

2

CHAPTER

An Astrologer's Day

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➔ About the Author

The full name of R.K. Narayan is Rashipuram Krishnaswami Narayan. He was born in a small village in Tamil Nadu in 1906. He got his education in Mysore and settled down there. Although his mother tongue was Kannad, he used to write in English. He started his career as a journalist. His feelings and ideas were purely Indian. He was awarded Sahitya Academy Award for his famous book, "The Guide." He died in May 2001.



➔ About the Story

The astrologer of the story was the son of a farmer. He had a friend named Guru Nanak. One day, they drank and quarrelled badly. He passed a knife through the body of Guru Nayak and pushed him into a well. He thought his friend dead. So, he left the village out of fear and chose the profession of an astrologer, so that he might not be traced out by his enemy. Guru Nayak was not dead. He set out in search of him. One day, when the astrologer was ready to go home, Guru Nayak came to him in the dark. He did not recognise his enemy but the astrologer recognised him. What did the astrologer tell him ? How did he get rid of him ? What happened at last ? Read the story to know the answers of all these questions.



Punctually at midday, he opened his bag and spread out his professional equipment, which consisted of a dozen cowrie shells, a square of cloth with obscure mystic charts on it, a notebook, and a bundle of palmyra writing. His forehead was resplendent with sacred ash and vermilion, and his eyes sparkled with a sharp abnormal gleam which was really an outcome of a continual searching look for customers, but which his simple clients took to be a prophetic light and felt comforted. The power of his eyes was considerably enhanced by their position — placed as they were between the painted forehead and the dark whiskers which streamed down his cheeks : even a half-wit's eyes would sparkle in such a setting. To crown the effect, he wound a saffron coloured turban around his head. This colour scheme never failed. People were attracted to him as bees are attracted to cosmos or dahlia stalks. He sat under the boughs of a spreading tamarind tree which flanked a path running through the Town Hall Park. It was a remarkable place in many ways; a surging crowd was always moving up and down this narrow road, morning till night. A variety of trades and occupations was represented all along its way : medicine sellers, sellers of stolen hardware and junk, magicians, and, above all, an auctioneer of cheap cloth, who created enough din all day to attract the whole town.

Next to him in vociferousness came a vendor of fried groundnut, who gave his ware a fancy name each day, calling it 'Bombay Ice-cream' one day, and on the next 'Delhi Almond', and on the third 'Raja's Delicacy', and so on and so forth, and people flocked to him. A considerable portion of this crowd dallied before the astrologer too. The astrologer transacted his business by the light of a flare which crackled and smoked up above the groundnut heap nearby. Half the enchantment of the place was due to the fact that it did not have the benefit of municipal lighting. The place was lit up by shop-lights. One or two had hissing gas-lights, some had naked flares stuck on poles, some were lit up by old cycle lamps, and one or two, like the astrologer's, managed without lights of their own. It was a bewildering criss-cross of light rays and moving shadows. This suited the astrologer very well, for the simple reason that he had not in the least intended to be an astrologer when he began life, and he knew no more of what was going to happen to himself next minute. He was as much a stranger to the stars as were his innocent customers. Yet he said things which pleased and astonished everyone : that was more a matter of study, practice and shrewd guesswork. All the same, it was as much an honest man's labour as any other, and he deserved the wages he carried home at the end of a day.

He had left his village without any previous thought or plan. If he had continued there, he would have carried on the work of his forefathers — namely, tilling the land, living, marrying, and ripening in his cornfield and ancestral home. But that was not to be. He had to leave home without telling anyone, and he could not rest till he left it behind a couple of hundred miles. To a villager it is a great deal, as if an ocean flowed between.

He had a working analysis of mankind's troubles : marriage, money, and the tangles of human ties. Long practice had sharpened his perception. Within five minutes, he understood what was wrong. He charged three pies per question, never opened his mouth till the other had spoken for at least ten minutes, which provided him with enough stuff for a dozen answers and advices. When he told the person before him, gazing at his palm, "In many ways, you are not getting the fullest results for your efforts," nine out of ten were disposed to agree with him. Or, he questioned : "Is there any woman in your family, may be even a distant relative, who is not well disposed towards you ?" Or, he gave an analysis of character : "Most of your troubles are due to your nature. How can you be otherwise with Saturn where he is ? You have an impetuous nature an a rough exterior." This endeared him to their hearts immediately, for even the mildest of us loves to think that he has a forbidding exterior.

The nut vendor blew out his flare and rose to go home. This was a signal for the astrologer to bundle up too, since it left him in darkness except for a little shaft of green light which strayed in from somewhere and touched the ground before him. He picked up his *cowrie* shells and paraphernalia and was putting them back into his bag when the green shaft of light was blotted out; he looked up and saw a man standing before him. He sensed a possible client and said : "You look so careworn. It will do you good to sit down for a while and chat with me." The other grumbled some reply vaguely. The astrologer pressed his invitation, where upon the other thrust his palm under his nose, saying, "You call yourself an astrologer ?" The astrologer felt challenged and said, tilting the other's palm towards the green shaft of light : "Yours is a nature" "Oh, stop that," the other said. "Tell me something worthwhile....."

Our friend felt piqued. "I charge only three pies per question, and what you get ought to be good enough for your money....." At this, the other withdrew his arm, took out an anna, and flung it out to him, saying : "I have some questions to ask. If I prove you are bluffing, you must return that anna to me with interest."

"If you find my answers satisfactory, will you give me five rupees ?"

"No"

"Or will you give me eight annas ?"

"All right, provided you give me twice as much if you are wrong", said the stranger. This pact was accepted after a little further argument. The astrologer sent up a prayer to heaven as the other lit a cheroot. The astrologer caught a glimpse of his face by the matchlight. There was a pause as cars hooted on the road, *jutka* drivers swore at their horses, and the babble of the crowd agitated the semi-darkness of the park. The other sat down, sucking his cheroot, puffing out, sat there ruthlessly. The astrologer felt very uncomfortable. "Here, take your *anna* back. I am not used to such challenges. It is late for me today....." He made preparations to bundle up. The other held his wrist and said : "You can't get out of it now. You dragged me in while I was passing". The astrologer shivered in his grip; and his voice shook and became faint. "Leave me today, I will speak to you tomorrow." The other thrust his palm in his face and said : "Challenge is challenge. Go on." The astrologer proceeded with his throat drying up : "There is a woman"

"Stop," said the other, "I don't want all that. Shall I succeed in my present search or not ? Answer this and go. Otherwise I will not let you go till you disgorge all your coins." The astrologer muttered a few incantations and replied : "All right, I will speak. But will you give me a rupee if what I say is convincing ? Otherwise I will not open my mouth, and you may do what you like". After a good deal of haggling, the other agreed. The astrologer said : "You were left for dead. Am I right ?"

"Ah, tell me more."

"A knife has passed through you once ?" said the astrologer.

"Good fellow !" He bared his chest to show the scar. "What else ?"

"And then you were pushed into a well nearby in the field. You were left for dead".

"I should have been dead if some passer-by had not chanced to peep into the well," exclaimed the other, overwhelmed by enthusiasm. "When shall I get at him ?" he asked clenching his fist.

"In the next world", answered the astrologer, "he died four months ago in a far-off town. You will never see any more of him". The other groaned on hearing it. The astrologer proceeded :

"Guru Nayak —"

"You know my name !" the other said, taken aback.

"As I know all other things. Guru Nayak, listen carefully to what I have to say. Your village is two days' journey due north of this town. Take the next train and be gone. I see once again great danger to your life if you go from home". He took out a pinch of sacred ash and held it to him. "Rub it on your forehead and go home. Never travel southward again, and you will live to be a hundred".

"Why should I leave home again ?" the other said reflectively. "I was only going away now and then to look for him and to choke out his life if I met him." He shook his head regretfully. "He has escaped my hands. I hope, at least, he died as he deserved". "Yes", said the astrologer. "He was crushed under a lorry." The other looked gratified to hear it.

The place was deserted by the time, the astrologer picked up his articles and put them into his bag. The green shaft was also gone, leaving the place in darkness and silence. The stranger had gone off into the night, after giving the astrologer a handful of coins.

It was nearly midnight when the astrologer reached home. His wife was waiting for him at the door and demanded an explanation. He flung the coins at her and said : "Count them. One man gave all that."

"Twelve and a half annas," she said, counting. She was overjoyed. "I can buy some jaggery and coconut tomorrow. The child has been asking for sweets for so many days now. I will prepare some nice stuff for her."

"The swine has cheated me ! He promised me a rupee," said the astrologer. She looked up at him.

"You look worried. What is wrong ?"

"Nothing."

After dinner, sitting on the *pyol*, he told her : "Do you know a great load is gone from me today ? I thought I had the blood of a man on my hands all these years. That was the reason why I ran away from home, settled here, and married you. He is alive."

She gasped. "You tried to kill !"

"Yes, in our village, when I was a silly youngster. We drank, gambled, and quarrelled badly one day — why think of it now ? It's time to sleep," he said yawning, and stretched himself on the *pyol*.

||Glossary||

professional equipment

resplendent

gleam

clients

prophetic

considerably

enhanced

din

transacted

enchantment

bewildering

shrewd

perception

provided

bluffing

jutka

cheroot

clenching

— things used in business (व्यावसायिक उपकरण)

— bright (चमकीला)

— brightness (चमक)

— customers (ग्राहक)

— godly, divine (दैवी)

— sufficient, enough (पर्याप्त)

— increased (बढ़ा हुआ)

— noise (कोलाहल, शोरगुल)

— carried on (जारी रखना)

— magic (जादू)

— confusing (भ्रमपूर्ण)

— cunning (धूर्त)

— observation (निरीक्षण)

— gave (दिया)

— cheating (धोखा देना)

— tonga (तांगा)

— cigar (सिगार)

— closing lightly (हल्के से बंद करना)

gratified	— satisfied (संतुष्ट)
shaft	— beam of light (प्रकाश की किरणें)
swine	— an abuse (एक प्रकार की गाली)
midday	— noon (दोपहर का समय)
obscure	— not clearly seen, understand (गुप्त, अदृश्य)
mystic	— having hidden meaning (रहस्यपूर्ण)
palmyra writing	— something written on palm leaves (ताड़ की पत्तियों पर लिखी बातें)
vermilion	— a brilliant scarlet red (सिन्दूरी रंग)
abnormal gleam	— unusual brightness (असाधारण चमक)
prophetic light	— light showing spiritual powers (आध्यात्मिक शक्ति को दिखाने वाला प्रकाश)
half-wit	— unintelligent person (अयोग्य व्यक्ति)
sparkle	— shine (चमकना)
to crown the effect	— to produce more impression (अधिक प्रभाव डालना)
tamarind	— a fruit (इमली (खटाई वाली))
surging crowd	— crowd moving forward strongly (आगे जाती हुई भीड़)
vociferousness	— making a noise (शोर करते हुए)
dallied	— amused itself with (स्वयं मनोरंजन करना)
ancestral	— belonging to one's forefathers (पूर्वजों से सम्बन्धित)
tangles	— confused situations (भ्रमित परिस्थिति)
well disposed	— friendly and helpful (मददपूर्ण, भिन्नतापूर्ण)
impetuous	— impulsive (आवेगपूर्ण)
forbidding exterior	— stern outward appearance (बाहरी वेशभूषा)
careworn	— worried (चिन्तित)
piqued	— hurt and insulted (दुःखी तथा अपमानित)
disgorge	— throw out (बाहर फेंकना)
incantation	— magical words (चमत्कारिक शब्द)
jaggery	— sweat (गुड़)
punctually	— timely (नियमित रूप से)
spread out	— to unfold (फैलाता था)
consisted of	— implied with (शामिल थी)
sacred ash	— holy ash (पवित्र भस्म)
outcome	— result (नतीजा)
attracted	— charmed (आकर्षक, आकर्षित हुआ)
boughs	— branches (शाखाएँ)
remarkable	— unique (विलक्षण)
auctioneer	— seller (विक्रेता)
flocked	— come into a group (समूह में आना)
benefit	— profit (लाभ)
managed	— arranged (व्यवस्था कर लेता था)

intended	— desired (इच्छा की)
astonished	— surprised (आश्चर्यचकित कर देता था)
wages	— income (आमदनी)
gazing	— looking attentively (ध्यान से देखते हुए)
endeared	— precious (प्रिय बनाना)
vendor	— seller (विक्रेता)
grumbled	— spoke in a loud and heavy tone (तीव्र तथा भारी स्वर में बोला)
withdrew	— pulled back (खींच लिया)
sucking	— smoking (धूम्रपान करते हुए)
puffing out	— leaving smoke out (धुँआ बाहर निकालते हुए)

||Exercise||

➔ Short Answer Type Questions :

Answer the following questions in not more than 30 words each :

1. What did the astrologer's professional equipment consist of ?
2. Describe, in brief, his forehead and eyes.
3. What was the colour of his turban ?
4. Where did the astrologer sit to carry out his business ?
5. Although the astrologer knew nothing about Astrology yet he satisfied his customers. Why ?
6. How much money did the astrologer charge per question ?
7. What happened one evening when the astrologer was preparing to go home ?
8. Why did the astrologer find himself in Dilemma after seeing the customer ?
- Or** Why did the astrologer feel uncomfortable after seeing the customer ?
9. Who was Guru Nayak ?
10. Why had the astrologer left his village ?
11. What advice did the astrologer give to the stranger ?
12. Why did the stranger feel happy ?
13. Why was his wife overjoyed after counting the coins ?
14. What did the astrologer tell his wife after dinner ?
15. What was the load that the astrologer had been keeping in his mind ? How did he get rid of it ?
16. What did the astrologer tell Guru Nayak about his enemy's death?
17. Why did the astrologer advise the stranger never to travel southward?
18. How did the astrologer earn his living? Why was he forced to hide his identity?
19. How could the astrologer get rid of the stranger?
- Or** How could the astrologer get rid of the fear he was troubled with?
20. What made the astrologer feel uncomfortable?
21. How did the astrologer feel in the presence of the stranger?

