



Rabindranath Tagore

Letters from a Young Poet

1887-1895

MODERN CLASSICS



a minute or two that boy had begun to be swung again! Such are man's vows! This is his mental strength! Such is his resolve! He leaves his playing to go and lie down at a distance and then again he allows himself to be caught and to be smilingly swung again in the swing of intoxication! How will such a man ever be free! There are some boys who leave their playroom and keep lying down with their head in their hands—there's a home being built in paradise for all those good boys.

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Shahjadpur
June 1891

Last night I had a very strange dream. All of Calcutta city seemed enveloped in a great, terrible and yet surprising feeling—the houses could all be seen through a dark black mist—and within it there was some enormous commotion going on. I was travelling through Park Street in a hired carriage—as I went I saw that St Xavier's College was growing exponentially to an enormous size—in that dark mist, it had become impossibly high. Then gradually I came to know that a group of strange people had arrived who could use some sort of trickery to perform these astonishing feats for money. Reaching the Jorasanko house, I saw they had reached there too—awful-looking, with somewhat Mongolian features—thin moustaches, scraggly beards pointing this way and that on either side of their faces. They could make humans grow in size too. That's why all the women of our house were out on the porch—applicants for more height—those people were sprinkling some sort of powder on their heads and whoosh, they were all growing taller. I kept saying—how astonishing, this is just like a dream. Then, somebody proposed that our house be made to grow higher. They agreed and began to break a part of

the house. After smashing up a portion, they said, 'Now you have to pay us a certain amount of money, or we shall not work on the house any more.' Kunja Sarkar said, 'How's that possible, the work can't be paid for until it has been completed!' Immediately they became very angry—the whole house then sort of bent out of shape and became horrible, and in some places you could see that half a person was embedded in its walls, with the other half hanging out. Overall it seemed as if all of it was the work of the devil. I said to Baṛ-dada, 'Baṛ-da, do you see what's happening? Come, let us sit and pray.*' We went to the inner courtyard and sat down to fervent meditation. Emerging from there, I thought I would reprimand them in the name of god—but although my heart felt as if it would burst, I couldn't speak. After that I'm not sure when I woke up. What a strange dream, don't you think? All of Calcutta under the devil's spell—everybody trying to grow with his help and the whole city enveloped in this hellish, dark mist, horribly growing all the while. But there was a bit of farce in it as well—in the entire world, why was the devil so particularly well disposed towards the Jesuits?

After that the teachers at the English school here in Shahjadpur arrived with expectations of an audience with the lordship. They just didn't want to leave, yet I had really nothing very much to say to them—every five minutes or so I asked them one or two questions, to which they gave me an answer or half, and then I sat there like a fool, fiddling with my pen, scratching my head—I ask them what the crops have been like this season over here. The schoolmasters know nothing of crops, and whatever there was to be known about the students has already been said at the start. So I go back to the beginning and start again; I ask, 'How many students in your school?' One of them says, 'Eighty.' Another says, 'No, a hundred and seventy-five!' I think, now these two are going to have a tremendous argument. But instead, both

* Baṛ-dada: Dvijendranath Tagore, eldest brother of Rabindranath

immediately agree with each other. One and a half hours after that, it's difficult to know exactly why, they suddenly remembered to say, 'We'll take your leave now.' They could have said so an hour earlier, or they might have remembered to say so twelve hours later—it seems that there's no rule for this sort of thing—just a blind faith in miracles.

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Shahjadpur

Saturday, 4 July 1891

There is a boat moored to our ghat, and many 'common women' from the village are standing in front of it in a crowd . . . Perhaps one of them is going somewhere and everybody else has come to say goodbye. Lots of little boys, lots of veiled heads and lots of grey heads have got together. But there is one girl among them who attracts my attention more than anybody else. She must be about twelve or thirteen, but looks about fourteen-fifteen because she's well built. Her face is superlative. She's quite dark, yet quite good-looking. Her hair is cut like a boy's, and it suits her face. She has such an intelligent, self-aware, clear and simple look. She stood there with a boy on her hip, staring at me unabashedly with such unalloyed curiosity . . . Really, her face and figure were very attractive, but she was neither stupid nor lacking in simplicity nor deficient in any way. Her half-boy, half-girl look especially attracted my attention. A boy's complete unselfconsciousness had been mixed with sweetness to create an entirely new kind of girl. I had never expected to see this type of village girl in Bengal. I see that their entire clan is quite un-shy. One of the women is standing on the riverbank in the sun, running her fingers through her hair to disentangle it, while talking to another woman on the boat about domestic affairs at the top of her voice. I heard she had just one