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**Kazi Nazrul Islam , Sheikh Mehedi Hasan ,**

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## **The Garland of Jasmine**

**Kazi Nazrul Islam**



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**Transl. from Bengali by Sheikh Mehedi Hasan**

1

Mr. Azhar was known as a renowned young barrister in Kolkata.

His house was always busy with butlers, cooks, waiters, doorkeepers, gardeners, and housekeepers.

But there was something, the true beauty missing in his house. Mr. Azhar was unmarried!

Though Azhar was a well-known barrister, he would hardly take on extra cases. Not even was he requested a thousand times. People would say that it was a type of his business trick.

But the chess players of Calcutta knew that if Mr. Azhar had a trick—it was a chess-trick.

No one had been able to beat him in chess till today. His chess-player friends were aware that his addiction to chess had not allowed him to become a great barrister but made him a great man.

When other reputed barristers read "Weekly Notes", Azhar used to think how the chess players such as Alekhine, Capablanca, Rubinstein, Réti or Morphy made such and such moves; or, he would read chess-magazines and think of their moves, closing his eyes.

Azhar could not manage playing chess in the morning but he must play every afternoon. Most of the famous chess players of Kolkata used to come to his place; they would play, chat and discuss the game.

When Azhar thought of Capablanca's defeat to a player like Alekhine, he felt extremely sad. However, that Alekhine also lost at least five times to a player like Bogolyubov!

Mr. Mukherjee was a staunch fan of Alekhine. Even today, when Mr. Azhar once again was lamenting over Capablanca's defeat, Mr. Mukherjee said, "But whatever you say, Azhar, Alekhine's defence—it's unparalleled in the world. And Bogolyubov? He has vanished like a ghost after losing three-five for fifteen times to Alekhine! In the World Championship Tournaments, all the World Champions may lose such a few bets. He won five moves in a game of twenty four moves. Besides, Bogolyubov is not an ordinary player either!"

Azhar said laughingly, "Forget your Alekhine. This time he is playing with Capablanca again; you'll see his misery! And Bogolyubov was also recently beaten by the Italian Monticelli! Yeah, Grünfeld plays greatly!"

Getting angry, one among the friends said, "Don't you have anything to do? What Bogolyubov's armpits, what Alekhine or some hoax you are talking about—all makes no sense! You people are annoying me."

Mukherjee said with a smile, "Ajit, you can play card game well; such a gentleman! Why don't you go to your sister-in-laws' house! You can't get our chess tricks into your head!"

The young lawyer, Nazim, snapped his fingers and said with a yawn, "God has saved me as my head is free from that thing!" It's better if Mr. Azhar sings some songs; we'll hear and go back to our own houses. Then, you people can sit with the king and the ministers."

The chess players could not but oblige. Azhar had to sing. Azhar could sing *thungri* wonderfully. He knew numerous *thungri* songs of pure Lucknow style. And he used to sing them with such devotion that anyone who heard it would be fascinated. Today, however, he kept on singing only ghazals.

However, at other times, Azhar would hardly sing ghazals.

Mukherjee said, smiling, "Why are you melancholic, today? Is your heart broken? You are only singing ghazals! What's the secret, man? Do you have someone on your mind?"

Azhar laughed and said, "Just look outside for once."

For the first time, everyone was looking outside. The sky looked as if it were soaked with tears just after the rain had stopped. It was like a huge blue lotus. The autumn moon was on the top of the lotus amidst the sky. Stars were like light-bumblebees around.

The house was like a painted picture beside the Lake-Road.

The air mixed with the scent of jasmines and tuberose was occasionally bringing carefree and inebriated mood to the hall-room!

Everyone's eyes and minds were pleased!

Sitting up straight, Nazim said, "If you sat down with those chess pieces, would you enjoy all this?"

Azhar sighed and said absentmindedly, "Really."

Mukherjee said, "Nooo. . . I see the damn jasmine flowers won't let us play chess today!"

Azhar got surprised and said, "You are also blaming jasmines! Is there anyone connected with the (name of the) flower?"

Before they could say anything, Ajit said, "Come on, man! A chess player like Mukherjee will have romance!? The only love-affair in his miserable life happens to be with his wife! Falling in love with his wife! God forbid! Even, that wife has gone to her father's house being annoyed with his chess! He has no luck to have a 'Jasmine'!"

Everyone laughed out loud. Mukherjee got angry and said, "You stop, Ajit! It can no way be called a joke just because some nonsense is said by a crazy man!"

Ajit pretended to look glum and said, "I didn't make a joke, big bro. You've really fallen in love with your wife—as people gossip, so I have said. What's my fault if they laugh hearing that?"

Azhar laughed and said, "Isn't it your unjust slander, Ajit? How do you know that a chess player won't have a romantic encounter with anyone except his wife?"

Ajit replied, "I've known it from Mr. Mukherjee first, then from you!"

Azhar said, "Hey, I've never got married."

Ajit said, "I mean, your condition is worse! That poor man can at least fall in love with his wife but you have even no luck to get a wife!"

Nazim slapped the table and shouted, "Bravo! Long live Ajit babu! This time you've just nailed it!"

In the meantime, the gardener left a pair of beautiful jasmine-garland on the table. Everyone laughed as Ajit with a serious look hung the garlands in the wall-bracket. Ajit turned to the other side and said in a playful tone, "Oh bracket-beauty! At this moonlit autumnal night this jasmine garland's..."

Azhar interrupted with a faint smile, "Please Ajit. Don't mock the garland, brother! It's not mine!"

Ajit was stubborn! Subduing his surprise, he said, "Then who does it belong to, my friend? Or for whom the garland was made?"

Nazim said, "Look, who said chess players don't do romance?"

Azhar said, "Every year on the first *Ashwin* I float such a garland of jasmine in the water. This garland only belongs to water, nobody else." Sad smile appeared on his face.

The whole chess team sat up straight. Ajit shouted at the waiter to bring tea. He tidied up his dresses and sat down; he then turned his chair towards Azhar and asked, "Then tell me, friend, what's the matter? It must be something auspicious! Every year on the first *Ashwin* floating jasmine-garland in water! That would be a great story! Tell us. Otherwise, everyone will start *Satyagraha* here!"

Everyone laughed, but agreed to Ajit's proposal.

After a lot of persuasion, Azhar smiled and said, "But it also started with a chess game!"

Ajit jumped up and said, "It's okay! I'll somehow swallow this bitterness hoping that in the end I'll get sweetmeat and desserts.

Mukherjee said, "In that chess game, boats (rook) will have more moves. The bishops and knights will be eliminated! No fear!"

2

After everyone had another cup of tea, Azhar lit a cigar and smoked for a minute. He then went on—

I just passed Barrister-at-Law and went to visit Shillong. It was the month of *Bhadra*. Up to then people on vacation had not gathered there. However, a few started coming beforehand. From my childhood, chess has held a strong fascination for me. That fascination became my obsession when I went to England. There I played with all the well-known players such as Yates, Mitchell, Winter, Thomas and so on and won many rounds for Cambridge. After reaching Shillong I was searching for chess players and got acquainted with a few. However, they were not professional players. They would frequently lose to me. One day one of them said, "There's an old retired professor here; he's a skilled chess player; we've heard that no one can beat him. Will you go playing with him?"

I immediately got up and said, "Let's go now, where is he?"

The gentleman said, "You'll see; let's go first! He'll be so happy to get a player like you. He is just as addicted to chess as you are. What a weird old player! He plays blindfolded, mister!"

I saw many blindfolded chess games in Europe; I myself also played blindfolded many times. So I was not particularly surprised.

Meanwhile, evening was approaching with a slice of the moon in the sky; it seemed the fifth day of the moon, a sign of new hope. As if flocks of white cloud had started playing a boat-race all over the sky. The moon and the stars were drowning in the middle of it— floating once and then rising.

As soon as we got to the colourful bungalow surrounded with eucalyptus and fir trees, we saw an old man around sixty with a calm and poised build playing chess with a young girl.

For the first time I found a woman of our country playing chess.

As soon as I looked at her with amazement as well as reverence, she got up and said, "Father, look who's here!"

The old gentleman looked at us as if he was a little annoyed, for the girl got up before the game was over but he then changed his face swiftly with a smile and said, "Hey, Binay Babu! Who are they? Come on, be seated."

When Binay Babu, who took me there, introduced me to the old man, he jumped up and hugged me tightly and said, "You? Hey, are you that Azhar? I've seen your name in chess magazines and newspapers many times. You're such a great player! You bet with Yates; what a great achievement in such a young age! I'm so so happy! Shiuli, my girl, see what a great chess player has come! Have a look! Wow, we'll then have great time! Even at this old age, I am so fond of playing chess; what can I do when I can't find anyone to play with? So I was playing with my daughter!" After saying all this, he rejuvenated the quiet evening with his joyous laughter.

Shiuli greeted me with a bow and then sat down beside her father in silence. Seeing her, I felt like she was really an autumnal Shiuli—an autumnal Jasmine.

Her spotless fair face in the midst of the twilight-coloured sari on her body looked as beautiful as the white jasmines stemming from the yellowish footstalk. I might have stared at her a little longer but the old man's words broke my bewilderment.

The old professor looked impatient to play chess with me. As soon as the servant brought the tea making equipment, Shiuli said smilingly while making the tea, "Baba can't wait any longer!" Just after saying this she looked at me and said, "Please don't mind! My father loves playing chess very much! He gets sick when he can't play!" She then put forward the tea cup to me and said, "Now start playing while drinking tea; let's enjoy your match!"

Binay laughed and said, "Yes, this time there will be an equal fight. See Miss Chowdhury, he beats us hard every day."

The game began. Everyone was observing curiously; some were even suggesting alternative moves. When Miss Chowdhury alias Shiuli pointed out a few wrong moves of her father, I understood that she was also a good player like her father.

After playing for a while, I realised that Professor Chowdhury was a better player than many of those I had played with in Europe. I knew Professor Chowdhury as a great chemist, but I did not know that he could play so surprisingly such good chess.

As soon as I dismissed one more piece, the old man patted my back and started playing defensive game. He was quite appreciative of my moves with the bishops. Shiuli stared at me again and again with a look of wonder and admiration. But the old man even after losing one more piece than me started playing so well that I ended the game in a draw. With constant compliments he said, "See, Shiuli *ma*, we the players believe that bishops don't play like horses (knights). But haven't you noticed how he played with a pair of bishops! Son, you play really well! I beat or lose, but don't draw so easily!"

Shiuli said smilingly, "But tell me how many years you haven't lost, father!"

Professor Chowdhury also smilingly said, "No daughter, I also lost. About fifteen years ago, a gentleman from a village, not highly educated, beat me. Oh my God! I have never seen such a player!"

As soon as the game started again, Binay laughed and said, "Miss Chowdhury, please test your luck with Mr. Azhar this time!"

The old man said happily, "Well said! Now you'll play, *ma*; I'll enjoy!"

Embarrassed, Shiuli said, "I am no match for a player like him!"

But at everyone's request she sat down to play. Shiuli and I were sitting face to face on the chairs and the chessboard was kept in-between. I was getting drunk with the smell of her hair; I was being tempted. As soon as I made a few wrong moves, Shiuli looked at me and immediately lowered her eyes. It seemed a line of smile appeared on the edge of her lips. That smile seemed meaningful.

When I made another mistake, I was forced to lose one of my boats (rooks). The old man seemed a little surprised. Binay Babu and his fellows laughed and said, "This time Mr. Azhar will definitely lose." It seemed that a note of irony was hidden in their laughter.

I then resisted my desire and concentrated on the game. With two bishops and a minister and moving forward pawns of my court, I started playing such an offensive game that even Professor Chowdhury could not save the match. Shiuli eventually lost! She lost but she played so well that I could not help admiring her skills. I said, "Look, I played with Miss Menchik, the first women's world chess champion and beat her with less effort. But I was almost losing to you."

I observed Shiuli turning red like a lotus flower with joy and shame! I was saved from her anger. I felt fortunate enough that she was not furious with me after her defeat.

I played again with Professor Chowdhury; the game was a draw.

The old man's joy knew no bound! He said, "Yes, after all this time, I've got such a player like you. Before I start playing with you I have to think of at least my eight moves!"

It was then decided that every day chess matches would be held at Professor Chowdhury's house.

When I was about to get up, the old man suddenly said, "Shiuli, *ma!* Mr. Azhar must have been exhausted after playing for so long. Could you sing a song for him?"

Shiuli said reluctantly, "I've been learning for a while now; I still don't know how to sing well!"

But she had to submit to our insistence. She started singing.

I don't know who wrote that song, but it seemed to me that its lyric was springing out of Shiuli's heart. As if she was profusely pouring forth her soul's pain.

Some people have such amazing voices; when you listen to those voices, you will lose your power of judgement. Her voice was so tender, so genuine that it would make the listener forget to appreciate it. It was far above the judgment of good or bad; it had no apparent goal, no rigid maintenance of melody, but it would touch one's heart. Praise for this ingenuity is not seen in one's face, but in eyes!

That was the very voice! I was fascinated. I did not feel like saying anything. For the sake of politeness, I just wanted to say "wonderful" but could not make any sound. Shiuli noticed tears in my eyes. She was looking for the meaning of that tears with her wide eyes full of wonder.

Alas! If she knew—a piece written with ink is erased, but the piece written with tears is not!

I've never bothered about who thought what regarding my reactions on that day. I did not think about it that day, nor do I think about it today. I thought if a jasmine flower could sing, she would certainly sing in that way. Such a devotion in her voice, such passion in her tune!

The melody so far she poured down was a mixture of *thungri* and *tappa*. But I realised that she had not learnt it; the varied melodies in her voice were spontaneous! That was like a lotus attracting unknowingly hundreds of lotus towards her scent and pollen.

At the end of the song I could not but say, "If you learn *thungri*, you can be an unrivalled singer of the country! What a wonderful melodious voice!"

Shiuli, blushed with a feeling joy and coyness was looking as beautiful as the branches of jasmines brightened by the moonlight.

Shiuli overcame her shyness and said, "No, no! My throat is a little bit dry today. Anyway, I guess you know how to sing. If you really know, please sing a song."

I got into a little trouble! I thought I should say "no". But after listening to her song, my throat was tickling to sing! At last, I said, "I'm not a singer, just an appreciator! And I know only Hindi songs."

Professor Chowdhury felt happy and said, "Wow, wow! You could have said it earlier. I would then listen to your songs first. And songs in Hindi are the real songs. That language is the language of songs. You see, Bengali can't be the language of classical music. Except *Kirtan*, *Baul* and *Ramprasadi*, other style of singing is not suitable in Bengali." I said, "Even though I don't know Bengali music, I am not so pessimistic about the Bengali language."

I sang. Professor Chowdhury insisted that I would have to teach him music from tomorrow. Shiuli's eyes were shining with admiration.

I also found Binay Babu and his fellow group favouring classical music. At their request, I sang a few *kheyal* and *tappa*. Half of my songs could not be heard properly due to the excessive praises of Professor Chowdhury! Towards the end I mostly sang *thungri*.

At the end of the song, I saw a few more women standing behind us. Shiuli introduced them to me, "This is my mother—this is my aunt—these are my younger sisters."

The next day at noon I was invited to Professor Chowdhury's house. While I was taking a leave after salutation, I happened to look at Shiuli's eyes. I felt like my eyes were burning. I was thinking if just a glance would bring such burning, then what would happen when one had full eye-gaze with those eyes? That pain will be beyond any feeling!

3

I was in Shillong for one and a half months. A week later, I had to leave the guesthouse and stay at Professor Chowdhury's house. My days and nights flowed like a river. My main task was playing chess and singing songs.

I got into a sort of trouble; it was because not only I had to play chess with Professor Chowdhury but also teach him music, which was the most difficult task for me.

Shiuli also started learning songs from me. After a while, my stock of songs and tunes almost ran out.

I thought it was my right decision to learn music as it was now of great use. I poured all my melodies and tunes into her voice.

We didn't exchange garlands—it would never happen in our lives; but our voices were exchanged! And the language of our minds—that only our minds know!

Ajit interrupted and said, "Was it just an exchange of voices or garlands? I know the story will end with typical romance! Shame, shame!"

Azhar did not say anything; he lit his cigar and went on narrating—

One morning I woke up by Shiuli's voice. She was singing—

"Now it is my time to go  
Open the door, open the door."

Listening to the song, I felt pain all over my ribs. I could not get up even after trying. Tears welled up in my eyes.

All the pain of her heart was flowing through the gentle *Gandha (ga)* and *Dhaibata (dha)* of *Asavari* tune. Today, for the first time, I found a trace of profuse tears in Shiuli's voice.

Looking back at a slight sound of ting, I saw Shiuli laying a jasmine garland from her palms on my table like a worshipper. Tears were visible in her eyes.

As soon as she looked at my eyes, she asked without any pretence of hiding her tears, "Are you leaving tomorrow?"

My voice was choking with tears as I tried to answer. With full strength I restrained my emotion and said softly, "Yes, my friend!" I felt like I would say something more; but I forgot what I wanted to say.

Shiuli picked up the jasmines in her hands and subconsciously rubbed them up against her lips and forehead and said, "When will you come again?"

I smiled faintly and said, "I am not sure, dear! Maybe I'll come!"

Shiuli left the flowers and went away. She did not ask a word further.

My whole mind cried out in agony; I was whispering to myself, "You idiot, the most auspicious moment of your life has just come for once and you've lost it in negligence! This happy moment will never come again in your life. Never!"

I was at their house for a month. How much affection, how much care, and how much warmth they offered to me! Free mixing—there was no prohibition, no shame, no interference, and no suspicion. And since we were free without any boundary, we never happened to touch even one another's hands though we stayed so close. This freedom was our most insurmountable obstacle to getting intimate. We didn't look into each other's minds. We didn't feel like asking questions to one another. One was an infinite sky and the other an unfathomable ocean. We wouldn't say any word but keep on gazing at one another's eyes.

No one would stop me, no one would come and stand on my way! As if she knew I had to leave; as if I also knew I had to go.

Perhaps, the current of a river is authentic—two hapless edges of the river look at one another. There is no desire but only gaze, long long gaze with helpless tears.

After she had left, I picked up the jasmine garland with both hands from the table and put it on my face. Unknowingly, my forehead touched the garland and I then put it on the table. It seemed that the garland belonged to a worshipper, not just a lover. At this thought my heart was breaking in inexplicable pain.

I looked up and saw Shiuli standing smiling. She asked, "Won't you teach me music today?"

I said, "Let's start; it won't be over today!"

Shiuli raised her gazelle-eyes and stared at me. I was scared of making out the meaning of her look.

She was like a delicate *Kamini* flower; I was like scared morning wind. Intense love brings intense fear! She might turn into dust if she was touched.

It was like an enchanting dream of the fairyland; the dream would disappear, if the eyes were opened!

It was like a phantom-gazelle—it would vanish into the air as soon as you tried to catch it!

I taught her songs—not the farewell song. The songs of all themes except the theme of farewell. The moment of farewell was inevitable. But why should I spoil all her dejection, all her dignity by addressing her in the songs?

That evening was immaculate—cloudless—unadorned. I said to Professor Chowdhury, "This evening has dressed up surprisingly like a modest person! No excessive attire."

Professor Chowdhury snatched my words and said, "Today's evening has turned out to be a 'widow'!"

I could understand his mind with this one word. I could realise how that calm gentleman's heart was storming. I thought if I could tell him, "You are a steep mountain; one should sit at your feet and meditate! No storm can touch you!"

The old man could understand what my mind said in silence. He smiled faintly and said, "I am very insignificant, son! Not a mountain, but a pile of sands! Yet, I wish I would be the Himalaya when I see how you people respect me."

Shiuli came and stood in front of us before I could answer anything. Suddenly it came out of my mouth, "Here comes the evening goddess!" However, saying this I felt embarrassed.

That day a beautiful bright red sari was covering her figure of golden complexion. I had never seen her wearing red sari before. It appeared that the evening in person had come down to the earth by depriving the whole sky. She was wearing a blood red sari, her heart was also bleeding and on her face a pale shadow of the upcoming night was seen! She not only burnt my eyes but also fluted a tune of *Poorvi* in my heart.

I learned a couple of Bengali songs from Shiuli. I said, "Shall I sing a song?" Shiuli sat on the grass close to my feet and said, "Sing!"

I sang—

"In the red colour of wedding  
The sky turned golden!"

Professor Chowdhury got up. As he was leaving, he said, "Dear son, we'll play chess for the last time today!"

After Mr. Chowdhury left, I said, "Well, dear Shiuli, can you tell me what I'll do when such *Ashwin*—such evening comes again?"

Shiuli's eyes emptied all her words into my eyes! Then she said slowly, "Float a garland of jasmines in the water!"

I silently agreed, "So be it!" I asked, "What will you do!" She replied, smiling, "At the end of *Ashwin*, jasmines fall on the ground!"

The evening-stars were sparkling as tears welled up in our eyes.

We played chess at night! Professor Chowdhury lost to me but I lost to Shiuli! That was the first and the last defeat in my life! And that defeat became the garland around my neck!

When I said goodbye in the morning, the willows around their bungalow were covered in snow!

I haven't met her again—it will not happen at all! If I hold out my hand a little, I may touch her as she is so close to me. Yet, I do not dare to touch her. Jasmine-flower—very soft, very delicate; if you wear it around your neck, it will be twisted and torn so easily! So when *Ashwin*, the month of jasmines comes, I silently tie a garland of jasmines and float it in the water!

Glossary:

<i>Ashwin</i>	the 6 <sup>th</sup> month in the solar Bengali calendar
<i>Baul</i>	Bauls are known as wandering bards generally inhabiting the districts of Kushtia, Meherpur, Chuadanga, Jhenaidah, Faridpur, Jessore, and Pabna of Bangladesh and some parts of West Bengal, Tripura and Assam's Barak Valley of India and associated with devotional songs known as Baul songs.
<i>Bhadra</i>	the 5 <sup>th</sup> month in the solar Bengali calendar
<i>Kheyal</i>	a major form of Hindustani classical music in the Indian subcontinent
<i>Kirtan</i>	a call-and-response style song sung by multiple singers describing a legend or expressing devotion to a deity or discussing spiritual ideas
<i>Ma</i>	mother; daughters are also called ma by their parents.
<i>Ramprasadi</i>	songs composed by the eighteenth century Bengali saint-poet Ramprasad Sen
<i>Satyagraha</i>	holding firmly to truth, or truth force, a particular form of nonviolent resistance or civil resistance
<i>Shiuli</i>	known as the night-flowering jasmine and Parijat

*Tappa* form of Indian classical vocal music. There are four such forms. The other three are dhrupad, kheyal and thungri.

*Thungri* a simple raga/classical song placed immediately after kheyal.

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