



a novel

A Ballad of Remittent Fever

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Translated from the Bengali by Arunava Sinha

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CELEBRATING DISTINGUISHED FICTION BY INDIAN WRITERS

1. The House of the Ghoshals

The river lay ahead. A blue current. A densely wooded hill sloped upwards on the left. A boy of thirteen or fourteen lay on the ground, surrounded by a group of primitive naked men and women. Only one of them was dressed in a furry deerskin. The boy was foaming at the mouth, his eyes whirling in a frenzy, his body shaking uncontrollably. The man covered from head to toe in deerskin had two antlers on his head. His face resembled an ape's, and he even had a tail of a fox attached to his buttocks. This strangely attired man stood out from all the others. Suddenly he began dancing in a circle around the boy, waving a branch from a tree. His lips moved at intervals, uttering unintelligible words—incantations, perhaps. At the same time he kept touching the body of the boy with the branch. Abruptly he stopped. Cupping his hands around his mouth, he howled at the sky, aaaayeeee. Another figure in deerskin materialized next to him. His eyes were red, and he was carrying a leather case, which he opened to reveal a set of sharpened stones. Choosing a flat, knife-edged one, he turned it round and round in his hands, examining it carefully. Handing the case to the other man in the deerskin, he stepped confidently up to the boy, who was lying on the ground, all but dead. Planting one foot on either side of him, the man surveyed him with bloodshot eyes, taking stock of the situation. Suddenly leaping forward and planting himself on the boy's chest, he sliced off a portion of the skin on the right side of the boy's scalp at lightning speed with his stone implement. As soon as he peeled the skin away, the skull presented itself like white ice. Now the man in the deerskin chose a thicker, sharper stone and swiftly cut open a circle in the skull, removing the disc. Blood flowed freely from the wound, while the boy screamed at the top of his voice, his body convulsing in pain. Several naked men and women were holding him down firmly. The boy's screams echoed through the mountain ranges, flying across the rough terrain spreading from one forest to the next. The other tribes in the mountains, as well as every animal and bird in the area, tried to locate the source of the sound. Three of the four women who had emerged from a cave nearby glanced at the scene before proceeding, unperturbed, towards the river. Without warning there was the sound of wild drumbeats.

Dwarikanath woke up with a start. He had this dream frequently, not exactly in the same form, but recurring in different versions. Sometimes the boy lay alone on the riverbank, the wound in his head bleeding uncontrollably. A fire blazed nearby. Suddenly a hairy human would appear from nowhere to pick a thin branch out of the flames and rub it against the wound, which closed immediately as the blood burned and clotted. It wasn't dawn yet, and the air in the room was chilly. He didn't feel inclined to abandon the comfort of his bed.

Kuuuooooooooor ghotitawlaaaaaaa... Dwarika's drowsiness was dispelled at once. Sahadeb's cry meant the sun would be rising soon. The first birds were heard calling indistinctly, the fidgety ones among them flapping their wings. These were the sounds that conveyed the hour of day in Calcutta. The guns would go off at the fort in the maidan at first light, with a second round at one in the afternoon, and a third at nine at night. This would meet with an ecstatic response from Baiju and Beni, the two Hindustani gatemmen—bomkali kalkattawali.

Dwarikanath jumped out of bed and looked out the window. The fog was a muslin veil, spreading across the earth like chloroform seeping into the air.

It was light by the time he had finished washing his face and hands in the tiny bathroom on the first floor. The small room facing north was Dwarika's dining room, where he occasionally had a drink, all by himself. The first guns went off as he was polishing off the bananas, guavas, and sweets laid out for him on a plate. Going into the library, he was greeted by rows of bookshelves—stacked storehouses of knowledge gazing at him in unblinking silence. They wanted nothing from him, only seeking to give of themselves selflessly, desirous only of his company. Dwarika felt the soothing touch of their comfort in his heart. He ran his hands across their spines, then reached out for the skeleton suspended from a hook. The human frame swayed ever so slightly. Then he went to his desk to change the date on the calendar. It was Wednesday, 16 January 1884. A memorable day. He had to be at the Medical College lecture hall on time.

The door to the next room was shut, for no one lived in it, but the door to Sureshwari's room was wide open. She wasn't there. Her personal maid, Mokkhada, was making her bed. Sureshwari usually woke up before sunrise, going downstairs and rousing the household staff to get them started on the day. How else was Dwarika to reach the hospital on time?

Dwarika took the north staircase downstairs. He was reminded of his dream once more. But then everything that had taken place before today also seemed like a dream. He was sixteen when he passed the entrance examination to the Calcutta Medical College. But the aristocratic Ghoshal family of Kidderpore was exceedingly conservative. It had been a while since Madhusudan Gupta had been the first to dissect a corpse with a view to enabling students to overcome their mental block against handling the dead. But for the family the dark ages had not ended even forty years later. Studying medicine meant handling the dead bodies of people of all castes, which made it hard to secure their permission to study medicine. Still Dwarika had expressed his desire to his father to be a doctor. Not only was Ramkanta Ghoshal, the head of the family, incredibly orthodox, short-tempered, and inflexible, but there was also the malicious advice of his young second wife to contend with. His eyes bulging out, he had said, 'How can a student of Harinath Nayaratna's primary school harbour such a heretical idea?' Permission was not given. Dwarika, who had lost his mother in his childhood, was not superstitious like his father, but he was a match for Ramkanta when it came to angry, obdurate determination. He *would* study medicine, come what may. 'I shall disown you in that case,' his father had announced that night.

Lowering his eyes, the son had said, 'So be it, but still I must study medicine.' Ramkanta's fair-skinned face was red now. His suddenly cruel eyes boring into Dwarika, he said viciously, 'Not another word, get out of this house tomorrow morning...' and left. Dwarika would have left that very night, but his father's sister, Sureshwari, had prevented him from doing so. A child widow, she had been married at a time when an average of thirty Brahmins from the highest sub-caste married some two thousand one hundred women in Hooghly district every year. Her nephew was the only person in this lifeless mansion she could talk to. That very night she had attempted to pass on some money and two gold ornaments in secret to Dwarika.

Leave alone the ornaments, Dwarika was hesitant even to accept the money. Touching his cheek, Sureshwari had said, 'This jewellery, it's from your grandfather, and the money, it's from your uncle...now that he's left me and gone, what will I do with it... You'd better take it...it'll come in useful...you must study hard and be famous...like Doctor Goodeve.'

At this Dwarika had held out his hand humbly, taking the money but not the ornaments. 'Let those be,' he had said with a smile, 'keep them for yourself...you can always sell them if you're in trouble.' His aunt had smiled too. 'Take your widowed aunt away from here when you become a top doctor, all my troubles will be over...'

Dwarika had only ten rupees left after using this money for his admission fee. Uncertainty loomed large over him. A wealthy and well-known businessman called Edward John Smith had been surprised to see the handsome young man, who looked gloomy and had possibly been starving, sitting with his back propped up against the water trough for horses, near the entrance to the Medical College. The scene resembled a painting.

Going up to Dwarika, Smith had asked, 'What's the matter, my son? Why are you so sad?' Dwarika had jumped to his feet, and Smith had patted his back sympathetically. He hadn't broken down, but his voice had choked as he recounted his story—his eyes must have misted over too. The Englishman had taken him at once to his enormous rented house on Free School Street. Given him shelter in one of the large rooms in his house. Dwarika got a new lease of life.

The childless Smiths never held back their affection for him. Rosemary Smith would scold him like a mother, but she would also smother him with love.

The Englishman's father had been an indigo trader. When this business slowed to a trickle, Smith turned to exporting tea, sugar, silk and, later, jute. His credo was that if you were intelligent enough you could become a millionaire even selling water. 'Do you know the profit American businessman Frederic Tudor made from despatching ice from Boston to Calcutta?' Smith's blue eyes danced as he whistled. 'Two hundred and twenty thousand dollars. Not bad, eh?' He laughed. 'Intelligence, you know, that's all there is to it.'

Like business, he claimed to understand people well too. After two glasses of sherry, he would put his arm around Dwarika and tell his wife, 'Mark my words, Rosie, this boy will climb to the top.'

The Smiths were Protestants. They went to church every Sunday. Dwarika would accompany them, although they had never insisted that he do so. Sometimes it was to the Old or Mission Church, known as the Red Church, and at other times, St John's. That was where Dwarika heard pipe organ music for the first time. Just like an inkdrop instantly soaking into a sheet of blotting paper, the cadence of the glorious divine music slipped through his pores into his veins. His body thrilled to the diminuendos and crescendos. That was the first time that Dwarika had had the opportunity to marvel at the power of music, how it could make a slave of a man. He began to visit St John's Church regularly just to hear the organ. And he wondered often what might

happen if his father were to change his mind and despatch someone to the Smiths to bring him back home. Would Dwarika abandon his benefactors? Never. Mrs Smith did tell him over and over again to go back to his father, and Smith supported her, but he knew they were just saying it. Both of them would be hurt beyond belief if he left.

Dwarika decided to convert to Christianity without anyone urging or provoking him to do so. He was now nominally a Protestant Christian like the Smiths. He did not believe in god, but, just in case Ramkanta had a change of heart, he had made sure that the road to returning home was now blocked forever.

From his third year in college onwards, Dwarika began to examine patients for a fee of four rupees. This not only paid for his expenses but also left him with money to spare. Mrs Smith approved greatly of this self-reliance, and Smith was, in any case, enamoured of everything Dwarikanath did.

Then came his medical degree. He graduated with the highest honours—two gold medals. Delirious with joy at his performance, Dwarika went to G. F. Kellner and Co. at Esplanade East the same day. The Smiths loved their sherry, so Dwarika bought a crate of Manzanilla, a mature dry sherry, for a full thirty-two rupees. Mrs Smith scolded him when she saw the twenty-four bottles, saying he really shouldn't have spent so much money. But then she hugged him, and said, 'You're wonderful, Dooarik.' They had a delightful time that evening, with Smith alone finishing off five of the small bottles, and Mrs Smith keeping pace. Dwarika had to drink a glass of sherry too at their request. And then the Smiths began dancing uninhibitedly.

Such joyous singing and dancing took place at their house on one more occasion besides Christmas—on 15 October or, sometimes, 15 November, the date of an annual reunion of the Europeans who lived in Calcutta. Smith had explained its history to Dwarika. There was a time when Calcutta lived in constant fear of deadly diseases—a serious illness usually meant death. Patients went to hospital in the hope of being cured, but very few of them returned home. Nor was there any way of assuring oneself that someone who was alive today would be alive tomorrow. That was why this annual celebration was held, for the survivors to meet one another. Perhaps they counted their numbers to calculate how many more had been consigned to their graves. Those who continued to be alive in this disease-beleaguered city probably told themselves, 'Thank the Lord for one more year.' And then they gave themselves up to the joy of being alive....

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