



AN ASTROLOGER'S DAY

R K Narayan

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- R. K. Narayan's novels are like a box of Indian sweets: a highly-coloured container conceals a range of delectable treats, all different in a subtle way, but each one clearly from the same place.
- There are fourteen novels in the oeuvre – enough to create a world. Enthusiasts of his work will read them all and return to them time and again. The busy, or the less committed, may open the box and take out one at random – it does not really matter which order one reads them in. But be warned: the consumption of one leads to a strong craving for more.
- Narayan's life spanned the twentieth century, which meant that he belonged both to an old world and a new.

- At the time of his birth in 1906, the British Raj, that astonishing imperial conceit, was firmly in place, as were those iron-clad notions of caste that were to prove so difficult to shrug off.
- The British presence in India had brought with it a large civil service, an educational system, and railways – to all of which institutions the people of the subcontinent took with enthusiasm. But it had also brought with it a language, and the literature which that language created, and it is this which proved a most productive legacy.
- The British took English to India and the Indians gave back a literary tradition which continues to delight and enrich us to this day. Contemporary writers such as **Vikram Seth**, **Rohinton Mistry**, or **Anita Desai**, whose novels have given such pleasure to readers in Europe and North America, stand rooted in a tradition which R. K. Narayan, as one of the earlier Indian novelists to write in English, did a great deal to establish.

- Although Narayan did not draw attention to his personal life, he did write a memoir, *My Days*, which tells us a great deal about his boyhood years and the inception and development of his literary career.
- His childhood was fairly typical of that of a middle-class boy of the time. His father was the headmaster of a school, a somewhat stern figure in his professional life, and this connection with the world of education is very much apparent in the earlier novels, where schools, colleges, and the whole business of becoming educated play a major role.
- His father's job required mobility, and Narayan spent a number of childhood years living with his grandmother in Madras. Eventually, though, he joined his parents in Mysore, where he attended the school presided over by his father.

- Reared by his grandmother, Narayan completed his education in 1930 and briefly worked as a teacher before deciding to devote himself to writing. His first **novel**, *Swami and Friends* (1935), is an episodic narrative recounting the adventures of a group of schoolboys.
- That book and much of Narayan's later works are set in the fictitious South Indian town of Malgudi.
- Narayan typically portrays the peculiarities of human relationships and the ironies of Indian daily life, in which modern urban existence clashes with ancient tradition.
- His style is graceful, marked by genial humour, elegance, and simplicity.

- Among the best-received of Narayan's 34 novels are -
- ***The English Teacher* (1945),**
- ***Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955)**
- ***The Guide* (1958)**
- ***The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961)**
- ***The Vendor of Sweets* (1967)**
- ***A Tiger for Malgudi* (1983).**

- Narayan also wrote a number of short stories; collections include ***Lawley Road* (1956), *A Horse and Two Goats and Other Stories* (1970), *Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories* (1985), and *The Grandmother's Tale* (1993).** In addition to works of nonfiction (chiefly memoirs), he also published shortened modern prose versions of two Indian epics, ***The Ramayana* (1972) and *The Mahabharata* (1978).**

Summary

- “The Astrologer’s Day” is a short story which deals with a day in the life of an ordinary but fake astrologer. The setting of the story is a town, Malgudi which is located in South India, near to Madras.
- It is not a story of contemporary times but pre-independence times.
- The story opens at the midday. This is the time when the astrologer opens his business. The writer describes how he begins his business.
- He removes all his professional equipment like cowries shells, charts, Palmyra writing etc. He is also dressed typically like an astrologer to attract customers.

- His forehead is bright with sacred ash and vermilion. His eyes are assumed to have a prophetic light by his customers. He wears a saffron turban. Thus the astrologer presented himself so perfectly that he was consequently a point of attraction for all the people.
- The writer describes the path along the Town Hall Park where the astrologer sits to lure his prospective customers. He carried on his business under a tamarind tree on the Town Hall road.
- The path was the right place to carry on his business as it was amply crowded with different trades and traders like medicine sellers, hardware and junk, magicians, cloth – sellers etc.
- Next to him sat a fried groundnut vendor whose gas light enabled him to carry on his business even after sunset.

- The astrologer was a shrewd person who hardly had any knowledge of astrology. He just made guesswork when people approached him.
- He had to work hard to earn his wages. He had absconded from his native village since he didn't want to continue the traditional occupation of his forefathers i.e. farming.
- He never had any plans to return to his native village. He was a mastermind at analyzing human mind and psychology.
- His strong perception made him diagnose the exact problem of his customers. His customers would finally leave satisfied.

- He closed his shop for the day when his neighbour, groundnut vendor blew out his light.
- On the day under description in the story, the groundnut vendor left and the astrologer was packing up his wares when he located a man standing before him. He perceived him to be his prospective customer.
- When the astrologer invited him, he posed a challenge before him and his astrological science. They have a deal between them.
- The man gave him an anna and asked the astrologer to answer his questions and if he doesn't answer satisfactorily he will have to return the anna with interest.

- At the same time if the astrologer can answer the questions satisfactorily he would give him eight annas.
- But if the astrologer fails, he would pay double amount i.e., sixteen annas to the man. Thus the deal was finalized between them.
- The astrologer prayed to heaven. Then suddenly the astrologer denied the challenge and requested the man to let him go. The man said that he will not let him give in.

- He holds him in his grip thereby making the astrologer shiver. Finally, the astrologer realized that he is trapped and has no chance of moving out. The man turned out to be a criminal by profession.
- The astrologer shivered and unwillingly accepted the challenge. He started telling about some woman but the man was not satisfied and stopped him.
- He had a single question that whether he would get what he was searching for.
- The man promised the astrologer that if he is satisfied with his answers, he would pay him a rupee. The astrologer prayed a few incantations before replying.

- The astrologer began with his prophecies by saying to the man that you were left for dead in the past and a knife has passed once on your chest. The man was excited at this information since he had really faced it.
- After he got wounded, he was thrown into a well nearby to die. A passerby saw him and rescued him and that is how he was saved from dying. The man was waiting to revenge the culprit who had attacked him and was in search of the culprit who had tried to kill him.
- The only thing which the man wanted to know from the astrologer was if he can find his killer. The astrologer instantly replied that the culprit had died four months ago in a far – off town. The man was disappointed to hear this.

- The astrologer identified the name of the man before him as Guru Nayak. He told the man that his village was a two days' journey to the north and warned him to go back home and never to travel south again.
- He asked him to return to his hometown immediately as his life was in danger if he left his hometown again. The man replied that he left home just to search the culprit who had tried to kill him and was interested in knowing if he had died in the worst way.
- The astrologer satisfied him by informing that the culprit was crushed under a lorry. The man left after giving the astrologer a handful of coins. The astrologer too winded up his belongings and went home.

- The astrologer's wife was waiting for him worriedly since he was unusually late that day. The astrologer flung the coins at his wife to count. They were twelve and a half annas in all.
- She was extremely happy to encounter that big amount. She planned to buy jaggery and coconut for their child, who was demanding for sweets from a long time. However, the astrologer looked worried and was not happy like his wife. He was angry at Guru Nayak as he had cheated him.
- He promised to give a rupee and actually gave only twelve and a half annas.

- After dinner, he shared the secret of his life with his wife. He said that a great burden of his life was gone that day. He always felt that he had killed Guru Nayak.
- So the astrologer had run away from his native village due to the fear of being accused as a murderer. He settled in Malgudi and married and decided that he would never return back to his native village.
- Actually, the man who tried to kill Guru Nayak was the astrologer himself. So he was able to make accurate predictions about him though he hardly knew astrology.

- The astrologer confessed to his wife that in his youth he was into bad company with Guru Nayak.
- He drank, gambled and quarreled badly one day and had a fight and had almost killed Guru Nayak.
- This is how life with its unpredictable twists and turns had created an astrologer out of a vagabond.

Questions

- How does the astrologer's appearance help him attract customers?
- How do you characterise the astrologer's attitude toward the stranger?
- What details does the astrologer give the stranger about his past?
- Why does he advise the stranger to go home immediately?
- Suspense is the feeling of anticipation you may have as you read. In this story, what details contributed to your feelings of suspense and surprise? Explain.