

# A Woman's Tale

by  
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I still have a rankling feeling in my mind whenever I think of her. I came in contact with her as a physician. I was working at that time as a pathologist in a civil hospital. (A government doctor has to work in various capacities at different times : sometimes as a pathologist, at other times either as an obstetrician or a surgeon or an ophthalmologist and so on). She had come to me for a blood test. The doctor, under whose treatment she was, wanted to know whether her blood contained syphilitic bacilli or not. (When we, the doctors, fail to diagnose an ailment right, very often we suspect it to be some venereal disease. We don't rely on what the patient says and are more inclined to believe in the weakness that flesh is heir to. We are chary to give credit to a person's integrity, self-restraint or sanity. The means through which we wish to ascertain the fact is also not infallible, as it itself has certain inherent defects).

I was charmed to see her. For such beauty as hers is rarely found. Not that she had a very fair complexion. But her figure, features and bearing had such a fine combination of dignity and grace as is seldom seen in one person. Later on, when I learnt that she was a prostitute, I was shocked and had a feeling as if a crystal clear pool had suddenly turned turbid. I took her blood samples. I was cocksure about the result of the blood test in advance. However, I was surprised to find no trace of syphilis-causing bacteria in her blood. Through my past experience I knew that the tests which we conducted were not always dependable. She was undoubtedly syphilitic. I examined it again. The result was again negative. My surprise became indeed great when



she came to collect her blood examination report. A negative report in such a case was generally glad news to people, yet it made her unhappy. Her entire face turned pale. She quietly went away taking the report. The doctor who was treating her also might not have given credence to the report. I too didn't. The cause of her backache was syphilis or gonorrhoea or both—there was no doubt about it. It appeared to me that a cancerous worm had entered a beautiful flower. However, I forgot everything about her after some time.

Six months later, she came to me again. Her beauty was undiminished still. But her finery bore the stamp of impoverishment. Her wrap was not as good and the *sari* too was dirty. I noticed the absence of ornaments on her person. Her backache had not been cured yet. She had consulted many doctors for that complaint. She had come back here after making a round of Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta and Patna.

Hearing the fame of a local doctor with foreign qualifications she had gone to him. He had asked her to get her blood examined once more.

In a piteous voice she appealed to me: "Please doctor, examine my blood more carefully this time and see if there is anything in the blood."

On this occasion also nothing was found in her blood. There was no syphilitic bacteria in her system. "Did you find anything?" "No."

"Didn't find anything?" "No." Her eyes brimmed over with tears.

Failing to restrain my curiosity any longer, I queried, "Why are you so worried about it? It is a good thing that there is no bacteria in your body."

"It is the opinion of all the doctors that if my backache is due to syphilis it can be cured, otherwise it is incurable. That is why I have staked my all and got my blood examined by experts at various places to know for certain whether my blood has syphilitic bacteria or not. But everywhere the result of the examination has been found negative. Now I don't know what to do."

"Do you find your backache unbearable?"

"No. It is not too much. But one cannot dance with it. And dancing is my profession, Doctor Saheb. If I give it up I will have to starve."

She hung her head in shame. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

I knew the above facts, as a pathologist. And as a police surgeon, I have extricated three bullets from her dead body a little while ago. I learnt that she had laid down her life in an attempt to mediate between two of her aggressive lovers.

*(Translated into English from the original Bengali by Rasik Bihari.)*