

Father's help. By R.K Narayan.

Lying in bed, Swami realised with a shudder that it was Monday morning. It looked as though only a moment ago it had been the last period on Friday. Already Monday was here. He hoped that an earthquake would reduce the school building to dust, but that good building—Albert Mission School—had withstood similar prayers for over a hundred years now. At nine o'clock Swaminathan wailed, 'I have a headache.' His mother said, 'Why don't you go to school in a jutka?'

'So that I may be completely dead at the other end? Have you any idea what it means to be jolted in a jutka?'

'Have you many important lessons today?'



'Important! That geography teacher has been teaching the same lesson for over a year now. And we have arithmetic, which means for a whole period we are going to be beaten by the teacher... important lessons!'

And Mother generously suggested that Swami might stay at home.

At 9.30, when he ought to have been shouting in the school prayer hall, Swami was lying on the bench in Mother's room. Father asked him, 'Have you no school today?'

'Headache,' Swami replied.

'Nonsense! Dress up and go.'

'Headache.'

‘Loaf about less on Sundays and you will be without a headache on Monday.’

Swami knew how stubborn his father could be and changed his tactics. ‘I can’t go so late to the class.’

‘I agree, but you’ll have to; it is your own fault. You should have asked me before deciding to stay away.’

‘What will the teacher think if I go so late?’

‘Tell him you had a headache and so are late.’

‘He will beat me if I say so.’

‘Will he? Let us see. What is his name?’

‘Samuel.’

‘Does he beat the boys?’

‘He is very violent, especially with boys who come late.

Some days ago a boy was made to stay on his knees for a whole period in a corner of the class because he came late and that too after getting six cuts from the cane and having his ears twisted. I wouldn’t like to go late to Samuel’s class.’

‘If he’s so violent, why not tell your headmaster about it?’

‘They say that even the headmaster is afraid of him. He is such a violent man.’

And then Swami gave a lurid account of Samuel’s violence; how when he started caning he would not stop till he saw blood on the boy’s hand, which he made the boy press to his forehead like a vermillion marking. Swami hoped that with this his father would be made to see that he couldn’t go to his class late. But Father’s behaviour took an unexpected turn. He became excited. ‘What do these teachers mean by beating our children? They must be driven out of service. I will see...’

The result was that he proposed to send Swami late to his class as a kind of challenge. He was also going to send a letter with Swami to the headmaster. No amount of protest from Swami was of any avail.

Swami had to go to school.



By the time he was ready, Father had composed a letter to the headmaster, put it in an envelope and sealed it.

‘What have you written, Father?’ Swaminathan asked apprehensively.

‘Nothing for you. Give this to your headmaster and go to your class.’

‘Have you written anything about our teacher, Samuel?’

‘Plenty of things about him. When your headmaster reads it, he will probably dismiss Samuel from the school and hand him over to the police.’

‘What has he done, Father?’

‘Well, there is a full account of everything he has done in the letter. Give it to your headmaster. You must bring an acknowledgement from him in the evening.’

Swami went to school feeling that he was the worst perjurer on earth. His conscience bothered him: he wasn’t at all sure if he had been accurate in his description of Samuel. He could not decide how much of what he had said was imagined and how much of it was real. He stopped for a moment on the roadside to make up his

mind about Samuel: he was not such a bad man after all. Personally he was much more genial than the rest; often he cracked a joke or two centering around Swami’s inactions and Swami took it as a mark of Samuel’s personal regard for him. But there was no doubt that he treated pupils badly.... His cane skinned pupils’ hands. Swami cast his mind about for an instance of this. There was none within his knowledge. Years and years ago he was reputed to have skinned the knuckles of a boy in first standard and made him smear the blood on his face. No one had actually seen it. But year after year the story persisted among the boys.... Swami’s head was dizzy with confusion in regard to Samuel’s character—whether he was good or bad, whether he deserved the allegations in the letter or not.... Swami felt an impulse to run home and beg his father to take back the letter. But Father was an obstinate man.

. As he approached the yellow building he realised that he was perjuring himself and was ruining his teacher. Probably the headmaster would dismiss Samuel and then the police would chain him and put him in jail. For all this disgrace, humiliation and suffering, who would be responsible? Swami shuddered. The more he thought of Samuel, the more he grieved for him—the dark face, his small red-streaked eyes, his thin line of moustache, his unshaven cheek and chin, his yellow coat; everything filled Swami with sorrow. As he felt the bulge of the letter in his pocket, he felt like an executioner. For a moment he was angry with his father and wondered why he should not fling into the gutter the letter of a man so unreasonable and stubborn.

As he entered the school gate an idea occurred to him, a sort of solution. He wouldn’t deliver the letter to the headmaster immediately, but at the end of the day—to that extent he would disobey his father and exercise his independence. There was nothing wrong in it and Father would not know it anyway. If the letter was given at the end of the day there was a chance that Samuel might do something to justify the letter.

Swami stood at the entrance to his class. Samuel was teaching arithmetic. He looked at Swami for a moment. Swami stood hoping that Samuel would fall on him and tear his skin off. But Samuel merely asked, ‘Are you just coming to the class?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You are half an hour late.’

‘I know it.’ Swami hoped that he would be attacked now. He almost prayed: ‘God of Thirupathi, please make Samuel beat me.’

‘Why are you late?’

Swami wanted to reply, ‘Just to see what you can do.’ But he merely said, ‘I have a headache, sir.’

‘Then why did you come to the school at all?’

A most unexpected question from Samuel. ‘My father said that I shouldn’t miss the class, sir,’ said Swami.

This seemed to impress Samuel. ‘Your father is quite right; a very sensible man. We want more parents like him.’

‘You don’t know what my father has done to you,’ Swami thought. He was more puzzled than ever about Samuel’s character.

‘All right, go to your seat. Have you still a headache?’

‘Slightly, sir.’

Swami went to his seat with a bleeding heart. He had never met a man so good as Samuel. The teacher was inspecting the home lessons, which usually produced (at least, according to Swami’s impression) scenes of great violence. Notebooks would be flung at faces, boys would be abused, caned and made to stand up on benches. But today Samuel appeared to have developed more tolerance and gentleness. He pushed away the bad books, just touched people with the cane, never made anyone stand up for more than a few minutes. Swami’s turn came. He almost thanked God for the chance.



‘Swaminathan, where is your homework?’

‘I have not done any homework, sir,’ he said blandly.

There was a pause.

‘Why—headache?’ asked Samuel.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘All right, sit down.’ Swami sat down, wondering what had come over Samuel. The period came to an end, and Swami felt desolate. The last period for the day was again taken

by Samuel. He came this time to teach them Indian History. The period began at 3.45 and ended at 4.30. Swaminathan had sat through the previous periods thinking acutely. He could not devise any means of provoking Samuel. When the clock struck four, Swami felt desperate. Half an hour more. Samuel was reading the text, the portion describing Vasco da Gama's arrival in India. The boys listened in half-languor. Swami suddenly asked at the top of his voice, 'Why did not Columbus come to India, sir?'

'He lost his way.'

'I can't believe it, it is unbelievable, sir.'

'Why?'

'Such a great man. Would he have not known the way?'

'Don't shout. I can hear you quite well.'

'I am not shouting, sir, this is my ordinary voice, which God has given me. How can I help it?'

'Shut up and sit down.'

Swaminathan sat down, feeling slightly happy at his success. The teacher threw a puzzled, suspicious glance at him and resumed his lessons.

11. His next chance occurred when Sankar of the first bench got up and asked, 'Sir, was Vasco da Gama the very first person to come to India?'

Before the teacher could answer, Swami shouted from the back bench, 'That's what they say.'

The teacher and all the boys looked at Swami. The teacher was puzzled by Swami's obtrusive behaviour today.

'Swaminathan, you are shouting again.'

'I am not shouting, sir. How can I help my voice, given by God?' The school clock struck a quarter-hour. A quarter more. Swami must do something drastic in fifteen minutes. Samuel had scowled at him and snubbed him, but it was hardly adequate. Swami felt that with a little more effort Samuel could be made to deserve dismissal and imprisonment.

The teacher came to the end of a section in the textbook and stopped. He proposed to spend the remaining few minutes putting questions to the boys. He ordered the whole class to put away their books, and asked someone in the second row, 'What's the date of Vasco da Gama's arrival in India?'

Swaminathan shot up and screeched, '1648, December 20.'

'You needn't shout,' said the teacher. He asked, 'Has your headache made you mad?'

'I have no headache now, sir,' replied the thunderer brightly.

'Sit down, you idiot.' Swami was thrilled at being called an idiot. 'If you get up again I will cane you,' said the teacher. Swami sat down, feeling happy at the promise.

The teacher then asked, 'I am going to put a few questions on the Mughal period. Among the Mughal emperors, whom would you call the greatest, whom the strongest and whom the most religious emperor?'

Swami got up. As soon as he was seen, the teacher said emphatically, 'Sit down.'

'I want to answer, sir.'

'Sit down.'

'No, sir, I want to answer.'

'What did I say I'd do if you got up again?'

'You said you would cane me and peel the skin off my

knuckles and make me press it on my forehead.'
'All right, come here.'

13. Swaminathan left his seat joyfully and hopped onto the platform. The teacher took out his cane from the drawer and shouted angrily, 'Open your hand, you little devil.' He whacked three wholesome cuts on each palm. Swami received them without blenching. After half a dozen the teacher asked, 'Will these do, or do you want some more?'

Swami merely held out his hand again and received two more; and the bell rang. Swami jumped down from the platform with a light heart, though his hands were smarting. He picked up his books, took out the letter lying in his pocket and ran to the headmaster's room. He found the door locked.

He asked the peon, 'Where is the headmaster?'

'Why do you want him?'

'My father has sent a letter for him.'



'He has taken the afternoon off and won't come back for a week. You can give the letter to the assistant headmaster. He will be here now.'

'Who is he?'

'Your teacher, Samuel. He will be here in a second.'

Swaminathan fled from the place. As soon as Swami went home with the letter, Father remarked, 'I knew you wouldn't deliver it, you coward.'

'I swear our headmaster is on leave,' Swaminathan began. Father replied, 'Don't lie in addition to being a coward...' Swami held up the envelope and said, 'I will give this to the headmaster as soon as he is back.' Father snatched it from his hand, tore it up and thrust it into the waste-paper basket under his table. He muttered, 'Don't come to me for help even if Samuel throttles you. You deserve your Samuel.'