

The Dilemma

by
Vijay Dan Detha

ONCE there was a rich Seth. His only son had just got married with great pomp and show, and now the procession was returning home. On the way, they stopped to rest in a forest. Cool lay the heavy shadows. The lake leapt and danced, its water mirroring the lotus flowers. The sun was approaching its zenith. The forest quivered beneath the whip of June's blazing winds. The bridegroom's father decided it would be best for them to lunch before they proceeded, and the guests were only too willing to accede to his proposal. The bride's five maid-servants spread rugs in the shade and sat down together. Nearby grew a huge tree, silver barked and festooned with yellow flowers. The guests sat in its shade while preparations for the meal were set afoot.

The bride sat a little apart, and unveiled her face. She glanced upwards. Numberless green shoots hung down, cooling to the eyes. It so happened that a ghost had his dwelling in the hollow of that tree. His eyes were dazzled by that glimpse of the bride's unveiled face, fragrant with unguents and perfumes. Could a mortal woman really be endowed with such youth and beauty? She looked as though moulded of the softness, the fragrance, the essence of roses. One could scarcely believe that such beauty existed on the face of the earth. Perhaps the lightning had left its abode in the clouds and descended in this form? But what simile could be found for those nectarous eyes? It was as if all the beauty of nature had compressed itself in her face. He had



seen thousands of women, but she was unique indeed. The very shade cast by the tree began to sparkle.

The ghost felt that his existence had become meaningful. First, he thought of taking up habitation in the bride's body, but then he realised that this would cause her suffering. How could he hurt such beauty? He was in a dilemma. In a few minutes, she would depart. He could neither bring himself to trouble her by inhabiting her frame, nor could he bear to be parted from her. Never before had he found himself in such a plight. Should he take possession of the bridegroom? But that too would cause the bride sorrow. If such beauty were to grieve, the clouds would withhold their waters and the lightning veil itself. The sun would not rise nor the moon. Nature would be despoiled. Never

before had he felt compassion for anyone. Today, he felt that he would prefer to suffer himself than to inflict pain on such beauty. But would he be allowed to suffer for her sake? Were this granted him, he would ask nothing more of life.

After they had rested, it was inevitable that they depart. When the bride rose to go, darkness swam before the ghost's eyes. How had eyes that were accustomed to see in the dark become misted over? How had blackness suddenly eclipsed the noonday sun?

Her jewels tinkling, the bride ascended the groom's bullock cart. How fortunate was this groom! How happy! The ghost was pierced by a hundred thorns. A fire flared up in his heart. This fire of separation made it impossible either to live or to die. How

could one live and endure this burning? Yet, if one died, one would be deprived even of this pain. The ghost had never known such conflict. As the bullock cart disappeared from his view, he fell down in a trance.

The bridegroom, in his bullock cart, was caught in no less a dilemma. He had spent two hours trying to compute the wedding expenses but was still unable to tally his accounts. His father would be very angry. It appeared that the expenditure had been a bit too heavy. Father could not tolerate such mistakes. The joys of accounting and trade are the greatest joys. Everything else is nothing but a useless distraction. God too is a careful keeper of accounts. He keeps track of each breath we draw. He preserves an exact record of every drop of water, gust of wind and grain of soil. When even nature makes no mistake in its accounts, how can a mistake in a trader's ledger be overlooked?

The groom was frowning over his calculations; the bride lifted the curtain and looked out. The sun blazed down so that the eye could barely rest anywhere. Red berries glowed in the green fields. How tempting they were! Her eyes were transfixed by those smiling berries. Catching hold of the groom's arm, the bride said in the tones of a wheedling child: "Take your eyes off that ledger and look out for a moment. How lovely those berries are! Do go and gather a handful or two! Look, they haven't even got scorched by the sun. The sun only makes them shine the more. Usually, the brightest colour fades or withers in the sun, doesn't it?"

Now the bridegroom was an ordinary mortal, like any other. Neither too beautiful nor too ugly. He had got married in the heyday of his youth, but he was not particularly overjoyed at the event. If it had taken place five years later, it would have suited him

just as well, but now that it had happened he was content. It was to happen some time or other, after all. One big job was over and done with. Stroking his wife's nine-gemmed necklace, he said: "It's only village bumpkins who like to eat berries. How can you want them? If you are hungry I'll open the bundle and give you sweetmeats or coconut slices. You can eat your fill."

But the bride turned out to be a village bumpkin. "No", she said, stubbornly. "Just get me the berries. I'll be grateful to you. If you don't want to trouble yourself, allow me to go and pluck them."

The bridegroom repeated: "Who wants to get tangled in those thorns? Only uncivilised people go around plucking and eating berries. Why don't you have some pancakes or sugar candy or crystal sugar? And when we get home, don't you mention such things as berries or limes. People will laugh at you."

"Let them laugh!" So saying, the bride leapt down from the bullock cart. Like a butterfly, she sported in the fields. In a short while, she was back, her veil full of berries. She washed them and cooled them in a pitcher. Her lips and the berries were of one hue but the bridegroom was not pleased by either. He remained buried in his accounts. Despite the bride's blandishments he refused to taste the berries.

"As you please", said she. "Each to his own taste. I almost felt like leaving my nine-gemmed necklace in the fields, in exchange for the berries."

This made the groom look up. "Don't talk such nonsense ever again. My father will get very angry. He prizes women's good qualities above their beauty."

Smiling, the bride replied: "Now I know - it's for fear of your father that you are so tied up with your accounts. Everything is proper in its own time and place. Whoever heard of being

busy with accounts at your wedding?"

"The wedding had to take place so it did", replied the groom. "But the accounts are not yet settled. I have to reckon up the wedding accounts before *Teej*, because on that day I must leave on a business trip to another land. There isn't another such auspicious day for seven years to come."

But the rustic bride was not in the least glad to hear of this auspicious day. She even lost her taste for the berries. She felt as if somebody was squeezing the blood from her heart. What was the meaning of this impossibility? She could hardly believe her ears. "What did you say?" she said. "You are going abroad for business? But I have heard that there is untold wealth hoarded up in your house."

"There is no doubt of that", he answered, proudly, "You can see it for yourself- heaps of diamonds and pearls. But wealth should keep increasing, twofold by day and fourfold by night. Business is the primary duty of a trader. We must increase our wealth. How can we let such an auspicious day go unutilised?"

The bride said not another word. Of what use was it to speak? One by one, she threw out all the berries. Smiling, the groom remarked: "I told you those berries are eaten only by rustics. We big people can't eat them. See, you had to throw them, after all. So it was for nothing that you exposed yourself to the heat of the sun."

So saying, he leant out of the bullock cart to see how hot it was. It was hot enough to make his eyes burn. The brambles laden with yellow flowers looked to him like so many flames of fire. "I hope you won't insist on having these brambles next", he joked. "If they had been edible, the shepherds wouldn't have spared them you may be sure!"



The bride made no reply. Silent, she sat with bent head. It was for this husband, she thought, that she had left her home and borne the separation from her parents. She had given up so many joys - her group of girlfriends, her brothers and cousins, the shore of the lake, the songs and games, dolls, hide-and-peek - just to take this husband's hand. She had left her mother's lap for a strange house, and here he was, eager to go abroad for business on the auspicious occasion of *Teej*. Of what use then this unparalleled wealth? It fulfils none of life's needs, not even that of a shroud at death. What happiness had she hoped for when she had followed him? What impalpable joy and satisfaction had she sought when she agreed to live in a strange place? When are one's earnings, property and wealth to be enjoyed? Of what use is possession even of the three worlds, at the cost of real happiness? All the riches of the universe will not buy back one lost moment. Do human beings exist for wealth or does wealth exist for human beings? This is the only account which has to be reckoned. Once this is understood, no reckoning remains. Is gold of more value than flesh and blood? Is breath of more value or money? All the meanings of life are contained in the

answer to this question.

The groom was immersed in his accounts, the bride lost in her thoughts, but the bullocks kept up their pace. They who set out must reach their destination. The procession finally came to a halt at the Seth's door. Welcomed with music and song, with drums and trumpets, the bride entered the women's quarters. None could see her without extolling her. Here was beauty indeed!

As dusk fell, lamps of clarified butter were lit in the bedchamber. The groom came at midnight. As soon as he came, he began to scatter pearls of wisdom. She must preserve the honour of the house at all costs. She must serve her parents-in-law. Her honour was in her hands. Why awaken the desire of the flesh for this couple of days? Two days of togetherness would torment them for five years. Time flies; five years would soon pass away. What would they lack then? This same bed-chamber, these same lamps. These nights and this bed. She must not allow herself to be at all uneasy. Five years would pass away in the twinkling of an eye.

The bride listened in silence to these words of wisdom. It was not in her power to say, to do, or to change anything. Her husband's will must be her will. The father's will was the

son's will, Lakshmi's will was the father's will. And what greed willed was what Lakshmi willed. The night was spent on the purveying of these words of wisdom. Along with the night, the nine million twinkling stars too faded and fled.

Faraway, in the forest, the ghost awoke from his swoon, and looked around him. Empty the forest, empty its greenery. Deep the shadows, thick hung the foliage. But where was the bride? Where were her intoxicating eyes, where her lovely face, her pink lips? Had it all been a dream? On awakening from the swoon, he felt as if his mind was bathed in milk, washed clean of all fraud and deception. Such a sun had never risen before. A huge pink sphere. Spreading light through the universe. What soft breezes! The greenery swung to and fro in an invisible swing. His mind took on a myriad different forms and united with every element in nature.

Never, before this day, had there been such a sunset. Rose coloured light lay scattered in the west. The earth was neither too bright nor yet too dark. No sun, moon or star was to be seen in the sky. Nature had covered herself with a transparent veil. Both the face and the veil were visible. Then nature changed her veil. This dark veil was studded with nine million

stars. Her face could be dimly seen. Dim trees, dim greenery. As though a dream were being woven. Never had nature appeared so enchanting. And it was the bride's face which had wrought this miracle.

The bride's husband, turning away his face from her youth, set out on his journey. He had a bundle of diamonds and pearls tied to his waist and two slung over his shoulders. Before him, he saw the matchless sun of business shining in the sky. Truly, there is no end to happiness, profit and the earning of money. He passed by the forest and the ghost recognised him at once. Assuming the form of a man, he greeted him, and asked: "Brother, the auspicious threads of your wedding are not yet untied. Where do you go so soon after marriage?"

The Seth's son made answer: "Cannot the threads be untied in another land?"

The ghost walked with him quite a long way. He learnt that this fellow was off to trade in a foreign land, and would not be back for five years. He carefully observed the Seth's son's ways of talking and moving, his manner and style, then he took his leave. He thought to himself that if he were to take on the form of the Seth's son and turn up on the Seth's doorstep next morning, no one would ask any questions for five years. What good luck! What a perfect coincidence! He would leave the rest to time. God had heard his prayer. He couldn't wait another moment. Assuming the form of the Seth's son, down to the last detail, he set off towards the village. His mind overflowed with joy and contentment.

There were three hours of day-light left, yet it had grown dark. A terrible black and yellow tornado was seen approaching from the north. Gradually, the darkness thickened. One could not see one's own hand. What strange dreams nature has! Had

it not been for this dream, could the dust that lies underfoot have blotted out the sun? Dust ascended into the sky. The air shrieked aloud, whipped by the coming storm. The whirlwind stirred the very roots of the mountains. Huge trees, hollow in their pride, were uprooted, one by one. But the flexible bushes that humbly swayed and bent to the storm, remained unhurt. The grass that is trampled underfoot remained unhurt. Enquiring, caressing, stroking, the storm passed overhead. All vegetation rocked as though in a cradle. Every leaf and bud was shaken. Large birds were slapped around while small birds sat glued to the branches. It was impossible to fly. The storm ruled the sky. A loud rustling filled the air as though the forest were crying out. The light of the sun was swallowed up by the dust of the earth. Strange is this dance of the whirlwind, this moving of the sands. Nature hid herself in the storm. Neither hill nor greenery nor earth was to be seen. Formless. Invisible. Before this slight stirring of nature, human knowledge is of no account, human strength of no use, human pride of no avail, human achievement of no value. Then came nature's next scene - light began to be sprinkled around. One's hands became visible - the hills in their place, the sun round like a gold disc. Trees in their place, bushes in their place, the wind in its place. What magic was this? Suddenly, it began to rain heavily. The drops dashed against one another. The clouds opened their mouths. Nature bathed, and washed every part. Water flowed in streams and rivulets. Water lay all around. The sunlight watched nature's bath.

The ghost wondered how all this had happened so swiftly. What kind of natural phenomenon was this, which one could scarcely believe? What had happened? How had it happened? Surely, this was not the storm in his own mind finding

outward expression? Was this sport of nature buried somewhere in his own breast? Lost in these thoughts and making his plans, he walked briskly along. He went first to the Seth's shop. The Seth, busy with his accounts, looked up and could hardly believe his eyes. How could his son have returned? Never had he disobeyed the Seth. Marriage renders a man good for nothing. Truly, one can either follow the dictates of business or those of a woman, not both.

Before the father could open his lips, the son understood what was coming. Folding his hands, he said: "Please listen first to what I have to say. I have returned to consult you on a business matter. If you so desire, I will set out again without showing my face at home. What happened was that on the way, I saw a holy man in a trance. His body was covered with layers of white ants. I carefully removed them, and then fetched water from a well to bathe him. I served him food and water. He was pleased and granted me a boon. Every morning, as I rise from bed, I will get five gold coins. But if I even think of going abroad, the boon will be withdrawn. Now it is for you to decide how I should act."

Such an unexpected boon could result only in one decision. The Seth cheerfully gave his consent. The Sethani too was overjoyed. Her only son would be with her, and his earnings would be doubled. The bride was happy but also astonished and proud. Of course, her husband had been unable to go abroad, leaving such beauty as hers behind. He had had to return within three days.

After sitting in the shop and having a meal, the husband came and lay down in the bedchamber. Lamps of clarified butter illuminated the bed of flowers. What joy could surpass this anticipation? The tinkle of anklet bells was heard. What music could

surpass that tinkle? Bejewelled and bedecked, the bride entered the room. What beauty could surpass this loveliness? A sweet fragrance spread through the chamber. What perfume could surpass this fragrance? It was this fragrance which had awakened the ghost's sleeping emotions. Today, their eyes met at last. Little had he dreamt that his wish would so soon be fulfilled.

The bride came forward without any shyness, and sat next to him. When she lifted her veil, the supreme joy of all three worlds shone forth. Even the shadow of such beauty would dazzle one. Smiling, she said: "I knew that you would break off the journey and come back. This starry night would never have let you proceed. My dear, if you were a man of such resolve, why did you go at all, when I asked you to stay? Anyway, my desire has been fulfilled."

When she spoke thus, a storm arose in the husband's mind. How could he mix filth in this pure milk? To deceive her would be a great sin. She was so happy because she thought he was her real husband. What lie could be meaner, more despicable? This was indeed the ultimate lie. How could he play false with love's unconsciousness? Love washes clean even a ghost's mind. One may try one's wits against an equal, but to cut the throat of one who is asleep is to defile the sword.

Moving a little away from her, he said: "Are you sure your desire has been fulfilled? You'd better make sure I am not some other man, some magician posing as your husband."

At first, the bride was a bit startled. Then she fixed her gaze on him. Exactly the same face. The same form and figure. The same expression and voice. She immediately understood that her husband was trying to test her virtue. Smiling, she said: "I would never let a strange man

touch me, not even in a dream, let alone in reality. If you were a strange man, you would long ago have been consumed by the fire of my virtue."

This stung the ghost. He almost retorted that her virtue must certainly be wanting in lustre since he was a strange man but had not yet been consumed. Instantly, however, another aspect of the matter occurred to him, and his annoyance was replaced by great joy. It is not one's face which can identify one's truth, he thought. If that other had been a husband in truth, could greed for business have made him desert this



woman? Had he taken her hand only so that he might leave her to bum in the fires of separation? Even a blind man would have been dazzled by her radiance; how then could he blind himself to it? What if he was the one who had taken the marriage vows in the presence of the fire? There was no truth in his love for her. But he, though a ghost, loved truly. He trembled at the thought of deceiving her. His love was true, his desire real. So the virtue of both of them was preserved. Yet, he could not hurt love by leaving truth unspoken. Coming close to her, he said: "Actually, I am

another man but your virtue is intact, because my love is true. The husband who married you has no true love for you. That is why he turned away from such beauty and went off abroad."

How could the bride distinguish between the true and the false? She did not understand his words. When the parents had accepted him as their son, why should she hesitate to accept him as her husband? Indeed, face and form are the most important seals of all relationships.

Then the ghost narrated to the bride how he had seen her in the forest, how he had fallen into a swoon when she left, how he had met and talked to her husband, how he had decided to assume his form and take his place. He even told her in detail about the storm he had encountered on his way. The bride sat still, like a puppet, listening. Had god given her ears only to hear such a story?

Stroking her wrist, the ghost added: "Mother and father will be satisfied with five gold coins every day and my earnings at the shop. They are not concerned with my real secret. But if I had not told you, the face of love would have been blackened. For five years, you would never have dreamt of this reality. You would have stayed with me, thinking me your real husband. But how would I have hidden the truth from myself? I have inhabited the bodies of many women, and troubled them a lot, but I never felt this way before. I do not even know in which corner of my mind this compassion lay dormant. If you are not agreeable to my staying on, I will go back this instant, and never again look your way. I do not want to enjoy a love which will cause suffering to you. Yet all my life I will remain indebted to you for having transformed the poison in my heart into nectar. This is the highest touchstone of woman's beauty and man's love."

The beautiful one opened her lips.

She said: "I can't make up my mind whether it is better that you have spoken the truth or whether it would have been better had you not spoken it."

Gazing into her eyes, the ghost replied; "Can a barren woman understand the pain of giving birth? This pain is itself the supreme joy of the womb. The anguish of truth is like the anguish of giving birth. Had I hidden the truth, there would have been neither agony nor ecstasy. There would have been merely an illusion of reality, a pretence of joy. Having inhabited the bodies of many women, I have understood what the illusion of reality is. I know many Sati Savitris who sleep only with their husbands but see another face in his face. It is true that they never touch a strange man. But I know, even better than god does, how much wifely feeling there is in their thoughts of others' faces, while they lie in the husband's embrace. I have seen the games these faithful wives play. It is dishonour that they fear. If there was no fear of the secret being revealed, even god would not hesitate to sin. Now tell me what you want. Even though I am a ghost, I have not hidden anything from you."

No woman could ever have had to solve such a riddle. It is one thing voluntarily to have an affair; whose mind is not stirred by desire for a man or a woman besides the spouse? But social opinion does not allow the curtain to be lifted. What has to happen behind the curtain does happen. Yet, how difficult it is to confront, to think about, and then to answer such a question. She sat, silent, as if she had forgotten how to speak. Hearing all this had rendered her dumb.

An unexpected wave arose in the bride's mind. She began to think. When she was born, a basket had been beaten instead of a plate. Her family was none too pleased. A son's

birth would have made them far happier. A daughter's growth is as unwelcome to her parents' eyes as the accumulation of dust in the house. As soon as she was ten, they grew anxious to send her off to a strange house. Neither the courtyard nor the world outside could contain her. No one hesitates to ask for whey, or for a girl's hand. The proposals came thick and fast. The fame of her beauty had spread far and wide. She could not complete her sixteenth year there. Her mother's womb had given her a place but there was no place for her in that house. A coconut happened to be sent from this house. It was her fate that her parents did not return that coconut. If another house had been chosen instead of this one, she would have had to go there. She would have had to take the hand of whichever man her parents chose. Her husband had remained lost in his business and his account books. He could discern little difference between the pages of a ledger and the face of a woman. Blooming youth or barren soil - it was all one to him. Neither in the bullock cart nor in the bedchamber had he understood his wife's desires. Leaving a deserted bedroom and an empty bed, he had set out on business, and had not once glanced back. Today, the sun was dimmed by the light of this ghost's love. She had not been able to control her wedded husband when he had insisted on leaving her. Could she control the love of this ghost? If she could not stop the one who went away, how could she stop the one who came? How could she fill her ears with oil when he expressed his love? Her husband had left her in midstream. Though a ghost, this other had shown her love. How could she refuse it? Could dreams be controlled, then might love be controlled!

Oblivious of all else, she fell into the ghost's arms.

Was this ghost perhaps called into being by the bride's own mind?

Can one hold one's mind at a distance? Where speech falters, silence is most eloquent. There was nothing further to be said. They spontaneously understood each other's unspoken thoughts. Then the lamps were quenched and darkness glowed like light. The withered flowers spread on the bed bloomed and blossomed. The nine million stars in the sky took on new radiance.

When nights are so intoxicating, time takes wing. Days tumbled on each other's heels. The business prospered. Trade increased. Their reputation grew. The parents were happy, and the whole district too was pleased with the Seth's son. He was helpful to all and sundry. He was no bloodsucker like other money lenders. He was simple and well behaved. He never cast bold looks at the women who came to the shop. He treated the younger women like sisters and the older women like mothers. People spoke of him with reverence. His only fault was that he tore up the letters that came from the Seth's son, and never replied to them.

Three years passed in this happiness and prosperity, like the passing of a blissful dream. The ghost felt settled in that house, as if he really were the Seth's own son. The daughter-in-law was intoxicated by his company. The rising sun was hurried to its setting by the anticipation of nightfall. And when they entered their room, the night sped by.

The daughter-in-law became pregnant. When he heard the good news, the Seth distributed one and a quarter *maunds* of palm sugar with his own hands. The people accepted it as if it were so much gold. This was the first time in his life that the Seth showed such generosity. People hoped that this was only a beginning. The son and his wife quietly gave a substantial amount in charity. A young moon would now join the

company of the nine million stars. The moon of the womb is always greater than the moon in the sky.

Both the husband and wife ardently longed for a daughter. How they would celebrate her birth! A son is no angel from heaven. Who knows what he may turn out to be? There is more pleasure in contemplating a child's coming than there is in its actual birth. Dreams grow as the child grows in the womb.

Days raced by, swift as horses. Five months passed. Seven were completed. It was now the ninth month. The daughter-in-law lay all day in the bedroom, waited on by three maid servants.

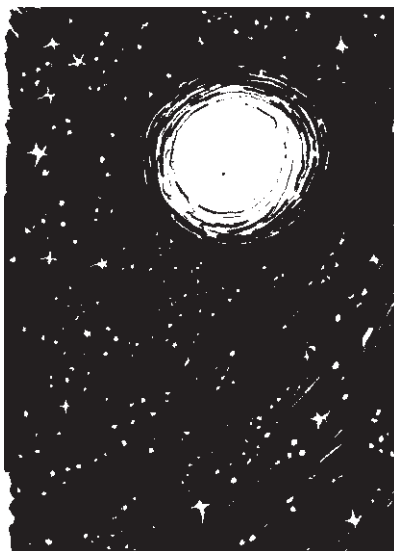
One night, as she lay in her husband's lap, she raised her head and said: "Often I wonder how I would have spent these four years, had we not happened to stop in that forest that day. I think I'd never have survived these years."

"You'd have survived, somehow or other", the ghost replied. "But what would my state have been? I'd have worn out my life in trees and bushes. Thank god I had the good sense not to inhabit you that day. I still feel as if I am dreaming rather than actually experiencing this joy." The night slid past as the fingers ran through the silk-soft hair.

Far away in a distant land, the wife's betrothed awoke during the last watch of the night. He stretched, yawned, and took a drink of cold water from the pitcher. He looked around. Stars twinkled in the dark sky. Not a sign of daylight. If only the nights were shorter, he mused. Why need the nights be so long? Half one's life is wasted sleeping. If one could spend that time on business, one's income would be doubled. Anyway, he had made plenty of money. Father would be very pleased. He often met traders who lived in the vicinity of his native village. They were astonished to find him here. Once, one even asked when

he had returned from the village. He was no less astonished by the question, and replied that he had never looked towards the village since the day he set out. Had they all gone mad? They told him the whole story in detail and insisted on its truth but he refused to believe it. He was here, so how could he possibly be there? These people were trying to mislead him because they envied his fat income. But he was no fool to be thus taken in. He immersed himself even more completely in his business.

But today, early in the morning, a



trustworthy neighbour had informed him that his wife was expecting a child. Perhaps it had already been born. The Seth's son interrupted: "My parents would definitely have informed me if any such thing had happened. I've written several letters but got no reply."

"My dear fellow", replied the neighbour, "Why should your parents inform anyone? Their son returned home after three days' journey. Thanks to a holy man's boon, he gives his father five gold coins every day. Their house is blessed by god. It resounds with music and festivity. Lamps of clarified butter are lit in the

bed-chamber. Of course, it's true that you look exactly like the Seth's son. A trick of nature! The Seth himself would not be able to tell you two apart. But on talking to you, I realised that although you look like him, you are another person."

"How can I be another person? Looks as if I'll have to return at once."

So the Seth's son settled his business affairs, explained the accounts to his clerk, and set out for the village. The same month of June, hot sand-storms whirled around. The sight of the red berries on the slopes reminded him of that day. He thought: "Well, if they are to her taste, why not indulge her? It doesn't cost any money." He plucked ripe berries and tied them in his turban fringe.

When he reached the house, the courtyard was full of women. The agitated Seth and Sethani were busy making vows to the gods. The ghost husband stood at the door of the bed-chamber. Sad. Perturbed. The wife lay within, moaning. The baby had gotten stuck. The midwives were plying their skill.

In the midst of this hubbub, the wedded husband, covered in dust, berries slung over his shoulder, presented himself. He bowed at his parents' feet. What was this? He looked exactly like the son of the house! Was he some enchanter, drawn hither by greed for wealth? An excess of amazement often strikes one dumb. The parents tried to speak but could not utter a word. The women changed their tune. Two husbands with one countenance! Which was true and which was false? What a drama, what excitement! Some ran one way and some another.

When he heard his wife moaning within, he suddenly realised that the rumours he had heard were true. Who had practised such fraud? How would it be exposed? Whose word would people believe? Suddenly his eye fell on the youth standing at the bed-

chamber door. He really was his double! Who can understand the deception of black magic? His blood froze in his veins. Oh, how had this horror overtaken him?

The husband of love heard only the woman's moans. He was oblivious to all else. For him, the sun had disappeared and so had the air. When would this moaning end and nature's bonds be loosened?

Looking at his father, the son said: "I have been abroad for years. How then did my wife become pregnant? You might have used a little more good sense."

The Seth reckoned up all the accounts in his head and replied: "Who are you, anyway? My son came back three days after he set out. Don't think that I'll be taken in by any of your tricks."

The son was astonished to hear his father speak thus, but he realised that to fall silent now would be fatal. At once, he replied: "I have earned plentifully for four years and have come back to my father's house. What trickery is there in that? It was you who insisted on my going?"

"I don't want such earnings", retorted the Seth. "How dare you try to tempt me with your earnings? Get lost immediately or it will be the worse for you."

His father seemed to have gone mad. Looking at his mother, he said: "Mother, cannot you recognise the son born of your womb?"

What could the mother say? Her tongue felt glued to her palate. She turned her eyes to her husband's face. When she too did not respond, the son was bewildered. Suddenly, he remembered the berries. With trembling hands, he opened the bundle, and, placing the red berries before his father, he said: "Ask my wife, about the berries. She will tell you everything. On the wedding day she herself plucked and ate berries. Today, I have plucked and brought

them for her. Just ask her. If you like I'll stand outside the door and ask her."

The Seth grew angry. "You lunatic", he said. "Is this the time to ask about berries? My daughter-in-law is grappling with death and here you are, talking about berries! To hell with you! In fact, this nonsense makes the whole thing clear to me. Would my daughter-in-law ever go plucking and eating berries, like a village bumpkin? If your honour is dear to you, take to your heels at once, otherwise so many shoes will descend on your head that you'll lose count of them."

The son said: "I don't mind my father's shoes hitting me, but, truly, that day in the bullock cart, I too said the same to her as you are saying today."

Within, the daughter-in-law continued to moan. The midwives several times asked her whether they should cut the child out, but she refused. She was close to death. Sometimes darkness overshadowed her eyes, and sometimes lightning flashed before them.

The rumour spread with the breeze from house to house. The Seth's house became like a funfair. The tongue does not get to savour such a tasty bit of news every day. Two look-alike husbands! One has been enjoying himself for four years in the bedroom and the other has just returned from abroad. The daughter-in-law lies groaning in childbirth. It was to be seen how the rich Seth would settle this matter. How could he be allowed to hide it? People chewed and munched and then regurgitated all over again.

The Seth could not stand the sight of this mob surrounding his house. Swallowing his spittle, he said: "This is my family affair and we will settle it ourselves. Why should others interfere? I say that this newcomer is a liar. I will get my servants to throw

him out of here. How dare he practise such fraud in broad daylight?"

"Father, are you mad?" screamed the son. "Do you want to call the sun a frying pan and a frying pan the sun? You must investigate the matter. This is blatant injustice!"

Rarely does one get a chance to humiliate the rich! The people too cried out that justice must be done. Let the wheat be separated from the chaff. The guilty must be punished. If this practice of having two husbands gets into vogue, what will happen? It will be all very well for the rich, but what of the poor? The villagers' opinion could not be ignored. However great the power of wealth, shoulders to lean on cannot be had for hire.

The situation took a turn for the worse. Neither was the Seth willing to budge an inch nor was the community. People had loud voices and the bride had ears. So the whole story reached her too. Being born a woman, heaven alone knows how many strange stories she would have to hear, how many insults she would have to endure, and how many dramas she would have to watch. This had to happen, sooner or later. Four years had vanished like a dream. How long can one reassure oneself with a dream? How much support can it offer? And how much depth?

The mob began to circle around the house like bats around a ruined building. Not a morsel of food could be swallowed till the matter was settled.

The midwives came out and announced the birth of a girl. The mother had narrowly escaped death. The women hovering at the door heard the baby crying. The husband, standing outside, felt himself return to consciousness, but in the same instant, the babble smote his ears and seemed to cleave his heart asunder. He stood there, paralysed. How had this thunderbolt fallen a year before it

was due?

The Seth and the Sethani were as though transfixed. The whole village was whispering about them. What an unforeseen calamity had descended on them! For the sins of which birth was this bastard taking revenge on them? The situation was fast getting out of control. Which of the two was a trickster? The bedchamber had been illuminated these four years. If they denied this man their honour would bite the dust. If the berry fellow could be brought to a compromise, all would be well. They were ready to give him any sum he named. What else did he want?

But neither would the berry fellow agree, nor would the villagers. They insisted on justice. The reputation of the whole village was at stake. After four years, as she was giving birth, a second husband had appeared. One of the two had to be proved false. The people raised a most unholy racket. It was as if a huge hive of wasps had fallen to the ground. Not to take the berry man's side was to pour oil on the troubled waters. That would spoil the whole show. So as to prolong the relish of the situation, everyone started supporting the berry man.

Folding his hands to them, the Seth implored tearfully: "What will you gain by dishonouring me? We all live together as brethren, and help each other whenever we can. You know well my son's good qualities. Which one of you has not benefited at his hands? How can you bite the hand that feeds you? My honour is in your keeping now. Please help me settle the matter. This berry fellow is a cheat. Throw him out of the village."

The elders replied: "Sethji, with one's eyes open, one cannot swallow a fly. We are ready to give our lives for you, should it be necessary, but how can water be tied in a bundle? Since this man insists upon it, why don't you ask your daughter-in-law about the berries? What harm will it

do?"

How could such a thing be asked? Who would ask? Some good old women came forward. Humanity demands that we help our fellow beings when they are in trouble. They went inside. The mother's stomach was contracting with postnatal pains. But she had forgotten the pain of labour. This new pain was far more vast. Grinding her teeth, she said with difficulty: "If a man asked me this, I might have answered yes or no. But how can you, having a woman's heart, dare ask me such a thing? Leave me



to my fate. Is this the time to come and torment me? Your courage is praiseworthy indeed!"

The women emerged, pulling a long face. "Would not a woman speak the truth in such a matter?" they said. "We think there's something fishy here. Do as you please."

It is such occasions that sharpen the wills. The elders said: "Only the king can decide this matter. If anyone else interferes, the whole village will feel the king's wrath. One has to save one's own skin, after all. We had better hand these two husbands over to the king. Then it will be the king's affair and the Seth's affair. Why

should we come in the way for nothing? Anyway, the community is god. Let it be as everyone decides."

So it was as everyone decided. Why should the community give up its divine status? They decided to bind the two husbands and take them along. When they started binding the husband who stood outside the bedroom, he realised how far matters had gone. He did not utter a word of protest. As they descended the steps, he allowed his heart to speak: "Let me go in and see how the mother and daughter are doing."

But the people said: "After the decision is made, you can spend your life looking after them. What's the hurry?"

The crowd moved forward. The two bound husbands walked side by side. The Seth too went along, dragging his feet. His turban had come undone, and hung round his neck. When they passed the forest, lightning darted through the ghost's body. His feet stopped moving. A tempest arose in his mind. Memories fluttered before his eyes until a jerk of the rope recalled him, and his feet proceeded mechanically, left, right, left, right. How much better it would be if memory had no place in the human heart. It is memory which wrings out the heart's blood.

The mind of the business husband was free of deceit. But how was it that truth had not won the victory today? He fell into doubt. What mystery was this? This person walking next to him looked like his own reflection in a mirror. The doubt could be resolved only by questioning him. With great difficulty, he pushed the words out of his mouth: "Listen, brother, god knows what kind of justice is going to be meted out, but you know well enough that I am the Seth's son. I am the real husband who circled the fire seven times. But tell me, who are you? What kind of magic is this? How did

this disaster suddenly descend on my head? Do tell me, between ourselves, who you really are.”

He was really a powerful ghost. He could have wrung the neck of all the elders. He could have taken possession of everyone and destroyed them. He could have done many things. But living a life of love for four years had transformed his mentality. He wanted to tell a lie but was unable to. Yet how could he tell the truth? He had to safeguard his beloved's honour. He had to keep faith with her. So he followed the example of Yudhishtir and said: “I am the subtle being within a woman's body, the lord of her love. I desire love and attraction far more than business or profit.”

The wedded husband broke in impatiently: “Why talk such nonsense? Tell me clearly whether you got married in the pavilion.”

“What is a mere marriage? It cannot last a lifetime. Things may be bought and sold but not love. You wanted to trade in love. This is the profit one gets in love's trade.”

The Seth's son felt as if his heart was being branded with hot irons. Such thoughts had never entered his head. He had never had occasion to think in this fashion. Today, he had occasion, but in what sad plight!

The crowd was advancing briskly to obtain justice from the king, when it came across a shepherd, grazing his flock. He had a staff in his hand. His locks flowed out beneath his red turban. His beard was black and luxuriant. Silver bracelets encircled his wrists. He was tall and burly, and hairy like a bear. His eyebrows and lashes were long; hair grew in tufts from his ears. His teeth were yellow. Laying his staff across their path, he asked: “Where are so many people going together? Has this caravan set out for an obsequial feast?”

The story had to be related twice

or thrice before he fully understood it. Laughter spilling from a corner of his mouth, he said: “Why trouble the poor king for this trifle? I will settle it in no time. Drink cold water from the stream and rest awhile. What a district yours is! Not one of you could settle this simple matter! Instead, you set off to the king!”

The people realised that the court was a long way off. If this bumpkin could serve the turn, why not let him? If he failed, they could always proceed. So they consented. The shepherd looked at the two husbands. Not a hair's difference! What a game the playful gods had played!

Untying their bonds, he exclaimed: “Good people, why did you have to bind them like this? How could they have escaped from such a crowd?” Then, turning to the headman, he asked: “Are they deaf and dumb?”

The headman replied: “No, most certainly not. They speak with perfect ease.”

The shepherd burst out laughing. “Then why drag them so far?” he said. “You could have interrogated them there. One of them is definitely a cheat.”

The elders smiled to themselves. This shepherd was an idiot. If the men were prepared to speak the truth, would this problem have arisen in the first place? Fine justice they could expect from this fool! In any case, if he had the brains to administer justice, would he be following a flock of sheep with a staff in his hand?

Winding up the ropes, the shepherd said: “I see, I see. They know how to speak but have also learnt how to tell lies. Never mind. It is child's play for me to get the truth out of them. Watch how I put my staff down their throats and drag the truth from their bellies. The boughs of the forest cannot withstand this staff. Poor truth

does not stand a chance before it. Quick, into whose throat shall I ram this staff? He who opens his mouth first is the true one.”

The ghost thought that he would be willing to face any danger or difficulty, if only he were involved. But now if the secret was exposed, the mistress of the women's quarters would also have to suffer. If only he had known this would happen, he would have preferred to stay in the brambles of the forest. He was well versed in the tricks played by ghosts but of human trickery he knew nothing. He took for truth every word that human beings uttered. The staff could do his throat no harm. Seven such staffs could not hurt a hair of his head. His love could never be false. So he immediately opened his mouth wide. The Seth's son did not move his lips. He felt angry enough to tear the bumpkin of a shepherd to pieces. But he said not a word.

The shepherd clapped the back of the husband who opened his mouth and exclaimed: “My fine fellow, to think that these foolish people have harassed a truthful man like you! But one should be fully satisfied. Why leave any room for doubt?”

His sheep were grazing in different corners of the meadow, far apart from one another. The shepherd said: “Whoever gathers all these sheep together before I clap my hands seven times is the true one.”

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than the ghost took the form of a whirlwind and gathered the sheep together before the shepherd had clapped five times. The Seth's son stood still, hanging his head. What but savage justice could be expected from the savage tribe of shepherds?

“Well done”, cried the shepherd. “None but the true could have displayed such alacrity and vigour. Now I will take one final test. Rest a bit”

He opened his waterskin, drank up

all the water in one gulp, and then belched loudly. Passing his hand over his belly, he said: "Whoever gets into this waterskin before I snap my fingers seven times, is the real master of the bedchamber. And remember, one blow of my staff is enough to fell anyone who casts doubt on the efficiency of my justice."

The people looked at the sharp scythe tied to the staff. One blow would be enough to send a head rolling to the ground.

Before the people had done glancing at the scythe, the ghost had entered the waterskin. He was practised in this feat from his birth. This poor shepherd had preserved his honour today. But once the ghost entered the skin, the shepherd did not hesitate one instant. He immediately closed the mouth of the waterskin and tied it tightly with his rope. Then he turned to the elders and said with pride: "That's how long it took to do justice. I've lost a waterskin all right but I calculated on that when I agreed to arbitrate. Come now, let us all go and throw this waterskin into the stream. The gurgling, leaping stream will take this fine gentleman straight to the bedchamber. Well, are you or are you not satisfied with my justice?"

One and all nodded their heads, to show approval. As for the Seth's son, he was well nigh mad with joy. He felt a thousand times happier than he had on his wedding day. With trembling hands, he took off his ring studded with gems and offered it to the shepherd. The shepherd understood his feelings but did not accept the ring. Laughing, he said: "I am no king to sell justice for money. I just did the job well. And of what use would this ring be to me? It would fit neither my fingers nor my staff. My sheep are rustics like me. They eat grass but won't even sniff at gold. Useless things are fit adornments for you rich folk."

Too late, the ghost understood



the shepherd's rough justice. But now what could he do? Matters were too far gone. Yet he yelled from inside the waterskin: "Father, take pity on me and release me. I will be your lifelong slave."

But who would listen to the ghost now? Filled with enthusiasm, they reached the stream and cast the waterskin into the fast flowing current. The lord of love finally obtained the leaping, whirling, waving, dancing, rippling bed of the stream. His life was fulfilled. His death was meaningful.

Then the villagers, the Seth and the Seth's son set off at a brisk pace towards the village. The Seth's son made straight for the lying-in chamber. One midwife was massaging the baby girl with clarified butter. Another was combing the mother's hair with a sandalwood comb. Without stopping for breath, he related the whole story of the shepherd's swift justice. Each word felt to the woman like a red hot spear being plunged into her heart. This agony was a thousand times more intense than that of child birth.

But she neither sighed nor moaned. She listened as though turned to stone.

After pouring out his pent-up emotions, he said: "But why are you so upset? When the parents who gave me birth could not tell the difference, how could you be expected to know? You are not at all to blame. But that wretch of a ghost got his due all right. After he was caught in the waterskin, he begged and pleaded and wept for all he was worth. But, good god, we were not such fools as to yield! We got rid of him and his screaming by throwing him into the stream. The bastard won't be trying his tricks again in a hurry."

After that, the daughter-in-law did just as she was told to do by the family. She never answered back. She never hesitated to obey. She quietly ate the sweetmeats her mother-in-law prepared. She washed her head when her mother-in-law told her to. She worshipped the sun. The priest conducted a sacrifice. The women sang songs. Auspicious sweet porridge was prepared. She went to

the lake and worshipped the watergod. She wore a yellow veil. She rocked her daughter in a cradle. She worshipped pitchers of water. She sprinkled saffron in the courtyard. She applied henna on her hands. She dressed as she was told to. She wore jewels. It is indeed great good fortune to be blessed with such a good daughter-in-law.

On the night of the water worship, the daughter-in-law, in a yellow veil, climbed the steps of the bedchamber, her anklets tinkling, her daughter in

her arms, her breasts filled with milk. Empty her eyes. Desolate her heart. Numberless crickets buzzed in her head. Her husband sat waiting on the bed of flowers. How many lives would she have to endure in this one bedchamber? But if this baby girl, now at her breast, should not have to endure such a life when she grew to womanhood, the mother's sufferings would not have been in vain. Even animals cannot be so easily used against their will. At least they do shake their heads in protest. But are

women allowed to have any will of their own. Until they reach the cremation ground, they must be in the bed-chamber, and when they escape the bedchamber, they go straight to the cremation ground.

(translated by Ruth Vanita from Hindi version in Duvidha, Akshar Prakashan. From a collection of Vijay Dan Detha's stories in English translation forthcoming from Manushi Prakashan) □