

THE POST OFFICE

a play for grades 9-12+

adapted by **Melissa Leilani Larson**

from the 1913 Devabrata Mukerjea translation of Rabindranath Tagore



PLAN-B
Theatre Company

THE POST OFFICE by Melissa Leilani Larson received its world premiere August 24-26, 2019 in a Gandhi Alliance For Peace/Granite School District/Plan-B Theatre Company/United Nations Association of Utah co-production coinciding with the United Nations Civil Society Conference held in Salt Lake City, Utah in August 2019. Directed by Adam Wilkins, stage managed by Roey Howell & Zoey Fossen, designed by Madeline Ashton (set), Cheryl Cluff (sound), Pilar Davis (lighting) & Maddiey Howell-Wilkins (costumes). Featuring Alexis Bitner (Ash, Olympus High School), Elaia Echeverria (Maddox, Cottonwood High School), Kaplan Keener (Doc, Cottonwood High School), Sarah D'Anella (Stranger, Cottonwood High School), Melaine Isaac (Cheese Seller, Taylorsville High School), Hunter Oliphant (Soldier, Cottonwood High School), Andrew Pankey (Sheriff, Cottonwood High School), Emily Tippetts (Sage, Cottonwood High School), Carter Wagstaff (Badger, Cottonwood High School), Jevahjire France (Herald, Cottonwood High School) & Tyrah Sanchez (Royal Physician, Cottonwood High School). Dramaturg Mason Turton (Cottonwood High School). Crewed by Zach Scarborough (Set, Cottonwood High School), Caitie Neilson (Costumes, Kearns High School), Averro Larson (Lighting, Granger High School), Travis Fullerton (Sound, Granger High School).

Please contact playwright Melissa Leilani Larson (Dramatists Guild Member #75950) for production rights through her website melissaleilanilarson.com

TIME

The not-so-distant future.

SETTING

Most of the action takes place on and in the porch and front room of a cottage that has seen better days. A second space serves as the open countryside and as the location for a stream of water. The stream should take several steps to cross. It isn't necessary to keep Ash at the window the entire time.

CHARACTERS

ASH, early teens

MADDOX

DOC, contemporary to Maddox

THE STRANGER, 30s

CHEESE SELLER

SOLDIER

VILLAGE SHERIFF

SAGE, early teens

BADGER, contemporary to Maddox

HERALD

ROYAL PHYSICIAN

Ash, Sage and the Stranger should identify as female or non-binary. All other roles are gender-flexible. Depending on casting, the cis pronouns currently on the page may be adjusted accordingly.

All roles are open to actors of any race/ethnicity.

Age is also flexible unless otherwise noted. Ash and Sage should be the same age. Maddox, Doc, and Badger are contemporaries and should be roughly the same age.

Doubling is possible and is left to the discretion of the director.

NOTES

The country depicted in the play is fictional; the design of the play should not reflect any actual nation or government.

The play takes place over the course of a single day, beginning early in the morning and ending after moonrise.

A set of ellipsis points (...) indicates a brief pause, often at the beginning of a line. A double set (... ...) indicates a significantly longer—and potentially awkward—pause.

(Morning. The front porch and facade of a modest home that has seen better days. The cottage is situated on a country road, on the outside edge of a small town.)

(Light reveals 13-year-old ASH asleep in a bed under the large window, its panes thrown open to let in the morning air. After a moment, voices are heard off, and the light expands to fill the room. MADDOX and DOC enter.)

MADDOX (coming in:) There has to be something you can do.

DOC: Ssh, let's step outside. You'll wake Ash.

(MADDOX and DOC move to the porch.)

MADDOX: I tell you, Doc. My life was so much easier before Ash. Nothing mattered; I felt free. I didn't care about anything. But now I— (A quick glance at the sleeping ASH.) Everything is different when you have someone to take care of.

DOC: You're having doubts about taking her in.

MADDOX: No, it's not that. Once you have someone to care about, how do you go back to being alone?

DOC: None of this is your fault. You've done a fine job looking after her.

MADDOX: I haven't. I've failed. If it's as bad as you say— If anyone deserves a long life, it's Ash.

DOC: And what if the rest of us don't deserve to keep her here?

MADDOX: Don't start with your religious nonsense. It just makes me anxious.

DOC: A little faith never hurt anybody.

MADDOX: I'm still waiting to see who it helps.

DOC: She should stay inside and rest.

MADDOX: Ash lives to be outdoors.

DOC: We have to take every precaution. She's not improving—

MADDOX: Don't say it.

DOC: You asked me here for my opinion.

(ASH stirs in bed and wakes. She lies still, listening through the open window.)

MADDOX: I didn't ask for your opinion; I asked for you to do something. The truth is you don't know what's wrong, or what to do about it other than lock her away.

DOC: I can't name the illness, it's true. And since the Takeover it's harder to get access to supplies and medicine and— I can see the symptoms, Maddox. We need to do the best we can with what we have.

MADDOX: Surely some fresh air can't hurt.

DOC: If it was summer, perhaps. But the autumn chill and the damp air are both enemies to our cause.

MADDOX: Your methods, your treatment—it's very hard on her. Are you sure this is the best course?

DOC: Sometimes we need a little pain to know that the medicine is working. "In medicine as in good advice, the least palatable are the truest."

MADDOX: What did I say about quoting scripture?

DOC: That I don't do it enough? I must be off to see my other patients. She needs rest, and quiet, and nourishing food. None of that junk you two seem to prefer.

MADDOX: All right, all right.

(DOC exits. MADDOX sits on the edge of the porch with a sigh. ASH sits up in bed, leaning out of the frame of the open window.)

ASH: Hey! Maddox!

MADDOX: Hey yourself. You should be sleeping.

ASH: I was, but my dreams were boring.

(She gets out of bed, hurrying to sit beside MADDOX, who comes a little unglued.)

MADDOX: What are you doing?

ASH: Nothing. I was just going to sit with you and—

MADDOX: You're not supposed to be outside. You know better.

ASH: I'm feeling fine, Maddox.

(MADDOX shepherds ASH back to bed.)

ASH: Really, I'm OK.

MADDOX: You're tired.

ASH: ...Maybe a little. But being in the sun helps. (MADDOX moves to close the window.)
Don't! Please. If I can't go out, at least leave the window open.

MADDOX: Doc didn't say to shut it, so we'll pretend it's all right.

ASH: I was really hoping to go for a long walk up in hills today, and maybe see some squirrels there. Can I go?

MADDOX: Another day, perhaps.

ASH: It would be such fun to be a squirrel. So soft and lean, and quick to jump from branch to branch, with cheeks you can fill with nuts to save for later.

MADDOX: You're thin enough now someone would think you were a squirrel.

ASH: But if I were a squirrel you wouldn't let me come live here.

MADDOX: Heavens no, orphan or not. Squirrels are neurotic and paranoid and too fast for their own good. And they probably have fleas. And bad table manners.

ASH: But they're so sleek and clever.

MADDOX: It's a ruse. To get you to feed them.

ASH: Do you see that building over there? With the Queen's flag flying?

MADDOX: Huh. I don't know and I don't care to know.

ASH: What if the Queen is there?

MADDOX: Our town is far too dusty for the likes of the Queen.

ASH: So you don't think she'll ever come?

MADDOX: No. Thank goodness.

ASH: Why shouldn't you want her to come?

MADDOX: There are people in this town who would turn us all inside out to prepare for one woman to walk through without looking a single one of us in the eye. And for what? For her to

go back to her palace and forget about our problems? Meanwhile, we've spent every last penny to carpet the ground in rose petals for her to walk on.

ASH: But those demands come from her councilors, not from the Queen herself.

MADDOX: It's true.

ASH: She can do whatever she likes, can't she? The Queen?

MADDOX: It seems that way.

ASH: Imagine being able to go wherever you like, whenever you like, with no one in the world to stop you.

MADDOX: There are stories of the Queen disappearing from her council chambers for days at a time. That she disguises herself and walks unseen among the people.

ASH: What if I were to go on a long walk and meet the Queen?

MADDOX: Someday, perhaps.

ASH: Why not today?

MADDOX: Doc says you need to stay inside.

ASH: How can Doc know?

MADDOX: Doc is educated. He's always got his nose in a book thicker than your arm.

ASH: Then why do I always feel like he's—uncertain about what he's doing?

MADDOX: Yours is a special case. A mystery. Don't worry; Doc is up to the challenge.

ASH: If you say so.

MADDOX: You could be like him some day. Think about it. Learned people like Doc are just like you—they never step out of doors.

ASH: Ha ha.

MADDOX: They have eyes for nothing but their books. And someday, you'll learn to read, and even better than Doc. You'll go to the university, and read every book ever written, and people will meet you in the street and marvel at how brilliant you've become.

ASH: Oh, no.

MADDOX: What's wrong?

ASH: I don't want learn to read. I don't want to be educated in that way. That's the last thing I want.

MADDOX: What are you talking about? How will you get out of this place without an education? Oh, Ash. My life would have been so different if I could have gone to school.

ASH: You work hard, Maddox, to keep a roof overhead and food on the table. That's nothing to be ashamed of.

MADDOX: I'm not ashamed. I'm—tired.

ASH: Do educated people get more rest?

MADDOX: Perhaps not. Just the rich ones. You're a smart kid, Ash. Education will open doors you never imagined.

ASH: I want to learn. I never said otherwise. I want to spend my whole life learning. But I don't want to sit in a room and read letters on a page. Get headaches from the smell of the ink. I want to go out and explore and see the world. Run my fingers through tall grass and feel glassy pebbles beneath my feet and figure the age of a tree by counting its rings and smell the salt of the ocean.

MADDOX: The ocean?

ASH: Yes! I want to see everything. I want to meet people, and know what they know, and see how they live and love and evolve...

MADDOX: Haven't we already evolved? Are you looking to see people devolve?

ASH: You're teasing, and I choose not to listen. I mean the fact is that people change. Every day, we all change, even just a little bit from this day to the next. How does that happen?

MADDOX: We get older. Life wears on us.

ASH: That's some of it, yes. But people are all different from one another. Some will change so completely because of the friends they make and the work they do. While others will simply grow up and be, without a hint of change. Not a glimmer, not a shake.

MADDOX: I don't know that the world is as big as you think it is.

ASH: I'd like to find out for myself. You see that hill, over there?

MADDOX: Past the squirrel hill?

ASH: Yes, the big, tall hill that is furthest from us. I often long to go there.

MADDOX: There's nothing to see.

ASH: I disagree. If I could get to the top of that hill, I could see everything. I bet the world would seem a completely different place than it does from here.

MADDOX: You don't talk sense, Ash. It's not practical to just climb a hill for the view.

ASH: Why else would you climb a hill?

MADDOX: We don't. We go to work. Or, in your case, you rest until Doc says you can go to work.

ASH: The sky is beckoning me to come. It wants me to climb the hill and go out into the world. This window frames that hill too perfectly for me to miss it. Do you think educated people look out windows like ours and see messages in the sky?

MADDOX: No. They don't have time for that kind of nonsense. They're not crazy like you. But it's said with affection.

ASH: Yesterday I met someone quite as crazy as I am.

MADDOX: Really? Is such a thing possible?

ASH: I went out to the stream to see—

MADDOX: Ash!

ASH: Nothing happened.

MADDOX: You're about to tell me something happened.

ASH: Yes, well. What I mean is, I didn't get sick.

MADDOX: You're already sick.

ASH: But I didn't die, did I?

MADDOX: You're lucky I don't save myself some time and kill you.

(ASH smiles at this, but MADDOX regrets the joke.)

ASH: Anyway. Down at the stream, there was this woman, a stranger, who looked like she had walked miles just that day. Her hands were dirty, but her face was full of light. She was washing her hands in the stream.

(As ASH tells the story, the lights shift and the STRANGER kneels to catch water from the stream in her cupped hands. She carries a small bundle on her back. Her clothes are elegantly simple and well made, but don't necessarily draw attention.)

ASH: Hello.

STRANGER: ...Hello.

ASH: Where are you going?

STRANGER: I don't know. Anywhere.

ASH: Don't you like it here?

STRANGER: I used to.

ASH: Then why are you going?

STRANGER: To look for work.

(ASH pauses in the scene, turning back to MADDOX.)

ASH: Have you had to find work before, Maddox?

MADDOX: Yes. Many times. It's very hard. Since the war, there are many about looking for jobs.

(ASH turns back to the STRANGER.)

ASH: Wouldn't that be great? To look for jobs? To find interesting things to do?

STRANGER: That's not quite how it—

ASH: I'd love to be out looking for things to do.

STRANGER: Then why don't you go out looking?

ASH: The doctor says I'm not well enough to go.

(The STRANGER rolls up her trouser legs and takes off her shoes. Carefully she steps into the stream.)

ASH: Isn't it cold?

STRANGER: I've grown used to it.

ASH: Good luck! I hope you find some work.

STRANGER: You too.

(She crosses the stream and exits. ASH watches him go. She steps to the edge of the water and considers. A shiver passes through her.)

MADDOX: Ash? Ash! (MADDOX rushes to catch ASH as she faints.) I told you to be careful.

ASH: I didn't mean to—

MADDOX: I know, I know. But you've gone and worn yourself out, and it's just barely morning.

(MADDOX helps ASH back to bed—he might even carry her. Once ASH is settled and MADDOX starts to step away, ASH grabs him by the arm. He sits, and she leans against him.)

ASH: When will I be well enough to go somewhere? Anywhere?

MADDOX: Not long.

ASH: Are you just saying that?

MADDOX: I don't know. Maybe.

ASH: Because I'm going to go to the top of that hill just as soon as I'm well. I'm going to cross that stream. So many streams. I'll go looking for work, and I will find it.

MADDOX: Then you'd better get well, hadn't you.

ASH: I'm working on it.

MADDOX: Speaking of work, I'm going to be late. You've been distracting me long enough. Stay inside and rest. Don't call out to strangers.

ASH: But I love talking to strangers.

MADDOX: What if they kidnapped you? Think what that would do to my nerves.

ASH: Oh, that be so exciting!

MADDOX: My nerves?

ASH: Getting kidnapped.

MADDOX: You really are crazy.

ASH: It would be like—like a free ticket to a mysterious destination. But no one wants to take me anywhere.

MADDOX: I'm not going to a mysterious destination. And neither are you. Are you?

(ASH sighs.)

ASH: No. I'm not.

MADDOX: Good. Have a good day—a quiet day—and I'll see you later tonight.

(MADDOX exits. ASH leans on the window frame, bored. But something catches her attention: the STRANGER stands ankle-deep in the stream. ASH sits up a little straighter. Waves at the WOMAN in the stream, who holds up a hand in response.)

STRANGER: You're right. The view is different on the other side. You should see it.

CHEESE SELLER (from off:) Cheese! Fine cheese for sale!

(The lights shift and the STRANGER disappears.)

(A CHEESE SELLER, carrying a covered basket, enters. Calls out:)

CHEESE SELLER: Cheese for sale! This is the best cheese you will ever eat, I know it.

ASH: Oh! I love me some cheese. Please, can I have a look?

CHEESE SELLER: And they said I wouldn't find any customers around these parts! Ha. (The CHEESE SELLER comes up to ASH'S window.) How much would you like to buy?

ASH: Buy? I don't have any money.

CHEESE SELLER: What? Why did you call me over if you can't buy anything? Ugh. What a waste of time.

ASH: I would go with you if I could.

CHEESE SELLER: Go? With me?

ASH: Mhmm. I felt homesick somehow, hearing you call out from down the road.

CHEESE SELLER: Isn't this your home?

ASH: Yes.

CHEESE SELLER: So how can you be homesick?

ASH: I want to see the world. I feel like I should be out in it. But I haven't had the chance. The doctor says I can't go out. So I just sit here all day long.

CHEESE SELLER: Well, that's awful. What happened to make you so sick?

ASH: I can't say. I'm not educated enough to know what's wrong with me.

CHEESE SELLER: I'm sorry to hear that. And I'm sorry I snapped earlier. I just really need to sell something today.

ASH: You can at least sit for a minute and rest yourself. I have plenty of rest to share.

CHEESE SELLER: You're pretty clever for someone who isn't educated.

ASH: Where are you from?

CHEESE SELLER: My village lies on the river, at the foot of those hills. Have you seen it?

ASH: No. I've never been to those hills. But I feel like I can see it, in my mind. Your village—it sits under some very big, old trees just by the side of the red road. Isn't that right?

CHEESE SELLER: It is.

ASH: There are cattle grazing on the slope of the hill. They wear bells that tell you where they are, and the fur around their eyes is long and curly.

CHEESE SELLER: Yes! Some of them are mine. How did you know?

ASH: I can see women at the river, filling their pitchers with water.

CHEESE SELLER: That's exactly what they do, every day. Surely you have been to my village. It sounds like you know it well.

ASH: No, I've never been there. But I would love to go. The very first day the doctor says I can go out, you can take me to your village.

CHEESE SELLER: I'd be happy to.

ASH: You can teach me how to make cheese and we'll walk the long road together, selling it from door to door.

CHEESE SELLER: Heavens, why would you? You're too smart for that sort of thing. You'll read big books and be educated.

ASH: No, I don't want that. I want to be like you, walking along the red road in the shadow of the trees, carrying cheese from cottage to cottage, singing along the way and sneaking a bite now and then.

CHEESE SELLER: Well, you could just have a bite now, you know.

ASH: I told you; I don't have any money.

CHEESE SELLER: Let's not speak of money; it's vulgar. You'd make me so happy if you just had a little bit. Please.

(The CHEESE SELLER takes some cheese, wraps it in a napkin, and gives it to ASH.)

ASH: Thank you. That's very kind.

CHEESE SELLER: You're welcome. It's not a loss at all; you've taught me to be happy on the road. I hope you feel better soon.

(The CHEESE SELLER exits.)

ASH (calling:) Cheese for sale! Beautiful, salty, creamy cheese for sale! Cheese from the dairy village on the bank of the river, where the cows graze on the slopes and the families work milk into curds in the cool of the evening. It really is the best cheese! You should try it.

(A SOLDIER on patrol enters and approaches ASH'S window. The SOLDIER carries a large handbell, holding the clapper carefully so it doesn't ring.)

SOLDIER: Hey. Are you the one calling out about cheese? Why are you making so much noise? (ASH shrugs.) Aren't you afraid of me?

ASH: No. Should I be?

SOLDIER: I could march you off to prison.

(ASH perks up at the possibility.)

ASH: Would you?

SOLDIER: What?

ASH: Would you march me somewhere? Please?

SOLDIER: You're out of your head.

ASH: No. I can't even get out of the house. But you could take me to prison if it was beyond those hills. Can you take me there?

SOLDIER: I can march you straight to the Queen.

ASH: Oh! Please do.

SOLDIER: You're not supposed to be excited about getting marched to the Queen. Don't you know anything?

ASH: No. I am severely lacking in education and experience. But I make up for it with an abundance of imagination and curiosity.

SOLDIER: Indeed. So you imagine it would be enjoyable to be marched to prison.

ASH: It would be enjoyable to be marched just about anywhere. Especially to meet the Queen. But the doctor won't let me go.

SOLDIER: If the Queen calls for you, you don't refuse. Doctor or no.

ASH: Then we should go.

SOLDIER: Well. She hasn't asked for you, unfortunately. And your doctor's probably right; you don't look so well.

ASH: Aren't you one to talk.

SOLDIER: I didn't mean—

ASH: Are you going to ring your bell? Please ring it.

SOLDIER: No.

ASH: Why not?

SOLDIER: I'm only supposed to ring it at a certain time, on the hour. The time hasn't come.

ASH: Strange. Some people say that time hasn't come, while others say time has gone by. But surely the time comes at the moment you decide to ring your bell.

SOLDIER: No. That's not possible. I don't ring the bell until it is time.

(The SOLDIER checks a pocket watch, but shakes his head. Not yet.)

ASH: But I'd so love to hear you ring it. Such a fine bell. It's brass, so it will ring long and loud and low, like a big man singing at the back of a church choir. I hear it at lunchtime, when

Maddox tries to steal a nap before going back to the factory and is startled awake by your bell—
What does it mean? Your bell's song?

SOLDIER: That time waits for no one, but goes on forever.

(ASH sees the STRANGER standing in the stream. Waiting.)

ASH: Where does the time go? To another land?

SOLDIER: A distant land that no one knows.

ASH: Then no one has ever been there to say what it's like. I wish I could go there, and see what no else has seen.

SOLDIER: We all go there some day.

ASH: Do we? Even me?

SOLDIER AND STRANGER: Even you.

STRANGER: Everyone finds a way there, even if it takes some longer than others.

ASH: But Doc says I need to stay inside.

STRANGER: The doctor may be the one to lead you there by the hand.

(ASH and the STRANGER stare at each other.)

SOLDIER: Hello? Are you all right?

ASH: Sorry?

(She looks at the SOLDIER. When she glances back to the stream, the STRANGER has disappeared.)

SOLDIER: You were staring off, like you were in a trance.

ASH: Oh. I'm sorry. I was just thinking— You're in the Queen's service. What is that is that building over there? Men have been building it for weeks, and now it flies the Queen's flag, with so many people coming and going.

SOLDIER: That's our new Post Office.

ASH: Post Office? Really?

SOLDIER: The mail was disrupted by the war, and the Queen has been working to reestablish it.

ASH: ...The Queen's Post Office. Does she send letters here?

SOLDIER: She does. And I'm sure several go back to her palace in the city.

ASH: Can ordinary people get letters?

SOLDIER: Of course. All the time. Ordinary people are the Queen's favorite kind. One fine day there may be a letter there for you, you know.

ASH: A letter for me? But I'm nobody.

SOLDIER: The Queen often writes to people who don't expect it. She likes to know how her people are, and what they're up to. Especially when times are hard, like they are now.

ASH: A letter from the Queen. Can you imagine? When do you think my letter will come?

SOLDIER: I can't say. But I know it will come. With a post office so close, how can you not receive a letter?

ASH: But how will I know that I have a letter, and that I need to go and get it? And what do if the doctor won't let me get it? Oh no. That would be a tragedy.

SOLDIER: Don't be ridiculous. You don't pick up your mail yourself. If you have a letter, an official courier will bring it to you.

ASH: An official of the Post Office?

SOLDIER: Yes. In a uniform, with a gilt badge. Haven't you seen one before, running everywhere?

ASH: Everywhere? Where do they go?

SOLDIER: All over the place. From door to door, delivering letters and packages. All across the country.

ASH: That's it.

SOLDIER: What's it?

ASH: I could do that. I could deliver mail in the Queen's service. I could walk the red road and bring people letters from far off. I could see the whole continent that way.

(The SOLDIER chuckles.)

SOLDIER: Goodness. It's not an easy job. Rain or shine, rich or poor, going from house to house to house carrying a heavy bag full of letters.

ASH: I'd cherish every moment. Hard work is what I like best. Why are you smiling?

SOLDIER: I can't say.

ASH: It's important work, to deliver the mail. Of course, your work is important too. Letting people know what time it is, and whether or not they're late. I hear your bell at noon, and sometimes when I wake in the middle of the night to see the lamp blown out, I hear you striking midnight, and it's a comfort. I know where I am, and when I am.

SOLDIER: Aren't you a strange child.

ASH: I get that a lot.

(Somewhere nearby someone whistles a tune. The SOLDIER freezes.)

SOLDIER: Oh no. It's the village sheriff. I have to go; if he catches me chatting with you, I won't hear the end of it.

ASH: The village sheriff? Did the Queen appoint him?

SOLDIER: No, not at all. It's a title he gave himself. He's a busy-body who likes to get in other people's business and pretend like he's in charge. Rather unpleasant fellow all around, always making trouble for everybody. He doesn't care what happens to everyone else, as long as he gets what he wants.

ASH: Someone should complain.

SOLDIER: No one dares bother the Queen with that kind of nonsense.

ASH: But you should. You should write her a letter. If he is abusing his power, someone should tell her—

(The whistling is closer.)

SOLDIER: I have to go. Bye now.

(The SOLDIER hurries off.)

ASH: Bye!

Huh. Imagine getting a letter from the Queen. Just one would be enough. But there is some lucky person out there who gets more than one letter from the Queen. Maybe even a new letter every

day! For the first time, I wish I could read. When I get my letter, I'll have to find someone to read it to me. Perhaps Doc could read it. Or the courier who delivers it. I bet they can read.

(The SHERIFF enters, whistling. There is something both lazy and sinister about him.)

SHERIFF: You there. What are you muttering about?

ASH: Nothing important. Just—the mail.

SHERIFF: Nothing important! Stupid kid. The mail is very important.

ASH: It's not as important as you are.

SHERIFF: Well, that's true.

ASH: I'm sure everyone listens to you, since you're in charge.

SHERIFF: Perhaps you're not as stupid as I thought.

ASH: Do the couriers and postal workers answer to you?

SHERIFF: They had better. If I tell them to stop, they ought to freeze, right where they are, in mid-step even.

ASH: Would you tell the couriers, please, that my name is Ash and that I live here?

SHERIFF: Why would I do that?

ASH: In case there's a letter for me.

(He stares at her for a minute. Snorts. Then laughs, loud and hard.)

SHERIFF: You? A letter for you? Who in the world would write to you?

ASH: The Queen.

SHERIFF: Ha! What's in that head of yours? The Queen. She doesn't have time for the likes of you. As if you were friends who hadn't seen each other in so long that she sat down to write a letter to a girl named Ash who probably can't even read.

ASH: Why do you have to be so mean about it?

SHERIFF: If you weren't so ridiculous perhaps I could take you seriously. A letter from the Queen. You could write to her, if you could write. But she's a very busy person, and under no obligation to write back.

ASH: Never mind.

(She is very upset and tries to hide it.)

SHERIFF: Come now, don't cry. You'll get your letter. I'll see to it myself.

ASH: Don't bother yourself with it.

SHERIFF: And why shouldn't I? I'll tell the Queen about you, and she'll drop whatever business she has to write back. I'm sure of it.

(He exits, whistling as he goes.)

SAGE: What a horrible man. I hope he trips over himself.

(ASH looks up to see SAGE, a girl her age, standing at the edge of the path, carrying a basket of flowers.)

ASH: I don't hope for that. If he does, he'll come back and blame me. And then they really will take me to prison.

SAGE: If he does, I'll be a witness and call him a liar.

ASH: You'd speak out against the sheriff?

SAGE: I would if I knew he was lying. Anyway, I should go. My sister is expecting me.

ASH: You have a sister?

SAGE: Yes. She raised me when our parents died in the war. Now we work together.

ASH: Selling flowers. (SAGE nods.) I've always wished for a sister.

SAGE: Is that why you look so sad? Because you're alone?

ASH: I'm not alone. Not really. Maddox adopted me, and we keep each other company. I'm sad because the doctor says I have to stay inside.

SAGE: Oh. I'm sorry to hear that. Do you need to rest? Should I close this window a bit for you, or—?

ASH: No, thank you. It's fine. It's— All the others are shut, and I like to look out. I know what the doctor says, but I could swear I feel better outside than in.

SAGE: Well, if the doctor doesn't mind.

ASH: The doctor isn't here.

SAGE: And what he doesn't know... (They share a conspiratorial smile.) I'm sorry you're cooped up in there. Though I don't think I would mind lying around all day. Even if was just once.

ASH: What do you usually do all day?

SAGE: I run errands for my sister. Back and forth, delivering flowers. I need to take these back to her before they wilt.

ASH: How do they smell?

SAGE: I don't know. I smell them all at once, and it gets overwhelming. But if you smell just one...

(She takes a single flower from her basket and gives it to ASH.)

ASH: Oh, that's nice.

(ASH hands the flower back, but SAGE shakes her head.)

SAGE: You keep it.

ASH: But I don't have any money.

SAGE: It's all right. She won't miss it. Ssh. It'll be our secret.

ASH: Someday, when I'm grown up and delivering mail for the Queen, I'll find you and pay you back.

SAGE: Will you?

ASH: Yes. I'll cross the stream and—

(She sees the STRANGER standing in the stream, her shoes in her hand.)

SAGE: And?

ASH: Huh?

SAGE: You'll cross the stream and do what?

ASH: ...I'm going to travel the world.

SAGE: My sister says anyone who can get out of this place is lucky.

ASH: I bet we could do it. We could travel together. Imagine the flowers you could bring back to your sister from the other side of the world.

SAGE: I have always wondered what life is like in other places.

ASH: There's only one way to find out.

SAGE: What was your name?

ASH: Ash.

SAGE: Like the tree.

ASH: Yes. And yours?

SAGE: Sage.

ASH: Like the herb.

SAGE: It's nice to meet you.

ASH: And you.

SAGE: Look, I really do need to get these delivered... But why don't I stop by on my way back tonight?

ASH: Would you do that? We could make our plan to travel the world.

SAGE: Sure.

ASH: We could be friends.

SAGE: Aren't we already?

ASH: So you'll come back?

SAGE: I said I would, didn't I?

ASH: You won't forget about me?

SAGE: Ash, the girl who wants to cross the stream and deliver letters for the Queen. How could I forget that?

ASH: You could.

SAGE: I won't forget. You'll see.

(SAGE exits. The STRANGER still stands in the stream, looking at ASH. Somewhere, the soldier's bell rings, long and slow. It's noon. ASH rests her head on her folded arms on the windowsill and closes her eyes. The STRANGER crosses the stream and vanishes. As ASH sleeps, the afternoon fades into the early evening. Another bell tolls.)

(MADDOX enters with his friend, BADGER.)

BADGER: You, Maddox, an adoptive parent. My mind is blown. I didn't think you had it in you.

MADDOX: You've been away a long time.

BADGER: I couldn't get across the border. There's fighting everywhere. It was safer just to stay down and cover my head.

MADDOX: I believe it.

BADGER: What made you decide to adopt a thirteen-year-old child?

MADDOX: She has no one in the world. I couldn't leave her alone.

BADGER: She'll take all your money, every penny. One day she'll disappear and leave you destitute.

MADDOX: No. Ash isn't like that. She might wander off, but she wouldn't think to take anything with her. She would just go walking until it made sense to sit down. And then she would walk some more. She'd never think to take anything from anyone. You'd have to persuade her to pick your pocket.

BADGER: Even if she doesn't steal it, she'll get everything you earn.

MADDOX: That's just it, Badger. I don't mind. I want her to have it all. Going to work used to be just that—work. I used to dread it, standing for hours on the factory floor as the hours dragged by... But now I have someone to work for, and earning that paycheck every week is a joy—
(MADDOX stops in front of the house. Sees ASH sleeping in the window.) Badger.

BADGER: Hmm?

MADDOX: What if this week is the last?

(BADGER comes up beside MADDOX.)

BADGER: My friend, thinking like that will only bring you heartache.

MADDOX: I can't seem to help it.

BADGER: What you both need is a good laugh. I have an idea.

(BADGER gestures for MADDUX to go first. Under the following, BADGER takes a coat and hat from his pack and puts them on. MADDUX sits outside of ASH'S window and touches her gently on the arm, waking her.)

MADDUX: Ash?

ASH: Maddox? Oh no. I forgot your supper.

MADDUX: Don't worry about it.

ASH: There was this lovely girl and we talked, but I got tired.

MADDUX: What did I say about calling out to strangers?

ASH: She's not a stranger. Sage is my friend. But I guess I fell asleep. Who's that?

MADDUX: Oh. Um. That's my friend, Badg—

BADGER (perhaps in a British:) I am Sir Ealing Broadway, world famous explorer, amateur pilot, and expert pedestrian.

ASH: Are you really?

MADDUX: Oh, good grief.

BADGER Hush. (To ASH:) I am indeed. I have visited all sorts of interesting places across the globe. I've been lost in a number of terrifying situations, at least one of which involved a spider of unusual size.

ASH: I would love to be an explorer.

BADGER: You can, if you put your mind to it.

ASH: Tell me about your adventures! All of them.

MADDUX (drily:) Yes, why don't you tell us about your—adventures?

BADGER: Well, to begin, I've just returned from the Isle of the Parrots.

ASH: What was it like?

MADDUX: Loud.

BADGER: Magical.

ASH: Perhaps you could take me there one day.

MADDOX: Ash—

BADGER: Of course I will. I'll teach you all of the great secrets of exploration, so that not even the tallest mountain or widest desert will bar your way.

MADDOX: Nonsense.

BADGER (Aside, to MADDOX:) I know what this girl needs. Let me help her.

(BADGER turns back to ASH.)

BADGER: You can conquer any ocean, but it takes faith in the unseen and belief in one's self. Your aunt, and the doctor... They believe in science and sitting quietly. But sometimes a good adventure can cure anything.

(MADDOX rubs at his eyes.)

ASH: We won't tell Doc, will we, Maddox? And someday I will go with you and conquer the oceans.

(Something in MADDOX snaps.)

MADDOX: Stop it! Just—stop it. Talking about leaving— You know I don't—

(He goes off.)

ASH: Maddox—

BADGER: Let him go. He'll be back soon enough.

ASH: What about the parrots?

BADGER: The Isle of Parrots is a land of wonders; it's haunted by birds. When I was there, I was the only person on the entire island. Every other occupant sang and flew.

ASH: Oh, that's wonderful. It's by the sea?

BADGER: It is.

ASH: And there are green, rolling hills?

BADGER: And the birds live among them. When the sun sets, there is a red glow in the hillside, almost like the tall grass has caught fire. And the birds with their green wings fly back to their nests.

ASH: Are there waterfalls?

BADGER: You can't have hills without waterfalls. Waterfalls that sing as they course over the rocks, rushing down the hills toward the sea. If I could, I would build a cabin among their nests and spend my days counting the waves as they crash on the shore.

ASH: Did the birds mind your being there?

BADGER: They didn't even give me a thought. I was just a sad, trifling creature without wings.

ASH: You're not sad. You're not trifling. You can travel and see the world, and walk beyond this window. This village. How is that sad?

(BADGER considers this.)

BADGER: You're right. It's not sad. Not at all.

(MADDOX, his face still stony, re-enters.)

ASH: I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you.

MADDOX: It's all right. I know you just want to go out. But I worry.

ASH: I know.

(She sits up suddenly, remembering. Looking around.)

MADDOX: What? Is something the matter?

ASH: No, nothing's the matter. I just wondered if it was delivered while I was asleep.

MADDOX: Delivered?

ASH: A letter.

MADDOX: Are you expecting a letter?

ASH: From the Queen.

(Before MADDOX can argue, BADGER speaks:)

BADGER: I'm certain that if the Queen has sent you a letter, it's on its way as we speak.

(MADDOX shoots him a look.)

ASH: Yes, I think you're right. I can see the courier riding down the narrow road that winds like a ribbon through the trees. She's traveled that road many times, a lantern in her hand and a bag of letters on her back. She climbs down and down, where the foot of the mountain becomes a waterfall that becomes a stream that becomes a brook. And she takes the footpath on the riverbank and cuts through a field of rye, and then a field of sugarcane, and then an open meadow where crickets chirp. I can feel her coming closer.

BADGER: I can see it, just like that.

ASH: The courier will come, in her fine uniform with her gilt badge, and deliver that letter. My letter. And I'll take it, following the courier's path back through the fields and up the mountains until I come to the city. I'll go to the palace and find the Queen and volunteer to be a courier myself. I'll get down on my knees and I'll plead, "Make me your courier, that I may travel the country delivering letters on your behalf. I'll do anything as long as I don't have to stay inside all day."

(MADDOX is moved by this, and BADGER sees it. The sun has set, and the moon has come out.)

BADGER (Gently:) I can't imagine that she would deny you the opportunity.

ASH: Someday.

MADDOX: ...Someday.

ASH: Sir Ealing, if I were to receive a letter from the Queen, could you read it for me? I don't think I can make it out on my own.

BADGER: Well, I wonder if you aren't too excited to actually read it. How can you be anything but disappointed, no matter what it says? Wouldn't it just be enough to see the Queen's seal and know your name is on the envelope?

ASH: My name on the envelope! Isn't that a thought.

(DOC comes up the path.)

DOC: And how are we feeling this evening?

ASH: I feel pretty well, Doc. I don't feel any pain at all.

(DOC looks concerned.)

MADDOX: Is something wrong?

DOC: Often, near the end—

MADDOX: Don't.

DOC: Often, patients can lose their sense of pain and discomfort temporarily. It's a bad sign. We need to take more precautions. Shut up all the windows. Lock the doors. No more company. (To ASH:) Do you hear what I'm telling you?

ASH: No! You can't do that. I can't be locked up. It's not fair—

DOC: There's a peculiar quality in the air tonight. Something bad will happen. I'm going to fetch some medicine that will help you to sleep.

ASH: I don't want to sleep.

DOC: You're exhausted, you're not thinking clearly—

ASH: If I'm exhausted, it's because you never let me do anything but sleep.

DOC: I'll be back. (DOC exits.)

ASH: Maddox, please. He doesn't know what he's doing.

MADDOX: He knows more about illness than either of us.

ASH: You can study bad information just as easily as you can study the good.

(Whistling.)

MADDOX: Oh no. Not now.

(Enter the SHERIFF.)

SHERIFF: Ah, Maddox. I hear you hobnob among the elites nowadays.

MADDOX: I'm just a humble factory worker, minding my own business.

SHERIFF: But your girl there— She's expecting a letter from the Queen. Where did she get an idea like that?

MADDOX: She has an imagination. Pay it no mind.

BADGER: There is illness in this house, Sheriff. Leave it be.

SHERIFF: Oh, but it's too much fun to leave it be. Usually I'm off the clock by this time, but I had the notion just a little while ago to stop by the Post Office.

ASH: You did?

MADDOX: Go away, Sheriff.

SHERIFF: I did. And guess what I found there.

ASH: What?

SHERIFF: A letter. For you. From your friend, the Queen.

ASH: Really?

MADDOX: This is just a prank. It's not possible that the Queen—

(But BADGER holds MADDOX back: Wait.)

SHERIFF: I have it right here.

(He takes a folded letter from his pocket and holds it out.)

SHERIFF: That's your name, isn't it? "Ash"?

(ASH leans out the window to see the letter, but her smile fades when she sees that the paper is blank.)

ASH: Is it? I can't tell. Sir Ealing?

BADGER: It is a letter. And it is addressed to you, Ash.

ASH: I don't understand. It looks blank to me. What does it say?

(The SHERIFF pretends to read:)

SHERIFF: The Queen writes, "I am calling on you shortly; I look forward to having tea with my dear friend."

(The SHERIFF can barely contain himself; this is just about the best joke ever.)

MADDOX: This isn't funny.

SHERIFF: I disagree.

(BADGER grabs the letter and pretends to read it, pondering its contents seriously.)

SHERIFF: Hey. What are you doing?

BADGER: I see it plainly, Ash; the Queen is coming to call. And she is sending her own personal physician ahead to examine you. It says that Doc is a quack, Maddox. Right there. Ash needs to see a real physician.

(BADGER folds the letter and hands it to ASH, who holds it to her heart.)

ASH: Sheriff, I thought you disliked me. I never thought you would be so kind as to deliver the Queen's letter.

(The SHERIFF stops laughing. Stares at ASH for a moment.)

SHERIFF: You do realize it's a joke, don't you?

ASH: How can it be a joke?

(Somewhere a trumpet sounds. Everyone stops, disbelieving.)

(A HERALD enters, a trumpet under his arm. He salutes.)

HERALD: Good evening to you all.

ASH: Um, hello.

HERALD: I'm here to announce that the Queen comes tonight.

ASH: What?

MADDOX: This isn't happening.

ASH: She's— The Queen is coming here?

SHERIFF: Oh. My. God.

HERALD (to the SHERIFF:) You sir.

(The SHERIFF puffs himself up, ready to talk shop with another official.)

SHERIFF: How may I be of service?

HERALD: You are dismissed.

SHERIFF: Beg your pardon?

HERALD: Your service, though artfully offered, is refused.

SHERIFF: I'm sure there is someone with whom I might consult. Someone with more clout than a simple herald. I have a reputation—

HERALD: You do indeed. I strongly suggest that you not be in the vicinity when the Queen arrives.

(Chagrined, the SHERIFF exits.)

ASH: When? When is she coming?

HERALD: With the bells of the second watch.

ASH: The bells...

(The HERALD nods.)

BADGER: Just a little faith, I said.

(The STRANGER, unseen by all except ASH, steps up to the window. She takes the letter and unfolds it: but suddenly, miraculously, it's no longer blank. ASH stares at the paper in wonder.)

HERALD: In the meantime, I present Her Majesty's personal physician.

(The ROYAL PHYSICIAN enters.)

ROYAL PHYSICIAN: Good evening.

EVERYONE ELSE: ...Good evening...

ROYAL PHYSICIAN: This must be Ash. May I come in?

ASH: Yes, please?

(The PHYSICIAN enters the house and approaches ASH'S bedside.)

ROYAL PHYSICIAN: My word. It's dark and stale as a tomb in here. Let's open all these windows. Now.

(MADDOX and BADGER move around the house, throwing windows open.)

ROYAL PHYSICIAN: Now, Ash. Tell me how you are.

ASH: I feel wonderful, Doctor. I haven't felt this strong in ages.

ROYAL PHYSICIAN: Are you in any pain?

ASH: None at all. I feel tired, but that's not new. I can't seem to sleep enough to not be tired.

ROYAL PHYSICIAN: Rest is good.

ASH: I know. But sometimes when I sleep, I feel like I'm wasting time. Time that I could use to help people. To make something.

BADGER: There are plenty of people that you have helped already.

ASH: Do you think so?

BADGER: Yes. The world is already changed by your being in it.

(The ROYAL PHYSICIAN continues to examine ASH.)

ROYAL PHYSICIAN: Hmm. Do you think you'll be well enough to stand and meet the Queen when she comes?

ASH: Of course. I wouldn't dream of sitting while the Queen was standing. Do you think— Could she tell me which is the North Star? I've seen it often, but I can't seem to find it now.

ROYAL PHYSICIAN: Her Majesty will gladly tell you everything.

BADGER: It's getting dark. Should we light a lamp?

ROYAL PHYSICIAN: No. The moon is full, and the starlight abundant. Let her breathe the night air. I'm worried we might be too late.

ASH: Maddox?

MADDOX: Yes, I'm here.

ASH: Will you sit with me?

MADDOX: Of course.

(He does so. ASH looks up to see the STRANGER waiting outside of the window.)

ASH: I can smell the fresh grass, and there's a delicious breeze that's got the salt of the ocean in it. I can see the stars twinkling from the other side of the dark. The hill, though. It's disappeared. How will I find it again?

MADDOX: It will be there in the morning.

ASH: Of course it will.

MADDOX: So will the squirrels. You can chase them if you like.

ASH: Can I?

MADDOX: Of course. When you've had some rest. Tomorrow, perhaps.

ASH: Tomorrow. We'll see the squirrels, and climb the hill, and cross the river.

(Silence. Starlight.)

ASH: I think I'm going to sleep a bit. Before the Queen comes.

(MADDOX can only nod. Everyone is frozen for a moment in a tableau.)

(As if moving in her own time, THE STRANGER approaches the window and holds out a hand to ASH. She takes it, stepping out through the window. Inside, everyone is unaware that she has gone, looking at the bed as if ASH is still there. The tableau holds until ASH is away from the cottage.)

(SAGE appears at the door, flowers in hand.)

SAGE: Ash?

ROYAL PHYSICIAN: Who are you?

SAGE: A friend. She wanted me to come back tonight. We were going to talk... We have plans to make.

BADGER: Plans?

SAGE: To travel the world.

BADGER: Of course. I'm sorry, though; she's asleep now.

SAGE: How long will she sleep?

ROYAL PHYSICIAN: As long as she can. The Queen is coming directly, to call for her.

(As all this is said, the STRANGER leads ASH by the hand to the stream. She steps into it, but this time feels no cold. The STRANGER lets go.)

SAGE: May I—?

(MADDOX is lost in thought. The PHYSICIAN nods.)

(SAGE approaches the bed and places the flowers as if in ASH'S hand.)

SAGE: Ash, it's me. It's Sage. You see, I didn't forget. I won't ever forget.

(ASH crosses the stream. She looks back momentarily, and then moves toward the hills. Black.)

END OF PLAY





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DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

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



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

The more he winces, the surer is the 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 com-

ing 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 Rāmayana, 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 Rāmayana; 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 humming-bird 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 pussy-cat 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 sepoys 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

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 *sāree*; 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 be-

ing 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.

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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

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