

Folktale

Plucking out the Last Pins

SHAMS AFIF SIDDIQI *

Whenever Shabnam was alone in the cottage, it seemed someone would call out to her aloud. She was not afraid but felt perplexed by a man's voice making a strange request.

'Can I come down,' the voice called her clearly two days ago for the first time.

She looked around herself in order to locate the direction of the voice. All she could see was her own reflection on the lengthening shadow of the rising sun and the cool breeze blowing on her face.

'My imagination is now a days running wild,' she smiled to herself. 'What else can I expect staying alone all the day and dreaming of the good old days which will never come back.'

Her stepmother Asma had gone to the market with her daughter, Zarina to buy vegetables. Or that is what they always told her when leaving her alone in the sprawling cottage. Her father had died leaving her at the mercy of these unkind women.

She opened the main door and peeped into the narrow lane outside but all she could see were some stray dogs lazing in the midday noon.

'I must be dreaming,' she told herself, 'who is so stupid to be interested in a poor girl like me, reduced to the position of a servant because of the turn of time.' She shrugged her shoulders and sighed. 'I am not what things were when my father was living. Those days are gone for ever. Now it is only drudgery and pain...'

But soon the voice again called out clearly: 'Can I come down...'

This time she craned her neck towards the place from where the voice originated. She was sure now not only of the reality of the voice but also about the direction of its origin. It had come from the sloping tiled roof of the cottage. Stretch her body as far as she could, she could find no one out there on the inclined roof. No one except a cat could keep itself perched on such a slanting angle.

'It must be my imagination,' she told herself, 'staying alone after the death of my parents for the last two years I must have become mad.'

* Head, P. G.. Department of English, Hooghly Mohsin College, Hooghly, (W.B.)

And then she went on performing her usual daily chores, like dusting the furniture, sweeping the floor and filling water in containers before the tap ran dry. The two women would return and chide her if things had not been performed according to their orders.

But the next day again, when her stepmother and stepsister went out and she was alone, the voice once again disturbed the silence of her peaceful day.

'Can I come down,' the voice sailed down from the roof of the cottage.

She could make out from the tone that it must be a young man's voice. She had not met a man for a long, long time since her stepmother had kept her pent up in this little room.

She felt scared not knowing who it was and what would happen if she gave him the permission to come down. Was it some wicked men out to take advantage of her loneliness? Or was it some one from the world of romance coming to the aid of a girl who had suffered enough because of the vicissitudes of life? These stories she had heard from her grandmother but can they be a part of real life? She racked her brain but could not make any headway. All that appeared starkly before her, was the harsh reality. She had been reduced to the position of a servant in the household after the death of her father.

Shabnam could not recall much about her mother who had died when she was too young. She could remember that her mother had been the most beautiful woman in the whole area, or that is what everyone said about her even today. Some said she had inherited the beauty and personality of her mother but she did not agree.

If that would have been the case then why did no young man agree to marry her?

But if her recollection of the mother was hazy, she remembered her father well. He was a tall man, well built and of gentle disposition. When her father married a second time, the whole world knew it was a death knell for him. Asma was a dominating lady and already divorced living with her first daughter who was two years older than her. She made life hell for him so that in a short time of five years he had a heart attack from which he never recovered and died after a few months.

Shabnam went inside the room as if to hide herself from the strange problem that was beckoning her towards itself.

The third day when the mother and daughter went away as usual, she came out into the courtyard ready to face the voice squarely. She

had hardly been out in the open for a moment when she clearly heard the voice calling her again: This time it seemed to plead before her with gentleness.

'Can I come down,' it called from the top of the sloping tiled roof. 'Can I come down please...?'

'Come down if you are so much interested,' she replied and laughed to herself.

She knew some one must have been playing mischief from somewhere and so wanted to see what would be the man's next move.

She had hardly uttered the words when something seemed to roll down somewhere with enormous force. She was shocked to find something fall down with massive force right from the roof. It slid down the tiled slope and fell down on the courtyard with a gigantic thud before she could even bat an eyelid.

But she was aghast to find the body of a young man lying flat on his back as if someone had pushed him down the roof like a corpse. And yet it was not a lifeless body. She was more horrified to find the body bruised in a way she had never seen anyone in her life. She went closer and found that the young man was still breathing and was only unconscious.

A shiver ran down her spine when she saw the miserable plight of the man. She could only gasp in disbelief. Hundreds of pins were pierced on all parts of his body; from head to toe, as if someone had tried to practice black magic on a living being. If she had failed to understand the mystery behind the voice and the falling of the body in the beginning, now she was more puzzled about the piercing of needles on the body.

'What is the meaning of all this?' she asked herself in disbelief.

The body was that of a handsome young man who was as good as dead. His eyes were also closed because two pins on each eye had kept it wedged like a stitched cloth.

She failed to understand what to do with a problem that she herself had invited on the spur of the moment. All kinds of questions came to her mind and she felt nervous. What bothered her most were the two women who were sure to hold her responsible for a heinous deed which she had not performed. They would not hesitate to cast aspersions on her moral character. A young man inside the house and that too bruised in such a manner?

She again looked at the body but soon smiled to herself.

'Who knows,' she told herself, 'God might have sent this prince to take me away from this dungeon. It seems that the worst of days are as good as over.'

It gave her some satisfaction and she felt relieved.

'Someone must have cast a spell on this prince?' She went on with her thoughts. 'May be if I take out all the pins inserted in his body he may come back to normal self. I must not waste a single moment. Every moment is important in the life of this unique individual. And then, and then...' she blushed and could not relate the thoughts even to her own self.

She had by that time made up her mind what to do with the young prince. For prince he really was. A witch had cast her spell by binding him with the pins. He could come back to life only if a young lady could take out all the pins from his body. Then he would be allowed to marry her and lead a normal life. That is why for some days the bruised body was busy taking permission of the lady to come down from the top of the roof.

Shabnam quickly set down to perform the work of extracting the pins from the body. It was an enormous task and had to be performed with tact and caution. She perched on the floor of the courtyard and started taking out the pins from the body of the young man. She brought with her a utensil in which to place the pins before deciding to throw them away. She started from the foot and took out the first pin. She noticed the youth remaining unmoved and still like an unfeeling corpse. She dropped the pin on the utensil. Then came out the second, the third pins and so the work went on and then she knew there were so many. She was for the first time dreaming of a better life with this strange but handsome youth who, she knew, did not come from an ordinary family background..

She had heard of princes coming and taking young poor girls to their castles and marrying them. Now she would not only see the miracle take place but herself would be the heroine in this strange drama in which a real prince had come all the way from an unusual world.

It was in no time that she had finished clearing one foot of all the pierced needles. She did not tarry and immediately set to clear the other one. She caught hold of the big toe and felt thrilled. She had never had the chance to touch the body of any young man from so close a quarter. When she had finished with the second foot, she sat down to take rest. She looked at his face. She saw an unblemished

feature; fair colour that would put to shame even the fair sex, and cheeks with one or two days stubble that imparted a green look to his countenance.

Looking at the face of the young man was like staring at the open face of the heaven and feeling satisfied. She began to hum the song of an old romantic song: 'You are with me whenever I am alone...'

She again started removing the pins from different parts of the body while it lay lifeless on the floor of the courtyard. When she came up to the neck for the needles stuck there, she found the man stirring as if in his sleep. She felt happy and quickly took out the remaining one stuck in the neckline. As soon as it came out the body stretched itself and she felt scared lest it got up and she would not know how to react. She stopped in her work for a while and waited for the next movement of the body. But it did not move any more, rather it went back to its long and peaceful slumber. She sighed but felt relieved and then went on with her work.

It must have taken her a quarter of an hour more to finish the job of extracting pins from the jaws and cheeks. When she finished the work of this part of the body, she once again stared at the face of the young man. He looked like one who had come straight from the world of romance. He was young, handsome, and princely and had somehow been created only for her.

She thanked her stars for being kind to her. She knew this opportunity never comes twice in life. She did not want to miss such an opportunity. There were just two pins remaining on each eyelid that kept them fast so that the prince could not see. She had a feeling he could now sense that someone was helping him bring out the objects that had played such havoc in his life.

She soon looked at herself and felt shocked to see her shabby appearance.

'I must take a wash and dress properly before taking out the last pins,' she told herself, 'I do not want the prince to see a shabby and dirty girl like me. After all, he is bound to propose to me for I will help him come back to life.'

She ran to the bathroom with some crumpled up clothes and slammed the door feeling herself to be on top of the world. But soon a stray thought disturbed her world of dreams. She tried to shake it away but it refused to go away.

'What's if Asma and Zarina came back from their daily sojourns?' she asked herself. 'Zarina was the most envious girl she had ever

met in life. And Asma was sure to arrange something that she would not like. She was capable of creating all kinds of upsets.'

Hardly had she dressed up when the sound of the keys being placed on the main gate caught her ears and she heard both the women enter the threshold with shuffling steps.

'They have returned home. Now what will happen?'

She was abnormally quick this time. She wanted to come out of the bathroom before they could go and see the body of the young man in the courtyard. There was half a chance of missing it for the man had fallen on the left side edge which was behind the main gate. If they walked straight away to the rooms they might not see him at all.

But by the footfalls of the women she could understand they had stopped in their stride. She cursed her stars for leaving the last pins unopened.

She tried to quieten herself by false consolation. 'Zarina may not even know what to do with the stranger and so I may not have made any mistake,' she told herself once again. She came out of the room and went straight towards the courtyard but Asma was standing as if to stop her in her movements.

'Go to the kitchen and wash the utensils,' she growled in an abnormally rough voice.

'I have left something in the courtyard,' she quickly told a lie, 'let me pick it up first.'

'How dare you defy my words,' the older woman barked once again. 'Didn't I tell you to move to the kitchen? Now do as you are told.'

Shabnam stopped for a while and then with bowed head trudged towards the kitchen.

'They can stop me temporarily from my prized possession, she told herself in tears. But nobody can take him away from me. After all, he is meant to be for me. Didn't he come only for me? Didn't I take out all the pins from his body? He is sure to recognize me when he opens his eyes. I will tarry a few minutes in the kitchen and then sneak out when both of them are safely lodged in their respective rooms.'

She was surprised to find too many utensils in the kitchen for the washing. She quickly opened the tap and went along with her work. Unless she finished the work it would not be wise to leave the place. It must have taken her quite some time when she finally succeeded in coming out. She headed straight for the site where she

knew the man must have still been lying in the same position. Once she will take out the last pins, he would open his eyes and see who had performed the miracle for him.

'He is sure to take me in his arms and thank me. Then he will propose to me. I will feel shy but relent in the end.'

She quickly edged forward saying to herself that she was becoming a mad girl always lost in a reverie.

As soon as she reached the spot her surprise knew no bounds when she found both the mother and daughter present there. They had even managed to bring a stool in which she saw the handsome man sitting in a peaceful posture. He was probably engaged in conversation with Zarina who was pretending to act as coy as she could. Asma looked backed and saw her approach. Initially she wanted to stop her but soon desisted from the idea.

She spoke in a diplomatic tone introducing the stranger to her.

'Sir, this is our maidservant,' she spoke with cultivated but artificial grace in her voice, 'And this, she addressed her, 'is the prince who has taken a fascination for our daughter. He is the prince of our neighboring country. He wants to take her to his place and show her to his parents. After all she had performed a miracle for him.'

The man looked towards her and spoke with gentleness she had never heard before.

'This is the lady who has done so much for me. My whole body was pierced with needles by one who had practiced witchcraft. I had lain in that position for over a year. They told me that any lady who will take out all the pins would be able to make me come back to normal life. But no one ever came to my rescue. I was lucky Zarina had taken so much of pains to take out hundreds of pins and rescue me from the clutch of the devil. I will forever remain indebted to her.'

Shabnam's eyes were moist with tears. She did not say anything for there was nothing more to say. She could imagine all that would have taken place while she was away from the sight. The two would have found the man lying with all but the two pins keeping his eyes fastened. Asma must have asked her daughter to take them out while keeping her out of the way. The prince must have come back to life and seen the only girl by his side and all the pins lying inside the utensil. What else was there more to say!

Shabnam turned back to go towards the kitchen. But as she limped back she muttered the words to herself. 'She who takes out hundreds of pins is forgotten. For whoever takes out the last pins is seen by the prince and so wins his heart. This is the way of the world.'