

Glory at Twilight



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Bhabani Bhattacharya

- ☛ Look for these expressions in the story and guess the meaning from the context

brusquely	attuned himself
queer rhythmic frenzy	wrenching
flush of prosperity	daze of bewilderment
wide-eyed wonder and eager homage	
talking animatedly	tremulous deliberation
on terms of a perpetual feud	

The slow, narrow-gauge Indian train with its awkward freak of an engine had a way of making unauthorised stops for no good reason, between fields of corn or at the foot of a village—it was said that the guard signalled a halt to pluck a pumpkin or ripe melons from its stem or to buy fistfuls of green gram from a peasant. Some of the passengers grumbled and sat with drawn brows, composing in their minds angry letters to Authority, or to the Press, but others seized the chance to slip merrily out of doors for a breath of air and a view of the green fields.

Satyajit, languid on the cushioned bench now vacated by the other occupants, reached out for his cigarettes but, on second thought, withdrew his hand brusquely. That won't do, he told himself with a stern shake of his head. His smoke was rationed. He had attuned himself in the past month to a fast-growing list of denials, large and small, and this was one. How can he afford the unrestricted luxury of chain smoking? Life lay sharpening to realities that still had the semblance of an undreamable dream.

He winced, the turning wheel of fortune in his unhappy eye, as always. Along the orbit of reminiscence he went

round and round, pulled by a force beyond his will. The banking establishment of which he had attained control. The amazing tempo of it all. Luck had come his way, undeniably, but behind it was his mind, his initiative, grit, energy. Starting as a mere clerk he had become Managing Director. And now? What now?

Tall, thin, near forty, he had sharp features, the hair receding on his temple in wide shiny smooth patches. His eyes hated glare and he wore smart eye-glasses to shield them. His mouth, thin-lipped, would tighten in repose to a line that suggested strength of will but might have been only pride.

‘What now?’ he said to himself in an underbreath. Those words had become his obsession. ‘What now?’

He had no business to be on this wretched train on a neglected railroad, travelling away from the city where he must look for work, for the means of living. With the sudden collapse of his bank, all his private assets were gone overnight; the equities; the house on Tagore Street; even the two cars, his and his wife’s. A mercy that she was away from the scene, with her parents at Delhi, and unaware of the full extent of the ruin. A telegram had come last Tuesday announcing the safe birth of her child. Their first-born, for he had married late in life. His son, his heir. And he had sold off his diamond ring to send his young wife a remittance for the name-giving rites.

She had married a man of fortune—that made it harder for him in this crisis. True, she knew all about his earlier life. But that was story-book stuff. It could be narrated happily to their first-born when he grew older. The story lay killed by its sequel—failure. Glory was all overlaid with dark shame. Glory was dead.

It would be easy enough today if there were none else to think of except himself. Born in a humble village home, self-educated, struggle had been his life-breath. How grateful he was for the clerkship he secured. A turning of the wheel of fortune? he had wondered. The next turning, a year after, was more dramatic. What made him give a fixed look to the man beyond the brass grille of the counter? The cheque presented for encashment was not a large sum.

Eye upon eye. Alarm vivid in the face and the hand on the counter shaking curiously. Surprised, stirred by a quick impulse, he took the cheque to the accounts desk, compared the signature with the one on record. It tallied. But that face, that hand. A hundred reasons, none connected with the cheque, could explain the face and hand. Even so, the impulse led him to the telephone. 'Sir, have you signed a bearer cheque for Rs 2,000? It has yesterday's date...' 'Rs 2,000? No.' His heart felt pain for lack of air. 'Sir, are you sure? The signature seems okay.' In the next instance he was back to his counter in a rush. Where was the man? There, close to the exit, and the face turning back for a moment wore stark fear. He was going away.

Feet bounded up the counter. The bank clerk hunted down his prey on the gravel path, twenty paces from the front door. There was no struggle. The man crumpled down in a heap. He squatted with head between his hands, looking down, tears rolling down. 'Why did you have to commit forgery?' 'She has TB.' 'She?' 'She is dying for want of medicine.' 'Who?' 'My wife. I saw no other means. I give lessons in Maths to the rich man's son. That money...' The head between the hands wagged from side to side in a queer rhythmic frenzy.

That was the way the clerk grew into an accountant. He deserved what he had gained. He was not made to be a mere clerk. Lost in the thrill, he had honest contempt for his stepping-stone, the forgerer. You could not commit such a crime even to save your dying wife. But today, as he sat on his lone bench on the train, he saw mind-pictures and felt troubled. The crouched figure on the gravel path wrapped in mute grieving. The prisoner at the bar, face frozen, as though he had died within himself. Had he anything to say to the Court? the Judge had asked. 'Punish me.' 'Is that all?' 'Punish me as a killer.' 'Killer?' 'I have put my wife to shame. Shame kills as fast as TB.'

Yes, that wretched one had turned the wheel for him with his trembling hand. From that point the wheel attained a volition of its own, moving continuously. He had every reason to be grateful to the forgerer. Too late now to seek him out, give him a chance to live?

Too late. He himself sorely needed a chance to live. The banking business lay around him in a broken mass and there was he, prostrate on his face in the wreckage, sucking its dust. All his fault. He had tried to overreach himself. Each wrong step was now clear in time's perspective. The run on the bank had come all too suddenly though. Failure had a tempo far faster than success.

He had great need to fly from himself—that was why he was on this train. A letter had come in the nick of time offering him an excuse, a temporary relief from the wrenching within.

'The wedding of my fifth daughter, Beena, is to take place on the twentieth of this month. I have kept you posted with the progress of negotiations. I seek your benediction as in the case of my second, third and fourth daughters—Kamini, Damini and Suhashi. With Beena wedded, there will be only Aruna left, and she is in her tenth year. Your benediction alone can pull me through the present daughter crisis. That is all I have to say—Your helpless Uncle Srinath.'

Daughter crisis, indeed! mused Satyajit with a dim smile. Uncle Srinath, a neighbour at Shantipur village but no blood relation, seemed to have been producing his numerous daughters secure in the faith that others would bear the brunt of the repeated crises of their marriage needs. And Satyajit, in the flush of prosperity, had been more than open-handed. It was a matter of pride, self-satisfaction.

In his younger days, the village people had not thought much of him, had not seen in him any special gift or brilliance. One of the common herd. That was all the more reason why he enjoyed success. He needed the wide-eyed wonder and eager homage of Uncle Srinath and the like while they had use and longing for his money. It was plain give-and-take.

All that was over. Fallen from his castle in the clouds, Satyajit must tread the earthly ways of humble folk. But he could not deny the old man altogether. He must send some help. He had pondered over the amount. He had to ponder over each rupee before he spent it.

Then, all at once, he had come to a decision. He would go to Shantipur and attend the marriage. This would be a

welcome relief—the city was suffocating him. His mind would be freshened, his strength renewed for the coming struggle by a return to the physical scene which had been his starting point in life. Let that be his starting point once more, outwardly as much as in the spirit. He would also take this chance to look at his ancestral house and fish-pond, both leased out, bits of property still intact amid the vast demolition. Those he must pass on to his wife as his last gift. And he had sent word to Uncle Srinath about his arrival on the marriage day.

The engine came to life with a shrill of warning. The passenger hurried back. Another half-hour and it was Shantipur. Satyajit leaned out of the door, his eyes looking for Uncle Srinath on the station platform, where many people stood crowded together, alert and apparently excited, one of them holding aloft the national flag on a bamboo pole. A political celebrity on the train? Strange that Uncle Srinath, who had always feared politics, was leading the group. Suddenly, there was a rush of legs towards Satyajit as he stepped down. The legs stopped and a booming chorus followed. *Swagatam! Welcome!*

A small girl with an awestruck face stepped up with a jasmine garland in her hand. Satyajit stood in a daze of bewilderment as the girl rose on tiptoe to place the chain of flowers around his neck. He bent mechanically to receive the offer, not knowing what it meant. It was obviously a mistake, a very curious one.

‘Welcome!’ the voices rang again. Then, an expectant hush. Uncle Srinath turned round to the group. On the high cheekbones and grey stubble of his face was a clear coating of strong elation.

‘Friends and brothers! Bengal has seen greatness in almost every field of action. I shall not belittle your knowledge by citing names. It is only in trade and industry that Bengal has lagged behind sadly—the plums of business have gone to people from upcountry or from overseas. That is why our hearts grow big with pride at the sight of a son of Bengal, a son of our own Shantipur village, who has attained great success in that field, that

forbidden field, and become the glory of the motherland, *Swagatam!* Welcome!

'*Swagatam!*' the combined voices roared while the tricolour flag on its tall pole nodded approvingly.

When Satyajit slipped down from the ox cart at the door of a mud-brick house, a knot of women waiting tensely with brass water-bowls rushed up and stooped over his feet, scrambling for the privilege to wash his feet with cool water. Satyajit shrank back, embarrassed.

'It's my Beena's privilege,' cried Srinath, smiling. 'This is her day. Let Beena alone wash and wipe the reverent feet. All her life she will remember this honour befalling her on the auspicious day of her marriage.'

Satyajit looked at the girl who stepped forward, shy, slender with large pensive eyes in a graceful face. 'So this is the bride,' he smiled at her and touched her hair in the gesture of blessing. 'I hope the groom is worthy of this girl,' he said as she knelt down to unlace his shoes. She slipped off his socks and poured cool water to freshen his feet, washing them with keen care. As her slim fingers went between his toes, he wiggled them, for he felt ticklish. Presently he sat on a carpet in the inner verandah with a plateful of sweets and a glass of whey while Kamini, Damini and Suhashi sat near him on their haunches and waved palm leaf fans with all their energy, as though each passing minute had to be fully used before their hands were deprived of the privilege. Sweat



broke out on their faces and they shifted their fans from right hand to left and again to the right. Their mother, who stood by, now spoke in a murmur, husky with emotion.

'You have been more of a father to these girls than he,' jerking her head at her invisible husband. 'But for the bigness of your heart, they would still be maids under this room, shooting up in years and in height with no chance of having husband and home.' She lifted her sari fringes to her eyes, wiping off two grateful tears.

The meal over, Uncle Srinath, who had been shuttling between the inner verandah and the outer quarters, now stopped, leaning over his guest.

'Beena has been given the old jewellery of her mother,' he confided. 'So, that part of the dowry problem has been met. Her three married sisters, whom you see before you and who owe all their bliss in life to your benediction, have given her the marriage gifts she must have: sari, jacket, chemise. Also brass utensils for her new household.'

'Good! Good!' Satyajit cried happily. He had Rs 200 in his purse and had wondered how much of it had to go into the marriage pool. May be Rs 100; or, rather, Rs 101, since a figure ending with zero was not propitious. During the meal he had been slowly adding to that figure: ten, twenty, finally stopping at an additional fifty. Now that Beena had got all she needed, he could just as well slice a goodly bit off the amount. Let it be Rs 101. The fifty rupees saved would buy a perambulator for his newborn son.

'Your benediction is our blind-man's staff,' Srinath went on. 'Do I have to say more?' He apparently decided that he did not, for he changed the topic abruptly. 'My house has become a place of pilgrimage. You are the pride of the village, its strength. In you the people see their own inmost dream fulfilled. Will you now show yourself for a minute to the devotees who sit waiting—'

Satyajit followed his host. His devotees were seated on a floor mat, talking animatedly, and at the sight of him there was an instant hush. Hands joined to his chest, Satyajit made salutation to all. He caught sight of the schoolmaster who had taught him as a boy and made a

deep obeisance. Swelled with pride, the old man swept the floor mat group with a superior glance before he spoke:

‘Didn’t I say? Didn’t I say a hundred and one times in those far off days that the light of genius blazed on the face of my young pupil? That he stood apart from every other young pig—’ He broke short and yielded to a violent fit of coughing to cover up the slip. Presently he resumed: ‘That he with the light of genius on his face was afar from the world where the other youngsters dwelt? Why, I predicted that he would be a High Court Judge—’

Satyajit burst into a laugh. ‘Alas, I am no High Court Judge’. ‘Even more, much more!’ counted the old man. His good memory reached back to the boy with whom he had been on terms of a perpetual feud. Always bent on some kind of mischief—he did have an inventive mind that way! Arithmetic was his bogey. How does he count all his pile of money? He owns a million, if Srinath is to be believed. A million? And the old man hastened to add a brushful of colour to the drab picture presented by memory. ‘Even in those far-off days I could see two shadow forms about him, clear as life—Saraswati at his left, Lakshmi at his right. And I knew even then that the twin goddesses of knowledge and wealth, though hating the sight of each other, had for once united, stayed together, drawn by their common love.’ He lifted joined palms to his forehead, offering salutation—perhaps to those goddesses.

Satyajit was determined to enjoy himself. He felt a twinge of regret that he had not thought of coming to Shantipur and basking in the people’s homage when it was truly his due. Now he was an impostor. He impersonated the man he had been a few weeks before. He made an angry jerk of his hand about his face, waving off a sand-fly—and the regret. Let him be happy for the day even with a false echo, let him be wrapped a while in the lingering twilight splendour of departed glory. Tomorrow he would be in the full fury of a stream, tugged under water, fighting for life. Today he would have his last breath of peace, freedom, content.

Through the rest of the day he went round the village, meeting the elders, sipping the proffered milk of green

coconuts. He visited his house occupied by a tenant. His house—and he touched the walls possessively. This small house gave him a feeling of security which had not come to him even from his huge city mansion. He spent an hour by the fish pond. His pond—and he sprinkled a palmful of its water on his head. A good-sized carp landed at the end of his hook. When he came home with the catch, Uncle Srinath gazed at it raptly—one would have thought he had never before seen such fish. ‘What gills!’ he breathed in apparent ecstasy. He patted the head of the fish with an affectionate hand. ‘Bride and groom shall eat curried portions of this auspicious one when they break their marriage fast at midnight. That will bring them all the blessings that life can give’. It was near twilight when the groom’s party arrived in ox carts and palanquins. Conches blew welcome. Young women gathered at the dooryard and gave the shrill traditional greeting expressive of great joy; Ulu-ulu-ulu-ulu-ulu! When the bridal party was well settled, chewing betel leaf and waiting for the marriage hour as prescribed by the almanac, Satyajit felt for his purse. Time now to part with Rs 101. Srinath, reading his thoughts, took him to the secluded darkness under a fig-tree in the backyard ‘My begging bowl is ready,’ he announced happily.

‘Yes, yes,’ Satyajit nodded.

‘The cash dowry stands fixed. Only Rs 2001.’

‘What!’ Satyajit felt a hard blow in the pit of his stomach.

‘That is all.’

‘Rs 2001?’

Srinath smiled. ‘Everything else is provided for, even the cost of the marriage feast. Only this last item awaits your benediction.’

Benediction—Srinath’s favourite word. Nothing abstract in its meaning. It could be interpreted only in terms of money. Satyajit felt a burning inside him. He had stretched his leg right into the snare of benediction, unthinkingly. How could he be so very stupid?

Srinath broke the silence with a half laugh. ‘This drop in the ocean of your fortune. It shames me to mention the petty figure.’

‘Why didn’t you write and tell me?’ The voice was harsh.

The half laugh repeated itself. ‘Have I no sense? I am not such a big ass as I look. What! Mention money to a millionaire! And such a pittance. A drop in the ocean.’

‘A drop,’ echoed Satyajit, his mouth dry. This was the moment for confession. He was even worse off than Srinath. Hard struggle lay ahead of him for bare survival. Srinath would understand.

‘Millionaire!’ Rhapsody in the voice. Plain worship on the face. A devotee, prayerful before his god. ‘We bask in your benediction. Our life-spark itself is held in your fist; you can destroy it just by closing your fingers tight. Words cannot say what I feel —’

Yes, the god had been a millionaire, truly. That was yesterday. Today... Confession stuck in his throat, clutched by the millionaire’s dead hand. Better give an excuse. He had come rushing in the midst of heavy work and had not thought of equipping himself with adequate cash. That would sound plausible. Later—it wouldn’t matter if Srinath discovered the terrible truth later, as he must.

Something stronger than he spoke with his tongue. ‘I had to catch the morning train—there was no time to go to the bank. Maybe someone in the village—’ The words ‘cash a cheque’ were almost on his lips. ‘Someone in the village will advance a loan—’

Uncle Srinath rushed out of the house, panic on his face. He had been under the impression that a millionaire always had his pockets stuffed with money. Satyajit returned to the assembled guests. Instantly the groom, on his foot-high satin-draped platform, fat round cushions on three sides of him, was forgotten. Silence. All eyes took their fill of the rich man. A god on the pedestal of fortune. He too sat quiet, the tiredness within him heavier than even before. The peace he had attained erstwhile was gone. He longed to see the face of his new-born son. The rich man’s son who would never ride in a perambulator.

Srinath returned in half an hour. His face looked angry. Satyajit saw his beckoning hand, rose heavily to his feet, and stepped outside, away from the people.

‘Only one person in Shantipur can produce so much cash at this late hour,’ said Srinath, ‘Harish, the money-lender. That shark refuses to make an advance though.’

The swift flood of relief! ‘Harish does not trust me?’ Moneylenders did have a sixth sense. There was no knowing when Harish would have got his money back—perhaps never.

‘Preposterous! Not to trust the word and signature of a millionaire! Harish is off his senses; or, is it malice?’ The voice collected anger. ‘I could drag him to you and make him grovel at your feet and rub his fat nose on the ground.’

Satyajit could be generous. ‘No need, no need. Trust is out of date in these cynical times.’ The wonder of it—his leg was off the snare of benediction!

‘Where will our India be if such things are tolerated? What is Nehru doing about it? Is there no one to tell him how things stand in the country?’

Satyajit patted the excited man on the shoulder, soothingly. Srinath controlled himself with visible effort. His face saddened. ‘What is to be done?’ he moaned. ‘The groom’s father is a man of stone. He will break off the marriage unless cash is paid to him before the ceremony starts. Who will ever marry Beena after such dishonour?’

Satyajit wagged his head in befitting sympathy. ‘If only you had written to me. Just two words or three. Anyway, do not be worried. You will find another suitable match, a better one maybe. Who can foresee the ways of destiny?’ He felt for his purse the second time. He ought to restore the fifty rupees he had cut. Let it be Rs 151. Even if there would be no perambulator for his son—

Srinath cleared his throat twice. ‘It shames me to tell you the full story.’

‘Yes?’

‘Harish is willing to pay.’

‘What! you have just said—’

‘He will pay against security. He wants security, that evil-eyed shark. Your house and fish-pond. The madness! To think that house and pond have more weight than a millionaire’s signature!’

Satyajit trembled within him. ‘House and pond,’ he murmured to himself. The only possessions that had not

toppled into the deluge. They were all he could give to his wife—

‘All the old values destroyed, where will our India be? Has Nehru no sense to understand this? What! A pond weighs more than a millionaire’s word, a house is better security than the signature of his hand! Yet, what else is to be done?’ Palms folded together made supplication. ‘What else is to be done in the daughter crisis?’

Satyajit had a queer drugged look. And the dead voice of the millionaire came from his throat. ‘Let the money-lender pay on those terms.’

‘The insult, what about the insult?’ Srinath’s wrathful hand cleaved the air. ‘When the thing is done, I will make the shark rub his fat nose on the ground at your feet; I will do that, be sure. You will also see the whole village spit at the shark, *thool!*’

The deed was signed, the house was gay with marriage music. Satyajit walked off to the deep dark under the fig tree, all by himself.

‘What now,’ he said under his breath, and a dim smile pinched the corners of his lips as he stuck between them the cork tip of a cigarette, the last one in the tin, and lifted a lit match with slow tremulous deliberation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bhabani Bhattacharya (1906–1988), one of the foremost Indian writers of fiction in English, won acclaim for his novel, *So Many Hungers* (1947), which presents a vivid picture of the Bengal famine during World War II. He won the Sahitya Akademi Award for *Shadow from Ladakh* (1966). He also wrote a number of short stories.

‘Glory at Twilight’ is taken from the collection, *Steel Hawk and Other Stories*.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

1. Give reasons for the following
 - a. Satyajit attending the village wedding.

- b. Satyajit's recollection of the forgerer when he was on the train.
 - c. Srinath and his family members' eager expectation of Satyajit's arrival.
 - d. Srinath's disappointment with Satyajit.
 - e. Satyajit's feeling that he was an impostor.
 - f. Satyajit not disclosing his present financial status to his uncle.
2. Describe the cycle of events in Satyajit's life that brought him back to where he began.

TALKING ABOUT THE TEXT

Discuss in pairs

1. It is difficult to adjust to a fall from glory.
2. 'Failure had a tempo faster than success.'
3. Satyajit should have revealed his predicament to his uncle.
4. The author's comment on crime and punishment.

APPRECIATION

1. How is Satyajit's financial crash introduced to the reader?
2. Comment on the way in which the story is narrated from Satyajit's perspective.
3. How has the author used the episode of the bank theft to comment on Satyajit's success in his career?
4. How do these lines capture the essence of the story:
'Glory was all overlaid with dark shame. Glory was dead.'
'... let him be wrapped a while in the lingering twilight splendour of departed glory'.

LANGUAGE WORK

1. Notice this description
Tall, thin, near forty, he had sharp features, the hair receding on his temple in wide shiny patches. His eyes hated glare and he wore smart eye-glasses to shield them. His mouth, thinlipped, would tighten in response to a line that suggested strength of will but might have only been pride.

Look at the padding of adjectives. Notice how physical features are related to mental qualities.

- a. Pick out other such descriptions of people from the story.
- b. Try writing out a description of a person you have observed closely.

2. Notice these expressions

'We **bask in your benediction**. Our **life-spark itself is held in your fist**.'

'This is her day. Let Beena alone **wash and wipe the reverent feet**. All her life she will remember **this honour befalling her on her auspicious day of her marriage**.'

- ♦ How do they capture the Indian idiom?
- ♦ Underline other such expressions.

3. Notice these fragments in para three of the lesson

- a. The banking establishment of which he had attained control.
- b. The amazing tempo of it all.

These are not complete sentences but serve to capture the character's train of thought. Such devices are often used in creative writing.

SUGGESTED READING

1. *An Astrologer's Day and other Stories* by R.K. Narayan.

