

Lachmi's Talisman

When she sat by the roadside, old, tired and worn, she would occasionally wonder why her mother had given her the name of the Goddess of Wealth, for she had been a beggar from childhood like her mother, whose dark, narrow, lined face sometimes swam before her blurring eyes, and then would be lost, like that woman herself, how many years ago, she couldn't remember, not that it mattered. She never had a father, but, yes, a few uncles, or were they husbands? Of course they had used her, don't all men, even before her menstrual blood began to flow, but somehow she had never conceived. When they tired of her they would abandon her as barren, as if any of her 'uncles' would have looked after any child, or really wanted any! Her life had been lonely, always lonely, with only the roads as her constant companion. Yes, long ago she had longed for a baby to cuddle, which would be hers to love, but Lakshmi the Goddess had denied her even that comfort. She wouldn't blame the Goddess, it was as well, for what could she have offered her darling child, nothing more than stale food, torn saris to cover her breasts, and then the harsh embrace of passing men - the sting of scorpions!

She sat on the roadside, under the shade of the flyover, beside the petrol station, and counted the coins she had begged that morning before the road started to scorch her bare feet. Enough for a cup of tea, not yet enough for samosas from the street vendor. She must leave enough for the policeman on night duty, or he would thrash her. She was thirsty, she must hobble across to the petrol station and beg for some water to drink from

one of the attendants. They would scold but they never refused water, they were good boys.

She got up, leaning heavily on her stick, and then stumbled back, for a camel procession was passing down the road. The animals had green brocaded cloths thrown over their humps, and boys sat up on top waving peacock-feather fans over the holy book. There would be singing, then, at the Sufi saint's *dargah* that evening, a windfall for her, they would be generous over there, but of course all the others would come as well and the stronger beggars would elbow her out. But that was life – a full well nearby, but for her, only a splash of water. A long black car which had been following the procession pulled into the shade of the station for some petrol. Maybe someone among the devotees in it would give her a few paise, maybe even half a rupee! Her thirst almost forgotten, Lachmi hobbled as fast as she could to the door of the car, and then slowed cautiously fearing to offend. A big man was sitting in the back wearing a tall green cap over large dark glasses. She peered at the glass window, and he turned to look, a slow smile appearing under his long black moustache. He rolled down the glass, reached out a white hand, she noticed the long fingers with fine rose-shell nails, and he put a coin in her palm and then rolled up the glass, losing all interest in her.

A thrill had vibrated through her withered frame, and she hobbled back to look at the coin he had given her. Pain more than anger dimmed her eyes. He hadn't given her any money at all! It was just a small square piece of thin glittering copper, worth nothing, even to her. She let it drop into the fold of her sari, where her few coins were gathered, and was

thinking of going back to him to beg, but the car shot off leaving her disappointed and thirsty.

‘Hey! Mother! Come drink this cool water,’ a young attendant called out, and then he himself came over with the jug. She drank thirstily and nosily. He looked at her closely.

‘Have you eaten today, mother? No, I can see you haven’t. Here take my tiffin, I am off to a wedding.’

He led her to the shade of the building and put a large paper-wrapped packet into her hands. Greedily she opened it. It had three large rotis and potato curry in the middle. It was her lucky day after all! She ate slowly, for she had not eaten for quite a while, and she knew from past experience the danger of gobbling up rich food.

She sat quietly for a few minutes after she had finished eating, it felt so good. There was no point in begging any more that day, if she got any more money the police would take it away. She had better rest in the shade and save her strength for the morrow. She must have dozed off for hours rolled up like a small dirty little bundle on the pavement, for it was quite dark when the policeman on the beat prodded her with his stick.

‘Oh, Sarkar! I have some money here, somewhere,’ she whined as she got up hurriedly, feeling for the coins in her sari fold.

But the constable did not seem to be interested. He sat down on the pavement and took a long swig at the beer bottle he carried. 'Here! I have had enough. Finish it off, mother,' he said pleasantly passing the bottle to her. There wasn't much left, just a bit at the bottom, but she drank it all and felt happy.

'Here's your money,' she said holding out his share of her beggings.

'Keep it, mother,' he said grandly. 'I have been promoted! I will be "Head" in a police station! Do you know what that means?'

She shook her head, what did she know.

'It means money will roll into my hands by itself!' he said laughing. 'No more beat work. No more beggars' money. Real Money! Real Money! From crooks, agents, pimps, business men all! I will be rich, Mother! Rich!'

She remembered the rotis, the potato curry, the beer and was happy sitting there beside that happy man.

He put a friendly hand on her shoulder. 'When I got the news, I thought of you, honest! Look, I have brought you a few of my wife's old saris. Wear them, tomorrow you will look like a queen!'

He thrust a bundle into her hands. Anxiously she opened the bundle, and then as she took out the saris, fear gripped her heart. 'They will beat me, kill me if they see me wearing such costly saris...' she began.

'Who will beat you? Who will threaten you?' shouted the policeman drunkenly. 'Here! You! You there, you loafer, come over here if you want to live!'

The biggest beggar rogue of that beat came running over, and bent submissively before the constable.

'This is my mother! Do you understand? My Mother, you rascal!' The policeman was standing unsteadily and shouting at the top of his voice. 'I will visit her every week, I, Head Constable of the *thana* here, and if any of you have hurt her, I will personally hang you upside down and flog you till your blood runs into a bowl I keep to feed pigs!'

It was a grand threat, and the beggar chief trembled at the image it conjured up.

Lachmi sat huddled up fearfully in a corner while the policeman waddled off wagging a finger at everybody and shouting 'Remember!'

Early next morning, before the better-off people were up, even before the milkman plied his rounds, Lachmi got up in a hurry, went to the public pump and took a nice cold bath. She was very excited. She was still very scared of wearing any of the saris the policeman

had given her, but at the same time she wanted to very much, after all she had to die someday, better to die in a nice sari than in torn, smelly rags.

That morning at the crossroads, she looked like a queen. The beggar men gave her a wide berth, and even the other women begging there avoided looking at her. But that was all right, cars stopped near her, and the rich sahibs and memsahibs inside gave her money, golden five-rupee coins, and even ten-rupee notes! Nothing like that had ever happened to her before, or to any beggar. A young memsahib, really only a girl, come to think of it, took off her foreign straw hat and reaching out of her car put it over her white hair and went away laughing. Some people also laughed, and so did she, cackling, but it did shade her head.

The next few days passed like a dream. People continued to give her money, no one bothered her, she ate well, and slept well, and she began to feel better, quite strong, actually. And then, an amazing thing happened. The padre who ran the Christian retreat for sisters stopped his old car, and instead of giving her money, opened the door and asked her to get in. Hesitantly she got in. He then pulled up by the side of the road, stopped the car and turned to her.

‘Our maidservant who swept and washed our floors has gone back to her village. We need someone. Why don’t you do some honest work? You will have a room to stay in on the ground floor, three meals a day, and I will give you a thousand rupees a month?’

She looked at him open mouthed.

‘Well, will you work for us?’ he repeated. ‘It is better than begging. God does not want anyone to beg.’

A dark suspicion gathered behind her eyes. ‘Will you make me a Christian?’ she asked fearfully.

The padre laughed. ‘I do not do conversions, so remain, old woman as you are, that is between you and God. I am offering you work, food, and a place to live out your days.’

No one had ever been so kind. She sobbed in gusts, humbly over his hand. He laughed a little self-consciously.

‘Enough, enough, I have done nothing. We are all God’s servants. Come, bring your bundle and I will take you straight away to your work.’

And that is how Lachmi found a home and work for the first time in her life. Her room had a picture of the Virgin Mary on the wall, a small wooden cot, and a cupboard. She was ashamed to keep any of her things there, except for the saris the policeman had given her. So she made a neat bundle of the rest, including some string, rubber bands, plastic bags and the other odd bits she had, and was going to throw it all out into the trash can when the small piece of copper caught her eye. It lay there glittering at the bottom of the

pile. She remembered the strange man with the tall green cap who had given it to her. It had brought her luck, it was a talisman. She put it carefully away at the feet of the Virgin.

The work was hard for an old woman, but the regular meals she ate gave her strength, so really within a few months, she began to think of her old life as if it had all been a bad dream that had happened to someone else. One of the sisters was very clever with needlework and in the afternoons when Lachmi had finished all the cleaning up work, taught her how to crochet lace. Sister Philomena said that the money they earned by selling the lace helped to maintain the large Retreat House, and since Lachmi was very grateful for finding a home there, she worked very hard at lace work, even late at night.

That Christmas, the bishop praised her workmanship and said she would join as a craftsperson in the St Ann's Needlework Company run by the Church, of course she could stay at the Retreat House, but she would work in the factory building. It was really not a factory, just a large shed to which there was a straight bus from the home. When she blithely climbed into the bus every morning none of the sahibs who got up to give her a seat would have thought she had once been a beggar!

She had grown quite strong she noticed one morning with mild surprise, as she put on her white sari after her bath. Her back had straightened, her arms were fuller, and even her cheeks were filling out, with some of the wrinkles quite gone except when she laughed. Her greatest shock came a few months later, when after washing her hair she noticed in the mirror that her scalp seemed to have turned black. It wasn't the scalp at all, her hair

was growing black roots once again! Even the Reverend Mother in charge of the factory began to notice the change in her appearance, and said wisely that good food, and the help of the Virgin Mary, was all that a good person ever needed.

She worked harder than ever. She was told to copy new designs they had found in foreign magazines, and somehow she managed to do so to the Reverend Mother's satisfaction.

There were Telugu magazines as well, and when she looked through them for designs, she realized almost with a shock that she could read them slowly, with difficulty, yes, but she could read! When had she learnt to read? Perhaps, when she was very young, a long time ago, and then had forgotten it all, who knows, she could not remember. The day of the International Exhibition of Indian Crafts was the most exciting day of her life. She had never ever dreamt that she would enter through the doors of a five-star hotel, and that liveried gatemmen would open doors for such as she! But more was to come. Her work won the gold medal for her factory! TV people took photographs, and she was interviewed by a reporter from the Times of India. The Minister asked her to stand beside him!

The next two weeks turned out like a continuous party. Orders for their work poured into the factory, and the Reverend Mother was very happy, beaming at Lachmi whenever they met in the corridor. It was whispered that even the Pope had sent a message of congratulation. And then, she was called into the front office. The Reverend Mother was reading a file, then she spoke in English for a long time over the phone, and then she signaled to Lachmi to sit down.

‘There is happy news and there is sad news, Lakshmi,’ said the Reverend Mother looking at her without emotion. ‘First, the sad news. We are to lose your company. I have enjoyed having you work here, you have worked in God’s interest selflessly, a pattern to others, even for the lay sisters. I am sorry to let you go, but it is God’s will.’

Tears brimmed in Lachmi’s eyes, and her heart sank to end of her beginnings.

Suddenly, the Reverend Mother’s face crinkled into a broad grin. ‘My child, it is the best news possible for you! The government is appointing you as a Resident Trainer of Trainers in the new Crafts Centre. You will have a government salary, a government pension, a position in life, and who knows where it will take you! God’s will be done! But give this old woman a hug before you leave!’

Lachmi was quite confused, but she embraced the Reverend Mother obediently, and as she looked over her shoulder into the long mirror on the wall, she realized with quite a shock that she looked quite young! She had never looked so very young! The daze she was in remained with her for a few days, even after she had moved into the Crafts Centre, found and liked the nice large room allotted to her, and wondered at the glory of being given an office with a desk, telephone, and a male attendant! She put her small copper talisman into the top drawer of her desk, carefully wrapped up in a piece of silk, and within a stout sealed manila envelope.

The nice accounts officer, one Mr. Prasanna, whose room was opposite hers, helped her fill in the numerous government forms that were needed before she could be officially employed. She told him frankly she was an orphan, so he wrote Laxman Rao under 'father's name' and Lakshmi Devi under 'mother's name.' The Crafts Centre was of course her residential address so there was no difficulty there. Under 'education' he wrote 'some schooling' and for 'age' he just put down 'thirty-five' without asking her, so she laughed and he also joined in. They became very good friends from that moment on.

Within six months of employment at the government centre, she received a letter of commendation from the Secretary Women's Welfare, which she took to Mrs. Basu, the Director, a heavy grey-haired lady of fifty, who said without looking up that of course she deserved it, she was a very good trainer, and she was expected to do even better in the future. Mr. Prasanna was vocally more appreciative. He had of course been guiding her quietly all the while. Now he said the time had come for her to learn English if she wanted to make presentations abroad about her craft. Abroad, she queried? Yes, of course, he said calmly, the government expected all its best employees to help the country shine even more in the eyes of foreigners! That was how her English lessons began, in the evenings, after work, in some nearby park, shop, or restaurant, with Mr. Prasanna teaching her the words and helping her place her orders. He seemed even more pleased than she was at her successes. He never asked her about her earlier life, and when she tried to confide in him, he did not seem to want to know, so after a time she desisted. But he told her a lot about his life, about his uncle's village, how he had been brought up by him after his parents had passed away, and how the world had almost ended for him

when the old man, his only relative, had died two years earlier. She held his hand in quick sympathy.

‘Now I am no longer alone,’ he stammered. ‘That is, that is, if, if, you Madam, let me call you Lakshmi, if Lakshmi, you will, perhaps, marry me?’ His voice had trailed off uncertainly, anxiously, so she did not know whether to laugh or to cry. She, an old hag, to marry this wonderful man? How preposterous! What could she offer him, not even sons. At that thought, she stopped herself. She had very strangely started menstruating once again after a long, long time. He misunderstood her silence and was turning away, when she caught his hand and said she was not worthy of him. After that statement nothing would stop him, and their marriage was performed in a local temple with most of the staff attending, including the formidable Mrs. Basu, the Director. Lakshmi – she had begun to think of herself as Lakshmi – moved to his three-room apartment, located, as was to be expected of Mr. Prasanna, in a quiet middleclass area. He splurged and bought her a lot of things, including jewellery which she had never aspired to. Her most important possession though was her small glittering copper talisman, which she now carried everywhere in her handbag for extra luck and safety.

Within weeks she was pregnant and the doctor told them calmly everything was as normal as could be, she was in perfect health to bear a bouncing child. The weeks turned into months, she grew bigger by the day and Mr. Prasanna was as caring a husband as he had been a good friend. One weekend, he organized a picnic at a lakeside resort not far from the city. They would drive there in the secondhand car he had bought in expectation

of their baby's birth. The rickety old scooter he had taught her to ride was left in a place of honour in the corner of their garage.

They set off in high spirits, laughing and joking. The car sputtered and he noticed they were low on petrol, so he pulled in at a station next to the flyover he was about to take. A camel procession from a nearby Sufi saint's *dargah* passed behind their car, and suddenly, as if it was yesterday, she knew where she was! She looked back. There was the long black car pulled up as well, with that strange man wearing the tall green cap and the big black glasses sitting in the back seat. On an impulse, she got out of their car and went over.

'Thank you, very much, I want to return this talisman back to you,' she said in English as the man rolled down the glass. He took the small glittering piece of copper, and a slow smile broke under his long black moustache.

Mr. Prasanna said nothing at all. As they drove away she saw in the rear-view mirror the strange man's hand stretched out, his long fingers with rose-shell nails pressing the talisman into the open fingerless palm of a leper.