



SHORT STORY
KAMALA DAS

Pativratyam

ONLY after trying for a long time was she able to meet her husband's paramour. She would often say to the driver: "I am sure you know that house. Take me there at least once."

The driver, busy wiping the car would answer casually: "Bai Sahiba, how can I know? I don't think there even is such a house."

She would get angry: "You are just like your master. Every time you open your mouth, you tell a lie. Don't think I don't know what is going on outside this house. It's true I don't know English as she does. I can't eat raw meat like her, nor go around without a drop of fresh water touching my

body. But I certainly have the ability to understand what is happening in front of my eyes."

The driver would smile.

"You needn't smile, Bali Ram. You have not reached the stage where you can make fun of me. You have not yet acquired the right to be amused at the daughter of the *zamindar* of Tejpur, Bali Ram. You mad Oriyan, I will...."

But since her anger was a constant phenomenon, nobody took any notice. In the morning, when she saw her husband coming down the stairs after his bath, immaculate in his starched and ironed clothes, she would growl: "I am going to

put a stop to these scented and powdered outings of yours. I am also coming to this office one day. All the secrets will be out in the open then. Hmm..."

He would get into the car without looking at her or wishing her goodbye. Holding *tuhi* leaves and flowers in her hand, she would stand watching the car go out of the gate and turn into the street. The neighbours' children sitting on the compound wall would look at her and laugh. But she never realised that they called her the mad auntie. Everyone said she was mad. Otherwise, when she had so

'Loyalty or fidelity to a husband.

much money, why did she go around in these old and torn white saris? Why, at this age, did she fight so loudly, like a child? Pick up the black cat and kiss it? But she didn't hear all this. Even if she did, she didn't pay any attention.

"You are mad. If I listened to everything you said, people would laugh at me," her husband once said.

After his return from England where he had gone for further studies, he had avoided acting like a husband to her. He had removed his boxes, cupboards, bed, and writing desk from her room to another one. She ate alone in the dining room, talking and arguing with the servants. After dinner, as his personal servant walked up the stairs with the soda for his brandy, she would call out: "You bring me also some of this English medicine. Let me see whether it helps me too to sleep well."

But the man would pretend that he had not heard. Many times, she had tried to shame her husband. When his friends' visited, once a month or so, she would struggle up the stairs and pant out: "Have you lost your way? You can only meet him at his English speaking wife's place. If you go there, you will get nice English medicine to drink. Everything will be blissful."

He did not say anything to her in front of them. But he sat there talking to them in English in an agitated tone.

"You are saying I am mad, aren't you? Do you people understand Bengali? I will tell the truth. It is because of him that I have become like a mad woman. How long is it since he has even looked at me? How long since he has had a meal with me? Just ask him and see. I don't know English. My father was the *zamindar* of Tejpur. So I was never able to step out of the house. So he has started disliking me. But he should have said that at the beginning. He got his education with my father's money. With my father's money..."

"Stop raving", he got up and said one day. "Don't insult me in front of others..."

But in spite of his wife's statements, nobody ventured to blame him. Because they all liked that man who appeared decent, no matter how you looked at him.

He never hesitated to help with money, or in any other way. Even though he was a competent lawyer, nobody found him greedy for money.

Besides he was very good looking. Nice looking in his youth, as he neared 60, he became truly handsome. A trim physique, straight grey hair, glowing fingernails... everyone liked him. Respected him.

She couldn't bear it. If at least at some stage he had loved her, used the tender words one uses with a beloved, she could have gone up to him and cried. Perhaps, that old trick might have worked in their case too. But she had never experienced such a thing.

The marriage took place when she was 15. Her father's clerk Sandeep Babu's son, Dilip. A young man not appropriate to her status. But times were hard. Not many came forward to accept an unattractive girl, even with a fat dowry. Moreover, there was her eccentricity. Her father asked her: "Shanthu, would you like to marry Dilip?"

She was very happy about it. Until then, she had not set her eyes on any other young man. She lowered her head and smiled. He left for England within a month of her marriage. She started sleeping with her grandmother once again. There were no letters for her. But when he returned after eight years, she stood by the door with a loving smile. Her white sari had a red border. Her feet were reddened with *altha*. Still he disliked her. Moved away from her for no reason.

Her heart was beating as she got into the car. She was very sorry that she had had to bribe Ball Ram with Rs. 100. But she consoled herself that, after so many years, the day she had waited for had come. She was wearing the heavy white silk sari with the red border that he had brought from Assam. Around her neck was the gold jewellery her grandmother, had given her long ago. In her hand was a red silk handkerchief with a hundred rupee note knotted into it.

She was prepared in every way. Suddenly struck her that that woman would answer all her questions in English.

"Bali Ram, don't you know English?"

"No, Bai Sahiba, I have not even seen a school. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I just asked. Knowing: English is useless. It is intelligence that counts..."

She kept talking until they reached that light green coloured house. Her pretence of not being flustered was not very successful. Because, as she was getting out of the car, the driver asked her: "Bai Sahiba, why so much perspiration?"

When she reached the door, she said: "Bali Ram, you must also come in with me. How can I walk into a foreign woman's house without any servants?"

The day after he left for Darjeeling, she didn't leave her bed at all. He used to go to Darjeeling for a vacation twice or thrice a year. For two years now, he had been going alone. Not that she was unable to go. Even during the times when she felt that she had barely the strength to get up and walk, she had gone to Darjeeling. Enveloped in the cool breeze which seemed to have caressed the wings of angels, she would lose her tiredness and become beautiful again.

"You are always 18, Jill. I can't believe that so many years have passed since I first met you."

"Don't be silly, Dilip. I am past 48."

She knew, when she thought of him, that she should have no cause for regret. He had said that it would be hard.

"Jill, if you come with me, you will have to face a lot of problems. I can never get a divorce. Nobody there will understand about love. So we will have to stay away from everybody, flouting all conventions. Do you understand?"

After his studies, as he was preparing to return to India, they both cried a lot. If he could have given his name at any time in the future, he would have invited her to India. But he was the son of a poor man. He did not have the temerity to insult that royal family which had given him education and status. So, to the English girl he had loved for eight years, he repeated over and over again: "Don't come with me, Jill. I can only give you a bad name."

But when he got on to the ship she

was with him. From that time, his life was divided in two. In the evenings, in a black Bentley, he would arrive at that green house in Kidarpur to see her. He lowered his head even in front of the servants who were employed to look after her. His wife often asked him: "Where do you go in the evenings? Won't you take me also one day?"

He lowered his head at that too. He could not behave lovingly towards his wife or touch her. Because he was already so deeply in love with Jill. If he had ever been asked directl : "Do you have another wife?" he would have told the truth. But that never happened.

The first few years were peaceful. But then he realised that he should not have allowed Jill to come to India. Curled up in her large white bed, like a bird scarred from many surgeries, she said: "I am a half woman."

She sobbed for a long time. If she saw pictures of children in any magazine, she sat silent a long time like a stone statue. He brought her a cage to hang in her room, and a multicoloured parrot for it. To sit on her lap, he bought a pup with long years and a pointed nose. Still she said: "I am getting scared, living alone."

Whenever she saw her maid with the big red *bindi* and silver Wangles or her servants in white, she would say to him: "Dilip, these people will kill me, I am quite sure."

Sometimes, stiffening her pale weak limbs, and banging her head on the floor, she would scream aloud. She would lie in his arms and sob like a child.

"What has happened to you, my dearest?"

That was a futile question. He knew full well why she had brought herself to this pass. She was a tender hearted woman. He had not given her an opportunity to be a mother. For his own self preservation, he had destroyed her life. But he still pretended that he did not understand the reason for her tears. Pretended that his sins were not sins. But he needed that pretence to live.

"What has happened to you, Dilip?"

How have you become so cruel?"

Their arguments became never ending. To the Jill who, purely for love, had left her home and country, prepared to be the mere cook of an Indian, he said once: "You shouldn't have come. You have ruined my life."

Struggling to sit up in bed, she said: "Please go away from here. I can't bear to look at you. You have killed my love too."

He went out. When she eard the car door slamming, she called out

grew weaker, such situations were becoming common place.

"My face is getting all wrinkled, isn't it?"

"See, I am losing all my hair. I have lost my looks. .What do you fell?", she would often ask her maid. With the usual tactlessness of servants, that old woman would answer: "True. How Memsahib used to be, like the rising sun. Now she is unrecognisable."

She would go back and sit in front of



remorsefully: "Dilip, come back."

But he did not come. In the evening, his driver came and handed her a letter.

"Dear Jill,

I am an altogether unlucky man. But according to your wishes, I will stay away from here for a few days at least. I am going to Darjeeling for a couple of weeks. Hope you will have recovered a little from your illness by the time I get back.

As she sat in front of the mirror, combing and smoothing out her greying red hair, she cried silently. As her body

the mirror again and cry. Sometimes, she would scream at her servants: "Get out, all of you. I don't want to see your dark faces."

The day after he left for Darjeeling, she woke up at 10 a.m. She decided to stay in bed the whole day. She felt that her relationship with Dilip had become totally perverted.

"I am going to kill myself," she said.

Her maid, who was drawing the table close to the bed, looked up: "Memsahib, what did you say?"

"I am going to poison myself."

Then she broke down and wept over and over again. She felt comforted by the fact that as she was a patient who suffered from a nervous disorder, she could afford to act as crazily as she wanted. When she reached that state, she felt at peace as though the chains had been removed from her mind. She constructed a stage and became the main character on it. With uncombed hair strewn all over her face, dressed only in torn white silks, talking of suicide all the time, she gave her life a nonexistent significance.

"Memsahib, you shouldn't cry like this. That headache of yours will be back again today."

"You get out of here."

It was in the midst of that scene that her servant came and announced that Dilip Sarkar's wife was in the room outside. She felt that this too must be Dilip's doing. Otherwise, how could his wife have come calling on her, the very next day after the first major fight in their life? Had Dilip not gone to Darjeeling? Would Dilip not come to see her again?

Though her head was full of questions, she said: "Tell her I have a bad headache and am in bed."

She felt no hesitation in entering that bedroom without being invited in by its owner. First of all, the woman lying there was a mere foreigner. Second, surely there was no need to ask the permission of that chit of a girl who had led her husband astray.

When she entered, the servants hovering around just disappeared. To the woman lying in bed under a blue coverlet, and looking at her with frightened eyes, she said: "What is the illness?"

Since these words were in Bengali, there was no response whatever to that question.

For a while they scrutinised each other. A sick woman with lean cheeks and thin reddish hair. A dark fat old Bengali woman.

Suddenly the dark woman smiled. "I didn't come to say anything. Don't be afraid of me. I just had a desire to see."

Still that Englishwoman continued to look at her in consternation. So, even though a little shyly, with immense maternal tenderness, she picked up those thin white hands and placed them on her lap. At that, her husband's mistress broke down completely.

"I don't know English. How can I make

this poor creature understand?"

She looked around. A photograph of her husband in his youth hung on the wall. At the foot of the bed on the floor, inside a white basket a little pup was asleep on a white mattress. To the woman sobbing on her shoulder, she said very gently: "How long can you live alone here like this with this parrot and this dog? That good for nothing man of ours has turned out to be so stupid. I didn't realise all this...."

When she got into her car again, the driver turned around and asked: "Bai Sahiba, didn't you tell her to go back to England?"

"No"

"What a pity. Why were you so timid, Bai Sahiba? Could you have got a better opportunity to intimidate her into going back?"

Readjusting the sari which had fallen off her head and clearing her nose with her handkerchief, she said: "You keep quiet, Ball Ram. I am the daughter of the *zamindar* of Tejpur. You have no right to criticise me. Remember that when you speak, you Oriyan."

(translated from Malayalam by Sharada Nair)

Any Government Officer Can Read Your Private Letters

On December 10, 1986, the Rajya Sabha passed a Bill, already passed earlier by the Lok Sabha, to amend the Indian Post Office Act enabling government to intercept, detain and dispose of any mail it thinks fit.

The ostensible purpose of the Bill is to empower government to regulate the courier service business, but its real purpose is to reinforce government monopoly on the communications system in the country.

So far, both central and state governments have regularly censored mail without any guidelines. The local police have been assuming the powers to prepare the list of people whose mail is to be tampered with. A senior policeman is posted in the post office to open all the mail addressed to the listed persons. These powers are used not only against

opposition party 40 leaders and other dissenters but also against journalists and even ruling party members.

The new law does not lay down any criteria for a person's name to be put on the censorship list. It also empowers "any officer authorised by the government" to undertake the censorship. Considering how the central government used its powers before the Emergency, to intercept the mail of over 1,500 people in Delhi alone, including opposition leaders and civil servants, there is every reason to fear that the new law will be used against dissenters of different shades and hues, such as civil libertarians and human rights activists.

The law constitutes a serious infringement of the fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression, and also a violation of people's right to privacy.

The Congress (I) is using its captive majority to push through more and more draconian legislation. Unfortunately, we can no longer assume that the opposition parties will undertake the task of effectively resisting such laws. Apart from staging an ineffective walk out, which is their standard response to anything they do not, like, whether important or unimportant, the opposition seems to have no programme of resistance to the government's systematic attempt to nullify our fundamental rights and to undermine due process of law.

Therefore, we hope readers will join us in strongly protesting against this law and find ways to make their protest effective, so that more people oppose the alarming pace at which their rights are being eroded, and we all begin to take steps to restore them.