

FICTION

Rabindranath Tagore

The Post Office

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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The Post Office

By Rabindranath Tagore

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

- MADHAV
- AMAL, his adopted child
- SUDHA, a little flower girl
- THE DOCTOR
- DAIRYMAN
- WATCHMAN
- GAFFER
- VILLAGE HEADMAN, a bully
- KING'S HERALD
- ROYAL PHYSICIAN

THE POST OFFICE

ACT I

[Madhav's House]

Madhav. What a state I am in! Before he came, nothing mattered; I felt so free. But now that he has come, goodness knows from where, my heart is filled with his dear self, and my home will be no home to me when he leaves. Doctor, do you think he--

Physician. If there's life in his fate, then he will live long. But what the medical scriptures say, it seems--

Madhav. Great heavens, what?

Physician. The scriptures have it: "Bile or palsey, cold or gout spring all alike."

Madhav. Oh, get along, don't fling your scriptures at me; you only make me more anxious; tell me what I can do.

Physician [*Taking snuff*] The patient needs the most scrupulous care.

Madhav. That's true; but tell me how.

Physician. I have already mentioned, on no account must he be let out of doors.

Madhav Poor child, it is very hard to keep him indoors all day long.

Physician. What else can you do? The autumn sun and the damp are both very bad for the little fellow--for the scriptures have it:

"In wheezing, swoon or in nervous fret,
In jaundice or leaden eyes--"

Madhav. Never mind the scriptures, please. Eh, then we must shut the poor thing up. Is there no other method?

Physician. None at all: for, "In the wind and in the sun--"

Madhav. What will your "in this and in that" do for me now? Why don't you let them alone and come straight to the point? What's to be done then? Your system is very, very hard for the poor boy; and he is so quiet too with all his pain and sickness. It tears my heart to see him wince, as he takes your medicine.

Physician. effect. That's why the sage Chyabana observes: "In medicine as in good advices, the least palatable ones are the truest." Ah, well! I must be trotting now. [*Exit*]

[*Gaffer enters*]

Madhav. Well, I'm jiggered, there's Gaffer now.

Gaffer. Why, why, I won't bite you.

Madhav. No, but you are a devil to send children off their heads.

Gaffer. But you aren't a child, and you've no child in the house; why worry then?

Madhav. Oh, but I have brought a child into the house.

Gaffer. Indeed, how so?

Madhav. You remember how my wife was dying to adopt a child?

Gaffer. Yes, but that's an old story; you didn't like the idea.

Madhav. You know, brother, how hard all this getting money in has been. That somebody else's child would sail in and waste all this money earned with so much trouble--Oh, I hated the idea. But this boy clings to my heart in such a queer sort of way--

Gaffer. So that's the trouble! and your money goes all for him and feels jolly lucky it does go at all.

Madhav. Formerly, earning was a sort of passion with me; I simply couldn't help working for money. Now, I make money and as I know it is all for this dear boy, earning becomes a joy to me.

Gaffer. Ah, well, and where did you pick him up?

Madhav. He is the son of a man who was a brother to my wife by village ties. He has had no mother since infancy; and now the other day he lost his father as well.

Gaffer. Poor thing; and so he needs me all the more.

Madhav. The doctor says all the organs of his little body are at loggerheads with each other, and there isn't much hope for his life. There is only one way to save him and that is to keep him out of this autumn wind and sun. But you are such a terror! What with this game of yours at your age, too, to get children out of doors!

Gaffer. God bless my soul! So I'm already as bad as autumn wind and sun, eh! But, friend, I know something, too, of the game of keeping them indoors. When my day's work is over I am coming in to make friends with this child of yours. [*Exit*]

[*Amal enters*]

Amal. Uncle, I say, Uncle!

Madhav. Hullo! Is that you, Amal?

Amal. Mayn't I be out of the courtyard at all?

Madhav. No, my dear, no.

Amal. See, there where Auntie grinds lentils in the quirn, the squirrel is sitting with his tail up and with his wee hands he's picking up the broken grains of lentils and crunching them. Can't I run up there?

Madhav. No, my darling, no.

Amal. Wish I were a squirrel!--it would be lovely. Uncle, why won't you let me go about?

Madhav. Doctor says it's bad for you to be out.

Amal. How can the doctor know?

Madhav. What a thing to say! The doctor can't know and he reads such huge books!

Amal. Does his book-learning tell him everything?

Madhav. Of course, don't you know!

Amal [*With a sigh*] Ah, I am so stupid! I don't read books.

Madhav. Now, think of it; very, very learned people are all like you; they are never out of doors.

Amal. Aren't they really?

Madhav. No, how can they? Early and late they toil and moil at their books, and they've eyes for nothing else. Now, my little man, you are going to be learned when you grow up; and then you will stay at home and read such big books, and people will notice you and say, "he's a wonder."

Amal. No, no, Uncle; I beg of you by your dear feet--I don't want to be learned, I won't.

Madhav. Dear, dear; it would have been my saving if I could have been learned.

Amal. No, I would rather go about and see everything that there is.

Madhav. Listen to that! See! What will you see, what is there so much to see?

Amal. See that far-away hill from our window--I often long to go beyond those hills and right away.

Madhav. Oh, you silly! As if there's nothing more to be done but just get up to the top of that hill and away! Eh! You don't talk sense, my boy. Now listen, since that hill stands there upright as a barrier, it means you can't get beyond it. Else, what was the use in heaping up so many large stones to make such a big affair of it, eh!

Amal. Uncle, do you think it is meant to prevent your crossing over? It seems to me because the earth can't speak it raises its hands into the sky and beckons. And those who live far and sit alone by their windows can see the signal. But I suppose the learned people--

Madhav. No, they don't have time for that sort of nonsense. They are not crazy like you.

Amal. Do you know, yesterday I met someone quite as crazy as I am.

Madhav. Gracious me, really, how so?

Amal. He had a bamboo staff on his shoulder with a small bundle at the top, and a brass pot in his left hand, and an old pair of shoes on; he was making for those hills straight across that meadow there. I called out to him and asked, "Where are you going?" He answered, "I don't know, anywhere!" I asked again, "Why are you going?" He said, "I'm going out to seek work." Say, Uncle, have you to seek work?

Madhav. Of course I have to. There's many about looking for jobs.

Amal. How lovely! I'll go about, like them too, finding things to do.

Madhav. Suppose you seek and don't find. Then--

Amal. Wouldn't that be jolly? Then I should go farther! I watched that man slowly walking on

with his pair of worn out shoes. And when he got to where the water flows under the fig tree, he stopped and washed his feet in the stream. Then he took out from his bundle some gram-flour, moistened it with water and began to eat. Then he tied up his bundle and shouldered it again; tucked up his cloth above his knees and crossed the stream. I've asked Auntie to let me go up to the stream, and eat my gram-flour just like him.

Madhav. And what did your Auntie say to that?

Amal. Auntie said, "Get well and then I'll take you over there." Please, Uncle, when shall I get well?

Madhav. It won't be long, dear.

Amal. Really, but then I shall go right away the moment I'm well again.

Madhav. And where will you go?

Amal. Oh, I will walk on, crossing so many streams, wading through water. Everybody will be asleep with their doors shut in the heat of the day and I will tramp on and on seeking work far, very far.

Madhav. I see! I think you had better be getting well first; then--

Amal. But then you won't want me to be learned, will you, Uncle?

Madhav. What would you rather be then?

Amal. I can't think of anything just now; but I'll tell you later on.

Madhav. Very well. But mind you, you aren't to call out and talk to strangers again.

Amal. But I love to talk to strangers!

Madhav. Suppose they had kidnapped you?

Amal. That would have been splendid! But no one ever takes me away. They all want me to stay in here.

Madhav. I am off to my work--but, darling, you won't go out, will you?

Amal. No, I won't. But, Uncle, you'll let me be in this room by the roadside.

[Exit Madhav]

Dairyman. Curds, curds, good nice curds.

Amal. Curdseller, I say, Curdseller.

Dairyman. Why do you call me? Will you buy some curds?

Amal. How can I buy? I have no money.

Dairyman. What a boy! Why call out then? Ugh! What a waste of time.

Amal. I would go with you if I could.

Dairyman. With me?

Amal. Yes, I seem to feel homesick when I hear you call from far down the road.

Dairyman [*Lowering his yoke-pole*] Whatever are you doing here, my child?

Amal. The doctor says I'm not to be out, so I sit here all day long.

Dairyman. My poor child, whatever has happened to you?

Amal. I can't tell. You see I am not learned, so I don't know what's the matter with me. Say, Dairyman, where do you come from?

Dairyman. From our village.

Amal. Your village? Is it very far?

Dairyman. Our village lies on the river Shamli at the foot of the Panch-mura hills.

Amal. Panch-mura hills! Shamli river! I wonder. I may have seen your village. I can't think when though!

Dairyman. Have you seen it? Been to the foot of those hills?

Amal. Never. But I seem to remember having seen it. Your village is under some very old big trees, just by the side of the red road--isn't that so?

Dairyman. That's right, child.

Amal. And on the slope of the hill cattle grazing.

Dairyman. How wonderful! Aren't there cattle grazing in our village! Indeed, there are!

Amal. And your women with red sarees fill their pitchers from the river and carry them on their heads.

Dairyman. Good, that's right. Women from our dairy village do come and draw their water from the river; but then it isn't everyone who has a red saree to put on. But, my dear child, surely you must have been there for a walk some time.

Amal. Really, Dairyman, never been there at all. But the first day doctor lets me go out, you are going to take me to your village.

Dairyman. I will, my child, with pleasure.

Amal. And you'll teach me to cry curds and shoulder the yoke like you and walk the long, long road?

Dairyman. Dear, dear, did you ever? Why should you sell curds? No, you will read big books and be learned.

Amal. No, I never want to be learned--I'll be like you and take my curds from the village by the red road near the old banyan tree, and I will hawk it from cottage to cottage. Oh, how do you cry--"Curd, curd, good nice curd!" Teach me the tune, will you?

Dairyman. Dear, dear, teach you the tune; what an idea!

Amal. Please do. I love to hear it. I can't tell you how queer I feel when I hear you cry out from the bend of that road, through the line of those trees! Do you know I feel like that when I hear the shrill cry of kites from almost the end of the sky?

Dairyman. Dear child, will you have some curds? Yes, do.

Amal. But I have no money.

Dairyman. No, no, no, don't talk of money! You'll make me so happy if you have a little curds from me.

Amal. Say, have I kept you too long?

Dairyman. Not a bit; it has been no loss to me at all; you have taught me how to be happy

selling curds. [*Exit*]

Amal [*Intoning*] Curds, curds, good nice curds--from the dairy village--from the country of the Panch-mura hills by the Shamli bank. Curds, good curds; in the early morning the women make the cows stand in a row under the trees and milk them, and in the evening they turn the milk into curds. Curds, good curds. Hello, there's the watchman on his rounds. Watchman, I say, come and have a word with me.

Watchman. What's all this row you are making? Aren't you afraid of the likes of me?

Amal. No, why should I be?

Watchman. Suppose I march you off then?

Amal. Where will you take me to? Is it very far, right beyond the hills?

Watchman. Suppose I march you straight to the King?

Amal. To the King! Do, will you? But the doctor won't let me go out. No one can ever take me away. I've got to stay here all day long.

Watchman. Doctor won't let you, poor fellow! So I see! Your face is pale and there are dark rings round your eyes. Your veins stick out from your poor thin hands.

Amal. Won't you sound the gong, Watchman?

Watchman. Time has not yet come.

Amal. How curious! Some say time has not yet come, and some say time has gone by! But surely your time will come the moment you strike the gong!

Watchman. That's not possible; I strike up the gong only when it is time.

Amal. Yes, I love to hear your gong. When it is midday and our meal is over, Uncle goes off to his work and Auntie falls asleep reading her Ramayana, and in the courtyard under the shadow of the wall our doggie sleeps with his nose in his curled up tail; then your gong strikes out, "Dong, dong, dong!" Tell me why does your gong sound?

Watchman. My gong sounds to tell the people, Time waits for none, but goes on forever.

Amal. Where, to what land?

Watchman. That none knows.

Amal. Then I suppose no one has ever been there! Oh, I do wish to fly with the time to that land of which no one knows anything.

Watchman. All of us have to get there one day, my child.

Amal. Have I too?

Watchman. Yes, you too!

Amal. But doctor won't let me out.

Watchman. One day the doctor himself may take you there by the hand.

Amal. He won't; you don't know him. He only keeps me in.

Watchman. One greater than he comes and lets us free.

Amal. When will this great doctor come for me? I can't stick in here any more.

Watchman. Shouldn't talk like that, my child.

Amal. No. I am here where they have left me--I never move a bit. But when your gong goes off, dong, dong, dong, it goes to my heart. Say, Watchman?

Watchman. Yes, my dear.

Amal. Say, what's going on there in that big house on the other side, where there is a flag flying high up and the people are always going in and out?

Watchman. Oh, there? That's our new Post Office.

Amal. Post Office? Whose?

Watchman. Whose? Why, the King's surely!

Amal. Do letters come from the King to his office here?

Watchman. Of course. One fine day there may be a letter for you in there.

Amal. A letter for me? But I am only a little boy.

Watchman. The King sends tiny notes to little boys.

Amal. Oh, how lovely! When shall I have my letter? How do you guess he'll write to me?

Watchman. Otherwise why should he set his Post Office here right in front of your open window, with the golden flag flying?

Amal. But who will fetch me my King's letter when it comes?

Watchman. The King has many postmen. Don't you see them run about with round gilt badges on their chests?

Amal. Well, where do they go?

Watchman. Oh, from door to door, all through the country.

Amal. I'll be the King's postman when I grow up.

Watchman. Ha! ha! Postman, indeed! Rain or shine, rich or poor, from house to house delivering letters--that's very great work!

Amal. That's what I'd like best. What makes you smile so? Oh, yes, your work is great too. When it is silent everywhere in the heat of the noonday, your gong sounds, Dong, dong, dong,-- and sometimes when I wake up at night all of a sudden and find our lamp blown out, I can hear through the darkness your gong slowly sounding, Dong, dong, dong!

Watchman. There's the village headman! I must be off. If he catches me gossiping with you there'll be a great to do.

Amal. The headman? Whereabouts is he?

Watchman. Right down the road there; see that huge palm-leaf umbrella hopping along? That's him!

Amal. I suppose the King's made him our headman here?

Watchman. Made him? Oh, no! A fussy busy-body! He knows so many ways of making himself unpleasant that everybody is afraid of him. It's just a game for the likes of him, making trouble for everybody. I must be off now! Mustn't keep work waiting, you know! I'll drop in again to-morrow morning and tell you all the news of the town. [*Exit*]

Amal. It would be splendid to have a letter from the King every day. I'll read them at the window. But, oh! I can't read writing. Who'll read them out to me, I wonder! Auntie reads her

Ramayana; she may know the King's writing. If no one will, then I must keep them carefully and read them when I'm grown up. But if the postman can't find me? Headman, Mr. Headman, may I have a word with you?

Headman. Who is yelling after me on the highway? Oh, you wretched monkey!

Amal. You're the headman. Everybody minds you.

Headman [*Looking pleased*] Yes, oh yes, they do! They must!

Amal. Do the King's postmen listen to you?

Headman. They've got to. By Jove, I'd like to see--

Amal. Will you tell the postman it's Amal who sits by the window here?

Headman. What's the good of that?

Amal. In case there's a letter for me.

Headman. A letter for you! Whoever's going to write to you?

Amal. If the King does.

Headman. Ha! ha! What an uncommon little fellow you are! Ha! ha! the King indeed, aren't you his bosom friend, eh! You haven't met for a long while and the King is pining, I am sure. Wait till to-morrow and you'll have your letter.

Amal. Say, Headman, why do you speak to me in that tone of voice? Are you cross?

Headman. Upon my word! Cross, indeed! You write to the King! Madhav is devilish swell nowadays. He'd made a little pile; and so kings and padishahs are everyday talk with his people. Let me find him once and I'll make him dance. Oh, you snipper-snapper! I'll get the King's letter sent to your house--indeed I will!

Amal. No, no, please don't trouble yourself about it.

Headman. And why not, pray! I'll tell the King about you and he won't be very long. One of his footmen will come along presently for news of you. Madhav's impudence staggers me. If the King hears of this, that'll take some of his nonsense out of him. [*Exit*]

Amal. Who are you walking there? How your anklets tinkle! Do stop a while, dear, won't you?

[*A Girl enters*]

Girl. I haven't a moment to spare; it is already late!

Amal. I see, you don't wish to stop; I don't care to stay on here either.

Girl. You make me think of some late star of the morning! Whatever's the matter with you?

Amal. I don't know; the doctor won't let me out.

Girl. Ah me! Don't then! Should listen to the doctor. People'll be cross with you if you're naughty. I know, always looking out and watching must make you feel tired. Let me close the window a bit for you.

Amal. No, don't, only this one's open! All the others are shut. But will you tell me who you are? Don't seem to know you.

Girl. I am Sudha.

Amal. What Sudha?

Sudha. Don't you know? Daughter of the flower-seller here.

Amal. What do *you* do?

Sudha. I gather flowers in my basket.

Amal. Oh, flower gathering! That is why your feet seem so glad and your anklets jingle so merrily as you walk. Wish I could be out too. Then I would pick some flowers for you from the very topmost branches right out of sight.

Sudha. Would you really? Do you know more about flowers than I?

Amal. Yes, I *do*, quite as much. I know all about Champa of the fairy tale and his seven brothers. If only they let me, I'll go right into the dense forest where you can't find your way. And where the honey-sipping hummingbird rocks himself on the end of the thinnest branch, I will flower out as a champa. Would you be my sister Parul?

Sudha. You are silly! How can I be sister Parul when I am Sudha and my mother is Sasi, the flower-seller? I have to weave so many garlands a day. It would be jolly if I could lounge here like you!

Amal. What would you do then, all the day long?

Sudha. I could have great times with my doll Benay the bride, and Meni the pussycat and-- but I say it is getting late and I mustn't stop, or I won't find a single flower.

Amal. Oh, wait a little longer; I do like it so!

Sudha. Ah, well--now don't you be naughty. Be good and sit still and on my way back home with the flowers I'll come and talk with you.

Amal. And you'll let me have a flower then?

Sudha. No, how can I? It has to be paid for.

Amal. I'll pay when I grow up--before I leave to look for work out on the other side of that stream there.

Sudha. Very well, then.

Amal. And you'll come back when you have your flowers?

Sudha. I will.

Amal. You will, really?

Sudha. Yes, I will.

Amal. You won't forget me? I am Amal, remember that.

Sudha. I won't forget you, you'll see. [*Exit*]

[*A Troop of Boys enter*]

Amal. Say, brothers, where are you all off to? Stop here a little.

Boys. We're off to play.

Amal. What will you play at, brothers?

Boys. We'll play at being ploughmen.

First Boy [*Showing a stick*] This is our ploughshare.

Second Boy. We two are the pair of oxen.

Amal. And you're going to play the whole day?

Boys. Yes, all day long.

Amal. And you'll come back home in the evening by the road along the river bank?

Boys. Yes.

Amal. Do you pass our house on your way home?

Boys. You come out to play with us, yes do.

Amal. Doctor won't let me out.

Boys. Doctor! Suppose the likes of you mind the doctor. Let's be off; it is getting late.

Amal. Don't. Why not play on the road near this window? I could watch you then.

Third Boy. What can we play at here?

Amal. With all these toys of mine lying about. Here you are, have them. I can't play alone. They are getting dirty and are of no use to me.

Boys. How jolly! What fine toys! Look, here's a ship. There's old mother Jatai; say, chaps, ain't he a gorgeous sepoy? And you'll let us have them all? You don't really mind?

Amal. No, not a bit; have them by all means.

Boys. You don't want them back?

Amal. Oh, no, I shan't want them.

Boys. Say, won't you get a scolding for this?

Amal. No one will scold me. But will you play with them in front of our door for a while every morning? I'll get you new ones when these are old.

Boys. Oh, yes, we will. Say, chaps, put these sepoy's into a line. We'll play at war; where can we get a musket? Oh, look here, this bit of reed will do nicely. Say, but you're off to sleep already.

Amal. I'm afraid I'm sleepy. I don't know, I feel like it at times. I have been sitting a long while and I'm tired; my back aches.

Boys. It's only early noon now. How is it you're sleepy? Listen! The gong's sounding the first watch.

Amal. Yes, dong, dong, dong, it tolls me to sleep.

Boys. We had better go then. We'll come in again to-morrow morning.

Amal. I want to ask you something before you go. You are always out--do you know of the King's postmen?

Boys. Yes, quite well.

Amal. Who are they? Tell me their names.

Boys. One's Badal, another's Sarat. There's so many of them.

Amal. Do you think they will know me if there's a letter for me?

Boys Surely, if your name's on the letter they will find you out.

Amal. When you call in to-morrow morning, will you bring one of them along so that he'll know me?

Boys Yes, if you like.

CURTAIN

THE POST OFFICE

ACT II

[*Amal in Bed*]

Amal. Can't I go near the window to-day, Uncle? Would the doctor mind that too?

Madhav. Yes, darling, you see you've made yourself worse squatting there day after day.

Amal. Oh, no, I don't know if it's made me more ill, but I always feel well when I'm there.

Madhav. No, you don't; you squat there and make friends with the whole lot of people round here, old and young, as if they are holding a fair right under my eaves--flesh and blood won't stand that strain. Just see--your face is quite pale.

Amal. Uncle, I fear my fakir'll pass and not see me by the window.

Madhav. Your fakir, whoever's that?

Amal. He comes and chats to me of the many lands where he's been. I love to hear him.

Madhav. How's that? I don't know of any fakirs.

Amal. This is about the time he comes in. I beg of you, by your dear feet, ask him in for a moment to talk to me here.

[*Gaffer Enters in a Fakir's Guise*]

Amal. There you are. Come here, Fakir, by my bedside.

Madhav. Upon my word, but this is--

Gaffer [*Winking hard*] I am the fakir.

Madhav. It beats my reckoning what you're not.

Amal. Where have you been this time, Fakir?

Fakir To the Isle of Parrots. I am just back.

Madhav. The Parrots' Isle!

Fakir. Is it so very astonishing? Am I like you, man? A journey doesn't cost a thing. I tramp just where I like.

Amal [*Clapping*] How jolly for you! Remember your promise to take me with you as your follower when I'm well.

Fakir. Of course, and I'll teach you such secrets too of travelling that nothing in sea or forest or mountain can bar your way.

Madhav. What's all this rigmarole?

Gaffer. Amal, my dear, I bow to nothing in sea or mountain; but if the doctor joins in with this

uncle of yours, then I with all my magic must own myself beaten.

Amal. No. Uncle shan't tell the doctor. And I promise to lie quiet; but the day I am well, off I go with the Fakir and nothing in sea or mountain or torrent shall stand in my way.

Madhav. Fie, dear child, don't keep on harping upon going! It makes me so sad to hear you talk so.

Amal. Tell me, Fakir, what the Parrots' Isle is like.

Gaffer. It's a land of wonders; it's a haunt of birds. There's no man; and they neither speak nor walk, they simply sing and they fly.

Amal. How glorious! And it's by some sea?

Gaffer. Of course. It's on the sea.

Amal. And green hills are there?

Gaffer. Indeed, they live among the green hills; and in the time of the sunset when there is a red glow on the hillside, all the birds with their green wings flock back to their nests.

Amal. And there are waterfalls!

Gaffer. Dear me, of course; you don't have a hill without its waterfalls. Oh, it's like molten diamonds; and, my dear, what dances they have! Don't they make the pebbles sing as they rush over them to the sea. No devil of a doctor can stop them for a moment. The birds looked upon me as nothing but a man, quite a trifling creature without wings--and they would have nothing to do with me. Were it not so I would build a small cabin for myself among their crowd of nests and pass my days counting the sea waves.

Amal. How I wish I were a bird! Then--

Gaffer. But that would have been a bit of a job; I hear you've fixed up with the dairyman to be a hawker of curds when you grow up; I'm afraid such business won't flourish among birds; you might land yourself into serious loss.

Madhav. Really this is too much. Between you two I shall turn crazy. Now, I'm off.

Amal. Has the dairyman been, Uncle?

Madhav. And why shouldn't he? He won't bother his head running errands for your pet fakir, in and out among the nests in his Parrots' Isle. But he has left a jar of curd for you saying that he is rather busy with his niece's wedding in the village, and he has got to order a band at Kamlipara.

Amal. But he is going to marry me to his little niece.

Gaffer. Dear me, we are in a fix now.

Amal. He said she would find me a lovely little bride with a pair of pearl drops in her ears and dressed in a lovely red *saree*; and in the morning she would milk with her own hands the black cow and feed me with warm milk with foam on it from a brand new earthen cruse; and in the evenings she would carry the lamp round the cow-house, and then come and sit by me to tell me tales of Champa and his six brothers.

Gaffer. How delicious! The prospect tempts even me, a hermit! But never mind, dear, about this wedding. Let it be. I tell you when you wed there'll be no lack of nieces in his household.

Madhav. Shut up! This is more than I can stand. [*Exit*]

Amal. Fakir, now that Uncle's off, just tell me, has the King sent me a letter to the Post Office?

Gaffer. I gather that his letter has already started; but it's still on the way.

Amal. On the way? Where is it? Is it on that road winding through the trees which you can follow to the end of the forest when the sky is quite clear after rain?

Gaffer. That's so. You know all about it already.

Amal. I do, everything.

Gaffer. So I see, but how?

Amal. I can't say; but it's quite clear to me. I fancy I've seen it often in days long gone by. How long ago I can't tell. Do you know when? I can see it all: there, the King's postman coming down the hillside alone, a lantern in his left hand and on his back a bag of letters climbing down for ever so long, for days and nights, and where at the foot of the mountain the waterfall becomes a stream he takes to the footpath on the bank and walks on through the rye; then comes the sugarcane field and he disappears into the narrow lane cutting through the tall stems of sugarcanes; then he reaches the open meadow where the cricket chirps and where there is not a single man to be seen, only the snipe wagging their tails and poking at the mud with their bills. I can feel him coming nearer and nearer and my heart becomes glad.

Gaffer. My eyes aren't young; but you make me see all the same.

Amal. Say, Fakir, do you know the King who has this Post Office?

Gaffer. I do; I go to him for my alms every day.

Amal. Good! When I get well, I must have my alms too from him, mayn't I?

Gaffer. You won't need to ask, my dear, he'll give it to you of his own accord.

Amal. No, I would go to his gate and cry, "Victory to thee, O King!" and dancing to the tabor's sound, ask for alms. Won't it be nice?

Gaffer. It would be splendid, and if you're with me, I shall have my full share. But what'll you ask?

Amal. I shall say, "Make me your postman, that I may go about lantern in hand, delivering your letters from door to door. Don't let me stay at home all day!"

Gaffer. What is there to be sad for, my child, even were you to stay at home?

Amal. It isn't sad. When they shut me in here first I felt the day was so long. Since the King's Post Office I like it more and more being indoors, and as I think I shall get a letter one day, I feel quite happy and then I don't mind being quiet and alone. I wonder if I shall make out what'll be in the King's letter?

Gaffer. Even if you didn't wouldn't it be enough if it just bore your name?

[*Madhav enters*]

Madhav. Have you any idea of the trouble you've got me into, between you two?

Gaffer. What's the matter?

Madhav. I hear you've let it get rumored about that the King has planted his office here to send messages to both of you.

Gaffer. Well, what about it?

Madhav. Our headman Panchanan has had it told to the King anonymously.

Gaffer. Aren't we aware that everything reaches the King's ears?

Madhav. Then why don't you look out? Why take the King's name in vain? You'll bring me to ruin if you do.

Amal. Say, Fakir, will the King be cross?

Gaffer. Cross, nonsense! And with a child like you and a fakir such as I am. Let's see if the King be angry, and then won't I give him a piece of my mind.

Amal. Say, Fakir, I've been feeling a sort of darkness coming over my eyes since the morning. Everything seems like a dream. I long to be quiet. I don't feel like talking at all. Won't the King's letter come? Suppose this room melts away all on a sudden, suppose--

Gaffer [*Fanning Amal*] The letter's sure to come to-day, my boy.

[*Doctor enters*]

Doctor And how do you feel to-day?

Amal. Feel awfully well to-day, Doctor. All pain seems to have left me.

Doctor [*Aside to Madhav*] Don't quite like the look of that smile. Bad sign that, his feeling well! Chakradhan has observed--

Madhav. For goodness sake, Doctor, leave Chakradhan alone. Tell me what's going to happen?

Doctor. Can't hold him in much longer, I fear! I warned you before--This looks like a fresh exposure.

Madhav. No, I've used the utmost care, never let him out of doors; and the windows have been shut almost all the time.

Doctor. There's a peculiar quality in the air to-day. As I came in I found a fearful draught through your front door. That's most hurtful. Better lock it at once. Would it matter if this kept your visitors off for two or three days? If someone happens to call unexpectedly-- there's the back door. You had better shut this window as well, it's letting in the sunset rays only to keep the patient awake.

Madhav. Amal has shut his eyes. I expect he is sleeping. His face tells me--Oh, Doctor, I bring in a child who is a stranger and love him as my own, and now I suppose I must lose him!

Doctor. What's that? There's your headman sailing in!--What a bother! I must be going, brother. You had better stir about and see to the doors being properly fastened. I will send on a strong dose directly I get home. Try it on him--it may save him at last, if he can be saved at all. [*Exeunt Madhav and Doctor.*]

[*The Headman enters*]

Headman. Hello, urchin!

Gaffer [*Rising hastily*] 'Sh, be quiet.

Amal. No, Fakir, did you think I was asleep? I wasn't. I can hear everything; yes, and voices far away. I feel that mother and father are sitting by my pillow and speaking to me.

[*Madhav enters*]

Headman. I say, Madhav, I hear you hobnob with bigwigs nowadays.

Madhav. Spare me your jests, Headman, we are but common people.

Headman. But your child here is expecting a letter from the King.

Madhav. Don't you take any notice of him, a mere foolish boy!

Headman. Indeed, why not! It'll beat the King hard to find a better family! Don't you see why the King plants his new Post Office right before your window? Why there's a letter for you from the King, urchin.

Amal [*Starting up*] Indeed, really!

Headman. How can it be false? You're the King's chum. Here's your letter [*showing a blank slip of paper*]. Ha, ha, ha! This is the letter.

Amal. Please don't mock me. Say, Fakir, is it so?

Gaffer. Yes, my dear. I as Fakir tell you it is his letter.

Amal. How is it I can't see? It all looks so blank to me. What is there in the letter, Mr. Headman?

Headman. The King says, "I am calling on you shortly; you had better arrange puffed rice offerings for me.--Palace fare is quite tasteless to me now." Ha! ha! ha!

Madhav [*With folded palms*] I beseech you, headman, don't you joke about these things--

Gaffer. Cutting jokes indeed, dare he!

Madhav. Are you out of your mind too, Gaffer?

Gaffer. Out of my mind, well then I am; I can read plainly that the King writes he will come himself to see Amal, with the state physician.

Amal. Fakir, Fakir, 'sh, his trumpet! Can't you hear?

Headman. Ha! ha! ha! I fear he won't until he's a bit more off his head.

Amal. Mr. Headman, I thought you were cross with me and didn't love me. I never could think you would fetch me the King's letter. Let me wipe the dust off your feet.

Headman. This little child does have an instinct of reverence. Though a little silly, he has a good heart.

Amal. It's hard on the fourth watch now, I suppose--Hark the gong, "Dong, dong, ding," "Dong, dong, ding." Is the evening star up? How is it I can't see--

Gaffer. Oh, the windows are all shut, I'll open them.

[*A knocking outside*]

Madhav. What's that?--Who is it--what a bother!

Voice [*From outside*] Open the door.

Madhav Say, Headman--Hope they're not robbers.

Headman Who's there?--It's Panchanan, the headman, calls--Aren't you afraid of the like of me? Fancy! The noise has ceased! Panchanan's voice carries far.--Yes, show me the biggest robbers!

Madhav [*Peering out of the window*] I should think the noise has ceased. They've smashed the door.

[*The King's Herald enters*]

Herald. Our Sovereign King comes to-night!

Headman. My God!

Amal. At what hour of the night, Herald?

Herald. On the second watch.

Amal. When from the city gates my friend the watchman will strike his gong, "ding dong ding, ding dong ding"--then?

Herald. Yes, then. The King sends his greatest physician to attend on his young friend.

[*State Physician enters*]

State Physician. What's this? How close it is here! Open wide all the doors and windows.
[*Feeling Amal's body*] How do you feel, my child?

Amal. I feel very well, Doctor, very well. All pain is gone. How fresh and open! I can see all the stars now twinkling from the other side of the dark.

Physician. Will you feel well enough to leave your bed with the King when he comes in the middle watches of the night?

Amal. Of course, I'm dying to be about for ever so long. I'll ask the King to find me the polar star.--I must have seen it often, but I don't know exactly which it is.

Physician. He will tell you everything. [*To Madhav*] Will you go about and arrange flowers through the room for the King's visit? [*Indicating the Headman*] We can't have that person in here.

Amal. No, let him be, Doctor. He is a friend. It was he who brought me the King's letter.

Physician. Very well, my child. He may remain if he is a friend of yours.

Madhav [*Whispering into Amal's ear*] My child, the King loves you. He is coming himself. Beg for a gift from him. You know our humble circumstances.

Amal. Don't you worry, Uncle.--I've made up my mind about it.

Madhav. What is it, my child?

Amal. I shall ask him to make me one of his postmen that I may wander far and wide, delivering his message from door to door.

Madhav [*Slapping his forehead*] Alas, is that all?

Amal. What'll be our offerings to the King, Uncle, when he comes?

Herald. He has commanded puffed rice.

Amal. Puffed rice! Say, Headman, you're right. You said so. You knew all we didn't.

Headman. If you send word to my house then I could manage for the King's advent really nice--

Physician. No need at all. Now be quiet all of you. Sleep is coming over him. I'll sit by his pillow; he's dropping into slumber. Blow out the oil-lamp. Only let the star-light stream in. Hush, he slumbers.

Madhav [*Addressing Gaffer*] What are you standing there for like a statue, folding your palms.-- I am nervous.--Say, are they good omens? Why are they darkening the room? How will star-light help?

Gaffer. Silence, unbeliever.

[*Sudha enters*]

Sudha. Amal!

Physician. He's asleep.

Sudha. I have some flowers for him. Mayn't I give them into his own hand?

Physician. Yes, you may.

Sudha. When will he be awake?

Physician. Directly the King comes and calls him.

Sudha. Will you whisper a word for me in his ear?

Physician. What shall I say?

Sudha. Tell him Sudha has not forgotten him.

CURTAIN