

THE SMILING STAR

By V. G. Nand

As the refrain of 'Happy birth-day to you' ended, the twelve men who stood surrounding the table, six on either side, clapped and parted like black-ants that when disturbed disperse from a piece of jiggery they were sucking at. Of course, before parting they courteously wished her happy birthday. The men were all in a uniform wearing white shirts under black jackets, white trousers and neckties and their moving away from the table exposed the lone possessor of the table occupying one end of it. This possessor of the table was a smartly dressed, smart looking young lady with Monalisa like smile. The senior among the men fed her a piece of cake she had cut and she in turn offered them bits of the cake. Then they took to their respective tables. Obviously, they were waiters. After some time a young man came to her and politely started making some sort of inquiry with her. He was probably from the managerial staff for a little later some snacks were served to her. It was now more than forty five minutes or, so, when the young lady still sat there all alone taking a bite of the snacks that were ordered by her.

It so happened that I also had been to that restaurant with V.K., a close friend of mine. We were meeting almost after a year. He was insistent that we spend an evening together, chat and dine leisurely and that was how we had chosen to meet at Heritage the city's tolerably good restaurant which was spacious and catered to both the types of customers – veg and non-veg, and alcoholic as well as non-alcoholic. It had been rather newly opened and boasted of shining glasswares and cutlery and quality of drinks and food.

V.K. had ordered a large one for himself and a small one or 'chhota' for me according to my wishes and had placed orders for eatables of his choice with clear instructions that dinner would be served to us only at 9.00 p.m. Not before. We started with the session in a jovial mood and V.K. was in high spirits as we were meeting after a long time. After I had emptied my first 'chhota' down the gullet I was relaxed and was enjoying the chat with V.K. but I could not take my mind off the young lady sitting all alone at the table with the birthday cake before her. Seeing her celebrating her birthday in such a lonely way was quite upsetting. Her

loneliness had started enveloping me. And though I was in the lively company of V.K. I felt I was getting mentally isolated in the situation, getting disjointed from my friend, from my ownself. Her loneliness in the situation started torturing my restless soul. Was she all alone? Had she been thrown into such a situation by some antagonistic forces? Or, was it the working of pitiless destiny that had dealt her such an unkind blow? My imaginative faculty started working fiercely. When it became unbearable I decided to speak out my mind to V.K. I spoke out the thoughts that were hovering upon my mind and I drew V.K.'s attention to her. However, he did not seem to think much about her. Seeing that my mind was drifting towards her he suggested, "buddy, why don't you go and talk to her; it'll relieve you of your anxiety, clear the fog from your mind." V.K. had read my mind correctly. I pounced upon his suggestion and approached the young lady who to me appeared like the Lucy of W. Wordsworth who 'dwelt among the untrodden ways,' whom there were none to praise, very few to love.

'Hi' I greeted her and offered my birthday greetings which she responded with great civility and politely asked me to take a chair. She asked me if I would like to have something from the dishes that were served to her which of course I declined explaining to her that I was already with my friend for dinner at the adjacent table. Then driven by curiosity to soothe my restless soul I made bold to ask her, "How is it that you are celebrating your birthday all alone! No one to kiss, no one even to wish you?" Continuing taking bite of something from the dish she seemed quite amused by my question. Perhaps she knew somebody could ask her like that. "Or is it," I continued, "that those invited had chosen to miss the occasion? How could they be so irresponsible, so unkind?" My mind was abuzz with such ponderings.

She then stopped eating and turned towards me. I repeated, "All alone!"

"Yes" she said.

"Strange! No one should come." I said.

"There should be someone to come," she said.

"How do you mean?"

"Pretty clear, what I said. There is no one..... I'm all alone....."

"Parents? Brother, Sister?" I asked.

“None. Really. Not even any kins.”

The aloofness in her tone touched me. The cruelty that was meted out to her by the blind fury of fate agonised me and tears started trickling down my cheeks. “Don’t cry uncle. My father will feel bad.” Startled I asked her,

“A moment ago you said you have no parents. No kins. Now you say ‘father will feel bad’.....”

“That’s true. He is in heavens, Mother too. Before his death he has taken a promise from me that come what may, I shall celebrate every birthday wherever he be, without tears and with a smile.”

“Simply great and astounding, too.”

On my further prodding she unfolded the story of her life briefly.

“She was the only child of her father. His darling. Years ago he had gone to the states. He had to go for her mom was there and she refused to come to India. After trying hard for two years father gave up persuading her and went there. She had become more American than the Americans themselves like most Indians who go to U.S.A. or U.K. Six month later, however, he had to go East to Japan on an assignment from his company. His return had been delayed by three months because of a small assignment his company asked him to carry out. When he returned to U.S. he did not know what was waiting for him. Mother had ditched him and got away with another man. That was the end of their relationship. Father took it pensively. He became a stoic for some time. He did not marry again. Gradually, he returned to normalcy. His only mission in life now was to see her well-settled in life. He prospered well. Saved well for her and provided her with every comfort possible. She was put in a public school in Panchgani. After school she was sent to St. Xaviers’ College for graduation. A governess was appointed to take care of her. Things were going well. Another six months’ time he was to return to India. He was posted to Scotland for a brief spell and just about when he was to return, he took ill. Certain tests were carried out and the diagnosis was cancer of the liver. His fate was sealed. The doctors gave him just six months of life. That night he phoned her, explained the situation and broke down, weeping bitterly. So did she. That was probably the last time she had wept. Before death he saw to it that she was placed on sound financial

footing. Then when he became quiet he extracted three promises from her: I shall take a man in my life after judging him carefully. He must promise me that he will accept me as I was and as his responsibility. Second that I shall be careful in money matters and third, I shall celebrate my birthday without fail, without tears and with a smile and added that though not physically, he would always be with me mentally.

He failed to return because cancer took toll of his life before that. He died in the bitter cold of Scotland; cold which he never liked.

‘An exceptionally courageous daughter of an exceptionally brave father’ I murmured to myself.

Before leaving I took her address and mobile number so that on her next birthday could wish her though the vacuum created by her father’s death could not be filled up by me, I knew.

Bio:

Prof. V.G. Nand is a retired Principal and Professor of English having taught English language and literature at graduate and post-graduate levels. He has taught Communication skills and public speaking to college students as also to professionals doing C.A. course. He had conducted Public Speaking and Effective Communication Course for Fifteen Summers for the Rotaract [Main] Club of Dombivli in recognition of which he was awarded Late AppaDatar Trophy for Best Social Worker of the town in 2001. He is a poet and translator with two publications to his credit namely TRIVIDHA in 2007 – a collection of poems in three languages, Marathi, Hindi, English and DHOOP KA SAAYA in 2012 – a collection of poems in Hindi. He has done a dozen of translations, seven of which have been published. ‘Relationships’ by N.F. Jain (English into English); some poems of Late Prof. and poet KeshavMeshram’s poems from Marathi into English appearing in Indian Literature Vol. XXIII No. 1 and 2 in 1980; two of his poems appeared in, ‘Poisoned Bread’ and ‘No Entry for the New Sun’ published by Orient Longmans in 1992 and Disha Publications in 1992

respectively, both edited by Arjun Dangle; 'Toba Teksinh' – Saadat Hassan Munto's story from Hindi into Marathi for Tarun Bharat in 2005; SONBA a short novel by Ramakant Jadhav, from Marathi into English published by Aai Publications Dombivli, in 2000 and by Hope India Delhi, in 2006; 'SONJATAK' by Ratanlal Sanagra from Marathi into English published by Signet Publications in 2002 and Padma Binani's A To Z Mahabharat from Hindi into English published by Binani Foundations in 2012.

EPISSTEME