

As Usual

by
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THIS is not my own story; this is one by Dwijesh, our lawyer. Lawyer Dwijesh had said once: "If you need a plot then come to me. You won't believe this but one does come across innumerable colourful stories in our court records, friend. In point of fact, none of your made up stories can come anywhere near them. Just by way of an example, the other day, a Bihari lad and a Bengali lass..."

I responded politely: "Dwijesh, just for the time being, let the Bengali story be. Why not spare us?"

Dwijesh smiled: "Ah, I had forgotten the moralist that you are; All right, then let me tell you the story of my own acquaintances."

Then after a pause and some stray conversation, he related the story.

No, not a story. He related what had actually happened, changing only the

names of the characters and the place.

He began. They lived in a small town up in the mofussil area. Let us say their names were Shoroju and Shoilen. A childless couple. It was not a love marriage. It had been, as is usual, arranged by their parents. But they fell madly in love with one another after marriage.

I wouldn't have believed that love could survive seven or eight years of marriage had I not seen the couple with my own eyes.

Dwijesh continued. Yes, I was practising at... during those days. My wife used to shame me quoting their love as an example whenever she decided that there was a good reason to lose her temper.

I think all the wives in that locality quoted their love as an example under

similar circumstances, that is, when they were displeased and lost their temper, because it so happened that Shoilen, the husband, was more in love with his wife, Shoroju.

I had studied them. It was not a put up pose meant for others. There was that depth. Once, Shoroju had to go to Calcutta for four or five days when her sister fell ill and Shoilen could not accompany her because of his job. You won't believe this, but the man did not have one proper meal during the entire period. He sent away the cook on a vacation, and lived just on tea and biscuits.

Shoilen used to work in my court. Somehow, the word spread and everyone started teasing him, "Shoilen has given up eating due to the pangs of separation." But Shoilen remained totally

unaffected by all that.

When the wife returned after a few days, the rascal seemed to have got back his life. He was so happy that he offered to pay for our lunch that day, very willingly.

But then, the ruthlessness of the stars does not allow human beings to live in peace for any continuous period of time. Perhaps, the peaceful and radiant life of these people became an eyesore to them. I mean those stars, and so at their connivance, an ugly disaster descended upon that beautiful life of theirs, and that is what I want to talk about.

As far as I remember, it was winter. But the sky having remained overcast for two days, it began to *drizzle* in the morning that day. It is pretty cold in winter in mofussil towns, generally. Over and above that, the rains added to the misery. Even our bones shivered under the flesh.

We all planned to return home early, and were just finishing our last cups of tea before doing so, when suddenly Shoilen stood up and said: "I have to go. No, I am not feeling too well. You all finish your tea, I am afraid I must go"

We had decided to share a horse-drawn carriage and return to our respective destinations, because that was not a day for walking. Therefore, none of us encouraged Shoilen. We shouted in a chorus, "Shoilen, all of us have worries more or less, friend, but none of us are this mad about the wife as you are. You know the wives of such wife obsessed people often run away and break homes?"

It was a simple joke. But Shoilen turned pale. He sat down in a chair quickly. It seemed as though someone had tied him to the chair. I was about to say, "We have detained Shoilen's body here, but his spirit must have reached that one storeyed yellow house in Anarbagh by now." But I refrained from saying anything. He was much younger than I, and then, of course, there was a substantial difference in our status. After all, he was a clerk in the government.

However, our get together broke up. We divided ourselves into two carriages according to our respective localities. Shoilen lived in our locality; he sat next to me. I don't quite remember the few others who were with me that day.

It was about half past three in the afternoon. The rains had stopped, but the skies were dark and forbidding. There was not a soul on the street. The carriage was plodding on. I am not commenting on the horse because I don't wish to appear to be heartless.

Suddenly, as soon as the carriage took a turn near Anarbagh crossing, I saw a woman who looked like a maid-servant of a house, running towards us dramatically with raised hands and screamingly desperately. Immediately, Shoilen made a strange, loud noise and got off the running carriage. Needless to say, the carriage stopped at once.

"What is the matter?"

"She is our maid."

By that time the maid had arrived on the scene.

The sum and substance of what I could comprehend after sorting words out of the incomprehensible noises that the maid was making, was that as she was hurrying as usual to attend to her daily chores she noticed from afar, that the door of the house was ajar. She decided to "reprimand" the mistress for this carelessness and quickly entered the house. But lo and behold, the mistress was lying senseless next to the door. And not very far from her, lay stone-dead, a young man who looked like a dacoit. His skull was broken. The courtyard was flooded with his blood. The maid covered her eyes as she shrieked and howled, "Master, I cannot describe that horrible sight."

It wasn't too difficult to grasp the situation. Although Shoilen's wife lay senseless, one could guess the situation.

I knew that notorious bad character, Dwijesh smiled. I am getting to know all the bad characters of the world. I am ceasing to believe that there is any sense in living in this world of ours. Well, as I was saying - forget his name - but he

used to roll *bidis* - that was his profession. Clearly, that was a facade. His real profession was noted in our records. That record had carefully maintained full accounts of several of his evil deeds.

Let that be. He had finally met his just end, dreadful though it was.

When Shoroju returned to consciousness, she said - she felt chilly sitting down inside the room all the time. So she decided to make herself some tea. As soon as she stepped into the courtyard, she saw this man scaling the wall. For a minute her blood turned cold. She lost all self control. Under the grip of a terrible fear, she picked up the thick stone which was standing near the wall, and with which she usually ground spices, and aimed it at the head of the man, gripping the stone with her two hands. After that, she fell down unconscious as though there was a wave of blood. If she had tried to run away and tried to open the door, she must have acted in an unconscious state.

You follow what happened after that - continues Dwijesh the lawyer. Murder in broad daylight and then, the murderer is a young woman of twenty six. The small town was shaken to its roots.

I thought this murder would not be counted as a murder. Besides, we were there. But whoever knew that an evil woman declaring herself to be the wife of the deceased, would fight the case?

I am sure some lawyers and *munisifs* encouraged her; that is what we lawyers always do. We don't allow the fire to burn out. We feed it to keep it alive. However, I wasn't aware that that evil woman also used to sell eggs. She filed a case that Shoroju had called for her husband to bargain for eggs. As they did not agree on the price, Shoroju lost her temper and hit him with whatever was handy.

I had to say something because I could not restrain myself any longer, "Even such cock and bull stories are acceptable in the courts?"

In the courts? Dwijesh laughed aloud. What kinds of stories are acceptable to the law courts are beyond you writers' conception. They are far beyond the

limits of your imagination. Otherwise, how does this farcical story go up to the high court? Oh! if you could see Shoilen during the court case. As though he had turned insane. He was hearing all kinds of rumours. Some said Shoroju would be hanged; some opined that she would be given a life term in the Andamans. Some mercifully reduced the punishment to at best, five to seven years' of jail sentence.

Desperate, Shoilen fell at our feet. We must save Shoroju at any cost. Shoroju was dying of shame from the comments that many were making on her honour and integrity. Shoilen could not stand that. He kept on saying, "I will say in the court that I had killed that man." He said many other things in a similar strain. It would be difficult indeed, for anyone to keep his head cool under similar circumstances. To tell the truth, we always come across cases where the wife fights unto death to save her murderer husband. But this kind of an opposite situation coming from a middle class family, not that of a princely or a landowning family, a family merely of an ordinary clerk - to say the least, was rare indeed.

However, there was no heroism in Shoilen's case, because any husband in a similar situation would sell his land, his everything, or take a loan from the money lender and fight the case. Shoilen had also done the same thing. Nothing more than that.

What was an exception was the sight of his desperate state. It was quite clear he could even go to hell, if necessary, for Shoroju's sake, or anywhere in heaven or earth, for that matter.

The young people jeered at his back, "the male Savitri." He seemed

to have taken a vow unto death, as did Savitri of our mythology. To protect his wife from evil, from pain and from indignity, he was ready to do literally anything.

Must say that no one had looked with disdain at this murderous act of Shoroju, neither the neighbours nor the women. If she did not save herself the way she did, everyone shivered to think what the consequence might have been. That's why everyone had to approve of her act. This was not a murder but self defence, saving the honour of her soul.

My wife used to remark, "Thank God, the stone was so handy", meaning fate was kind to Shoroju.

Shoroju was out on bail. When the case was transferred to the high court, she had to be brought to Calcutta. The dates on which she was summoned to the court, and was cross examined, you should have seen the agony on Shoilen's face. He would become restless. "Dwijeshda, she will pass out. I am telling you she will die, she won't survive this suffering."

"And Shoroju?" I ask. She had a

problem of another kind. She would say whether I am hanged or sentenced to jail, I won't repent. I will die in the knowledge that I lost life in order to save my honour. I am worried about him. Will he survive if anything happens to me? That woman was quite hard in a way. She showed no mental shock or repentance because she had killed a man. Rather, Shoilen would say, "Dwijeshda, I cannot bear to think of that terrible moment. I try to avoid thinking by closing my eyes. I imagine that that Shoroju must be someone else."

I said, "I have understood this far quite well. Now tell me what happened at the end of it all."

What else? She was released unconditionally, Dwijesh responded.

"Unconditionally released?"

Dwijesh said, What else? I knew it all the time. They had to suffer for so long because of the connivance of the lawyers and the barristers, and due to the obstinacy of that luckless woman. The lawyer for Shoilen's party asked the judge if it is not a crime to throw a stone at a mad dog who is heading for one in order to bite him, why should this act of

Shoroju be considered a crime? The judge could not answer that question. The case did not stand. Shoilen went to Kalighat along with his wife with *puja* offerings and thanks giving.

Dwijesh took out his snuff box at this point, and started gently to beat it against his left palm.

I asked "So, then?"

Then? Dwijesh the lawyer took a pinch of snuff with some relish, shut the snuff box and put it back into his pocket. Then he said, Then Shoilen returned to town and gave a banquet. He did not have any money, so he



borrowed some. He did not leave out anyone he knew. They had not seen a banquet of that kind in a long time.

I say sarcastically, "What kind of a story is this? Any courageous woman would have acted the way she did. There is nothing to rave about." Rave about? No I am not raving about Shoroju. Saying this, Dwijesh lookout his box of *paan*, stretched his hand towards me asking me if I would like one.

"All right. Whatever you may say, there is not much of a story in what you related."

But I haven't told you the story yet, said Dwijesh, closed his *paan* box, wiped it carefully with his handkerchief, and then neatly put it back into his pocket.

"You haven't related the story as yet?"

No. There is a little more yet to relate. That bit is the story. Afterwards, Shoilen left Shoroju.

"Left?"

Yes, Shoilen left Shoroju.

"Unbelievable! What does it mean? Did he have any suspicion?"

No, there was no question of any suspicion, said Dwijesh. Had Shoroju fallen into the hands of that evil man then such a situation could not have arisen. Even an infant could comprehend that fact.

If Shoroju had lost her honour then that man's life couldn't be taken, and also, Shoroju wouldn't have cared to live any longer. That Shoilen believed fully.

I say, quite stunned, "Then?"

Then? Then it is this that Shoilen said: I cannot live with a wife who is a murderer.

"Say it again", I said.

Yes, he said that. He said that to me clearly that the very hand with which she had killed a man, she will use to cook my meals, to serve my food, to take care of my comforts. I will not be able to stand that, Dwijeshda.

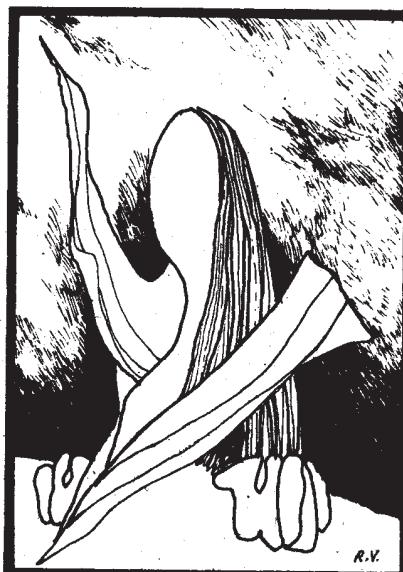
I said, "Wonderful. This indeed is a sample of pure love."

Dwijesh the lawyer shook his head and said, no - you can't say that, my friend. There was no room for doubt in

his love for her.

"Really? Then what is this?" Dwijesh replied, what this is, is very difficult to understand. Perhaps this is what is known as prejudice or superstition, which is more powerful than kindness, compassion, affection, love, understanding, intelligence, reason and judgement. It is more powerful than all these.

"I do not agree with you. He must be an utterly heartless man. The case had



been going on for a long time. What was he doing all this time? He wasn't looking at his wife's face?"

Dwijesh said, That is not the question. Of course, he saw her every day. But they didn't live together. The court ordered them to live separately. Besides, was he in his senses then? He had staked his life for her release, and he lived as though in a trance. I had thought that when everything would be over, the fellow would live in a paradise when he returns to his normal life with his beloved. But no, there was bound to be pain in the ecstasy. Yet, I could see how terribly it hurt him to leave Shoroju.

"Yes, you have told me a unique story, I do admit. Well, after that?"

Do you want to hear more even after this? Well, afterwards, that is, after saying good bye to Shoroju, that fellow roamed around shedding tears. Then

suddenly, without saying anything to anyone, he married again. I have seen her. A very ugly looking woman. He is living at the same place, leading a normal householder's life. After that, of course, I came away. And then, after a great deal of effort now I am reconciled to what I saw happen.

This exasperated me: "Who is dying to know what you did to yourself? Tell me what happened to Shoroju?"

Dwijesh the lawyer once again took out the snuff box and gently beating it against his palm, said - how can I say that? I was not her keeper that she would need to tell me what she did thereafter. Whether she is dead or alive; if alive, where she is, who would be interested to glean all that information? If we have to bother about the life of all those whose cases come to us, then we couldn't be professionals. Maybe that woman is still alive. Perhaps she is working as a maid in the household of her brother and sister-in-law. Maybe, she doesn't have that protection even. Maybe, she had to take to the streets. I wouldn't be surprised if I hear that she is working as a maidservant somewhere. If I hear that she had done the worst, it wouldn't surprise me either.

I was getting exasperated at Dwijesh's heartless indifference. I said angrily, "She should do just that. In order to take revenge on society, she should choose the road to hell."

Dwijesh the lawyer smiled meaningfully. My dear friend, all those big words sound well in novels and fiction. In real life, how many insane women are there who choose that path voluntarily? They get pushed around by circumstances, and ultimately, arrive at the road to hell - that is all. Of course, there are many examples of those who survive the challenges of life and have not been defeated. There are all sorts of examples in this world. If you wish, you have the choice of believing the better ones. But then, I was talking only about what happens usually. □

(translated from Bengali by Anima Bose)