

THE JUNGLE BLOSSOM
by Sylvia Townsend Warner
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I

Rajendra sits for an examination

RAJENDRA read the words again.

O Jungle Blossom!
You are so endearingly beautiful and of so sweet a perfume
That only with aching senses can you be apprehended.

He was a young man, and a poet, and recently in mourning for the death of his betrothed. The words made a deep impression on him though they were in an examination paper. He learned them by heart, and on the following day he quoted them to his tutor.

“Aha,” said the tutor. “Let me see! Yes, I know them. They were composed by the poet Shakspira.”

“And who was he?”

“A poet of the British Empire.”

“Then why did I find them in an examination paper for the Madras Riparian and Forestry Board?”

“Habit,” the tutor replied. “In former days, during the Subjugation, examinations for civil appointments were held in the British tongue, and this fragment, no doubt, was one of those which the candidate was required to parse and analyse. Translated, it still remains in the syllabus. We are eclectic people, Rajendraji, and prefer to digest rather than to expel.”

"I would like to know more of this poet."

The tutor shook his head.

"This fragment is all that I know. It refers, I imagine, to some concubine."

II

Rajendra sets out on his travels

Having plenty of time on his hands (for he did not succeed in passing the examination, neither did he need to since he was an orphan with considerable private means), Rajendra set himself to learn English in order to become better acquainted with the works of Shakspira. Though he soon mastered the language, his teacher (a Miss Kleinhof) could tell him nothing about the poet, nor could anyone else. Rajendra decided to visit the English-speaking countries in order to discover more about the author of the jungle blossom passage which had so deeply delighted him.

It was comparatively easy for Rajendra to undertake this journey, because he belonged to the sect of the Jains whose religious convictions disallowed them from taking any form of life. Jains, being harmless, were permitted by the Atomic Control Board to circulate through Europe with no more than the usual lets and hindrances. At one time the sect of the Quakers had also enjoyed this privilege; but their custom of eating flesh foods had rendered them obnoxious to the increasingly sensitive New England conscience and finally they were deprived of their passports; It was felt, too, that the period of their usefulness was over. During the earlier decades of Atomic Control, Quakers had travelled into almost every European country nursing and feeding the survivors, and reconciling public opinion. Afterwards, public opinion became better adjusted and no further reconciliation was called for.

Few Jains, however, had availed themselves of their right to circulate, and so Rajendra's departure created quite a stir, and a large crowd turned up at the aerodrome to wave him farewell.

III

Rajendra visits Stratford-on-Avon

Having landed in England and complied with the usual seven-day formalities of arrival, Rajendra asked where he could buy the works of Shakspira. No one could tell him; but the clerk at the Travel Bureau (a Mrs Obijeway) recommended him to visit Shakspira's birthplace, a licensed holiday resort called Stratford-on-Avon. Here Rajendra was directed to a restaurant called Anne Hathaway's Cottage. Through its walls of transparent plastic he saw holiday-makers drinking coca-cola and eating beefsteaks. The receptionist told him that Anne Hathaway had been Shakspira's girl-wife, and that this was her only authentic cottage. Later, Rajendra found five other restaurants bearing the same name and making the same claim. It occurred to him that this girl-wife of Shakspira's was in all probability the subject of the lines which he had found in the examination paper, but a Colonel Gideon Augustine Dwight (the local representative of the Atomic Control Board) assured him that this could not be the case, as Anne Hathaway was a superior girl who could not conceivably have been compared to anything in a jungle.

Rajendra left Stratford-on-Avon and travelled through England asking about Shakspira. He found the name pretty well-known. All those who knew it associated it with the name of Anne Hathaway, and some of them knew also that Shakspira was England's greatest poet. But no one could recall any of his poetry, and bookshops had no copies of his works. Though England had been one of the Favoured Nations, a certain amount of Atomic Control had been required to keep it in order. An insurrection of Communistic origin had led to the destruction of the old capital of London, the University of Oxford had risen for the King, the sister University of Cambridge had risen for the Parliament, and the necessary Atomic Control had obliterated both cities. If any copies of Shakspira's works had survived elsewhere, they had, in all probability, been absorbed by a salvage drive

for providing ice-cream cups, coffins and cricket scoring cards.

Just as Rajendra was about to leave England he met an old lady, the widow of a professional speaker, who not only knew the name of Shakspira but was able to recall two fragments of his poetry, both of which had often been quoted by her husband and were thus impressed on her memory.

We shall not rue if England to herself do rest but true was one of them. The other was in the form of an apothegm, and ran: *Put money in thy purse*. Rajendra did not feel that either of these fragments was as poetical as the piece about the jungle blossom. However, he thanked the old lady, and did what he could to relieve her necessities. He then took an aeroplane ticket for Tombstone, the capital of the United States of America.

IV

Rajendra pursues his enquiries

While flying, Rajendra fell into conversation with a Jesuit Father who opined that if the works of Shakspira were to be found anywhere, they would be found in the Vatican Library. "What a pity," exclaimed Rajendra, "that I am flying to the United States!"

"Where else would you fly?"

"But the Vatican is situated in Rome, which is in Italy."

The Jesuit Father explained to Rajendra that his geography was out of date. Very early in the Democratisation of Europe, he recounted, the American Cardinals Wunderkind and Kelly had foreseen that the Eternal City would need to be drastically revised, and so had arranged for the transfer of the Holy See and its appurtenances to the State of Utah, where it had been ever since. Rajendra hastened to Petrusville, Utah, and introduced himself to the Vatican Librarian. The Vatican Librarian informed him that the works of Shakspira had been expurgatorially indexed, the poet having written a drama called *Big Business in Venice*, which contained a grossly favourable portrait of a Jew and included the

heresy that Jews are not biologically differentiated from Christians.

At the thought of a whole drama by Shakspira, Rajendra was in an ecstasy, and cried out: "Then I must go to the Jews! Where can I find them?"

"On Devil's Island," replied the Vatican Librarian, "there are said to be a few."

Rajendra chartered a plane and flew to Devil's Island, where he found a small Jewish community. He inquired for the works of Shakspira and especially for the drama called *Big Business in Venice*.

The Rabbinical Secretary said: "You should not speak of it here. It contained a maliciously unfavourable portrait of a Jew, and I am sorry that anyone still remembers the name of Shakspira. I pray you to forget it."

Rajendra returned to the United States, and continued his inquiries for the poems and dramas of Shakspira, both by radio and through the Press.

V

Rajendra learns something

One day a young man of easy deportment called on Rajendra and said:

"If anyone can handle Ben Shakes, it's me. But it's going to cost you money."

"Is he called Ben?" exclaimed Rajendra.

"O rare Ben Shakespeare!" the young man replied. "And rare is certainly the word for it. Well, there are just three copies of Shakespeare and we have them all. One belongs to Mr Dwiddle the Ninth, one to Mr Popplefest the Third, and one to Mrs Melchior Sponger. I happened to know that Mrs Sponger might consider an offer. How much can you bid?"

Rajendra named a sum. The young man laughed. Rajendra went on naming sums and the young man went on laughing.

"I see," said Rajendra, "that the poems of rare Ben

Shakspira are valued at great price. I do not wonder at it. Indeed, I am sure that if I had a copy I would rate it as highly. Unfortunately, I cannot afford to buy Mrs Sponger's copy, so I must content myself with making a transcript."

"A what?" said the young man.

"A transcript. A manuscript copy."

"And just how do you propose to do that? Do you think that people are allowed to desecrate these First Folios? They're all First Folios. Why, no one can touch them! That is a stipulation with the insurance companies."

"Then does no one read them? Not even Mr Dwidle, or Mr Poppelfest, or Mrs Melchior Sponger?"

"Read them?" cried the young man. "*Read them?* Why, they are all in sealed wrappings, and the sealed wrappings are in safes, and the safes are in vaults, which were specially hollowed out during the period when we in this country were defying the menace of unauthorised atomic reprisals. Naturally, the vaults having been specially constructed, the First Folios are there still. They have been there ever since the evacuation of New York City and Boston, sited in the former Eastern Insecurity Belt. We take no risks with rare Ben Shakespeare, I assure you."

VI

Rajendra learns more

That evening Rajendra found himself followed by twelve citizens of burly dimensions wearing white calico burnouses stamped with the initials B.P.D.

Approaching one of the citizens, he asked him what these initials stood for.

"Bureau for the Protection of Democracy," a fearless voice replied. Immediately twenty-four fearless hands assailed Rajendra, pulled a sack over his head, trussed him with ropes, and threw him to the ground, where twenty-four fearless boots trod on his tenderer parts.

Being a Jain, Rajendra offered no resistance. When he

recovered consciousness, he found himself being given medical aid by a band of ladies, who washed him, bandaged him, disinfected him, injected him, took his basal metabolism, and fed him a special milk diet in ideal surroundings. All these ladies were kind, but the kindest of them was a lady called Miss Peruzzi. She told him that she came of old New England stock, and that her great-great-grandfather (a Dewlap) had been instrumental in freeing India from British tyranny.

"British tyranny reminds me," said Rajendra. "Have you ever heard of a poet called Shakspira?"

"Cousin Dewlap can say yards of him by heart," she replied. "He lives in Maine."

"Take me to Maine!" cried Rajendra, and lapsed into unconsciousness. When he was able to be moved, Miss Peruzzi took him to Maine, where her Cousin Dewlap lived in a replica log-cabin, ornamented with many cast-iron bygones. In a loud, thin voice which reminded Rajendra of the sacred bulls of his native land, Cousin Dewlap repeated the following lines:

*Good name in man or woman, dear my lord,
Is the immediate jewel of their souls;
Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something; nothing;
'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands:
But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him.
Then give me liberty or give me death!*

"How can I thank you?" exclaimed the delighted Rajendra. "Let me stay here for ever, in case you should remember some more!"

Cousin Dewlap looked from the window and saw the twelve burnoused representatives of the B.P.D. coming out of the woods.

"Who are those men?" he inquired.

Rajendra answered that he believed them to be democrats.

"Friends of yours?"

"They follow me," Rajendra answered cautiously.

"Then get out!"

Rajendra looked about for the back door, but was thrust out by the front one. To his surprise the protectors of democracy greeted him with loving halloos, and took him to a drug store. It was all very pleasant, but he thought he would go home.

VII

Rajendra visits Germany

Flying eastward, Rajendra changed his mind. It occurred to him that there might be fragments of Shakspira to be found among the un-English-speaking countries of Europe. They would, of course, be in translations; but the passage about the jungle blossom had been a translation, and he still liked it best of his collection. Once more he consulted Mrs Objeway, who told him that he would find Germany the likeliest place for his researches; and with the best accommodations.

The accommodations in Germany were very pleasing: he found quantities of little chalets housing well-fed and songful workers, many lakes, forests, etc., and some interesting pre-atomic ruins. But no one seemed to have heard of Shakspira. Then one day, while he was interrogating a waiter, he was interrupted by a genial man wearing nylon riding-breeches, who exclaimed: "You mean Wilhelm Shakespeare, our great German playwright. You should not call him Ben. It is misleading and slanderous. He was entirely Nordic, it is therefore impossible that he should have been called Ben."

"I understood that he was an English poet."

"How could that be? Wilhelm is not an English name. No, no, my good friend, it is our beloved German Shakespeare that you mean. Heavens, how hot it is! Do you not thirst?"

Rajendra could hardly control his impatience while the

gentleman in riding-breeches quenched his thirst at Rajendra's expense. His hopes were excessive. His new friend assured him that there was no chance of finding a printed copy of Shakspira's works in Germany. Such copies, he said, would be needless. The works of Shakspira were so truly part of the German national heritage that they were everywhere known by heart: like folk-songs. Rajendra took out his pencil and pad.

"*Nimmer*," said the gentleman, firmly. "*Nimmer! Nimmer! Nimmer!* What a line, eh? What completeness! What embracingness of negation! Is it not a line of granite?"

Unfortunately this was all he could remember, and this was all that Rajendra got in Germany.

VIII

Rajendra visits Spain, Portugal, Italy, Holland, Belgium,
Norway and Denmark .

Rajendra continued his researches through western Europe. He was not able to visit Switzerland or Sweden because their long-established neutralities made them impermeable even to Jains. The neutralities of Spain and Portugal admitted him, but he learned nothing there beyond what the Vatican Librarian in Utah had already told him.

In Italy Rajendra found only a few wretched peasants supporting themselves by means of goats and in turn supporting some religious communities. There were not even representatives of the Atomic Control Board, for they had been withdrawn as superfluous. In addition to the measures of atomic control, necessarily rather drastic, which had been required to pacify the country after the removal of the Vatican, there had been an unfortunate incident when a squadron of bombing-planes charged with a mission to Yugoslavia had become confused between the western and eastern coasts of the Adriatic and had atomised Italy for a second time (the error was, of course, corrected by a subsequent mission to Yugoslavia).

In both Holland and Belgium, Rajendra felt himself to be within snuffing distance of Shakspira. But though the people he interrogated seemed to recognise the name and even to hear it with pleasure, it was impossible to get them to say anything. Except for an elderly schoolmistress who assured him that Shakspira was certainly an English poet, he learned nothing in Norway either. In the little state of Denmark, however, Rajendra chanced upon what was almost a living tradition. His hotel keeper took him to see some very pre-atomic ruins which were, he said, the remains of the castle of Elsinore, the scene of Shakspira's greatest tragedy, of which the central character was a fat poet called Falstaff. Rajendra made a water-colour sketch of the spot.

IX

Rajendra visits Eire

In the hotel-keeper's private room there hung an old map of Europe. Examining it, Rajendra saw an island which was new to him.

"That is Eire," said the hotel keeper.

"I have never heard of it."

"That does not surprise me. It has never been Europeanly controlled. It is sometimes called The Isle of the Saints, because so many American mothers were born there."

"Then it is English-speaking? Would it know of Shakspira?"

The hotel-keeper replied that one might find anything in Eire except coal and snakes.

In Eire Rajendra was alarmed to find the officials speaking a perfectly unknown language; but by dint of addressing everyone in Urdu he persuaded them to answer him in English. Eire, he discovered, was as Catholic a country as Spain or Portugal, and he supposed that here too Shakspira would be only a name on an index. Nevertheless, he made his customary enquiry, and was told to take the second turning on the left. He did so, and beheld a signboard bearing the words: *Shakespeare Tavern*.

Rajendra made it a rule to spend every evening in the Shakespeare Tavern standing drinks to all comers. On the ninth evening he stood a double whiskey to a black-haired man who exclaimed to the bar-man who offered to add soda to it:

“Here is worse treachery than the seamew suffered!”

“Excuse me, but isn’t that Shakspira?” said Rajendra.

“It is not. It is Willie Yeats,” the man replied. “If you want the other old rip you must go to my uncle, who has the whole of him bound in blue morocco, and thirty pounds a year into the bargain for no more than directing the Shakespearean studies of the youth of Eire.”

“Does he keep it in a vault?”

“Keep it in a vault? It was on a window ledge beside a bottle of horse liniment the last time I set eyes on it,” said the black-haired man.

X

Rajendra visits Mr Seamus Tone

Rajendra’s hopes were green as the surrounding grass as he approached the house where Mr Seamus Tone directed the Shakespearean studies of the youth of Eire—a venerable mansion secluded in a bog, ideally situated for people wishing to concentrate. Good manners restrained his impatience, and he began by remarking that no doubt Mr Tone had many enthusiastic scholars.

“Scholars? Oh, there’s a wonderful lot of them, fine, well-grown creatures one and all. It’s a pity you should be coming this long way to see them just when they are all refreshing themselves at the Agricultural Show and Dairy Demonstration. But sit down now, all the same, and tell me about your travels.”

Rajendra did as he was requested. His host asked him many questions, and capped all the answers with anecdotes. After some hours, Rajendra said point-blank that he would like to see the copy of Shakspira’s works.

“God pity my wits!” said Mr Tone. “If I haven’t

forgotten to tell you the story that hangs by that. Did you ever hear of those olden fellows who painted themselves with soot and sulphur and were called the Black and Tans? Did you not, indeed? Anyhow, you're none the worse for it, for it's a dirty old story. Wait, now, and I'll tell you. There's another bottle downstairs."

Mr Tone's story was about one of the heroes of the Irish Liberation, who was taken prisoner by the English forces. Like all prisoners', his worst torment was boredom. He had nothing to read, nothing to distract his mind from the sense of imprisonment. But as his bearing was proud he was set as a humiliation to clean out a latrine used by the enemy officers, and there he found a copy of the works of Shakespeare. The first fifty pages had already been torn away; and he did not dare to remove the volume in case it should be taken from him; but each time he cleaned the latrine he read and memorised, and sometimes removed a whole drama. Though it was a losing race between him and the legitimate users of England's greatest poet he stocked his memory with sufficient poetry to endure the rest of his captivity with composure. In gratitude for this he founded the Chair of Shakespearean Studies. And though the poet was later placed on the Index, this endowment and a copy of the works were exempted from the ban because of the respect which the patriot's name still evoked.

Deeply stirred by this narrative, Rajendra exclaimed: "All being is dual! God and Man, male and female, wet and dry. Here, love of art and love of country, principles naturally opposed to each other, have combined to preserve the works of Shakspira. Now may I gaze on this volume?"

After rummaging about, Mr Tone produced a moist, approximately rectangular object which smelled of mildew. It became apparent that this had once been a handsome old-fashioned book bound in leather and printed on india paper. But it was so completely water-logged that its pages had coalesced in a pulpy mass, and only the title page was dimly legible.

Rajendra wept.

"It's the climate," said Mr Tone.

XI

Rajendra visits France

Everyone had agreed in telling Rajendra that there was not the smallest possibility of finding a trace of Shakspira in France. For one thing, France had required reiterated measures of atomic control; for another, the French had always preferred Racine; for yet another, France had now been reconstituted as a vacation centre for the controlling forces, which was the best solution of the Gallic problem, since the French were an inherently frivolous race, unapt for anything except purveying luxury and light entertainment.

Nevertheless, Rajendra went to France. He soon realised the truth of the first statement, but despaired of checking the other two, since there did not appear to be any French nationals left. Then, in a small town called Cahors, he came on a French colony, living quietly and tidily among the ruins. When his inquiries for Shakspira were received with sympathetic attention, he felt no special hopes; he had seen such recognising looks before. But Rajendra was on the brink of his greatest discoveries. An old mathematician introduced him to the memoirs of a nineteenth-century musician named Berlioz, a copy of which was preserved in the town museum. Not only were these memoirs saturated by Berlioz's admiration for Shakspira, they contained many small quotations and one long passage of extreme beauty. This, as it was given both in the original and in a French translation, afforded Rajendra the exquisite pleasure of considering a variant reading.

It is a tale

Told by an idiot, foul of sound and fury.

Signifying nothing.

*C'est un conte recité par un idiot, plein de fracas et de furie,
et qui n'a aucun sens.*

Which should it be? Which probability was the more probable—that a printer should mistake a letter, that a trans-

lator should misapprehend a poet's mind?

Nor was this all. One evening a young woman came to Rajendra carrying a twentieth-century book in a very good state of preservation. She opened it reverently.

"They have told me," she said, "that you are seeking the great Shakespeare."

Her thin and rather dirty finger pointed to an engraved portrait of a man with a high forehead and small wise eyes.

"This is he."

Rajendra cried out incoherently. He could not express his excitement, he could not believe his good fortune. She reassured him.

"The *Petit Larousse* is documentary."

XII

Rajendra becomes a married man

Rajendra's first thought was how to secure this inestimable prize. It was quickly followed by a realisation that he was quite as anxious to secure an amiable companion. He married Mlle. Duclos, and passed the next few years in becoming the father of three children (Falstaff, Ophélie, and Macbeth), and in editing his critical edition of *Shakspira's Remains*: to which the *Dictionnaire Larousse* contributed two additional fragments, *To be or not to be* and *Honest Iago*.

One evening he called his wife to his side.

"My task is completed," he said.

They looked at each other, and knew that the words were false. Rajendra's researches had been limited by rationality, convention, and the instinct of self-preservation.

"There cannot be any real likelihood that anything has survived in the Precautionary Zone," said Rajendra after a long pause. "But I suppose I should make sure of it, all the same."

"It would be scholarly," she replied.

XIII

Rajendra comes to the foot of a wall

Even as a Jain, Rajendra experienced enormous difficulties in obtaining permission to enter the Precautionary Zone, but at last it was granted, and on the day after the birth of his first grandchild he loaded the necessary documents in a smallish van and set out.

He entered the Precautionary Zone soon after crossing the river Elbe. Thenceforward he travelled with a sinking heart through an inconceivable landscape. Every feature of its geography had been obliterated; forests had been felled, rivers and lakes filled up, mountains and valleys levelled to an unvarying flatness; finally all this had been covered by a thick layer of concrete.

Naturally, Rajendra was not travelling alone. His permit attached him to a Sanitary and Welfare Commission of the Atomic Control Board. With them he inspected the underground factories where the natives worked the mineral resources of the Zone, and the even more underground barracks and administrative centres of the controlling authorities. At last they came to the Eastern Boundary of the Zone: a wall of polished red granite, extending from Tallin to Varna, and standing over a hundred feet high. Beyond this wall was the territory of the Soviets, and above it to a height not known, rose the magnetic defences which forbade the passage of any kind of machine or projectile.

XIV

Rajendra returns to his home

After so long an experience of the horizontal, it was curiously intimidating to be brought to a halt before this insistence upon the vertical. Rajendra felt a deep melancholy and discouragement. His companions appeared to be affected by similar feelings, for they sat close together and conversed in quiet tones. Being convinced by now that as far

as the quest for Shakspira went he had travelled in vain, Rajendra paid no attention to the speakers until his ear was caught by the word *drama*. The speaker was one of the staff of this outpost of Atomic Control.

"Believe it or not," he said, "it is in Petski's latest report. And Petski is the most reliable man we have."

"But what are these dramas?" another voice inquired. "It just doesn't sound lifelike to me."

"They profess to be a form of entertainment. They take place almost every night, and people throng to them. But instead of being film, radio, or television, everything is done by a handful of propagandists who actually appear in the flesh."

"Well, that's totally undemocratic," a third speaker cried out.

Rajendra rashly said: "Excuse me. Why?" The first speaker frowned at him, and continued:

"Even Petski, who is pretty tough, says he has never encountered such pernicious teachings. In one of these performances a friar is shown poisoning a young girl. That's to work up anti-clericalism, of course. In another they exhibited the most abandoned two young men, and a marriage, a wedding ceremony, if you can imagine it, for which one of these young men disguises himself in skirts. Nothing is held sacred! Every moral code, every fundamental decency, everything that civilisation stands for, is undermined. In one of these dramas—you may not believe it, but Petski is categorical about it—a white girl of social standing is made to dote on a negro."

"But. . . Oh, wait a minute, please!" Disregarding Rajendra, the speaker went on more firmly and loudly.

"And these filthy displays are immensely popular, so Petski says. He actually had to pay quite a lot to get in!"

"That's very significant," remarked a man who hitherto had not spoken. "That's Inflation. I've always said that sooner or later. . ."

The conversation took a more usual turn Rajendra sat musing. He had a strange sensation that something of great

importance had just failed to happen. He felt his flesh creeping, and his hair rising. Perhaps he was about to develop influenza.

He had to wait for some time before he could interpose in the conversation, which was now animated and general.

“There is one question I would like, if possible, to ask this Mr Petski.”

He was told that he might meet Mr Petski on the morrow. But on the morrow he learned that all his permits had expired, and that he must return to Europe. Under an escort Rajendra traversed the concrete expanse of the Precautionary Zone, the hygienic landscape of Germany. As the grass-grown ruins of France varied the horizon he gazed on them with tenderness. His quest had been fruitless, but he was now in sight of home, his wife, his children, his little circle, and the beloved and revered portrait in the family Larousse.



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“Sylvia Townsend Warner at Maiden Newton. Coal black coffee and cigarette and, for me, a coat over my knees against her clawing cats.” Janet Stone, Thinking Faces, Chatto & Windus, 1988.