

The Green Frock

by Charanjit Kaur



MORE often than not, Thakkubai's day began at the railway platform where a drunk and angry Bhiku would force her to seek refuge from his blows and curses. She had learnt to anticipate those days well. Bhiku would not be home even by midnight and when he did come he would be reeking of sweat, drink and vomit. Sometimes he would bring in a woman, too. Then he would not even look at her, give her the foot, and slam the tottering door of the unsteady hut in her face. Thakkubai had long ago learnt to absorb these blows, and her body had developed its own defences; her mind had grown a kind of instinct and she could sniff out the days that were going to be particularly bad for her. She would pick up her four month

old child Chinti, and walk quietly towards the station.

The beggars at the station were kind to her. They kept a small place reserved for her; they even joked about it to her; how often Misti, the lame beggar, had told her directly that she must not go back to Bhiku; after all, he was not her husband; and she would be tempted and for days she would stay away from her hut; till one day, Bhiku would come ranting, and drag her home, pulling her by the arms and her knotted hair. By now, Thakku's flesh had grown shields all over; and she had learnt that Bhiku would take her and leave her as he desired.

Today, she was quite happy. She had not seen Bhiku for a week now, and her

bones felt more relaxed. But, somehow, she knew that he would come for her tonight. Quite early in the morning, she had woken up to the sound of the trampling feet rushing for the first four o'clock local. And she hadn't slept since. Chinti, rheumy eyed and frail, slept soundly, her little head on the rag bundle. Thakku liked to get up early in the morning, because she liked to look at her little girl sleeping. At most times she found Chinti a burden; often, she had thought of leaving her at a remote station. But, in the early mornings, when the world smelt of flowers, when the first local had swept the early morning crowd away, when the beggars lay in quiet slumber, and the stall in the middle of the platform smelt of fresh, boiling tea,

Thakku would take a long look at Chinti. She would feel a mother then. Her heart would swell and tears would stand in her eyes. And she would feel a vague sense of fulfilment and rest. She would feel that she was sitting at the innermost shrine of the holiest of temples.

She noticed how thin Chinti was and how dark. She was not sure whether the child would last out the year. Last year, her oldest boy had died after a month of the racking cough which seemed to break poor Chinti's body. Thakku didn't know how long she would be able to bear it - the pain of giving birth and the pain of not being able to give a decent burial to those who were born to her. How she wished that she could be like one of those women who herded themselves into the compartments in train after train, like wild animals. Not like the ones who wore shining bangles and shining *saris*; but like those who wore torn *saris* like her, but who were well washed and who applied thick *kajal* in their girls' eyes. When her Chinti grew up, she would try to get two bits of string with which to tie her hair. Only if she did grow up, though.

Thakku smiled to herself, lost in reverie. She hardly noticed that the next

train had come and gone and the platform was empty again. Suddenly she realised that there was something in her hand now; a paper packet - wrapped up neatly. Someone in blue had rushed past her, thrown the parcel in her hands and run to catch the train. She couldn't remember the face of the woman. Normally, she knew the faces of most men and women who came to the station. But today, she had been busy in her own dream world.

She decided to open the parcel; perhaps it would contain some leftovers or some pieces of bread. There were women who packed the leftovers at home and brought them wrapped in paper for the beggars. She felt hungry now. She could go over to the teastall where she knew the Seth would pour out half a cup of tea for her. She felt the parcel again. It did not feel like bread. She ripped off a small corner of it just to take a look; her heart was aflutter; it was something green, some fabric; maybe an old blouse for her or an old frock for Chinti. But she would not open it now. If the others saw it, and if there were two blouses in it, they would make a grab for it and she would, perhaps, be left with nothing. She

decided to be patient. She would get into the next train - into the small compartment which went nearly empty throughout the day. There, she would open the parcel.

She entered the compartment to a cacophony of voices. It was some moments before she realised that the noises and the shouts were directed at her and that the whole mass of faces was dripping hostility towards her. In fear, she clutched at the baby and her bundle of rags. She could feel the hands pushing her in all directions.

One woman, red all over, was motioning her to get down; another was shouting at her; and a third was waving her hands about and talking excitedly to the ones who had remained seated within. Suddenly, one rose like the torrent and began to chide the police constable who had been watching the scene for the past few minutes with careless attention. He glanced at her, trying to balance the child in her arms and the bundle on her hip. He caught her mood - the desperate fear quivering in her dilating eyes. Instinctively, she sensed that he was on her side; but she feared that he, too, would demand his price at



the next station. And all she wanted was a quiet corner in which to open her parcel and have a peek at its contents. The constable was trying to pacify the other ladies, telling them that the woman would get down at the next station. Thankfully, she noticed that the women had turned on him, accusing him of neglecting his duty and encouraging all kinds of scamps and thieves to inconvenience the ladies who travelled by the first class.

She shrivelled up into a corner and hoped that they would not notice her - at least for the next two stations. For she wanted to alight at the small wayside station where no one would pry into what she was doing. The argument between the ladies grew louder and more heated, but the constable just kept on smiling. When the train slowed down at the next station, he jumped off with a spring, leaving her alone to face the curses. The women were upon her like a horde of red ants and she held out her hands to shield herself from their blowlike words; she was grateful when the train stopped again, and she found herself on the long, deserted platform.

Now Thakku took a good look around her - no one, not even another beggar; the lepers' colony across the tracks, however, was alive with people. There seemed to be some kind of celebration going on, with songs blaring from the middle of the settlement. Well, everyone must have gone there. She would not take her Chinti there. She had seen those lepers before and she shrank in fear from the evil spirit which she believed haunted their bodies and took possession of their souls. She walked slowly to the end of the platform and leaned against the newly constructed pillar. Chinti slept quietly. Thakku took out the small, soft parcel from her bundle and her heart beat fast and loud.

Bit by bit she tore off the paper and into her hands dropped a little green bundle. She was quivering with excitement now. Her fumbling hands



straightened it out with difficulty and her eyes gazed in wonder at the beauty that she held in her hands. A small green frock, in shining material, like the river in moonlight, with a small red border at the neck and arms. Quickly, she turned it round; it had a small bow too, at the chest, just near the gathers. How she had longed for such a dress when she had seen rich little girls, chattering away, holding the hands of their mothers at the station. Her Chinti too would wear this frock - and how beautiful she would be!

Not caring that the child was still asleep, Thakku tore away her old tattered dress and with hands that shook

violently, she put the new dress on the girl. Chinti, jerked away from her sleep, began to whine in her weak, trailing voice, but Thakku hardly noticed it. She was busy fastening the buttons at the back. Chinti bawled now, and kicked and screamed. But Thakku could only laugh in joy.

She turned to admire Chinti - her doll. And suddenly she stopped short. The rheumy eyes, the mud entangled hair, the dust covered skin and the running nose - the face belonged to Chinti and the body to someone else now. Chinti was not ugly, but ...but the frock; it told her that she had not even washed the child's

face for a week now. Of course, Chinti was sick, and a wash would only make her sicker. Still, Thakku cursed herself silently in her heart; soon the curses were directed at the world in general and she had the feeling that the whole of nature had conspired to show her the disease and ugliness in her child. By a strange process of association, her anger solidified and darted out against the woman who had given her the frock.

Did she not know that a new frock was of no use to folk like her? That even two rupees would have been more useful? That her child would look dirtier and skinnier in this get up? And, god knows what Bhiku will say when he sees such a frock? He'll give her the beating of a lifetime: anyway, he keeps a hawk's eye on her, and calls her a slut at all times. Perhaps, he will even tear the frock to pieces in his rage. And he will break every bone in her body. It would be much better for her to get rid of the frock; throw it away into the gutter, perhaps. Or, better still, why not sell it? It will fetch her at least five rupees. And with those five rupees, she and Chinti can have their stomachful of boiled rice. Yes, that would be the best thing to do. Bhiku would never know, and she would be able to buy two whole kilos of the broken rice from Shibhu's shop. Perhaps the rice would even bring some colour to Chinti's cheeks.

Her eyes fell on Chinti again. The child, having cried herself quiet, was looking at the mother with doleful eyes. Thakku suddenly felt a surge of emotion for her and she covered the girl with kisses. She looked at her again, this time with pride; how smart Chinti looked in this new frock. She would never have been able to buy such a new and shining frock for her. Why, she herself had never had a new blouse. As far back as she could remember, only cast off blouses from dustbins had adorned her back and her *dhotis* had been rag pieces brought from the *chor bazar* and sewn together

crudely.

Perhaps, *deva* had listened to her prayers, and sent Chinti the lucky and bright new frock. *Devas* are not happy when you reject their gifts - Bhiku had said to her in one of his good moods. No - Chinti would keep the dress; and Thakku decided that she would wash the child's face at the tap, straighten her hair and make her look fresh and beautiful. She would wash her little hands and feet and tie her up in an old *sari* to protect her from the cold.

When she returned from the tap, she couldn't but wonder at how clean Chinti looked. She had never known that she could look that fair. And the bright colour of the frock now shed a soft glow which spread all over the child's face. Thakku felt that nothing could make her unhappy now. She couldn't take her eyes off the child. My child - her heart told her with every beat.

How long she went on gazing at the girl Thakku could hardly say. Trains came and stopped and went their way, sweeping away the few, stray passengers in both directions. Some people stood awhile and looked at her with amusement, as she played with the little fingers, the little toes, the little nose of Chinti. Some others glared at her in suspicion.

Then, slowly, she became aware of the hefty man staring at her. She looked up at him; he would create trouble for her all right. She had caught his leering look at once, and her mind had geared up its defences against the intruder. She did not want this day to be spoilt for her. Not even for the ten rupees he was sure to offer her. Thakku decided to ignore the man.

Perhaps he sensed her hostility. He looked at her with disdain and brashness. And his face showed that he was going to say something unpleasant. And, sure enough, he barked at her: "Whose child have you stolen, eh? Running away with other people's children - wait till I call the police."

She clutched at his feet, whimpering. She sobbed that it was her own child; that she had done no wrong.

"You expect me to believe that, do you?" he bawled again. "Don't I know the likes of you? Are you going to blind the child or break its leg? Tell me."

Thakku could only sob in reply.

A small crowd had gathered at the scene now. All were shouting at her, each one gesticulating more wildly than the other. She could hardly think. The only thing she was sensible of was that they would not be able to force the child from her.

"Arre, I know this woman. She comes begging in our lane everyday. And the child - yes, its hers", a young man was heard saying, "but what has happened to the child - all dressed up so." He turned to her, angrily: "Now, where did you steal this frock from?"

Now Thakku was sure that they would not let her rest in peace. With the strength that comes of despair, in one bold stroke, she picked up the child and ran. The little gathering back there stood still for a moment and...burst out laughing. Thakkubai was out of the station now, sobbing, hysterical, and shouting curses back at them.

She sat down at the edge of the drain outside the station, deep in thought. They would not let her be; they would not let her child be. But she was determined. Chinti *will wear* the new frock. Even if no one knows it but me. They cannot take it away from me. She reached out her hand to the slush that lay on the sides of the drain, filled her palm with the black, slimy earth, and began to smear the shining, new frock with it, until it was dark and dirty all over. To top it, she passed one dirty hand across the face of Chinti, who suddenly smiled back at her. Then, she slowly picked up the raggedy child, and began walking back to the station deliberately.

Even Bhiku would ask her no questions now. □