

The Judge

Rabindranath Tagore

Translated from the original Bengali by

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First episode

Even the partner that middle-aged Khiroda had found at long last after passing through many circumstances abandoned her like a piece of torn cloth. She detested with all her heart the prospect of attempting to search for food and shelter for a second time.

At the end of youth, comes like the clear autumn, a profound and beautiful age, when it is time for the fruits and grains of life to ripen. At that age, the agility of the wild youth no longer seems appropriate. By that time, we have had already built our homes; many good and evil, happiness and sorrow have been cooked in the cauldron of life, making the inner-self matured; we have, by then, put our stray ambitions on leash and have established them within the four walls of our modest abilities, dragging them back from the dreamland of the unachievable; at that time it is no longer possible to attract the charmed look of a new found love; but people tend to become more dearer to the long-known and familiar. Youthful charm, by then, has slowly started giving way; but by long association with the body the fit inner-self expresses itself more prominently on the face and eyes - through the smiles, the looks, the voice.

Leaving hope for things we didn't get, ending bereavement for the departed, forgiving those that deceived, we seek solace among those who have been near, who have loved, who have remained close withstanding the vagaries of life; we build safe nests in the loving embrace of those few close, time-tested and familiar beings and see therein the culmination of all our efforts and the fulfilment, of all our longings. In that dusk of youth, in the peace of that stage of life, he who has to start again in the false hope of new gains, new acquaintances and new relationships – for whose rest the bed has yet to be spread – for whom no light has been lit to welcome him home at day end – cursed indeed is he.

At the brink of her youth, one morning, when Khiroda woke up to find that her fiancé had run off the last night with all her ornaments and money, to leave her with not enough even to pay the rent or to get some milk to feed her three-year old child – she reminisced that in her life of thirty-eight years she could not lay claim over a single man, she had not acquired the right to live or die in the corner of any room. She realised she would again have to wipe off tears to deck up her eyes with black kajol and put on red make-up on her lips and cheeks in a curious attempt to cover up the worn-out youth and devise new schemes cheerfully and with infinite patience to capture new hearts. She locked herself up in her room and started repeatedly banging her head against the hard floor – she remained there throughout the day without touching any food. Outside it grew dark. Inside the room, with no lamp lit, the darkness concentrated. As chance would have it, an old fiancé came over and started knocking at her door, calling “Khiro,” “Khiro.” Roaring like a tigress, Khiroda suddenly sprang up and started for the man with a broom in her hand; the love-thirsty youth had to look for escape without wasting any time. The child, bitten by the pangs of hunger, had fallen asleep under the bed after crying for some time. He woke up in the commotion and started crying in a broken voice, “Ma! Ma!”

At that juncture Khiroda picked up her child, held him fast against her breast and running at lightning speed jumped into a nearby well. Alerted by the sound, neighbours came up with lamps and gathered around the well. It did not take long to fish up Khiroda and her child. Khiroda was unconscious and the child had died.

Khiroda recovered in the hospital. The magistrate transferred her case to the session court on charge of murder.

Second episode

Judge – Mohitmohun Dutt, Statutory Civilian. In his ruthless judgment Khiroda was sentenced to death by hanging. Lawyers, moved by her wretched condition, tried their best to save her but without success. The judge could not consider her to be worthy of even a bit of mercy.

There was reason enough for that. Though the judge attributed Godly characteristics to Hindu women, his lack of trust on women as a class was straight from his heart. He was of the view that women are ever eager to sever all ties with their families; even a slight relaxation in governing them would result in not a single chaste woman being left in the society.

This belief of the judge also had a basis. To appreciate that, it is necessary to throw light upon a part of the history of Mohit's early life.

In the second year of his college, Mohit had been an entirely different person in appearance and manners. Mohit is now bald in the front-head, sports a tuft at the back, and his face is smooth with the thorough shave that he has every morning; but then with gold-rimmed glasses, beard and moustache and hair dressed in true European style, Mohit was like a new version of Kartik of the Nineteenth-century.

He was quite conscious of his dress, did not detest drinking and dining and also had a few concomitant vices.

A family stayed nearby. They had a widowed daughter called Hemshoshi. She was young – aged fourteen going on fifteen.

The tree-lined shore does not seem as picturesque and soothing from the land as it seems from the sea. Widowhood created a distance between family life and Hemshoshi. That distance made Hemshoshi view family life as a house of entertainment, full of deep mystery, on the distant other shore. She did not know that the nuts and bolts of this world are extremely complicated and iron-hard – a mixture of happiness and sorrow, wealth and poverty, uncertainty, danger, frustration and repentance. She used to think that family life was as easy as the crystal clear flow of the murmuring stream; that every road in the beautiful world is wide and straight; that happiness lies just outside her window while all unfulfilled desires reside deep within her soft warm heart, throbbing in her breast. Specially, at that time, a whiff of fresh air carrying the scent of youth would arise from the distant horizon of her mind and blow over the entire world giving it a touch of spring. The vibration of her heart would travel the entire stretch of the blue sky and the earth would bloom around her fragrant heart in layers like the soft petals of a red lotus.

At home, she had nobody except her parents and two younger brothers. The brothers would leave early for school after breakfast and would again go after supper to the nearby night school to practise lessons. The father used to earn a pittance and could not afford to pay for tuitions at home.

In the intervals from work Hem would come and rest in her empty room. She would watch intently people move up and down the main road; she would listen to the hawker crying out entreating people to purchase his wares; and she would think that people on the street were all content, that even beggars were all free and that the hawkers were not really engaged in a fight for survival – they were just actors, happily enacting on a stage a play of simple movements..

And every morning and evening she would see the immaculately dressed, haughty and broad-breasted Mohitmohun. It seemed to her that he was like Mahendra – the King, who had all the good luck on earth. She imagined that the well-dressed, good-looking young man with his head held high possessed everything and was also worth being bestowed with everything that one possessed. In her mind the widow would endow Mohit with all heavenly qualities and make him the God, like a little girl playing with a doll, thinking it to be a real being.

On some of the evenings she could see Mohit's brightly lit room, brimming with the sound of dancers' footsteps and voice of female singers. Those days she would sit up late, sleepless, staring thirstily at the silhouettes of the dancing figures. Her tormented heart would, like a caged bird, repeatedly pound upon the ribs in enormous emotion. Did she in her mind chide and speak ill about her make-belief God for his extravagance? Not really. As fire entices insects with the illusion of stars, Mohit's bright, music filled chamber overflowing with amusement and wine would attract Hemshoshi as an oasis of Heaven. Deep at night she would sit awakened, alone, building up a world with the shadow and light on the window nearby, mingling with it her own desires and imaginations. She would place her human-doll at the centre of this world. In the deserted and silent temple of her mind, she would worship him by offering like incense in the slow fire of her desire all she had—her youth, her happiness and sorrows, her life in this earth and beyond. She did not know that on the other side of the bright window, amidst waves of entertainment lay extreme weariness, filth, terrible hunger and a fire that eats away life. The widow could not see from distance the game of devastation being played behind the lights by the heartless cruelty of a sleepless demon with a crooked smile. Hem could have spent her entire life dreaming at her own window with her imagined heaven and God, but unfortunately, the God became merciful and the heaven started getting closer to the earth. When heaven touched upon earth, the heaven crumbled as did the person who had been building it all these days on her own.

When Mohit's lustful eyes fell on this mesmerised girl of the opposite window, when one day he got an emotion laden, misspelled letter written in nervous trepidation in response to his many missives sent under the pseudo name 'Binodchandro', when thereafter for some eventful days a storm started blowing —over many ups and downs, jubilation, hesitation, suspicion, reverence, hopes and fear, thereafter how the entire world maddened by pleasure started revolving around the widow and how after such continuous revolution the world completely vanished like a shadow and how at last one day all of a sudden, from that revolving world the lady got detached and was thrown faraway off at great speed, it is not necessary to give a detailed description of all that.

One day late at night Hemshoshi left her parents, brothers and her home behind and started off in the same carriage with the holder of the pseudo name Binodchandro. When the human-God with all its clay, hay and false golden ornaments came and sat close to her she almost died of embarrassment and repentance.

When the carriage started she fell crying on the feet of Mohit and pleaded, “Oh God please! I beg you to leave me at my home.” Mohit hurriedly muzzled her. The carriage started moving fast.

As a drowning man on the verge of his death momentarily remembers all the incidents of his life, Hemshoshi recollected in the deep darkness of the carriage that never would her father sit down to dine without having her in front of him; she remembered, her youngest brother would love to be fed by her after returning from school; that she would sit down with her mother in the morning to make betel leaves and in the evenings her mother would tie her hair. Every little corner of her home and every little incident started appearing before her in blazing prominence. All the daily chores: making betel leaves, tying the hair, waving the fan at his father when he was dining, plucking his grey hair when he would be asleep on a holiday afternoon, bearing with the mischiefs of her brothers – all those appeared to be things of immense satisfaction and rare pleasure; she failed to understand what else one required in the world to be happy!

She thought; all girls in the world would be in deep slumber at the moment. How did she fail to realise the pleasure of a quiet night’s peaceful sleep in her own bed, in her own room? The girls would wake up next day morning, unhesitatingly immerse themselves in their daily duties; and this sleepless night of the renegade Hemshoshi – where would it dawn; and on such joyless morning when the familiar, soothing and smiling rays of the sun would fall on their humble household what embarrassment would be revealed all of a sudden – what disgrace and wailing would ensue!

Heart rendering feat of sobbing befell Hem; she prayed repeatedly, “The night is yet to end. My mother, my two brothers have still not risen; you can still drop me back.” But her God would not listen; he continued to take her towards her much sought-after heaven, accompanied by the clickety-clack band of a second class chariot.

It was not long when God and the heaven parted ways with her in another rickety second class carriage – the lady remained immersed in neck-deep muck.

Third episode

Only one the many incidents from Mohitmohun's past has been narrated above, otherwise the piece would become repetitive.

Neither is it necessary to refer to such old incidents at this juncture. Today, it is doubtful whether anyone exists in the world who remembers the name Binodchandro. These days, Mohit observes all the prescribed rites of purity, worships God and is always into discussion of the scriptures. He even makes his young sons practise *Yoga* and vehemently guards the women folk deep inside his house from the sun, the moon and the air. But since once upon a time he had wronged many women today he makes sure that he levies the strictest of penalties on women for any social crime committed by them.

A day or two after having sentenced Khiroda to death the gourmet Mohit went to the garden adjoining the prison to collect his favourite vegetables. He felt curious to know whether Khiroda was repenting for all the crimes she had committed in her life as a fallen woman. He entered the prison chamber.

From a distance he could hear the noise of people quarrelling. Entering the room he found Khiroda engaged in a verbal duel with the prison guard. Mohit was amused; he felt, such is the habit of women! They would not let up on quarrelling even when death is near. Perhaps, when they reach hell they quarrel with the guards there.

Mohit thought, it would be proper to invoke repentance in her even at this stage by appropriately chiding and advising. As soon as he had approached Khiroda with the aforesaid noble purpose, Khiroda implored with folded hands, "I appeal on your honour! Please tell him to return my ring".

Asking questions he came to know that a ring was kept concealed in Khiroda's hair—as luck would have it, the prison guard confiscated it on noticing.

Mohit was again amused. A day or two to go before she would be hanged, yet she can't forget her ring; ornaments are all to these womenfolk!

He called the guard, "Where is the ring, let me see it" – the guard handed over the ring to him.

Mohit was jolted, as if he had unexpectedly come to hold a piece of burning charcoal. On one side of the ring in ivory curving was implanted a very small oil painted portrait of a young man sporting beard and moustache, and on the other side was inscribed in gold – Binodchandra.

Mohit raised his eyes from the ring and looked intently on Khiroda's face. He remembered another tender, shy and nervous face with tears overflowing, which he had seen twenty-four years back. This face had similarity with that one.

Mohit looked on the golden ring again and then when he gradually raised his eyes, the fallen woman standing in front of him emerged like a golden idol resplendent in the glow of the small golden ring.

The original, *Bicharok* was first published in the periodical *Sadhana* (Pous, BE 1301). It was collected later in *Galpo-Dashok* (Bhadra 15, BE 1302; August 30, 1895). Currently it is most readily available in *Galpaguchchho*, published by Visva-Bharati.

Published in Parabaas August, 2010

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Published in Parabaas August, 2010

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