

PREMCHAND

The Shroud

IN front of the door to the hut, a father and son were sitting in silence beside a smoldering bonfire while inside the son's young wife Budhiya was writhing about in labor pains, from time to time her heart-wrenching cries turning the blood of both men cold. It was a winter's night, eerily silent, the entire village covered by a heavy darkness.

"It seems like she won't make it," Gheesu said. "She's been tossing and turning all day. Why don't you go take a look."

"If she has to die, why can't she get it over with?" Madho said, suddenly irritated. "What's the point of going?"

"You're a heartless little shit! Are you really that indifferent to her, the woman you've spent a year's worth of good times with?"

"I can't bear to see her thrashing about."

They were from a chamar family and had a bad reputation throughout the entire village. For every day that he would work, Gheesu would take it easy for three. And Madho was so lazy that for every hour he worked, he would smoke his pipe for another. It was because of this that no one would hire them. If at home they had two handfuls of grain, then they said to hell with work. When they were out of food entirely, Gheesu would climb into a tree and tear off some wood that Madho would then sell in the market, and as long as the money from that lasted, the two of them would wander about without a care in the world. Then when they ran out of food again, they would sell some more wood or look for day-labor jobs.

There was no shortage of work in the village. It was a farming village and, for those willing to work hard, there was an unlimited number of ways to earn some money. But people called on them only when the straits were so dire that they were resigned to hiring two men who did the equivalent of one man's work. If only they were sadhus! They seemed like they had the natural disposition—they had already

mastered renunciation and ascetic indifference!

Theirs was an odd life. At home, except for two or three earthenware kitchen items, they owned nothing else. For clothes, torn rags hung from their naked bodies. They lived free from the world's snares and yet were insolvent beneath numerous debts.

Everyone insulted them, but they didn't care. Madho and Gheesu's destitution was so great that people lent them money, even knowing they would never be repaid. At harvest time they would surreptitiously pick peas or dig potatoes to fry them up to eat. Or they would steal sugarcane and at night suck them down to their fibers.

Gheesu had passed sixty years devoted to such roguery, and like a good son, Madho followed in his father's footsteps, believing himself content. And he outshone his father in his renunciatory ways.

Both were sitting beside the bonfire roasting potatoes that they had pilfered from somebody's field. Gheesu's wife had died some time before, and Madho had gotten married the previous year. From the time that Madho's wife had come, she had tried to civilize them in some way. From her daily work routine, she was able to secure for them two seers of flour and fill the stomachs of these two shameless men.

From the time that she had come, both of them had become even lazier and they began to strut about, flouting their new status. If someone called them to do some work, they impudently demanded double-wages. Madho's wife was dying in childbirth and maybe all they hoped for was that she'd die quickly so they could get back to lounging around.

Gheesu was peeling potatoes. "Go and see what's wrong with her," he said. "She seems possessed. Where's the money going to come from to pay for an exorcist?"

Madho was afraid that if he left Gheesu by himself, he would take the lion's share of the potatoes. "I'm afraid to go," he said.

"What do you mean 'you're afraid?' I'm right here."

"Then you go," Madho said.

"When my wife died, I didn't leave her side for three days," Gheesu began. "Wouldn't she be ashamed to see me?" he said, speaking of Madho's wife. "I've never seen her without a veil on. It would be wrong for me to see her now when she doesn't have control over her senses. If I went in, how could she behave modestly while flailing about in childbirth?"

"I'm worried about what will happen if she does give birth. Our kitchen is totally empty."

“Don’t worry. Everything will be alright,” Gheesu went on. “If God gives you a child, those who won’t give anything now, will come forward to help. I had nine sons, and even when we had nothing, we always got by.”

In a society in which those who work day and night can’t point to anything good about their lives, and in which an entire class lives off exploiting farmers for the increase of its own wealth and leisure, then a mentality like Gheesu’s is far from astonishing. You could say that in comparison to the farmers, Gheesu saw clearly this state of affairs, and for this reason he belonged not among their empty-headed herd but rather among the opportunists. And yet he didn’t have the capability to follow all their parasitic rules of etiquette and exploitation. Because of this, while many others became village leaders, Gheesu was left to be ridiculed by everyone. Nevertheless, he could always draw comfort from the thought that as bad as this life’s circumstances might become, at least he would never have to work like a dog like the farmers. Because of his simplemindedness and supreme passivity, others couldn’t find a way to take advantage of him.

Both began to devour the hot potatoes. They hadn’t eaten anything since the day before. They didn’t have enough patience to wait for the potatoes to cool and they both repeatedly burned their tongues.

When they peeled the potatoes, their outer part didn’t seem hot, but as soon as they bit down on them, the potatoes’ insides burned their tongues, the roof of their mouths, and their throats. And it was actually better that they not chew the potatoes but swallow them as quickly as possible, because in their stomachs they would quickly become cooled. And so they hurriedly swallowed them, although doing so brought tears to their eyes.

While eating the potatoes, Gheesu remembered the Thakur’s wedding procession that he had been a part of twenty years before. That day, the pleasure of eating his fill at the wedding feast became one of his life’s most memorable moments. And even today that memory was fresh in his mind. He said, “I’ll never forget that meal. Since then I’ve never had such a satisfying meal. The girl’s family served puris to everyone, everyone. The poorest and the richest ate puris, *satpanis* made from pure ghee, three types of dry vegetable dishes, one creamy dal, yogurt, chutney, and sweets. How can I tell you how tasty that meal was! We could eat as much as we wanted. You could order whatever you wanted and eat until you couldn’t eat anymore. People ate so much, ate so much, that afterwards no one dared to touch their glasses

of water. The servers brought around piping hot aromatic kachoris and despite our covering our plates with our hands, they never stopped giving us more. And after everyone had wiped their mouths for the last time, paan was passed around. But how could I take a paan then, I could barely stay standing! I made a beeline to my blanket and lay down. That Thakur's generosity was that much!"

Enjoying the memory of those elaborate preparations, Madho said, "Wouldn't it be great if someone would serve us such a meal?"

"Who would go to such trouble now? That was a different time. These days everyone seems so frugal—'don't spend too much on weddings,' 'don't spend too much on funerals'—ask them, what will they do with all that they're extorting from the poor? They don't let up with their hoarding, and yet you never see them spending anything."

"You must have eaten about twenty puris."

"More than twenty."

"I would have eaten fifty."

"I must not have eaten less than fifty. I was a real bear back then. You're not even half as strong as what I was."

Having eaten the potatoes and drunk some water, both of them covered themselves with their dhotis, curled up with their legs against their stomachs, and fell asleep before the bonfire as if they were two coiled pythons. And through all of this, Budhiya had been moaning in labor pains.

In the morning Madho went into the hut to check on his wife and found that she had gone cold. Flies were buzzing around her mouth. Her stony eyes were staring up into a void. Her entire body was sticky with dust and grime. Her child had died in her womb.

Madho rushed out to Gheesu. Then both of them began to wail loudly and beat their chests. Hearing this death lament, neighbors came running and, in keeping with the time-honored custom, tried to comfort the grief-stricken. But it wasn't a time to get too caught up in grief because Gheesu and Madho had to worry about a shroud and wood for a funeral pyre. In their hut money was as scarce as meat in an eagle's nest.

Father and son went crying to the village's zamindar, who hated the sight of these two and who had already had occasion to beat them many times—for their habit of stealing or for promising to work and then not showing. He asked, "What is it, Gheesu? Why are you crying?"

Where have you been hiding yourself? It seems like you're asking to be kicked out of this village?"

Gheesu lay prostrate, his head touching the ground, and with tears filling his eyes he said, "Sarkar, I'm in a bad way! Madho's wife passed away last night. She was writhing about all day, Sarkar. We kept vigil over her for half the night. Drugs and medicine, we tried everything available to use, but she left us anyway. Now there's no one to give us even a single roti. Boss, we're ruined! Our house is desolate. I am your slave. Except for you, there's no one left to see Budhiya through her final rites. Other than yours, before whose door should I go begging?"

The zamindar was a tenderhearted man. But being compassionate to Gheesu was as pointless as dyeing a black blanket with beautiful colors. The zamindar just felt like saying, "Get out of here! Keep the corpse at home and let it rot! Normally you don't show your face even when I call for you. Now all of a sudden when you need something, you come trying to flatter me, you sniveling imp!"

But this wasn't the time to get angry or to exact revenge. Willingly or unwillingly, he took out two rupees and flung them blindly in Gheesu's direction, without uttering one word of consolation. It was as if he were simply relieving himself of a burden.

After the zamindar had given two rupees, how were the *baniya* and moneylenders going to find the temerity to refuse Gheesu's pleas? Gheesu went around banging on a drum, shouting out that the zamindar had given two rupees. Someone gave two annas. Someone gave four annas. In an hour Gheesu had collected five rupees, enough for their needs. Someone gave some grain and someone some wood. In the afternoon Gheesu and Madho set out to bring a shroud from the market, and others began to cut bamboo for the corpse's stretcher.

The kindhearted women of the village came by Madho and Gheesu's hut to look at the corpse. Thinking about Budhiya's helplessness, they shed a tear or two and then left for home.

After reaching the market, Gheesu said, "We've got enough wood for the pyre, don't you think, Madho?"

"Yeah, we've got a lot of wood," Madho said. "Now we need a shroud."

"So let's get a cheap one."

"Yeah, why not. At night when we're taking the corpse to the pyre, who's going to see the shroud anyway?"

“What a bad custom it is that someone who didn’t even have a rag to cover her body, now, when she dies, has to have a new shroud.”

“A shroud only burns up with the corpse.”

“That’s the truth. If we had had five rupees earlier, we could have bought medicine for Budhiya.”

Both understood what the other was thinking. They kept wandering about the market until evening. Then, by chance or intentionally, they wound up in front of a wine-house. As if according to a decision already made, they entered and for a little while stood in a state of indecision. Then Gheesu ordered a bottle of liquor, some *guzak*, and both sat down on the veranda and began to drink.

After drinking one glass after another, both of them were reeling. Then Gheesu spoke, “What would be the use of getting a shroud? In the end it would just burn up. The dead don’t take anything with them.”

Madho looked in the direction of the sky, and, as if he were trying to prove his innocence to the angels, he said, “That’s how things are. Why do people around here give Brahmins thousands of rupees? Who knows if that gets you anything in heaven.”

“Rich people have money to throw around. What do we have to show off?”

“But what answer will you give people? People will ask where the shroud is, won’t they?”

Gheesu laughed. “I’ll say that the rupees slipped from my waist, that we searched everywhere but couldn’t find them.”

Madho laughed too. At this unexpected turn of good fortune and rout of faith, he said, “The missus was a real good one. Even dead she has looked after our food and drink.”

More than half of the liquor was gone. Gheesu ordered two seers of puris, meat with stewed vegetables, tasty livers, and fried fish. The shop was right in front of the wine-house. Madho hurried back, bringing everything on two broad leaf plates. All in all it cost one and a half rupees, and only a little money remained.

Both of them sat eating the puris with the grandness of a tiger feasting on his prey in the jungle. They feared neither having to answer for their actions nor the disrepute these actions would earn them—they had much earlier passed through these stages of vulnerable self-consciousness.

Gheesu said in a philosophic way, “If this pleases our souls, won’t that earn Budhiya her reward?”

Madho deferentially bowed his head and assented, "Of course...." Then he said, "God, You are all-knowing! Take Budhiya to heaven—both of us ask this of You from the bottom of our hearts ... In all my years I've never had a meal like today's."

After a second, a doubt arose in Madho's heart. "Dada, we too will have to go there one day."

Ghesu did not respond to this childish comment. He looked at Madho with reproach.

Then Madho said, "When we get there and she asks us, 'Why didn't you get a shroud?' then what are you going to say?"

"Just drop it, will you?"

"She's certainly going to ask."

"How do you know that she won't get a shroud? You think I'm some sort of idiot? What—you think that I've been just wasting my time for sixty years in this world? She'll get a shroud, a much better one than we could ever give her."

Madho didn't believe him. He said, "Who's going to give it? You've spent all the money."

Ghesu became short-tempered, "If I say that she'll get a shroud, why don't you believe me?"

"Why won't you tell me who'll give it?"

"The very people who have given this time, though that money won't come into our hands. And if somehow we do get a hold of it, we'll come sit here just like this and drink. And we'll get a shroud for the third time."

As darkness was spreading and the stars began to sparkle brightly, the atmosphere of the wine-house too became livelier. Someone sang. Someone began to shout out in drunkenness. Someone clung to his friend's throat. Someone brought a cup up to his friend's mouth. The atmosphere was thick with intoxication. There was drunkenness in the air—drinking just a mouthful, many had become drunk. The men had come intending to find pleasure in forgetfulness. More than from the alcohol, their happiness came from the wine-house's ambience. Life's calamities brought them there. And for a while they could forget if they were alive or dead or buried alive.

Both father and son even now were enjoying themselves, sipping at their liquor. Everyone was staring at them—what good fortune for the two of them ... they had an entire bottle between them!

After having eaten, Madho took the plate with the remaining puris and gave it to a beggar, who was standing and casting hungry looks

toward him, and Madho felt for the first time in his life the conceit, bravado and jubilation that comes with drinking.

Gheesu said, "Here, take these! Eat your fill. Give your blessings. The woman who earned this has died, but your blessings will certainly reach her. Give all the blessings you can muster—the money that we spent for this was hard-earned."

Madho again looked toward the sky and said, "She will go to heaven, Dada. She will become the queen of heaven."

Gheesu stood up and as if he were swimming in waves of happiness said, "Yes son, she will go to heaven. She harassed no one. She oppressed no one. In dying, she made this meal possible and our lives' most ardent desire was fulfilled. If she doesn't go to heaven then will the rich people who with both hands rob from the poor? Who go to wash away their sins in the Ganga and pray in temples?"

Their optimistic mood died away. A changeable mind is drunkenness's peculiar characteristic. Despair and sorrow returned.

Madho said, "But, Father, poor Budhiya endured a lot of suffering in her life. How much she suffered even in dying!" He covered his eyes with his hands and began to cry.

Gheesu consoled him, "Why are you crying, son? You should be happy she's broken free from this world's web of illusion, that she's broken from worldly entanglements so soon. She was very fortunate to have broken from the world's snares so quickly."

And standing right there, both of them began to sing, "Beguiler, your sidelong looks bewitch, Beguiler why?"

The entire wine-house was spellbound in watching Madho and Gheesu, and these two drunks kept singing in a state of engrossed delight. Then both of them began to dance. They leapt about. They fell down. They moved about with seductive gestures. And at last, becoming overwhelmed by their drunkenness, they collapsed right there. □

—*Translated by Matt Reeck and Aftab Ahmad*