The Post Office

Rabindranath Tagore

Translated from Bengali to English by Devabrata Mukherje

1912
Dramatis Personae

MADHAV
AMAL
his adopted child

SUDHA
a little flower girl

DOCTOR
DAIRYMAN
WATCHMAN
GAFFER
HEADMAN
a bully

KING’S HERALD
ROYAL PHYSICIAN
A TROOP OF BOYS
Act I

MADHAV’s House

MADHAV
What a state I am in! Before he came, nothing mattered; I felt so free. But now that he has come, goodness knows from where, my heart is filled with his dear self, and my home will be no home to me when he leaves. Doctor, do you think he—

DOCTOR
If there’s life in his fate, then he will live long. But what the medical scriptures say, it seems—

MADHAV
Great heavens, what?

DOCTOR
The scriptures have it: “Bile or palsey, cold or gout spring all alike.”

MADHAV
Oh, get along, don’t fling your scriptures at me; you only make me more anxious; tell me what I can do.

DOCTOR
(Taking snuff) The patient needs the most scrupulous care.

MADHAV
That’s true; but tell me how.

DOCTOR
I have already mentioned, on no account must he be let out of doors.

MADHAV
Poor child, it is very hard to keep him indoors all day long.
Doctor

What else can you do? The autumn sun and the damp are both very bad for the little fellow—for the scriptures have it:

“In wheezing, swoon or in nervous fret,
In jaundice or leaden eyes—”

Madhav

Never mind the scriptures, please. Eh, then we must shut the poor thing up. Is there no other method?

Doctor

None at all: for, “In the wind and in the sun—”

Madhav

What will your “in this and in that” do for me now? Why don’t you let them alone and come straight to the point? What’s to be done then? Your system is very, very hard for the poor boy; and he is so quiet too with all his pain and sickness. It tears my heart to see him wince, as he takes your medicine.

Doctor

The more he winces, the surer is the effect. That’s why the sage Chyabana observes: “In medicine as in good advices, the least palatable ones are the truest.” Ah, well! I must be trotting now. (Exit)

Gaffer enters

Madhav

Well, I’m jiggered, there’s Gaffer now.

Gaffer

Why, why, I won’t bite you.

Madhav

No, but you are a devil to send children off their heads.
Gaffer
But you aren’t a child, and you’ve no child in the house; why worry then?

Madhav
Oh, but I have brought a child into the house.

Gaffer
Indeed, how so?

Madhav
You remember how my wife was dying to adopt a child?

Gaffer
Yes, but that’s an old story; you didn’t like the idea.

Madhav
You know, brother, how hard all this getting money in has been. That somebody else’s child would sail in and waste all this money earned with so much trouble—Oh, I hated the idea. But this boy clings to my heart in such a queer sort of way—

Gaffer
So that’s the trouble! and your money goes all for him and feels jolly lucky it does go at all.

Madhav
Formerly, earning was a sort of passion with me; I simply couldn’t help working for money. Now, I make money and as I know it is all for this dear boy, earning becomes a joy to me.

Gaffer
Ah, well, and where did you pick him up?

Madhav
He is the son of a man who was a brother to my wife by village ties. He has had no mother since infancy; and now the other day he lost his father as well.
Gaffer

Poor thing: and so he needs me all the more.

Madhav

The doctor says all the organs of his little body are at loggerheads with each other, and there isn’t much hope for his life. There is only one way to save him and that is to keep him out of this autumn wind and sun. But you are such a terror! What with this game of yours at your age, too, to get children out of doors!

Gaffer

God bless my soul! So I’m already as bad as autumn wind and sun, eh! But, friend, I know something, too, of the game of keeping them indoors. When my day’s work is over I am coming in to make friends with this child of yours. (Exit)

Amal enters

Amal

Uncle, I say, Uncle!

Madhav

Hullo! Is that you, Amal?

Amal

Mayn’t I be out of the courtyard at all?

Madhav

No, my dear, no.

Amal

See, there where Auntie grinds lentils in the quern, the squirrel is sitting with his tail up and with his wee hands he’s picking up the broken grains of lentils and crunching them. Can’t I run up there?

Madhav

No, my darling, no.
Amal

Wish I were a squirrel!—it would be lovely. Uncle, why won’t you let me go about?

Madhav

Doctor says it’s bad for you to be out.

Amal

How can the doctor know?

Madhav

What a thing to say! The doctor can’t know and he reads such huge books!

Amal

Does his book-learning tell him everything?

Madhav

Of course, don’t you know!

Amal

(With a sigh) Ah, I am so stupid! I don’t read books.

Madhav

Now, think of it; very, very learned people are all like you; they are never out of doors.

Amal

Aren’t they really?

Madhav

No, how can they? Early and late they toil and moil at their books, and they’ve eyes for nothing else. Now, my little man, you are going to be learned when you grow up; and then you will stay at home and read such big books, and people will notice you and say, “he’s a wonder.”

Amal

No, no, Uncle; I beg of you by your dear feet—I don’t want to be learned, I won’t.
**MADHAV**

Dear, dear; it would have been my saving if I could have been learned.

**AMAL**

No, I would rather go about and see everything that there is.

**MADHAV**

Listen to that! See! What will you see, what is there so much to see?

**AMAL**

See that far-away hill from our window—I often long to go beyond those hills and right away.

**MADHAV**

Oh, you silly! As if there’s nothing more to be done but just get up to the top of that hill and away! Eh! You don’t talk sense, my boy. Now listen, since that hill stands there upright as a barrier, it means you can’t get beyond it. Else, what was the use in heaping up so many large stones to make such a big affair of it, eh!

**AMAL**

Uncle, do you think it is meant to prevent your crossing over? It seems to me because the earth can’t speak it raises its hands into the sky and beckons. And those who live far and sit alone by their windows can see the signal. But I suppose the learned people—

**MADHAV**

No, they don’t have time for that sort of nonsense. They are not crazy like you.

**AMAL**

Do you know, yesterday I met someone quite as crazy as I am.

**MADHAV**

Gracious me, really, how so?

**AMAL**

He had a bamboo staff on his shoulder with a small bundle at the top, and a brass pot in his left hand, and an old pair of shoes on; he was making for those hills straight
across that meadow there. I called out to him and asked, “Where are you going?” He answered, “I don’t know, anywhere!” I asked again, “Why are you going?” He said, “I’m going out to seek work.” Say, Uncle, have you to seek work?

**MADHAV**

Of course I have to. There’s many about looking for jobs.

**AMAL**

How lovely! I’ll go about, like them too, finding things to do.

**MADHAV**

Suppose you seek and don’t find. Then—

**AMAL**

Wouldn’t that be jolly? Then I should go farther! I watched that man slowly walking on with his pair of worn out shoes. And when he got to where the water flows under the fig tree, he stopped and washed his feet in the stream. Then he took out from his bundle some gram-flour, moistened it with water and began to eat. Then he tied up his bundle and shouldered it again; tucked up his cloth above his knees and crossed the stream. I’ve asked Auntie to let me go up to the stream, and eat my gram-flour just like him.

**MADHAV**

And what did your Auntie say to that?

**AMAL**

Auntie said, “Get well and then I’ll take you over there.” Please, Uncle, when shall I get well?

**MADHAV**

It won’t be long, dear.

**AMAL**

Really, but then I shall go right away the moment I’m well again.

**MADHAV**

And where will you go?
Amal
Oh, I will walk on, crossing so many streams, wading through water. Everybody will be asleep with their doors shut in the heat of the day and I will tramp on and on seeking work far, very far.

Madhav
I see! I think you had better be getting well first; then—

Amal
But then you won’t want me to be learned, will you, Uncle?

Madhav
What would you rather be then?

Amal
I can’t think of anything just now; but I’ll tell you later on.

Madhav
Very well. But mind you, you aren’t to call out and talk to strangers again.

Amal
But I love to talk to strangers!

Madhav
Suppose they had kidnapped you?

Amal
That would have been splendid! But no one ever takes me away. They all want me to stay in here.

Madhav
I am off to my work—but, darling, you won’t go out, will you?

Amal
No, I won’t. But, Uncle, you’ll let me be in this room by the roadside.

Exit Madhav
Dairyman
Curds, curds, good nice curds.

Amal
Curdseller, I say, Curdseller.

Dairyman
Why do you call me? Will you buy some curds?

Amal
How can I buy? I have no money.

Dairyman
What a boy! Why call out then? Ugh! What a waste of time.

Amal
I would go with you if I could.

Dairyman
With me?

Amal
Yes, I seem to feel homesick when I hear you call from far down the road.

Dairyman
(Lowering his yoke-pole) Whatever are you doing here, my child?

Amal
The doctor says I’m not to be out, so I sit here all day long.

Dairyman
My poor child, whatever has happened to you?

Amal
I can’t tell. You see I am not learned, so I don’t know what’s the matter with me. Say, Dairyman, where do you come from?
Dairyman

From our village.

Amal

Your village? Is it very far?

Dairyman

Our village lies on the river Shamli at the foot of the Panch-mura hills.

Amal

Panch-mura hills! Shamli river! I wonder. I may have seen your village. I can’t think when though!

Dairyman

Have you seen it? Been to the foot of those hills?

Amal

Never. But I seem to remember having seen it. Your village is under some very old big trees, just by the side of the red road—isn’t that so?

Dairyman

That’s right, child.

Amal

And on the slope of the hill cattle grazing.

Dairyman

How wonderful! Aren’t there cattle grazing in our village! Indeed, there are!

Amal

And your women with red sarees fill their pitchers from the river and carry them on their heads.

Dairyman

Good, that’s right. Women from our dairy village do come and draw their water from the river; but then it isn’t everyone who has a red saree to put on. But, my dear child, surely you must have been there for a walk some time.
Amal
Really, Dairyman, never been there at all. But the first day doctor lets me go out, you are going to take me to your village.

Dairyman
I will, my child, with pleasure.

Amal
And you’ll teach me to cry curds and shoulder the yoke like you and walk the long, long road?

Dairyman
Dear, dear, did you ever? Why should you sell curds? No, you will read big books and be learned.

Amal
No, I never want to be learned—I’ll be like you and take my curds from the village by the red road near the old banyan tree, and I will hawk it from cottage to cottage. Oh, how do you cry—“Curd, curd, good nice curd!” Teach me the tune, will you?

Dairyman
Dear, dear, teach you the tune; what an idea!

Amal
Please do. I love to hear it. I can’t tell you how queer I feel when I hear you cry out from the bend of that road, through the line of those trees! Do you know I feel like that when I hear the shrill cry of kites from almost the end of the sky?

Dairyman
Dear child, will you have some curds? Yes, do.

Amal
But I have no money.

Dairyman
No, no, no, don’t talk of money! You’ll make me so happy if you have a little curds from me.
Amal

Say, have I kept you too long?

Dairyman

Not a bit; it has been no loss to me at all; you have taught me how to be happy selling curds. (Exit)

Amal

(Intoning) Curds, curds, good nice curds—from the dairy village—from the country of the Panch-mura hills by the Shamli bank. Curds, good curds; in the early morning the women make the cows stand in a row under the trees and milk them, and in the evening they turn the milk into curds. Curds, good curds. Hello, there’s the watchman on his rounds. Watchman, I say, come and have a word with me.

Watchman

What’s all this row you are making? Aren’t you afraid of the likes of me?

Amal

No, why should I be?

Watchman

Suppose I march you off then?

Amal

Where will you take me to? Is it very far, right beyond the hills?

Watchman

Suppose I march you straight to the King?

Amal

To the King! Do, will you? But the doctor won’t let me go out. No one can ever take me away. I’ve got to stay here all day long.

Watchman

Doctor won’t let you, poor fellow! So I see! Your face is pale and there are dark rings round your eyes. Your veins stick out from your poor thin hands.
Amal
Won’t you sound the gong, Watchman?

Watchman
Time has not yet come.

Amal
How curious! Some say time has not yet come, and some say time has gone by! But surely your time will come the moment you strike the gong!

Watchman
That’s not possible; I strike up the gong only when it is time.

Amal
Yes, I love to hear your gong. When it is midday and our meal is over, Uncle goes off to his work and Auntie falls asleep reading her Ramayana, and in the courtyard under the shadow of the wall our doggie sleeps with his nose in his curled up tail; then your gong strikes out, “Dong, dong, dong!” Tell me why does your gong sound?

Watchman
My gong sounds to tell the people, Time waits for none, but goes on forever.

Amal
Where, to what land?

Watchman
That none knows.

Amal
Then I suppose no one has ever been there! Oh, I do wish to fly with the time to that land of which no one knows anything.

Watchman
All of us have to get there one day, my child.

Amal
Have I too?
Watchman
Yes, you too!

Amal
But doctor won’t let me out.

Watchman
One day the doctor himself may take you there by the hand.

Amal
He won’t; you don’t know him. He only keeps me in.

Watchman
One greater than he comes and lets us free.

Amal
When will this great doctor come for me? I can’t stick in here any more.

Watchman
Shouldn’t talk like that, my child.

Amal
No. I am here where they have left me—I never move a bit. But when your gong goes off, dong, dong, dong, it goes to my heart. Say, Watchman?

Watchman
Yes, my dear.

Amal
Say, what’s going on there in that big house on the other side, where there is a flag flying high up and the people are always going in and out?

Watchman
Oh, there? That’s our new Post Office.
Amal

Post Office? Whose?

Watchman

Whose? Why, the King’s surely!

Amal

Do letters come from the King to his office here?

Watchman

Of course. One fine day there may be a letter for you in there.

Amal

A letter for me? But I am only a little boy.

Watchman

The King sends tiny notes to little boys.

Amal

Oh, how lovely! When shall I have my letter? How do you guess he’ll write to me?

Watchman

Otherwise why should he set his Post Office here right in front of your open window, with the golden flag flying?

Amal

But who will fetch me my King’s letter when it comes?

Watchman

The King has many postmen. Don’t you see them run about with round gilt badges on their chests?

Amal

Well, where do they go?
Watchman

Oh, from door to door, all through the country.

Amal

I’ll be the King’s postman when I grow up.

Watchman

Ha! ha! Postman, indeed! Rain or shine, rich or poor, from house to house delivering letters—that’s very great work!

Amal

That’s what I’d like best. What makes you smile so? Oh, yes, your work is great too. When it is silent everywhere in the heat of the noonday, your gong sounds, Dong, dong, dong,—and sometimes when I wake up at night all of a sudden and find our lamp blown out, I can hear through the darkness your gong slowly sounding, Dong, dong, dong!

Watchman

There’s the village headman! I must be off. If he catches me gossiping with you there’ll be a great to do.

Amal

The headman? Whereabouts is he?

Watchman

Right down the road there; see that huge palm-leaf umbrella hopping along? That’s him!

Amal

I suppose the King’s made him our headman here?

Watchman

Made him? Oh, no! A fussy busy-body! He knows so many ways of making himself unpleasant that everybody is afraid of him. It’s just a game for the likes of him, making trouble for everybody. I must be off now! Mustn’t keep work waiting, you know! I’ll drop in again to-morrow morning and tell you all the news of the town. (Exit)
Amal

It would be splendid to have a letter from the King every day. I’ll read them at the window. But, oh! I can’t read writing. Who’ll read them out to me, I wonder! Auntie reads her Rāmayana; she may know the King’s writing. If no one will, then I must keep them carefully and read them when I’m grown up. But if the postman can’t find me? Headman, Mr. Headman, may I have a word with you?

Headman

Who is yelling after me on the highway? Oh, you wretched monkey!

Amal

You’re the headman. Everybody minds you.

Headman

(Looking pleased) Yes, oh yes, they do! They must!

Amal

Do the King’s postmen listen to you?

Headman

They’ve got to. By Jove, I’d like to see—

Amal

Will you tell the postman it’s Amal who sits by the window here?

Headman

What’s the good of that?

Amal

In case there’s a letter for me.

Headman

A letter for you! Whoever’s going to write to you?

Amal

If the King does.
HEADMAN

Ha! ha! What an uncommon little fellow you are! Ha! ha! the King indeed, aren’t you his bosom friend, eh! You haven’t met for a long while and the King is pining, I am sure. Wait till to-morrow and you’ll have your letter.

AMAL

Say, Headman, why do you speak to me in that tone of voice? Are you cross?

HEADMAN

Upon my word! Cross, indeed! You write to the King! Madhav is devilish swell nowadays. He’d made a little pile; and so kings and padishahs are everyday talk with his people. Let me find him once and I’ll make him dance. Oh, you snipper-snapper! I’ll get the King’s letter sent to your house—indeed I will!

AMAL

No, no, please don’t trouble yourself about it.

HEADMAN

And why not, pray! I’ll tell the King about you and he won’t be very long. One of his footmen will come along presently for news of you. Madhav’s impudence staggers me. If the King hears of this, that’ll take some of his nonsense out of him. (Exit)

AMAL

Who are you walking there? How your anklets tinkle! Do stop a while, dear, won’t you?

SUDHA enters

SUDHA

I haven’t a moment to spare; it is already late!

AMAL

I see, you don’t wish to stop; I don’t care to stay on here either.

SUDHA

You make me think of some late star of the morning! Whatever’s the matter with you?
AMAL
I don't know; the doctor won't let me out.

SUDHA
Ah me! Don't then! Should listen to the doctor. People'll be cross with you if you're naughty. I know, always looking out and watching must make you feel tired. Let me close the window a bit for you.

AMAL
No, don't, only this one's open! All the others are shut. But will you tell me who you are? Don't seem to know you.

SUDHA
I am Sudha.

AMAL
What Sudha?

SUDHA
Don't you know? Daughter of the flower-seller here.

AMAL
What do you do?

SUDHA
I gather flowers in my basket.

AMAL
Oh, flower gathering! That is why your feet seem so glad and your anklets jingle so merrily as you walk. Wish I could be out too. Then I would pick some flowers for you from the very topmost branches right out of sight.

SUDHA
Would you really? Do you know more about flowers than I?
Amal
Yes, I do, quite as much. I know all about Champa of the fairy tale and his seven brothers. If only they let me, I’ll go right into the dense forest where you can’t find your way. And where the honey-sipping hummingbird rocks himself on the end of the thinnest branch, I will flower out as a champa. Would you be my sister Parul?

Sudha
You are silly! How can I be sister Parul when I am Sudha and my mother is Sasi, the flower-seller? I have to weave so many garlands a day. It would be jolly if I could lounge here like you!

Amal
What would you do then, all the day long?

Sudha
I could have great times with my doll Benay the bride, and Meni the pussycat and—but I say it is getting late and I mustn’t stop, or I won’t find a single flower.

Amal
Oh, wait a little longer; I do like it so!

Sudha
Ah, well—now don’t you be naughty. Be good and sit still and on my way back home with the flowers I’ll come and talk with you.

Amal
And you’ll let me have a flower then?

Sudha
No, how can I? It has to be paid for.

Amal
I’ll pay when I grow up—before I leave to look for work out on the other side of that stream there.

Sudha
Very well, then.
Amal
And you’ll come back when you have your flowers?

Sudha
I will.

Amal
You will, really?

Sudha
Yes, I will.

Amal
You won’t forget me? I am Amal, remember that.

Sudha
I won’t forget you, you’ll see. (Exit)

A Troop of Boys enter

Amal
Say, brothers, where are you all off to? Stop here a little.

Boys
We’re off to play.

Amal
What will you play at, brothers?

Boys
We’ll play at being ploughmen.

First Boy
(Showing a stick) This is our ploughshare.
SECOND BOY

We two are the pair of oxen.

AMAL

And you’re going to play the whole day?

BOYS

Yes, all day long.

AMAL

And you’ll come back home in the evening by the road along the river bank?

BOYS

Yes.

AMAL

Do you pass our house on your way home?

BOYS

You come out to play with us, yes do.

AMAL

Doctor won’t let me out.

BOYS

Doctor! Suppose the likes of you mind the doctor. Let’s be off; it is getting late.

AMAL

Don’t. Why not play on the road near this window? I could watch you then.

THIRD BOY

What can we play at here?

AMAL

With all these toys of mine lying about. Here you are, have them. I can’t play alone. They are getting dirty and are of no use to me.
BOYS

How jolly! What fine toys! Look, here’s a ship. There’s old mother Jatai; say, chaps, ain’t he a gorgeous sepoy? And you’ll let us have them all? You don’t really mind?

AMAL

No, not a bit; have them by all means.

BOYS

You don’t want them back?

AMAL

Oh, no, I shan’t want them.

BOYS

Say, won’t you get a scolding for this?

AMAL

No one will scold me. But will you play with them in front of our door for a while every morning? I’ll get you new ones when these are old.

BOYS

Oh, yes, we will. Say, chaps, put these sepoys into a line. We’ll play at war; where can we get a musket? Oh, look here, this bit of reed will do nicely. Say, but you’re off to sleep already.

AMAL

I’m afraid I’m sleepy. I don’t know, I feel like it at times. I have been sitting a long while and I’m tired; my back aches.

BOYS

It’s only early noon now. How is it you’re sleepy? Listen! The gong’s sounding the first watch.

AMAL

Yes, dong, dong, dong, it tolls me to sleep.
Boys
We had better go then. We’ll come in again to-morrow morning.

Amal
I want to ask you something before you go. You are always out—do you know of the King’s postmen?

Boys
Yes, quite well.

Amal
Who are they? Tell me their names.

Boys
One’s Badal, another’s Sarat. There’s so many of them.

Amal
Do you think they will know me if there’s a letter for me?

Boys
Surely, if your name’s on the letter they will find you out.

Amal
When you call in to-morrow morning, will you bring one of them along so that he’ll know me?

Boys
Yes, if you like.
Act II

Amal in Bed

Amal
Can’t I go near the window to-day, Uncle? Would the doctor mind that too?

Madhav
Yes, darling, you see you’ve made yourself worse squatting there day after day.

Amal
Oh, no, I don’t know if it’s made me more ill, but I always feel well when I’m there.

Madhav
No, you don’t; you squat there and make friends with the whole lot of people round here, old and young, as if they are holding a fair right under my eaves—flesh and blood won’t stand that strain. Just see—your face is quite pale.

Amal
Uncle, I fear my fakir’ll pass and not see me by the window.

Madhav
Your fakir, whoever’s that?

Amal
He comes and chats to me of the many lands where he’s been. I love to hear him.

Madhav
How’s that? I don’t know of any fakirs.

Amal
This is about the time he comes in. I beg of you, by your dear feet, ask him in for a moment to talk to me here.

Gaffer Enters in a Fakir’s Guise
AMAL
There you are. Come here, Fakir, by my bedside.

MADHAV
Upon my word, but this is—

GAFFER
(Winking hard) I am the fakir.

MADHAV
It beats my reckoning what you’re not.

AMAL
Where have you been this time, Fakir?

FAKIR
To the Isle of Parrots. I am just back.

MADHAV
The Parrots’ Isle!

FAKIR
Is it so very astonishing? Am I like you, man? A journey doesn’t cost a thing. I tramp just where I like.

AMAL
(Clapping) How jolly for you! Remember your promise to take me with you as your follower when I’m well.

FAKIR
Of course, and I’ll teach you such secrets too of travelling that nothing in sea or forest or mountain can bar your way.

MADHAV
What’s all this rigmarole?
Fakir
Amal, my dear, I bow to nothing in sea or mountain; but if the doctor joins in with this uncle of yours, then I with all my magic must own myself beaten.

Amal
No. Uncle shan’t tell the doctor. And I promise to lie quiet; but the day I am well, off I go with the Fakir and nothing in sea or mountain or torrent shall stand in my way.

Madhav
Fie, dear child, don’t keep on harping upon going! It makes me so sad to hear you talk so.

Amal
Tell me, Fakir, what the Parrots’ Isle is like.

Fakir
It’s a land of wonders; it’s a haunt of birds. There’s no man; and they neither speak nor walk, they simply sing and they fly.

Amal
How glorious! And it’s by some sea?

Fakir
Of course. It’s on the sea.

Amal
And green hills are there?

Fakir
Indeed, they live among the green hills; and in the time of the sunset when there is a red glow on the hillside, all the birds with their green wings flock back to their nests.

Amal
And there are waterfalls!
Fakir
Dear me, of course; you don't have a hill without its waterfalls. Oh, it's like molten diamonds; and, my dear, what dances they have! Don't they make the pebbles sing as they rush over them to the sea. No devil of a doctor can stop them for a moment. The birds looked upon me as nothing but a man, quite a trifling creature without wings—and they would have nothing to do with me. Were it not so I would build a small cabin for myself among their crowd of nests and pass my days counting the sea waves.

Amal
How I wish I were a bird! Then—

Fakir
But that would have been a bit of a job; I hear you've fixed up with the dairyman to be a hawker of curds when you grow up; I'm afraid such business won't flourish among birds; you might land yourself into serious loss.

Madhav
Really this is too much. Between you two I shall turn crazy. Now, I'm off.

Amal
Has the dairyman been, Uncle?

Madhav
And why shouldn't he? He won't bother his head running errands for your pet fakir, in and out among the nests in his Parrots' Isle. But he has left a jar of curd for you saying that he is rather busy with his niece's wedding in the village, and he has got to order a band at Kamlipara.

Amal
But he is going to marry me to his little niece.

Fakir
Dear me, we are in a fix now.

Amal
He said she would find me a lovely little bride with a pair of pearl drops in her ears and dressed in a lovely red sari; and in the morning she would milk with her own
hands the black cow and feed me with warm milk with foam on it from a brand new earthen cruse; and in the evenings she would carry the lamp round the cow-house, and then come and sit by me to tell me tales of Champa and his six brothers.

Fakir
How delicious! The prospect tempts even me, a hermit! But never mind, dear, about this wedding. Let it be. I tell you when you wed there’ll be no lack of nieces in his household.

Madhav
Shut up! This is more than I can stand. (Exit)

Amal
Fakir, now that Uncle’s off, just tell me, has the King sent me a letter to the Post Office?

Fakir
I gather that his letter has already started; but it’s still on the way.

Amal
On the way? Where is it? Is it on that road winding through the trees which you can follow to the end of the forest when the sky is quite clear after rain?

Fakir
That’s so. You know all about it already.

Amal
I do, everything.

Fakir
So I see, but how?

Amal
I can’t say; but it’s quite clear to me. I fancy I’ve seen it often in days long gone by. How long ago I can’t tell. Do you know when? I can see it all: there, the King’s postman coming down the hillside alone, a lantern in his left hand and on his back a bag of letters climbing down for ever so long, for days and nights, and where at the
foot of the mountain the waterfall becomes a stream he takes to the footpath on the
bank and walks on through the rye; then comes the sugarcane field and he disappears
into the narrow lane cutting through the tall stems of sugarcanes; then he reaches
the open meadow where the cricket chirps and where there is not a single man to be
seen, only the snipe wagging their tails and poking at the mud with their bills. I can
feel him coming nearer and nearer and my heart becomes glad.

FAKIR
My eyes aren’t young; but you make me see all the same.

AMAL
Say, Fakir, do you know the King who has this Post Office?

FAKIR
I do; I go to him for my alms every day.

AMAL
Good! When I get well, I must have my alms too from him, mayn’t I?

FAKIR
You won’t need to ask, my dear, he’ll give it to you of his own accord.

AMAL
No, I would go to his gate and cry, “Victory to thee, O King!” and dancing to the
tabor’s sound, ask for alms. Won’t it be nice?

FAKIR
It would be splendid, and if you’re with me, I shall have my full share. But what’ll
you ask?

AMAL
I shall say, “Make me your postman, that I may go about lantern in hand, delivering
your letters from door to door. Don’t let me stay at home all day!”

FAKIR
What is there to be sad for, my child, even were you to stay at home?
AMAL

It isn’t sad. When they shut me in here first I felt the day was so long. Since the King’s Post Office I like it more and more being indoors, and as I think I shall get a letter one day, I feel quite happy and then I don’t mind being quiet and alone. I wonder if I shall make out what’ll be in the King’s letter?

FAKIR

Even if you didn’t wouldn’t it be enough if it just bore your name?

MADHAV enters

MADHAV

Have you any idea of the trouble you’ve got me into, between you two?

FAKIR

What’s the matter?

MADHAV

I hear you’ve let it get rumored about that the King has planted his office here to send messages to both of you.

FAKIR

Well, what about it?

MADHAV

Our headman Panchanan has had it told to the King anonymously.

FAKIR

Aren’t we aware that everything reaches the King’s ears?

MADHAV

Then why don’t you look out? Why take the King’s name in vain? You’ll bring me to ruin if you do.

AMAL

Say, Fakir, will the King be cross?
Fakir
Cross, nonsense! And with a child like you and a fakir such as I am. Let’s see if the King be angry, and then won’t I give him a piece of my mind.

Amal
Say, Fakir, I’ve been feeling a sort of darkness coming over my eyes since the morning. Everything seems like a dream. I long to be quiet. I don’t feel like talking at all. Won’t the King’s letter come? Suppose this room melts away all on a sudden, suppose—

Fakir
(Fanning Amal) The letter’s sure to come to-day, my boy.

Doctor enters

Doctor
And how do you feel to-day?

Amal
Feel awfully well to-day, Doctor. All pain seems to have left me.

Doctor
(Aside to Madhav) Don’t quite like the look of that smile. Bad sign that, his feeling well! Chakradhan has observed—

Madhav
For goodness sake, Doctor, leave Chakradhan alone. Tell me what’s going to happen?

Doctor
Can’t hold him in much longer, I fear! I warned you before—This looks like a fresh exposure.

Madhav
No, I’ve used the utmost care, never let him out of doors; and the windows have been shut almost all the time.
DOCTOR
There’s a peculiar quality in the air to-day. As I came in I found a fearful draught through your front door. That’s most hurtful. Better lock it at once. Would it matter if this kept your visitors off for two or three days? If someone happens to call unexpectedly—there’s the back door. You had better shut this window as well, it’s letting in the sunset rays only to keep the patient awake.

MADHAV
Amal has shut his eyes. I expect he is sleeping. His face tells me—Oh, Doctor, I bring in a child who is a stranger and love him as my own, and now I suppose I must lose him!

DOCTOR
What’s that? There’s your headman sailing in!—What a bother! I must be going, brother. You had better stir about and see to the doors being properly fastened. I will send on a strong dose directly I get home. Try it on him—it may save him at last, if he can be saved at all. (Exeunt MADHAV and DOCTOR.)

The HEADMAN enters

HEADMAN
Hello, urchin!

GAFFER
(Rising hastily) 'Sh, be quiet.

AMAL
No, Fakir, did you think I was asleep? I wasn’t. I can hear everything; yes, and voices far away. I feel that mother and father are sitting by my pillow and speaking to me.

MADHAV enters

HEADMAN
I say, Madhav, I hear you hobnob with bigwigs nowadays.

MADHAV
Spare me your jests, Headman, we are but common people.
HEADMAN
But your child here is expecting a letter from the King.

MADHAV
Don’t you take any notice of him, a mere foolish boy!

HEADMAN
Indeed, why not! It’ll beat the King hard to find a better family! Don’t you see why
the King plants his new Post Office right before your window? Why there’s a letter
for you from the King, urchin.

AMAL
(Starting up) Indeed, really!

HEADMAN
How can it be false? You’re the King’s chum. Here’s your letter (showing a blank slip
of paper). Ha, ha, ha! This is the letter.

AMAL
Please don’t mock me. Say, Fakir, is it so?

FAKIR
Yes, my dear. I as Fakir tell you it is his letter.

AMAL
How is it I can’t see? It all looks so blank to me. What is there in the letter, Mr.
Headman?

HEADMAN
The King says, “I am calling on you shortly; you had better arrange puffed rice
offerings for me.—Palace fare is quite tasteless to me now.” Ha! ha! ha!

MADHAV
(With folded palms) I beseech you, headman, don’t you joke about these things—

FAKIR
Cutting jokes indeed, dare he!
MADHAV
Are you out of your mind too, Gaffer?

FAKIR
Out of my mind, well then I am; I can read plainly that the King writes he will come himself to see Amal, with the state physician.

AMAL
Fakir, Fakir, 'sh, his trumpet! Can’t you hear?

HEADMAN
Ha! ha! ha! I fear he won’t until he’s a bit more off his head.

AMAL
Mr. Headman, I thought you were cross with me and didn’t love me. I never could think you would fetch me the King’s letter. Let me wipe the dust off your feet.

HEADMAN
This little child does have an instinct of reverence. Though a little silly, he has a good heart.

AMAL
It’s hard on the fourth watch now, I suppose—Hark the gong, “Dong, dong, ding,” “Dong, dong, ding.” Is the evening star up? How is it I can’t see—

FAKIR
Oh, the windows are all shut, I’ll open them.

A knocking outside

MADHAV
What’s that?—Who is it—what a bother!

KING’S HERALD
(From outside) Open the door.
MADHAV
Say, Headman—Hope they’re not robbers.

HEADMAN
Who’s there?—It’s Panchanan, the headman, calls—Aren’t you afraid of the like of me? Fancy! The noise has ceased! Panchanan’s voice carries far.—Yes, show me the biggest robbers!

MADHAV
(Peering out of the window) I should think the noise has ceased. They’ve smashed the door.

The King’s Herald enters

King’s Herald
Our Sovereign King comes to-night!

HEADMAN
My God!

AMAL
At what hour of the night, Herald?

King’s Herald
On the second watch.

AMAL
When from the city gates my friend the watchman will strike his gong, “ding dong ding, ding dong ding”—then?

King’s Herald
Yes, then. The King sends his greatest physician to attend on his young friend.

Royal Physician enters

37
ROYAL PHYSICIAN

What’s this? How close it is here! Open wide all the doors and windows. (Feeling Amal’s body) How do you feel, my child?

AMAL

I feel very well, Doctor, very well. All pain is gone. How fresh and open! I can see all the stars now twinkling from the other side of the dark.

ROYAL PHYSICIAN

Will you feel well enough to leave your bed with the King when he comes in the middle watches of the night?

AMAL

Of course, I’m dying to be about for ever so long. I’ll ask the King to find me the polar star.—I must have seen it often, but I don’t know exactly which it is.

ROYAL PHYSICIAN

He will tell you everything. (To Madhav) Will you go about and arrange flowers through the room for the King’s visit? (Indicating the Headman) We can’t have that person in here.

AMAL

No, let him be, Doctor. He is a friend. It was he who brought me the King’s letter.

ROYAL PHYSICIAN

Very well, my child. He may remain if he is a friend of yours.

MADHAV

(Whispering into Amal’s ear) My child, the King loves you. He is coming himself. Beg for a gift from him. You know our humble circumstances.

AMAL

Don’t you worry, Uncle.—I’ve made up my mind about it.

MADHAV

What is it, my child?
AMAL
I shall ask him to make me one of his postmen that I may wander far and wide, delivering his message from door to door.

MADHAV
*(Slapping his forehead)* Alas, is that all?

AMAL
What’ll be our offerings to the King, Uncle, when he comes?

KING’S HERALD
He has commanded puffed rice.

AMAL
Puffed rice! Say, Headman, you’re right. You said so. You knew all we didn’t.

HEADMAN
If you send word to my house then I could manage for the King’s advent really nice—

ROYAL PHYSICIAN
No need at all. Now be quiet all of you. Sleep is coming over him. I’ll sit by his pillow; he’s dropping into slumber. Blow out the oil-lamp. Only let the star-light stream in. Hush, he slumbers.

MADHAV
*(Addressing GAFFER)* What are you standing there for like a statue, folding your palms.—I am nervous.—Say, are they good omens? Why are they darkening the room? How will star-light help?

GAFFER
Silence, unbeliever.

SUDHA enters

SUDHA
Amal!
ROYAL PHYSICIAN

He’s asleep.

SUDHA

I have some flowers for him. Mayn’t I give them into his own hand?

ROYAL PHYSICIAN

Yes, you may.

SUDHA

When will he be awake?

ROYAL PHYSICIAN

Directly the King comes and calls him.

SUDHA

Will you whisper a word for me in his ear?

ROYAL PHYSICIAN

What shall I say?

SUDHA

Tell him Sudha has not forgotten him.