar Mitra looked around hard but could not find a suitable bridegroom for her. Finally he heard about the son of a big landlord, a Raybahadur. Although the ancestral estate of the landlord was now considerably reduced, there was no question about his aristocracy.

The prospective bridegroom's family demanded ten thousand rupees and considerable other goods and utensils. Without much thought, Ramsundar agreed to all demands; a bridegroom like him should not be allowed to slip through.

But how could one raise so much money! After mortgaging some of his property, and selling some of his possessions, he was still short by six or seven thousand rupees. On the other hand, the date of the marriage was drawing closer.

Finally, the day of the marriage came. A man who had agreed to loan the remaining amount at a very high interest failed to turn up at the appointed time. A great hubbub arose during the marriage ceremony. Ramsundar fell at the feet of Raybahadur and begged, "Let the auspicious event be completed. I will surely pay you the remaining amount." Raybahadur replied, "If the money is not in hand, the marriage cannot be solemnised."

When the news of this misfortune reached the inner chambers, the women started wailing. The central cause of the unhappy event was sitting in silence, decked with ornaments, sandalwood paste splashed across her forehead. It cannot be said that she felt much respect or sympathy for her would-be in-laws.

In the meantime the situation eased a little. The bridegroom suddenly turned against his father and told him, "I do not understand anything about buying and selling, about bargaining -- I have come here to get married, and I will get married."

The father turned to the person next to him and said, "You see, sir, how boys behave these days?" There were a few elderly people around who said, "There's no teaching of religion, no teaching of morals these days, so--"

The Raybahadur stunned by the evil consequence of contemporary education that he saw in his own son, sat down in silence. The marriage was somehow solemnised in a cheerless manner.

When Nirupoma was leaving for her father-in-law's house, her father held her close and could not hold back his tears. Nirupoma asked him, "Won't they let me visit you, father?" And Ramsundar replied, "Why won't they? I will bring you home myself."

Ramsundar often visited his daughter in the house of her in-laws but he was not much respected there. Even the servants looked down on him. In a small room outside the main house he sometimes saw his daughter for a few minutes; sometimes he did not.

Such humiliation from a close relative could not be borne for too long. Ramsundar resolved to find a way to repay the rest of the money.

But he was finding it difficult to bear the burden of the loan that was already heavy on his shoulders. There was little money to meet the expenses of his household, and he was constantly employing devious strategies to avoid his debtors.

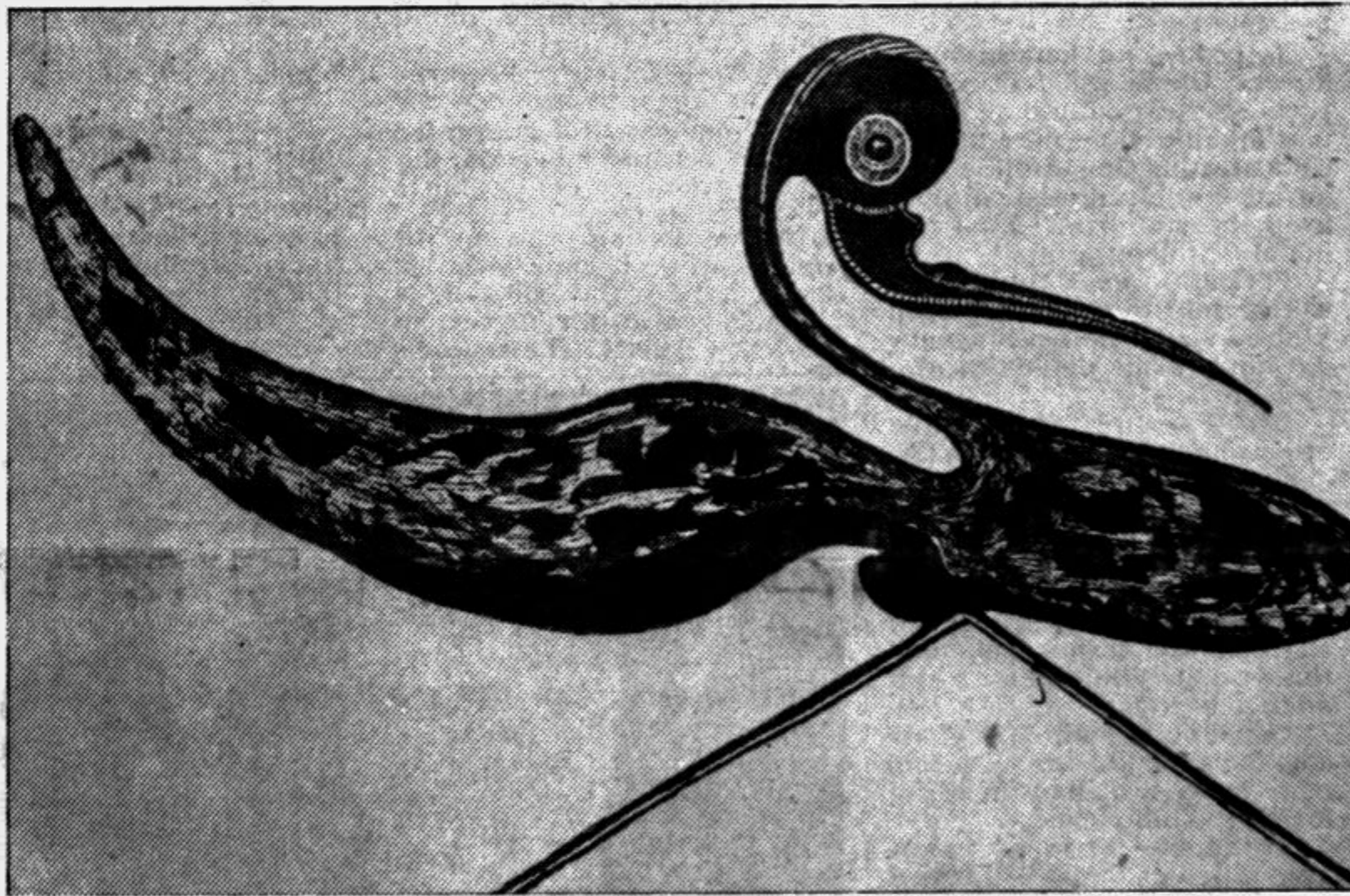
In her father-in-law's house, Nirupoma suffered constant humiliation. Listening to indignities hurled against her father and crying copiously standing at the door had become a daily routine for her.

Her mother-in-law's anger seemed particularly irritating. If someone said, "Ah, she is such a beauty! What a pleasure to behold such beauty," she would immediately huff, "What nonsense! Her looks match exactly the house she comes from."

Nirupoma was not even given enough to eat or clothes to wear; if some neighbour dared to mention it, her mother-in-law would cry out, "Enough!" In other words, if the father had paid the full amount, the daughter would have received full care. Everyone behaved as if she had no right in that house, that she



Rabindranath Tagore Composition pen ink, water colour & water proof ink on paper



Rabindranath Tagore Bird water proof ink on paper

had somehow tricked them into allowing her to enter that house.

Perhaps the ill-treatment and all the insults suffered by his daughter finally reached Ramsundar's ears. So he started thinking of selling his ancestral homestead.

But he kept this a secret from his own sons whom he was about to make homeless. He had planned to rent his own house after he had it, and run his own affairs in such a way that his own sons would not know anything until he was dead.

But his sons came to hear about it and they all broke down into tears. The opposition of the three older sons who had children of their own, was particularly vehement; and so the selling of the house was put off.

Ramsundar started borrowing small sums of money at very high interest from various sources. It was becoming impossible to make ends meet.

Nirupoma had only to look at her father's face to understand everything. Poverty and worry were clearly stamped on the old man's white hairs, thin face and shrunken frame. When a father has sinned against his daughter, can his sense of guilt be hidden from her?

In the few moments that were occasionally granted to Ramsundar to meet his daughter, the father's broken heart was evident to the daughter in the smile with which he greeted her.

Nirupoma became extremely anxious to go home for a few days so that she could console her distressed father. The sight of her father's sad face made the distance impossible to bear. One day when she met her father, she pleaded, "Father, take me home once -- please." And Ramsundar replied, "Okay."

But he felt as if he had no strength left; it was as if he had relinquished the natural right of a father over his daughter for his inability to pay the pledged amount. The embarrassment of begging even for a sight of his daughter made the articulation of a second request doubly difficult.

But how could a father be heedless to a daughter's desire to revisit her own home? Let the history of how much insult, loss and indignity Ramsundar suffered to put together some three thousand rupees before applying to Nirupoma's father-in-law remain untold.

Ramsundar wrapped up the banknotes in his handkerchief, tied the handkerchief to his shawl and appeared before his in-law. With a smile on his

face he first talked about his neighbours. He gave an elaborate description of the big robbery at Harekrishna's house; he compared the two brothers, Nabinmadhab and Radhamadhab, praising the intelligence and character of the latter, and condemning the former; he talked absurdly about a new disease that plagued the city. Finally, laying the hookah down, he said, "Ha, ha, it is true I still owe you money. Everyday I think of bringing it over, but I forget every time. You know, I have become old." With that elaborate introduction, he brought out the three banknotes with a show of much casualness, almost indifference. When he saw the three thousand rupees, the Raybahadur burst out in derisive laughter.

"That's all right. I don't need it," he said, and referring to a well-known Bengali proverb, he added that he did not want to soil his hands with such a petty amount.

Who could talk about his daughter's visit after such an incident? But Ramsundar simply thought, "I can ill afford to allow myself to be embarrassed by my relative." Deeply disappointed, he sat quietly for sometime and finally broached the topic mildly. Without offering any reasons, Raybahadur said, "It is not possible now." And he walked away purposefully.

With trembling hands, Ramsundar tucked the notes inside his shawl and went straight home without seeing his daughter. In his mind he resolved never again to go to Raybahadur's house till he had paid the entire amount and re-established his right over his daughter.

Many days passed. Nirupoma sent one messenger after another to her father, but still he did not come. Finally, hurt by her father's stubbornness she stopped sending messengers; now Ramsundar was hurt even more by his daughter's action, but still he wouldn't go.

When the month of *Ashwin* arrived, Ramsundar said, "I will bring my daughter home this Puja, or..." He took a solemn oath.

On the fifth or sixth day of Puja, Ramsundar again tied a few notes inside his shawl and set off. A five-year-old grandson came up to him and inquired, "Grandpa, are you going to buy a push-cart for me?" For days he had been wanting to go on a push-cart ride, but it had not happened. A six-year-old granddaughter said, "I don't have a single good dress to wear to the Puja." Ev-

Finally, the day of the marriage came. A man who had agreed to loan the remaining amount at a very high interest failed to turn up at the appointed time. A great hubbub arose during the marriage ceremony. Ramsundar fell at the feet of Raybahadur and begged, "Let the auspicious event be completed. I will surely pay you the remaining amount." Raybahadur replied, "If the money is not in hand, the marriage cannot be solemnised."

Ramsundar knew that very well, and had thought much about it while he puffed on his hookah. He had sighed countless deep sighs when he thought that his daughters-in-law would only display their poverty in the few ornaments they would wear when they went to Raybahadur's puja feast. And this only helped to deepen the furrows of old age on his forehead. With the piteous cries of his poverty-ridden household still ringing in his ears, the old man entered his in-laws house. Today, he didn't feel his habitual embarrassment. The shy and hesitant glances that he usually cast on the servants no longer showed on his face, and he entered the house as if it were his own. He was told that the Raybahadur was not in; he would have to wait for sometime. Unable to control his elation, Ramsundar met his daughter and tears of joy flowed down his cheeks. Both the father and daughter cried together and none could speak. Moments passed and then Ramsundar said, "This time I am taking you home, my girl. There is no more difficulty."

At this time, Ramsundar eldest son, Harmohon, suddenly entered the room with his two small sons and said, "Father, you have thrown us into the street now," he said.

In a rage, Ramsundar cried, "Do I have to go to hell for you? Won't you let me choose the right path for myself?" Ramsundar had sold his house. He had arranged to keep this fact hidden from his sons but somehow they had come to know about it; this irritated and enraged Ramsundar.

His grandson held him round his knee and looked up at him. "Grandpa, did you bring my push-cart?"

Grandpa stood silently with his head bowed and the child turned to Nirupoma. "Aunt, will you buy me a toy car?"

Nirupoma understood the entire situation and said, "Baba, if you give a single paise more to my father-in-law, you will never see your daughter again. Here, let me touch your body and say it."

Ramsundar said, "For God's sake, my girl, don't say such things. It is an insult to your father and an insult to you if I can't give him the money."

Nirupoma replied, "It is an insult if you give the money. Doesn't your daughter have any honour? Am I just a bag that has value only when there is money in it? Baba, don't insult me by giving money to him. Besides, my husband does not want this money."

Ramsundar said, "But they won't let you go without it."

"What can you do if they don't? Please don't come to take me home any more."

With his hands shaking in agitation, Ramsundar flung the shawl into which the notes were tied over his shoulder and walked back home, averting the gaze of all like a thief.

The news that he had come with money and gone away without giving it, at the command of his daughter, did not remain a secret. Some curious eavesdropping servant-girl revealed the news to Nirupoma's mother-in-law; and she was furious when she heard the news.

For Nirupoma, her father-in-law's residence had become intolerable. Her husband had gone away from home soon after marriage to take up his post as a Deputy Magistrate and her in-laws had banned her from the company of her relatives, lest such association bring about a degeneration of her character.

At this time Nirupoma contracted a serious illness. But of course, her mother-in-law could not be completely blamed for this. Nirupoma herself was very negligent towards her health. During the chilly *Kartik* month she slept with the window beside her bed open all night, and in the winter she hardly wore warm clothes. She had no regular meal times. Sometimes when the servants forgot to bring her food, she herself never opened her mouth to remind them. The belief that she was nothing more than a slave in an alien household, dependent on the will of others, was firmly taking root in her mind. Her mother-in-law found even this attitude intolerable. When she noticed that her daughter-in-law was indifferent towards food, she would cry out, "Oh, are you a nawab's daughter that you cannot eat the food from a poor man's house?" Sometimes she would say, "Just look at her, look at her! Ev-

eryday she looks more like a piece of charred wood."

When her illness became really serious, Nirupoma's mother-in-law said, "She is just being childish." Finally, one day, Nirupoma simply told her mother-in-law, "I would like to see my father and all my brothers once."

Her mother-in-law said, "This is just an excuse to go to your father's house." Nobody will believe that the first day a doctor was summoned to see Nirupoma also the last time the doctor saw her; that evening she breathed her last.

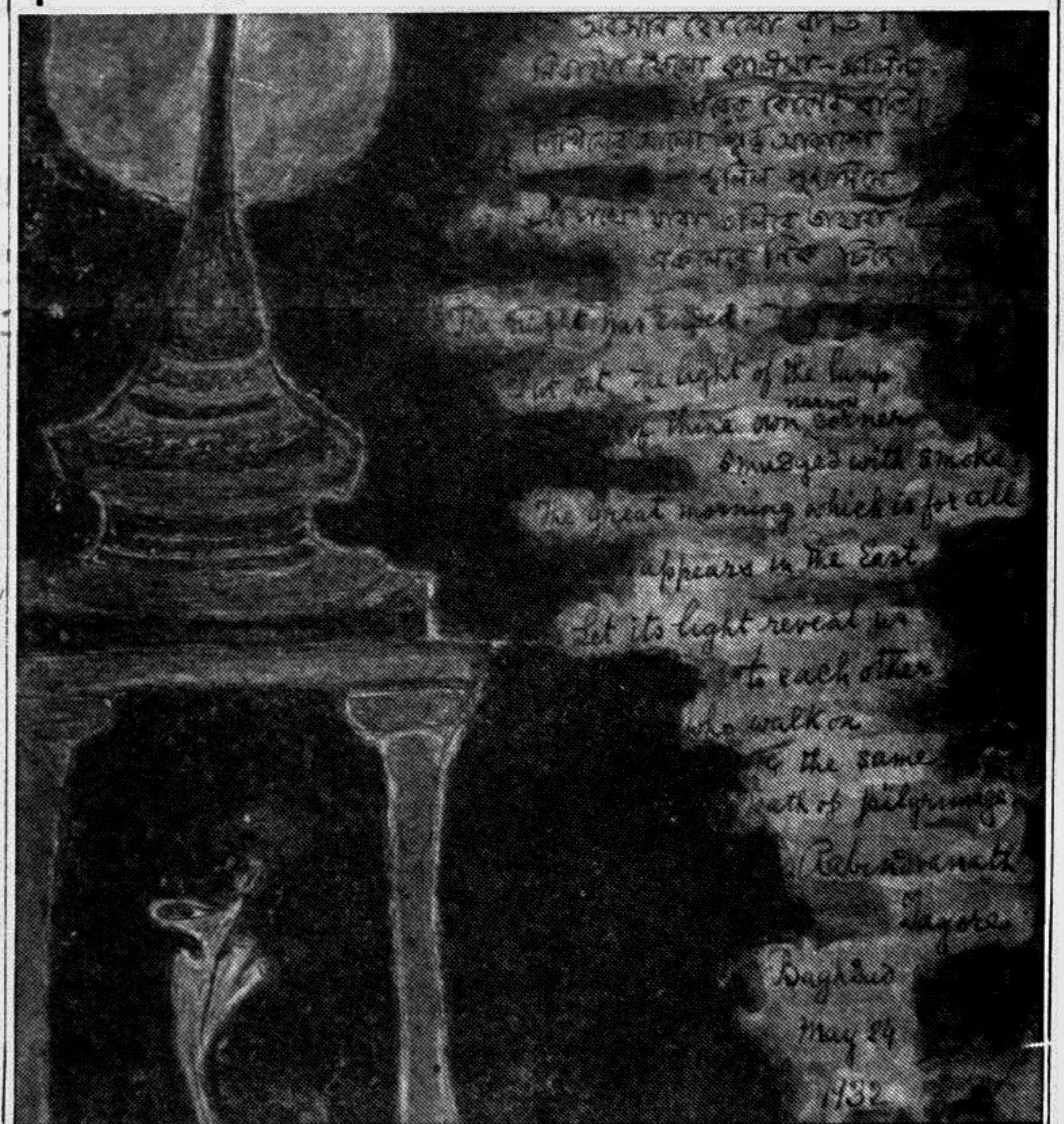
The death of the eldest daughter-in-law was observed by an impressive funeral. Just as the Raychowdhuri's had become well-known throughout the district for the grandeur of their puja observances, so now the Raybahadurs became famous for the last rites of their

daughter-in-law. None in this region had seen a funeral pyre built of sandalwood; only the Raybahadurs could have organised such elaborate preparations for the *sraddho* feast that followed the funeral. It is rumoured that even the Raybahadurs fell into a little debt.

In consoling Ramsundar, everybody gave elaborate accounts of the grandeur of his daughter's funeral. In the meantime, the District Magistrate wrote, "I have finalised all preparations, so please send my wife to me immediately." And the Raybahadur's astrologer wrote to him, "Son, we have negotiated a marriage with another girl, so take leave and come home immediately."

This time the dowry was set at twenty thousand rupees to be paid at the time of marriage.

poems



Rabindranath Tagore Composition water proof ink on paper

Translator's Note: Arguably the greatest Bengali poet after Rabindranath, Jibanananda seemed to have begun his career in the giant's shadow, but in no time found his own voice. Nevertheless, he always seemed to have viewed Rabindranath reverentially and wrote at least five poems on him as well as an essay in Bengali titled "Rabindranath and Bengali Poetry." I have translated here two of these poems: the first one seemed to have been written after Rabindranath's death and registers Jibanananda's apocalyptic musings on the occasion, the second one, in complete contrast, is optimistic in mood and declares that the primal, Shiva-like power and beauty of Rabindranath's creation will appear in the world again in the work of his descendant poets.

Rabindranath

The world's bustle is ended
That last sleep is overtaking the constellations
In a while their lights will go out.
The whole universe will hush in the dark.
Love's eternal fervor will fade,
In that quiet of the numbing darkness
God's handiwork will be done.
That last sleep is coming to the constellations,
That last sleep.

Rabindranath

"Because a light glows in the soul of men
The stars and the sun appear superb everyday"
Words such as these could be heard once upon a time,
But the one who spoke them now has gone for away

Because our world now is in a deep freeze
They think that Shiva's glory
And the bang of creation
Have faded into oblivion

And yet things of value still surface
In the newly silted shores of time
Like sovereign truth
In the consciousness, hopes and aspirations of men

Translated by Fakrul Alam