

ALL FOR A MATCH

Nowhere in all the seven parts of the Ramayana are we told where matches were used in Ravana's golden Lanka, or whether Hanuman, when he set in on fire, had to rub two pieces of wood together or strike at flint.

A fire does not start by itself nevertheless, however big the blaze may be. Will anyone dare to deny that any article in itself as insignificant as a match is indispensable?

A single match is sufficient to destroy a city. That is to say, it is sufficient if gunpowder is present in the required quantity.

But this morning Jahar and Jayanti proved that it is not impossible for a conflagration as great as the burning of Lanka to be caused by the absence of a match.

When Jayanti woke up in the morning and went into the kitchen to light the stove, her heart gave a jump. Not a match! She had looked everywhere that matches were likely to be found. But all of them seemed to have conspired to non-cooperate. There was not a match in the whole house!

She ought to have asked Jahar to buy some matches for her last night. She had even tied a knot in the end of her sari to remind her. But the night had flown!

The whole night!

A smile stole unconsciously over her face as she remembered. A box of matches was usually to be found in Jahar's pocket in case of emergency. But last night he had used the box up burning sticks of incense. How foolishly happy he had been! He bought the incense and garlands on his way home from a friend's wedding. He was in high spirits!

Stick after stick until the incense was gone and the matches as well, he had set alight. The sari with the knot that Jayanti

had tied in it to remind her about the matches lay in a heap under the bed, in offended neglect. Jayanti had to open her trunk and put on her sky-blue sari with the gold border.

If, after all this, Jayanti had not forgotten to communicate to Jahar the urgent piece of news about the matches, even when he ran out, we ourselves would have cried shame on her.

But that was last night.

This was morning. A summer morning. The scullery maid had not yet arrived and the house was in disorder, a disagreeable sight. Crows had flown down on to the covered porch and were fussing over last night's dirty dishes. The noise of a violent quarrel arose from the nearby slum already, so early in the morning. Shriill voice, harsh as a cracked gong, rose over the varied sounds of the streets, piercing the tin roof as though trying to reach heaven.

What had happened last night was embarrassing now. The sari with the gold border was out of place. Using up all the matches to burn incense seemed a shameless extravagance when Jayanti was confronted with the crude necessity of lighting the stove.

Tucking her sari, still fragrant with the jasmine garland of the night, tightly into her waist, Jayanti searched the kitchen once more, looking high and low, in the pantry, on the porch, on every shelf and rack, in every niche and hole. If only the much desired object would appear! Even the broken half of a match would do, a stump tossed aside in careless contempt!

But no! Not a match anywhere! One or two empty boxes appeared. So empty! Since when had Jayanti become so neat a housewife that not a stray match was to be found in her house, a match forgotten in a box somewhere?



She looked again in all the places she had looked before, went again through her trunks and boxes. Some curse appeared to have whisked the god of fire entirely away from Jayanti's house.

The clock which had been on the wall since her father-in-law's time suddenly reminded her in a soft deep voice that resembled his, that it was seven o'clock.

At eight-thirty Jahar was to have his breakfast of rice and curry. What was the poor girl to do?

Last night's foolishness had taken its toll. She had woken up late. And now this had happened!

What was Jayanti to do? Should she waken Jahar?

To waken Jahar was a job for a coolie! And to-day he had a special claim to his rest – to make up for the lost sleep of the night. How could Jayanti push and put him out of bed to make him run to a shop for such an insignificant thing as a match?

Couldn't a match drop out of the sky? Just a little bit of a stick with a gunpowder hat?

Won't two empty match boxes struck together light? Won't they produce a single spark? A spark would be enough with a liberal dash of kerosene.

After thinking of many foolish things, Jayanti was on the point, at last, of calling her husband. How long was he going to sleep, after all? Wasn't he going to shave? Have tea? Go to market?

Did nobody ever have to go to a shop in slippers as soon as he got up? Under the pressure of circumstances? Would it wear a person out to do it? Would Jayanti

have been in such trouble if she had known how to act like a modern girl? She would have put on the slippers herself and gone down to the shop on the corner!

She was not in the habit of doing such things.

She felt helpless and was on the point of calling her husband when a loud knock on the door announced the arrival of the maidservant Sarada! Now then, could Sarada not be asked to do it? Sarada did the housework in five families. She knocked, walked and worked in a military style. No doubt about the value of her time was permitted. Even to think of sending her to a shop was extremely daring, yet Jayanti, in her desperation, made the suggestion. Blaming herself over and over again for her forgetfulness, describing her anxious and futile search for a match, Jayanti asked her gently, entreatingly, "Will you bring me a match, Sarada? It won't take a minute!"

Sarada was not an innocent young girl. A little pleading was not going to soften her. A woman cannot do the work of five families with a heart so yielding. Sarada had known that before she took her first job. So she replied briefly that her time was valuable. It was not part of her duty to go to shops and markets.

The fire in search of which Jayanti had been so anxiously bestirring herself since early morning suddenly flamed inside her head.

"Such insolence in a hired servant! Is it not part of your duty to do as you are told?", she demanded in an unnecessarily loud voice.

Jayanti was not the only one who knew the art of raising her voice. Sarada had been a maidservant for twenty years!

Needless to say, the words that began to fly back and forth between them after that were not very sweet.

When Sarada, throwing down the bucket and broom, came to the point of walking out of her job, Jahar woke up.

He got up, came out and asked irritably, "What's all the noise about so early in the morning?"

Sarada knew exactly when and to what extent she could display temper. Instantly

her manner changed, her whole attitude changed. Her eyes filled with tears. Her voice choked with sobs. She complained, "I'll beg on the streets if I can't find work. That's better than putting up with such abuse! I cannot bear it! Please pay me my wages."

Even though he did not know exactly what had happened Jahar might still have been able, with the help of a few soothing phrases, to turn the course of events. Sarada would have come back, and picked up the bucket and the broom, the discarded weapons of her trade. But Jayanti, in a vicious tone of voice and with an expression on her face unbecoming to gentlefolk, exclaimed, "Dear, O dear! What a she devil you were a minute ago! And now, salt water just bubbles out of your eyes at the sight of the master. 'Please pay me my wages!' How sweet she is! So sweet!"

If anyone imagines that Sarada would stay after that, they do her a mortal injustice.

"Very well! Very well! Pay me or not as you like! Whatever gentlefolk say or do is found becoming! Steal a couple of rupees from a poor woman and make yourself a king if you want to! Fine!" With that Sarada walked rapidly out of the front door. She was gone. Gone!

If the matter had ended there nothing more might have happened. Jayanti would have set to work cleaning the house herself. Jahar would have fetched the matches and tried to light the stove for her himself. But Jayanti did not allow it to end there. She called after Sarada in a voice like a whetstone, "Go on! Get out, you slut! A handful of rice will bring many crows like you."

Jahar looked at her in astonishment. He looked at the crumpled blue sari with the gold border, at her unwashed face and at her mouth, red with betel juice. Suddenly she seemed to him – ugly! She appeared coarse!

"Lovely!" Jahar exclaimed with an ugly expression of disgust that matched Jayanti's own, "Your rice may be cheap but crows are not. You can go into the slum yourself to look for a new maid!"

"What did you say?" Jayanti was stunned. "You say that to me?"

"Why shouldn't I? You manners and your taste are not so much above theirs! If you lose a maid with your brawling, why can't you go into the slums to find another?"

Jayanti could not be expected to soften and yield after that! Neither could Jahar be expected to keep his temper even.

The language in which they spoke to each other that morning, so openly that the air was rent with it, bore, to say the least, no resemblance to the soft, sweet intercourse of the night before. Perhaps with no night, no evening, no morning in their lives ever before.

When and where had Jahar ever called Jayanti vulgar? When had he ever called her lazy, slovenly, silly? When had he complained that he had to put up with a great deal in the house?

And when had Jayanti ever blamed Jahar in such hot words for his incompetence? Had she ever before asked him so bitterly why a man who could not keep his wife in a little comfort had wanted to get married? Had she ever asked him how a man whose wife worked like a hired maid because he could not afford to keep a servant could sleep until 8 o'clock in the morning without feeling ashamed?

It was all so sudden.

Who could say where the gunpowder had lain hidden, the gunpowder that burst into a blaze for want of a match? Are words made only by the tongue? Do they not have to go through the pain of conception? Are they born on the instant?

Jahar, unwashed, unshaven, hungry, glanced at the clock and left. Jayanti sat morosely on, the housework lying undone around her. No such display of anger is possible where there is a baby. Jayanti's lap was empty. Several years before a daughter had been born to her but the child had died when she was a few days old.

It seemed to Jayanti now that she had never grieved adequately for her baby. She ought to! Why hadn't she? What harm was there in making up for it now? People cry over old sorrows.

They cry, it is true, but how long can they keep it up?

The sound of water gurgling in the tap awakened Jayanti. It was half-past three o'clock.

Had she cried herself to sleep?

She felt mortified when she looked around her. What an ugly scene over a trifle! What would anyone who dropped in for a visit think? Last night's dirty dishes were still lying scattered over the covered porch. The broom and the bucket were rolling about the courtyard where Sarada had thrown them. What a revolting sight!

Suddenly she realized that Sarada would not come.

Had she been unnerved by the black prospect facing her on Sarada's departure? What that the reason she had lost control of herself? Whatever the reason may have been, it was now time for her to get to work. Other things could wait.

The scene that morning had really been disgraceful!

Poor Jahar had left without even a cup of tea. He had to work in the office all day. And Jayanti? Jayanti had slept.

She had slept soundly and for a long time.

The night before had left a hangover. An illimitable weariness had weighed upon her, an exhaustion accented by lack of food and no bath.

Jayanti set to work quickly in order to finish everything before Jahar came home. She cleaned the pots and pans and dishes, swept down and washed the verandah and the courtyard. She bathed. Then she went into the bedroom. The stale fragrance of the jasmine of the night before struck her like a blow as she entered. The garland were still lying on the bed. How shameless! It was lucky no one had come! But why was the room so dusty? Why so untidy?

O! This morning, in her haste, Jayanti had gone to light the stove before tidying up. The dust was the dust of the night before, all that remained of the incense. And the trash consisted of burnt-out matches!

Jayanti tidied the room and swept it clean. When she looked at the sweepings, her eyes nearly popped out of her head. What was this! Not all the heads of all the matches were burnt out! There was one still wearing its little cap of gunpowder, laughing there among the rest.

Yes! It was looking at her! Looking at her and laughing!

If she had tidied up the room this morning as usual, she would have found it. Jayanti had tidied up the room the first thing in the morning for three hundred and sixty four days in the year but this day, today, she had neglected to do it.

Her eyes grew bigger and bigger as she started at the match. A strange burning remorse grew within her and



spread and spread. What could she do? Could the morning be brought back by beating herself on the head? Could she restore to Jahar, disheveled, hungry, unwashed Jahar, the sleepy contented look he had when he woke up? Could she take back all the mean, filthy things she had said?

She could do nothing. That is to say, she could do none of these things.

On the other hand she could, with the help of this match, make her kitchen glow with her preparations.

She could scrap the usual chapattis and curry they ate in the evening. It was unappetizing food. She could cook things Jahar like, rice and dal, balls of poppy seed, a curry of pulse dumplings as a substitute for fish. She could hold out a steaming cup of tea to Jahar as he came in the door! What could she not do! There were so many things! Could she only please him? Could she not conquer him?

Jayanti came into the kitchen with the match, a treasure worth seven kingdoms to her. Cakes of cow dung lay in front of the stove. Coal was in the basket. The

bottle of kerosene stood beside them. There lay the empty match box. All she had to do was to pour a little kerosene on to a bit of waste and drop the match on it!

Once more the night would be sweet with the eager protestations of an unclouded love! To take the place of a garland of flowers, there was her necklace, unfading. It would deck her with soft grace. And can beauty not be set alight with new and clever styles of dressing, in lieu of incense?

Poor Jahar would be swept away and drowned in the flood of her charm, her laughter, her fun!

But what was she doing? What? What are you doing, Jayanti, even after you have thought of so many things? Why are you pouring the kerosene on to yourself instead of into the stove? Aren't you spoiling the clean white clothes you have just put on? It is a mistake, isn't it?

What will Jahar do when he comes?

It never occurred to him that Jayanti would repair her error by doing such a terrible thing! He worked hard all day so that he could present her with a dozen or two boxes of matches when he came home, so that he could laugh the affair of the morning off as a joke!

Jayanti, will anyone believe the story of your obtuseness if I tell them? Will they not smile knowingly and say, "Not that! It was not that! A single match start such a conflagration? There was gunpowder somewhere!"

But I saw it all. I saw everything. I know there is nothing to disbelieve. I know that it was from that insignificant match! There would have been no need to relate this story at all if you had found it in the morning or had not found it in the afternoon!

More, much more incense would have been lighted for you, many more garlands laid around your neck. Up steps of incense and of flowers you would have climbed to become an honoured matron. Looking at your grave and beautiful face no one would ever have thought of trying to find the smell of gunpowder in your married life.

Translated from Bengali by Lila Ray