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CHAPTER

A Special Experience

Prem Chand

➡ About the Author

Prem Chand was born in 1880 in a village near Varanasi. He was one of the renowned Hindi novelists and story writers. He portrayed the life of Indian villages in his novels and short stories. He was totally against the treatment of landlords, money lenders and the upper class of society towards the poor and down trodden. He disliked castism, superstition, untouchability and religious bigotry. Some of his famous novels are *Godan*, *Nirmala*, *Karma Bhumi* and *Sewa Sadan*. He has written so many short stories. These are — *A Special Experience*, *The Chess Players*, *A Tale of Two Oxen*, *Rich Daughter-in-law*, *The Shroud* and *the Thakur's well* etc. He died in 1936.



➡ About the Story

A special experience is a fine story of two families. A lady is the narrator of this story. Her husband is sent to prison because he has served **sherbat** and **pan** to the political agitators. The narrator of the story is refused to be helped by her father and father-in-law. Gyan Babu, who was a teacher, brings her in his house and takes good care of her. The principal of the school forces him to turn her out of his house. Does Gyan Babu obey the principal ? What is the opinion of Gyan Babu's wife ? What does she do to face the problem ? Read the story and find out what happens at last.

1

They gave him a year's hard labour for it. For such a trivial offence three days ago, on a hot May afternoon, he'd gone and served *sherbat* and *pan* to the political agitators. I was in court at the time. Outside the courtroom, the political passion of the entire town's populace seemed to be lashing its tail and howling like a ferocious caged creature. They dragged him in handcuffed. Suddenly, pin-drop silence. But there was a maelstrom in my head, and I felt as if I was melting away into nothingness. Turbulent waves of sensation swept ceaselessly over my horripilating body. I had never felt so proud in my life before.

I had this strange reaction of contempt for the court, for the British officer pompously ensconced in his chair and for the police constables in their zari embroidered red turbans. I wanted to rush forward and touch the feet of my husband and sacrifice my life for the cause, he espoused. He was a calm, confident, radiant, resolute deity. No weakness, no gloom, no touch of grief. Rather on his lips, there played the mind-ravishing, energising flicker of a smile. A year's hard labour for this pretty offence ! What a mockery of justice ! What an alter ! And what a sacrifice ! I was inspired to commit a hundred such petty offences.

My husband glanced fleetingly in my direction as they led him away. I saw him smile faintly and then his expression became stern. After returning from the court, I ordered five rupees worth of sweets and fed the freedom fighters. That evening I participated for the first time a political meeting organised by the Indian National Congress. I actually addressed the members and pledged to follow satyagraha. I felt a surge of power within me; I had no idea of the source of this incredible power. When all is lost, what is there to fear ? Surely the Creature couldn't have a worse calamity in store for me.

2

The next day I sent off two telegrams — one to my father, another to my father-in-law. My father-in-law subsisted on a pension and my father had a high post in the Department of Forestry. A whole day passed — no reply. Another day and still no word. The third day, letters from both of them. Furious letters.

My father-in-law wrote : "Here was I, thinking I could depend on the two of you to care for me in my old age. How sorely you've disappointed me! What do I do now — go out with a begging bowl ? All I have is a small Government pension, and that will be cut off too if they find I'm siding with you".

My father's tone was milder, but his intention was similar. This was his year of grade and increment. He could be hauled up and his promotion stopped.

Yes, both were ready to give me verbal support, as much as I wanted. I tore the two letters up and decided that I would never write to them again. O selfishness! what a marvellous *maya* you weave on human beings ! His own father, always thinking of himself, so heartless towards his own son ! My father-in-law, so indifferent to his own daughter-in-law ! And to learn all this at so young an age — I have a whole world of wonders waiting for me.

Till this happened, I was caught up in my own little world of domestic business, but now this new problem cropped up. Without help or support, with no male in the house, how would I manage ? But where could I possibly go ? If I could have taken a job. But the fetters of femininity shackled my feet. All I could do was look pretty and sweet. I was a woman, that's all. It didn't matter if I died in the process, but my femininity had to be preserved at all costs. Not one flicker of a scandalous eyebrow could be raised against that, oh no.

I heard footsteps. I looked down. There were two men standing below. I felt like asking, who are you ? What do you want ? and then it occurred to me : What right have I ? It's a public thorough fare. Anyone has the right to stand there.

I have a sudden premonition of fear which refused to go. It rankled in my heart like a persistent ember.

My body seemed to be burning. I bolted the door from the inside. There was a large knife in the house; this I placed under my pillow. But the fear kept haunting me, as if parading around the bed.

A voice called. I shivered; my hair stood on end. I placed one ear to the door; someone was rattling the bolt. My heart started pounding. Those two ! What are they up to? What do they want from me ? It was all so eerie. I did not open the door; instead I shouted from the window, "Who's rattling at the door ?"

The reply calmed me. My fear vanished. It was Babu Gyanchand, my husband's best friend. I went down and opened the door. There was a lady with him, his wife. She was older to me; this was her first visit to my house; I touched her feet. It was men who made friends in our way of life; women observed the formalities.

I showed both the way up. Gyan Babu was a school teacher, a learned, large-hearted, utterly malice-free man. Today his wife had taken him in tow. A well-fleshed lady, amply endowed, with a commanding queenly presence; larded with jewellery from top to bottom; no great beauty by any stretch of imagination but an imperious figure all right. Had I had met her in any other context, I might have ignored her? But at that moment, she appeared to be the very embodiment of self-confidence. Her looks belied her — flint outside, gold inside.

"Did you write home ?" she inquired hesitatingly.

"Yest," I replied.

"Anyone coming to fetch you ?"

"No, My father doesn't want me. My father-in-law doesn't want me".

"What do you plan to do ?"

"Nothing. Pass my days here, I suppose."

"Come, stay with us. I won't let you live alone here."

"There are two police detectives loitering around here."

"I guessed as much".

Gyan Babu glanced at his wife as if seeking her approval. "Shall I go to get a tonga ?"

She looked at him with such insouciance as if to say You still here ?

He moved fearfully towards the door.

"Wait !" she said, "How many tongas ?"

"How many ?" He looked worried.

"Don't you realise we'll need one for us three passengers. And where do you think the trunks, bed-rolls and pots and pans will go on my head ?"

"I'll get two", he said apprehensively.

"How much can you load in one tonga ? What's wrong with you ?"

"I'll get three.....four."

"All right, but go ! Small thing like this, and it takes him an hour to think it out."

Before I could say a word, Gyan Babu had left. I said timidly, "Won't you be inconvenienced if I"

She retorted sharply, "Yes, I will; of course I will. You'll have two full meals a day and you'll occupy a corner of my room and rub two annas worth of my oil in your hair. You don't think that an inconvenience ?"

Ashamed I replied, "Please excuse me, I'm sorry".

Lovingly, she put her arm around my shoulder and said, "When your husband is released, invite me, I'll happily be your guest. Pay me back that way if you wish. Satisfied ? Start packing. We'll bring over the beds and heavy furniture tomorrow."

3

I had never come across such an affectionate, generous, sweet-speaking lady in my life. If I had been her younger sister she couldn't have treated me better. I was almost as if she had battled worry and anger and won a complete victory. There was always soothing sweetness about her. She was childless, but that seemed in no way to affect her. She had engaged a young boy to help out with minor household chores, but all the rest, the hard work, she did herself. How she managed. I had no idea. She ate next to nothing but kept in the pink of health. She never rested, not even a siesta in the hottest summer. She wouldn't let me do a thing. All she did was feed me any chance she could get. In fact, that was my real problem- how to avoid getting stuffed.

Hardly eight days had passed. One day I suddenly saw the two C.I.D. men in front of the house. I was upset. Won't the wretches ever leave me alone ? They follow me here too?

I said to her, "There they are, the two rascals, loitering around here, too."

She said contemptuously, "They are dogs. Let them hang around, who cares ?"

I said worriedly, "I hope, they are not up to mischief".

She looked unconcerned. "All they can do is bark."

I added, "And bite."

She smiled. "They can't frighten us away out of here."

But it didn't help. I would go again and again to the window to check on them. Why were they after me ? In what way could I damage the steel frame of the bureaucracy? What power, what abilities did I have to wreak harm ? Did they want to hound me out of here ? How would that help them ? How would it help them to see me run around destitute and forlorn ? Such meanness !

Another week passed. The two refused to leave. And here I was, my heart in my mouth, not knowing what would happen. I knew it was not right of me to take advantage of her hospitality but I did not have the courage to tell her so.

One evening, Gyan Babu turned up, visibly perturbed. I was in the verandah peeling parwals. He walked in and beckoned to his wife.

Without getting up, she said, "Why don't you first change, have a wash, eat something before you open your mouth ?

But Gyan Babu was a bundle of nerves. He had to have it all out. He insisted, "What's the matter with you ? Can't you even get up ? I tell you, my life is in danger !"

She kept sitting. "Why don't you come out with it ? I'm here."

"No, come here."

"What's the matter ? There's no one else here."

I tried to slip out. She caught hold of my hand and wouldn't let go. Gyan Babu didn't want to speak in my presence but he didn't have the patience either to check himself.

He said, "I had a quarrel with the principal today."

In a tone of mock-seriousness, she said, "You did ? And you beat sense into him, of course, didn't you ?"

"Oh do be serious. Here I am losing my job, and —"

"If you feared for your job, what made you go and fight with him ?"

"I didn't fight with him. I just quarrelled. He began it. He summoned me to his office and started giving me a piece of his mind."

"Just like that."

"What can I say ?"

"Tell me what happened. I look on this girl here as my sister. I don't hide anything from her."

"And supposing what I have to say, concerns her ?"

She read his mind and said, "Oh, I see. It's those C.I.D. men. They've gone and spoken to your principal, have they ?"

For the life of him, Gyan Babu could not make out how she had succeeded in reading his mind so easily.

He said, "The police didn't speak to the principal, they went straight to the commissioner. He ordered the principal to question me."

His wife replied knowingly, "I see. And the principal told you to turn her out of your house."

"Something like that."

"And what did you have to say to him ?"

"Nothing definite. What could I say ? It was all so sudden."

His wife let him have it straight. "There's only one answer, isn't there ? What's there to think about ?"

Gyan Babu was stupefied. "But I had to have some time to decide, don't you think ?"

She frowned. This was the first time I saw her in such a mood. She said, "You go this very instant to your principal and say to his face, 'There's no way I'm going to let that girl go from my house. And if you don't like the idea, you can have my resignation.' Go right now. You can wash up after you return."

On the verge of tears, I said, "Sister, I don't want to be....."

She cut me short, "Shut up ! You want your ears twisted ? Who are you to interfere between husband and wife ? We swim together or we sink together. I am ashamed of this brave husband of mine. Half his life's over and still he doesn't know how to behave."

Then, turning to her husband, she said, "What are you standing here for ? If you are so afraid, shall I go and tell him ?" Gyan Babu shuffled and said, "I'll do it tomorrow. I don't know where to find him now."

4

I tossed restless the whole night. Here was I, spurned by father and father-in-law, wandering homeless and alone and to receive such affection, such respect ! I said to myself, if there ever was a goddess, she is one.

When next day, Gyan Babu left for work, she said to him, "Don't come back without settling the matter. Don't come and tell me again that you have to think it over."

When he was gone, I said to her, "You're doing a great injustice to me, sister. I don't want to be any kind of burden on you."

She smiled and said, "Had your say ?"

"Yes, but I have plenty more to say."

"Very well, but before you do that, answer me this — why was your husband jailed ? Wasn't it because he helped the freedom fighters ? And who are these freedom fighters ? These are the heroes of our country, the soldiers who fight our battles for us. And don't these freedom fighters have children of their own, and don't they have parents too, and didn't they have work which they left behind in order to fight for the country, and haven't they given up everything for a noble cause ? The wife of a man who helps such freedom fighters, who goes to jail for their sake, is a very special person, she's a woman whose *darshan* purifies the heart."

I was silent. I bathed in the compassionate sea of her gratitude. Gyan Babu returned that evening with a look of triumph on his face.

His wife asked, "What happened ?"

Gyan Babu replied proudly, "I handed in my resignation and that made him come to his senses. He went straight to the police commissioner. And the two sat inside a car and they went on and on discussing, I don't know what. And then they came up to me and asked, 'Do you go to political meetings ?' And I replied, 'No, sir, not me'. 'Are you a member of the Congress Party ?' And I replied, 'Member' Sir ? No, I'm not even a friend of a member.' 'You contribute to the Party fund ?' And I replied, 'Not a measly pie, sir. Never'."

At which point, his wife embraced me warmly.

||Glossary||

political agitators	: freedom fighters (स्वतंत्रता सेनानी)
entire	: all (सभी)
creature	: people (लोग)
caged	: angry but helpless (क्रोधित किन्तु असहाय)
maelstrom	: whirlpool (बवंडर)
ensconced	: seated comfortably (आराम से बैठा हुआ)
espoused	: supported (सहायता की)
resolute	: firm (दृढ़ स्थिर, ठोस, साझे का व्यवसाय, कोठी, स्थायी)
ravishing	: delightful (सुन्दर, सुखदायक)
subsisted on	: lived on, depended on (आश्रित)
fetters of feminity	: limitations of being a women (महिला होने की मर्यादा)
shackled	: bound (बंधन में)
scandalous	: full of disgraceful reports (अपवादजनक)
thorough fare	: public way (आम रास्ता)
premonition	: fore warning (आशंका)
persistent	: continuous (निरंतर)
eerice	: strange, mysterious (रहस्यमय, विचित्र)

imperious	: commanding (आदेश देते हुए)
flint	: hard like a stone (पत्थर के समान कठोर)
insouciance	: indifference (उपेक्षा)
apprehensively	: grasped (परामर्श योग्य)
stuffed	: filled (भर दिया)
contemptuously	: without respect (निरादरपूर्ण तरीके से)
perturbed	: disturbed (व्यवधान पैदा किया)
destitute and forlorn	: poor and helpless (गरीब और असहाय)
spurned	: rejected; denied (तिरस्कृत)
measly	: meagre (रहस्यरहित)
straight	: direct (सीधा)
contribute	: give (देना)
hard labour	: rigorous imprisonment (सश्रम कारावास)
trivial	: small, insignificant (तुच्छ, रहस्यहीन)
populace	: the common people (आम व्यक्ति)
turbulent	: agitating (उत्तेजनात्मक)
ceaselessly	: continuously (निरन्तर रूप से)
horripilating	: with hair standing on its end (रोमांच, रोमहर्षण)
deity	: godlike (दैवीय)
altar	: platform on which offering are made to a god (बलिवेदी)
a surge of power	: a rising of power (शक्ति का बढ़ना)
hauled up	: pulled up (रोक लिया, खींच लिया)
flicker	: brief faint indication (थोड़े संकेत, हल्के संकेत)
rankled	: continued to give pain (कष्ट देता रहा)
ember	: a small live coal in a dying fire (बुझती आग में कोयला)
eerie	: strange, mysterious (रहस्यमय, विचित्र)
in tow	: to follow (अनुसरण करना)
larded	: decked (सजी हुई)
imperious	: commanding (आदेश देते हुए)
belied	: misrepresented, disproved (झूठा सिद्ध किया)
flint	: hard like a stone (पत्थर सा कठोर)
beds	: cot (पलंग, चारपाई)
chore	: a small duty, a piece of work (काम, छोटा काम)

wretches	: despicable persons (नीच)
not upto mischief	: not prone to mischief (शरारत करने पर नहीं तुले हुए हैं)
it didn't help	: it was useless (व्यर्थ)
to wreck harm	: to do harm (कोई नुकसान न करना)
my heart in my mouth	: afraid, worried, nervous (हताश, भयपूर्ण)
a bundle of nerves	: very nervous, anxious (बेचैन, व्याकुल)
mock seriousness	: false or pretended seriousness (मिथ्या, बहानेपूर्ण गम्भीरता)
started giving me a piece of his mind	: started scolded me (डाँटने लगे)
stupefied	: stunned (सन्न रह गया, चकित रह गया)
let him have it straight	: the wife told her husband directly the plain truth (सत्य बात कहने दो)
lashing	: beating hardly (जोर से मारते हुए)
howling	: crying (चिल्लाहट, गुराहट)
ferocious	: very angry (अत्यन्त क्रुद्ध)
turbulent	: given to act of violence and aggression (उथल-पुथल मचाने वाला)
sensation	: an emotion or feeling (अनुभूति)
pompously	: with pomp and show (दिखावे के साथ)
radiant	: emitting rays of light (द्युतिया, चमकदार)
energising	: active (सक्रिय)
glanced	: take a quick look (नजर डाली)
participated	: took part (हिस्सा लिया)
pledged	: took oath (कसम खायी)
incredible	: unbelievable (अविश्वसनीय)
calamity	: disaster (आपदा दुःख)
disappointed	: hopeless (निराश)
intention	: liking (इरादा)
undifferent	: neutral (उदासीन)
furios	: angry (नाराज)
marvellous	: strange (अद्भुत)
preserved	: to save from injury (संरक्षित)
rankled	: to be source of persistent irritation or resentment within the mind (भ्रष्ट कर दिया)
loitering	: walk slowly with frequent stops (घूमते हुए)

|| Exercise ||

➡ Short Answer Type Questions :

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

1. What were the political agitators fighting for ?
2. Who was jailed and why ?
3. Why did the lady want to rush forward and touch the feet of her husband ?
4. How did the wife react to her husband's imprisonment in the story 'A Special Experience'?
5. Why did the wife celebrate her husband's going to jail ?
6. What perturbed Gyan Babu one evening ? How did he face the situation?
7. Why was the narrator restless the whole night ?
8. Why did Gyan Babu's wife tell him to put in his resignation ?
- Or** What did Gyan Babu's wife tell him to do the next day?
9. How did the resignation of Gyan Babu affect the principal ?
10. "She was flint outside and gold inside." Who says this and what does it suggest ?
- Or** What kind of a lady was Gyan Babu's wife? Has she impressed you? Give examples in support of your answer.
- Or** What kind of a lady was Gyan Babu's wife?
11. "If there ever was a goddess, she is one." Who says this and why ?
12. How did the father and father-in-law of the narrator respond to her telegrams and why ?
13. How does Gyan Babu's wife justify her help to the lady whose husband had been jailed? How do you feel about her?
14. What do you think inspired Gyan Babu's wife to help the wife of the jailed husband?
15. Do you agree with the response of parents to their daughter whose husband had been jailed? Give reasons in support of your answer, based on the story, 'A Special Experience'.
16. Describe the qualities of Gyan Babu's wife that you liked most in the story, A Special Experience.
17. How can you say that Gyan Babu was a man of Principles?
18. What idea of the times do you gather from the story 'A Special Experience'?
19. Why did Gyan Babu and his wife go to the lady after her husband was arrested?
20. What was special in the story 'A Special Experience'?

