

A TRICK

R. K. Sinha

Dr R.K. Sinha (1917-2003), a University professor of English at Patna University obtained his D, Phil from Oxford University in 1950 under the able guidance of David Cecil on the topic 'Literary influence on D. H. Lawrence'. Born at Maheshpur in Munger in Bihar, Dr Sinha served in Patna University for 42 years including 27 years as the head of the Postgraduate Department of English. He was a brilliant teacher who kept his students spell bound in the classroom. Dr Sinha guided more than 50 researches for the award of Ph. D. and D. Litt.



A TRICK

- 1 'Hallo, Varma, Congratulations,' said I, advancing from amidst a group of five persons loitering on the hostel lawn, and proffered my hand to the new-comer who took it coldly, rather suspiciously, hesitation upon his face. Such cordialities were rare among us, and he had perhaps detected the rapid, stealthy glance that had passed from one to another, while he was still on the road.
- 2 "Your old jokes!" answered Mr. Varma, "you shall better enjoy them yourself," and seemed eager to drop this topic, and resume another in quite a matter-of-fact manner. But the group insisted on congratulating him, and a vociferous acclamation came.
- 3 "You've stood first."
- 4 "Who told you so?"
- 5 "Mr. Chatterjee told us in the tutorial class."
- 6 "Well, I really admire your inventive brain, but I am not going to be led away by your insipid jokes," answered Varma, strictly on his guard to keep himself out of the possible snare.
- 7 But all of us had assumed such an air of innocence that it would have been blasphemous to distrust, and there was already a ray of hope peeping in his heart; he

was rather eager to believe all we said. And then came a further corroboration from one of my friends, in the recital of what Mr. Chaterjee had said about Roll 14 (he did not actually know his name) who had stood first, his marks approaching first class almost. (Mr. Chaterjee was a bit eccentric, and held the rather pessimistic view that nobody could secure first class in English. God forgive me if I insinuate that he himself did not.) He could not tell them exactly, Mr. Clarke had kept it all so secret.

8 And we dragged him into a room, talking in an off-hand manner, yet all conversation was pivoted upon one central point, Examination.

9 "But, I hadn't answered the questions quite to my satisfaction," began he, trying to exhibit that he was quite composed, and was not overjoyed, implying at the same time that there was nothing extraordinary in it, and he could stand first as a matter of course, "the last answer was almost unfinished."

10 "That doesn't matter in the least," cried I, trying to remove the last shred of doubt, specially at the hands of an English examiner. 'The spark of genius' that's what he wants; and once he has detected it in one of your answers, he is satisfied. Well, it is literature, but in mathematics I heard Dr. Das Gupta gave first class marks to a student who had answered only two questions out of seven."

11 "Of course they should examine in this manner," acquiesced Mr. Varma, in a low voice, tense with joy and excitement.

12 "O yes, it is given credit to the person who deserves," we added. "Whatever it might be" he left the sentence unfinished.

13 By this time we were quite deep in our talk, and Varma proceeded to describe at length his two best answers. We were all compliments, and praised them enormously.

14 It was all a deception, to be sure; the whole thing was as thin as gossamer: a fool could have seen that. Yet, such was the secret machination of vanity that all improbabilities were leapt over, the specks of doubt enveloped in the flooding light of hope.

15 Mr Varma was pleased - pleased beyond measure. Joy had suffused his whole face, and he condescended to stay in my room (a favour never even dreamed of) and listen to the poems of Tagore, which a Bengali friend of mine had undertaken to read in the original.

16 Two hours - we had been listening to one poem, and then to another, evidently attracted by the charm of the preceding one. Urvasi then Sonar Tari we stopped there, and talked a little about the beauty of the poem, and its philosophy. We little comprehended the meaning of the poem; yet there was a bizarre attraction. It seemed as if words, mere words, the metre were enough to transport one into a dreamland, or at least to create a mental attitude. Yet, there was the magic of the implicit idea pervading the poem, shedding a dreamy light into one's mind, which could but vaguely follow it. But it seemed that the person in whose honour all this was taking place, was but half


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attentive to the poems. An inadvertent glance told us that he was in his own realms of fancy, where the music of success was echoing with more tender notes than all the poems of Tagore. Every now and then his eyes seemed to cast a glimmer of that happy world among our midst. We, then, came to realise the extent of our careless fraud. Yet, how happy, how glorious, to be transported, even if it be for a moment, from the drudgery of a drab life to the beautiful Utopia, where success is the passport and joy the eternal counterpart. Yet how frail! How slender! The slight gust of reality would shatter all to pieces. The charm would be broken, the film of fancy would vanish, the harsh reality staring full in the face.

- 17 We had already passed into the penumbra of an impending disaster. The crash was coming - inevitably as death. But the step we had taken was irrevocable. The error had been committed, and we seemed to see the premonition of the 'justice' of the Greek Tragedians. The fun was gone, and I could almost realise the pathos of a shattered dreamland, of crushed hopes, of ruined joy.
- 18 It was early in the evening that he went to Kamala, one of his friends and said in notes of half-suppressed joy.
- 19 "Kamala, they say I have stood first."
- 20 "Oh, they must be joking."
- 21 There was a sudden twitching of the lips, a contortion of the face, that lasted only for a moment, the words meant a direct attack upon his merits. He was in no way inferior to any of the students. Could not he stand first! Why wonder!
- 22 "Anyway, let us go to Mr. Chaterjee, the father of the news."
- 23 Out he went in headlong haste, dragging Kamala along the stairs. The first outburst of his joy was exhausted, and then there emerged a curious feeling of dread, that the whole thing might be a hoax. He wanted to satisfy himself as soon as possible. Ill or well, he must clear himself out of this dilemma. The suspense was really killing, and every second seemed to him a whole long year. His mind was in a state of tension from which he was suffering continuously. The internal strain expressed itself in his hasty pace, and sometimes it seemed he would run.
- 24 Anyhow, he reached the house of Professor Chaterjee, like that interesting figure in Hindu mythology, flying between the earth and sky, occupied a debatable space as to his age. In the class he was a grave man of forty, outside a buoyant young fellow of thirty. Actually he was thirty-five. He was a person of cheerful countenance and boisterous happy spirits. He would laugh or shut up like a Jack-in-the box.
- 25 Mr. Varma was in deadly earnest, and straightaway asked him about the matter. He was surprised and professed an utter ignorance of the whole thing; then seeing a similar surprise upon his face, burst into laughter. The whole thing was as transparent as crystal. He could perceive the deception at the first glance. Then came the heart-

reading mortification. Mr. Varma was humiliated, ashamed, then infuriated. Wounded pride raised its head and an insatiable anger possessed his heart. He felt he would kill one of us or die himself.

26 By the time he came to the hostel, his first fury was pacified to some extent, but not quenched. Who could quench it unless the burning feelings of the heart were exhausted, in speech, in tears?

27 It was I who had initiated the plot, but some friends of mine had aided me in carrying it out. The most outstanding of them was Mr. Sinha. The first volley of rage, therefore, was sure to be discharged against us who formed the first phalanx. Moreover, the deception practised was not pure fun. It had originated rather harmlessly in my brain, but the succour from Mr. Sinha had imparted a tinge of personal jealousy.

28 The fact was that just a few days before there had been a hot discussion between these two on an absurdly insignificant point. The cause lay not in the diversity of the opinion about the subject, but in the long tension that had been between them since the first idea of competition and jealousy had crept into their hearts. A latent envy was fermenting in their minds, and might burst out any moment, on any pretext, like molten lava. The occasion had come.

29 "Have you read *Vanity Fair*?" asked Mr. Sinha.

30 "Of course, I have."

31 "Who is the author?"

32 "Well, ... I forget the name actually can't say exactly."

33 Mr. Sinha in his moods of aggression was inclined to think too poorly of others, and he seemed to suspect Mr. Varma was merely aggrandising and had never come across the book.

34 "Perhaps you've never read it."

35 "I say I have. It is such a bulky book in two volumes, said Mr. Varma, explaining with his hands.

36 Mr. Sinha who had perhaps seen the one volume edition in *Everyman's Library*, was now sure of his point, and asserted, rather vehemently, that the book is not at all in two volumes, and never so bulky. There is only one truly expressive word for Mr. Sinha vehement. He was vehement in his gait, vehement in his talk, vehement in his gestures. He could sing to a roaring lion, God knows how he could roar.

37 They plunged into a hot discussion, Varma holding to his point and his opponent to his own. It seemed as if it would never be concluded, when both of them became aggressive, forcing their views in loud tones, praising their own merits, each despising the other's outrageously. Perhaps the hostel-bell rang and they parted. But the flame of envy, thus enkindled in their hearts was never completely extinguished and was ready to flare up on the slightest provocation.

38 Late in the evening I was walking on the hostel verandah when Mr. Varma stepped rapidly towards me on his return walk. His friend came along with him. There was an evident exhaustion on his face; his lips were parched; but his eyes seemed to be emitting fire. He was burning with rage. In a dry tone he showered congratulations upon me, saying it was I who had stood first. I understood it was no trick, no deception. He knew perfectly I could not be deceived; a wry smile upon his face expressed his grief, his rage, his wounded pride, more eloquently than a volley of words. He came to the point and began to upbraid me.

39 "It was not at all gentlemanly on your part ..." he spoke and stopped. He was choking with rage. It seemed there was a lump in his throat; he gulped it, and began again, "I never liked such jokes."

40 "What jokes!" ejaculated I, but soon perceived that it was no use carrying the fun any longer. I submitted but not out of fear. I had already had too much of it. I had lost that fun long ago, and now that the catastrophe had come. I was not at all ready to keep up the game.

41 Yet, the end had not really come. The rain had stopped suddenly and was to come with fresh thunder-storm. It was late in the evening, we were sitting in Mr. Sinha's room and taking tea. Suddenly the ward-servant came with two slips, one meant for me the other for Sinha. I read it carelessly and turned my glance towards Sinha who was still poring over it. His face seemed to express some resentment, with an undercurrent of glee. I could imagine the contents of the letter to be similar to mine, when he handed it over to me. So it was; Mr. Varma had wanted his books back from persons who could not like gentlemen!

42 How cold and simple the act looked; yet all the conglomeration of feeling turned into one molten form through the heat of rage, was metamorphosed there.

43 I attempted to laugh, but could not – perhaps I was a bit nettled at his mode of letter but I suppressed the feeling. What did this insult matter in the face of the grief I had inflicted upon him? I sent the servant back, and went into my room. A few minutes later Varma came himself. Now it was my turn to upbraid, and I was in no mood to let it go, without profit. But he was already sorry for what he had done not that he was pacified, for who could heal that sore except time. He was sorry at the meanness implied in his bitter tone of letter, and remained silent all the while I was speaking.

44 Then came an interval I shall never forget through my life. It was a period of leaden silence weighing upon us both; but neither had the heart to speak. We were silently sorry for what we had done at the sudden turn our fun had taken. It was for each a tacit acknowledgement of the wrong done; our hearts had been softened by remorse, and the mood of pride had given way to one of pardon. Silent we sat; one minute passed, then another. I wanted to get out, to raise some topic; but my mind failed. I

sank more and more into a kind of mental vacuity. Outside the students went talking to the mess. The shuffle of their shoes jarred upon our solemn calm. Suddenly the bell rang. I was startled out of my torpidity. Mr. Varma seemed to emerge from a dream. His eyes seemed to express remorse, to beg pardon. I wanted to avoid his looks. How they rent my heart. I was angry when I felt a drop of tear trickling upon my face.

45 "Let us go to the mess," said I in a hoarse voice, and he nodded in assent.

46 I thought the matter was over, but it came as an aftermath in my dreams. The feelings I had suffered from during the evening revived more pungently, but passed away quickly. Others came in rapid succession but they were not incoherent or inconsequential. It seemed I was taken before the Almighty Judge. All my crime was presented before me vividly. I had already been repenting for it, and I bowed my head listening to the ordeal.

47 "He shall be punished!" cried the Judge.

48 My whole frame trembled. I seemed to fall into a dark abyss, sense had deserted me. Some time elapsed (I was not at all conscious of it) before I felt a surging up of blood throughout my body – in the heart, in the head. A mosquito stung in my left leg. I felt annoyed, and seemed to realise that I was awake. I felt my bed, the wall beside it. It was pitch dark. My body was still trembling. There was an ache in my heart. I drank a cup of water and persuaded myself to sleep. In the morning the sun was fairly high when I awoke. I felt dog-tired and wished to be dead.

49 That very day the result was going to be out. We went to College, and waited for about two hours. The meeting at last dispersed, and the professors came out looking grave, as if the mystery of the universe were disclosed to them. One of my friends went to ask Prof. Chaterjee about the marks. He was sorry he did not know, Mr. Clarke had kept them secret. He came back disappointed, and I approached. My marks he did not know, but congratulated me saying "I had stood first." I came back; my head was swimming.

50 I could not analyse whether I was glad or sorry!

Let's Think and Do

1. What does the story-teller feel for the trick he played?
2. Have you ever played a trick with your friend as the Narrator plays with Mr Verma?
3. At times tricks inspire us to do better. Can you remember any such trick?
4. An old man asked you about an address and you misdirected him. Now you feel pity for him. Write about it in 200 words.
5. Find out different meanings of the word 'trick'