

## 2. The Gold Watch

Mulk Raj Anand

**Mulk Raj Anand** (1907–2003), one of the most prolific writers of novels and short stories, was also a journalist and art critic. He was the editor of the art magazine *Marg*. Born in Peshawar (now in Pakistan), he was educated in Lahore, London and Cambridge. He obtained his doctorate in philosophy from Cambridge University. Inspired by the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi, he took part in the struggle for freedom and was imprisoned for some time. He said that he was 'one of those who had begun to question everything in our background, to look away from the big houses and to feel the misery of the inert, disease-ridden, underfed and illiterate people.' In his novel *Untouchable* (1935) and *Coolie* (1936), he wrote about the evils of the caste system in India and expressed his deep sympathy for the poor and the downtrodden. In his novels and short stories, he waged a relentless war against social injustice. *The Lost Child and other Stories* (1934), *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937), *The Sword and the Sickie* (1942), *The Barbers' Trade Union and Other Stories* (1944), *The Tractor and the Corn Goddess* (1947), *The Power of Darkness* (1959), *Lajwanti and other Stories* (1966), *Confessions of a Lover* (1976), are well-known collections of his short stories. His novel *Morning Face* (1970) won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1972.

In 'The Gold Watch', Anand tells the story of Srijut Sudershan Sharma, a humble and loyal employee of Henry King & Co., who was humiliated and cleverly removed from service by Mr Acton, his European boss, five years before his expected date of retirement.

There was something about the smile of Mr Acton, when he came over to Srijut Sudershan Sharma's table, which betokened disaster. But as the Sahib had only said, 'Mr Sharma, I have brought something for you specially from London—you must come into my office on Monday and take it...', the poor old despatch clerk could not surmise the real meaning of the General Manager's remark. The fact that Mr Acton should come over to his table at all, fawn upon him and say what he had said was, of course, most flattering. For, very rarely did the head of the firm condescend to move down

GM - Acton

Clerk - Srijut Sudershan Sharma

sundry - not imp enough to be named separately

THE GOLD WATCH 17

the corridor, where the Indian staff of the distribution department of the great marmalade empire of Henry King & Co. worked. But that smile on Mr Acton's face! Specially, since Mr Acton was not known to smile too much, being a morose, old Sahib, hard-working, conscientious and a slave driver. Famous as a shrewd businessman, he was so devoted to the job of spreading the monopoly of King's Marmalade and sundry other products that his wife had left him after a three-month spell of marriage and never returned to India, though no one quite knew whether she was separated or divorced from him or merely preferred to stay away.

The fact that Acton Sahib had smiled was enough to give Srijut Sharma cause for thought. But then Srijut Sharma was, in spite of his nobility of soul and fundamental innocence, experienced enough by this time in his study of the vague, detached race of the white Sahibs. He had clearly noticed the slight awkward curl of the upper lip, behind which the determined, tobacco-stained long teeth showed, for the briefest moment, a snarl suppressed by the deliberation which Acton Sahib had brought to the whole operation of coming over and pronouncing these kind words. And what could be the reason for his being singled out from amongst the twenty-five odd members of the distribution department? He, the despatch clerk, normally received just an occasional greeting, 'Hello, Sharm—how are you getting on?' from the head of his own department, Mr West and twice or thrice a year he was called into the cubicle by West Sahib for a reprimand, because some letters or packets had gone astray. Otherwise, the incarnation of clock-work efficiency as he was, and well-versed in the routine of his job, there was no occasion for any break in the monotony of that anonymous, smooth-working empire, at least where he was concerned. To be sure, there was the continual gossip of the clerks and the accountants, the bickerings and jealousies of the people above him, for grades and promotions and pay. But he, Sharma, had been employed twenty years

dept - despatch.

snarl - to make sound while smiling

reprimand - to tell someone officially that he had done something wrong



*grihastha* *business* *college career*  
 ago as a special favour—he was not even a matriculate but had picked up the work somehow and though unwanted and constantly reprimanded by West Sahib in the first years, he had been retained because of the legend of saintliness he had acquired. He had five more years of service to do, because then he would be fifty-five, and the family-raising grihastha portion of his life in the four-fold scheme, prescribed by religion, finished, he hoped to retire to his home town, Jullundur, where his father still ran the confectioner's shop on the Mall Road.

'And what did Acton Sahib have to say to you, Mr Sharma?' asked Miss Violet Dixon, the plain snub-nosed Anglo-Indian typist, in her singsong voice. She considered herself safe enough with this old family man of fifty who had greyed prematurely, and freely conversed with him, especially during the lunch hour, while she believed that everyone else had only one goal in life—to sleep with her.

'He has brought something for me from England,' Srijut Sharma answered.

'There are such pretty things in U.K.', she said, 'My! I wish I could go there! My sister is there, you know! Married! ...'

She had told Sharma all these things before. So he was not interested. Specially today, because all his thoughts were concentrated on the inner meaning of Mr Acton's sudden visitation and the ambivalent smile.

'Well, half-day today, I am off,' said Violet and moved away with the peculiar snobbish agility of the Mem Sahib she affected to be.

Srijut Sharma stared at her blankly, though absorbing her physical form into his subconscious with more than the old uncle's interest he had always pretended to take in her. It was only her snub nose, like that of Surpanakha, the sister of the demon king Ravana, that stood in the way of her getting married, he felt; for she indeed had a tolerable figure. But he lowered his eyes as soon as the thought of Miss Dixon's

*deep*  
 body began to simmer in the cauldron of his inner life; as a good Hindu, every woman, apart from the wife, was to him a mother or a sister. And his obsession about the meaning of Acton Sahib's words returned from the pent-up curiosity with greater force, now that he realised the vastness of the space of time during which he would have to wait in suspense before knowing what the boss had brought for him and why. He took up his faded sola topee, which, with the bush shirt and trousers, was among the few concessions to modernity which he had made, and got up from his chair. On his way out he beckoned Dugdu sepoy from the verandah and asked:

'Has Acton Sahib gone? Do you know?'

'Abhi Sahib in lift going down,' Dugdu said.

Srijut Sharma made quickly for the stairs and, throwing all caution about slipping on the polished marble steps to the winds, hurtled down. There were three floors below him and he began to sweat both through fear of missing the Sahib and the heat of mid-April. As he reached the ground floor, he saw Acton Sahib already going out of the door.

It was now or never.

Srijut Sharma rushed out. But he was conscious that quite a few employers of the firm would be coming out of the two lifts and he might be seen talking to the Sahib. And that was not done—outside the office. The sahibs belonged to their private worlds, where no intrusion was tolerated, for they refused to listen to pleas of advancement through improper channels.

Mr Acton's uniformed driver opened the door of the Buick and the Sahib sat down, spreading the shadow of grimness all around him. Srijut Sharma hesitated, for the demeanour of the Goanese chauffeur was frightening.

By now the driver had smartly shut the back door of the car and was proceeding to his seat.

*Acton*  
*Srijut Sundeechan Sharma*  
*West*  
*Violet Dixon*  
*Dugdu Sepoy*  
*Goanese driver*



That was his only chance. Taking off his hat, he rushed up to the window of the car, and rudely thrust his head into the presence of Mr Acton. Luckily for him, the Sahib did not brush him aside, but smiled a broader smile than before and said,

'You want to know what I have brought for you—well, it is a gold watch with an inscription on it . . . See me Monday morning. . . .'

The Sahib's anticipation of his question threw Srijut Sharma further off his balance. The sweat poured down from his forehead as he mumbled: 'Thank you, sir, thank you. . . .'

'Chalo, driver!' the Sahib ordered. And the chauffeur turned and looked hard at Srijut Sharma.

The despatch clerk withdrew with a sheepish, abject smile on his face and stood, hat in the left hand, the right hand raised to his forehead in the attitude of a near-military salute.

The motor-car moved off. But Srijut Sharma still stood, as though he had been struck dumb. He was neither happy nor sad at this moment, only benumbed by the shock of surprise. Why should he be singled out from the whole distribution department of Henry King & Co. for the privilege of the gift of a gold watch? He had done nothing brave that he could remember. 'A gold watch, with an inscription on it!' Then the truth came upon him! The Sahib wanted him to retire.

The revelation rose to the surface of his awareness from the deep obsessive fear which had possessed him for nearly half an hour, and his heart began to palpitate. He reeled a little, then steadied himself and got on to the pavement, looking after the car which had already turned the corner into Nicol Road. He turned and began to walk towards Victoria Terminus Station. From there he had to take the train to Thana, thirty miles out, where he had lived, for cheapness, almost all the years he had been in Bombay. His steps were heavy, for he was now reasonably sure that he would get

notice of retirement on Monday. He tried to think of some other possible reason why the Sahib had decided to give him the gift of a gold watch with an inscription. There was no other explanation. His doom was sealed. What would he say to his wife? And his son had not passed the matriculation yet. How would he support his family? The provident fund would not amount to much specially in these days of rising prices. . . .

He felt a pull at his heart. He paused for breath and tried to calm himself. The blood pressure! Or was it merely wind? He must not get into a panic. He steadied his gait and walked along, muttering to himself, 'Shanti! Shanti! Shanti!' as though the very incantation of the formula of peace would restore his calm and equanimity.

During the weekend, Srijut Sharma was able to conceal his panic and confusion behind the facade of an exaggerated bonhomie, with the skill of an accomplished natural actor. On Saturday night he went with his wife and son to see Professor Ram's Circus, which was performing opposite the Portuguese Church, and got up later than usual on Sunday morning, spent a little longer at his prayers, but seemed normal enough on the surface. However, he ate very little of the gala meal of rice kichri put before him by his wife and seemed lost in thought for a few moments at a time. His illiterate but shrewd wife noticed that there was something on his mind.

'Thou has not eaten at all today,' she said, since he had left the tasty papadum and the mango pickle untouched. 'Look at Hari! He has left nothing in his thali.'

'Hoon,' he answered abstractedly. And then, realizing he might be found out for the worried, unhappy man he was, he tried to bluff his wife. 'As a matter of fact, I was thinking of some happy news that the Sahib gave me yesterday. He has brought a gold watch as a gift for me from Vilayat. . . .'

*bonhomie - cheerful friendliness*



Hari  
'Then, Papaji, give me the silver watch which you are using now,' Hari, his young son, cried impetuously. 'I have no watch and I am always late everywhere.'

'Not so impatient, son,' counselled Hari's mother. 'Let your father get the gold first and then he will surely give you his silver watch.'

In the ordinary way, Srijut Sharma would have endorsed his wife's sentiments. But, today, he felt that, on the face of it, his son's demand was justified. How should Hari know that the silver watch, the gold watch and a gold ring would be all the jewellery he, the father, would have for security against hard days, if the gold watch was, as he surmised, only a token being offered by the firm to sugarcoat the bitter pill they would ask him to swallow—retirement five years before the appointed time. He hesitated, then lifted his head, smiled at his son and said: 'Acha Kaka, you can have my silver watch.'

'Can I have it, really, Papaji—hurry!' The boy shouted, rushing away to fetch the watch from his father's pocket. 'Give it to me, now, today!'

'Nay, son, you are so selfish!' his mother exclaimed. For, with the peculiar sensitiveness of a woman, she had surmised from the manner in which her husband had hung his head down and then tried to smile as he lifted his face to his son, that the father of Hari was upset inside him, or at least not in his usual mood of accepting life evenly, accompanying this acceptance with the pious invocation—'Shanti! Shanti!'

Hari brought the silver watch, adjusted it to his left ear, to see if it ticked and happy in the possession of it, did a little caper. Srijut Sharma said nothing; pushing his thali away he got up to wash his hands.

The next day it happened as Srijut Sharma had anticipated. He went to see Mr Acton as soon as the Sahib came in, for the suspense of the weekend had mounted to a crescendo by Monday morning and he had been trembling with trepi-

dation, pale and completely unsure of himself. The General Manager called him in immediately and peon Dugdu presented the little slip with the despatch clerk's name on it.

'Please sit down,' said Mr Acton, lifting his grey-haired head from the papers before him. And then, pulling his keys from his trouser pocket by the gold chain to which they were adjusted, he opened a drawer and fetched out what Sharma thought was a beautiful red case.

'Mr Sharma, you have been a loyal friend of this firm for many years . . . and you know your loyalty has been your greatest asset here . . . because . . . or . . . Otherwise, we could have got someone with better qualifications to do your work! . . . Now . . . we are thinking of increasing the efficiency of the business all round! . . . And, well, we feel that you would also like, at your age, to retire to your native Punjab. . . . So, as a token of our appreciation for your loyalty to Henry King & Co., we are presenting you this gold watch.' And he pushed the red case forward. →

Srijut Sharma began to speak, but though his mouth opened, he could not go on. 'I am fifty years old,' he wanted to say, 'and I still have five years to go.' His facial muscles seemed to contract, his eyes were dimmed with the fume of frustration and bitterness, his forehead was covered with sweat. At least there might have been a little ceremony of the presentation. He could not even utter the words, 'Thank you, sir!'

'Of course, you will also have your provident fund and one month's leave with pay before you retire.'

Again Srijut Sharma tried to voice his inner protest in words which would convey his meaning without seeming to be disloyal, for he did not want to obliterate the one concession the Sahib had made to the whole record of his service with his firm. It was just likely that Mr Acton would remind him of his failings as a despatch clerk if he dared indicate that he was not amenable to the suggestion made by the Sahib on behalf of Henry King & Co.



'Look at the watch—it has an inscription on it which will please you,' said Mr Acton, to get over the embarrassment of the tension created by the silence of the despatch clerk.

These words hypnotised Sharma and, stretching his hand across the large table, he reached out for the gift. Mr Acton noticed the unsureness of the hand and pushed that case further forward.

Srijut Sharma picked up the red box, but in his eagerness to follow the Sahib's behests, he dropped it while holding it aloft. The Sahib's face grew livid as he picked up the box and hurriedly opened it. Then, lifting the watch from its socket, he wound it and applied it to his ear. It was ticking. He turned it round and showed the inscription to the despatch clerk.

Srijut Sharma put both his hands out, more steadily this time, and took the gift in the manner in which a beggar receives alms. He brought the glistening object within the orbit of his eyes, but they were dimmed with tears and he could not read anything. He tried to smile, however, and then with a great heave of his hand, which rocked his body from side to side he pronounced the words:

'Thank you, sir.'

Mr Acton got up, took the gold watch from Srijut Sharma's hands, and put it back in the socket of the red case. Then he stretched his right hand towards the despatch clerk, while he offered the case to him with the left hand.

Srijut Sharma took the Sahib's right hand gratefully in his two sweating hands and opened the palms out to receive the case.

'Good luck, Sharma,' Mr Acton said, 'come and see me after your leave is over. And when your son matriculates, let me know if I can do something for him.'

Dumb, and with bent head, the fumes of his violent emotions rising above the mouth which could have expressed

them, he withdrew in the abject manner of his ancestors going out of the presence of feudal lords.

Mr Acton saw the danger to the watch and went ahead to open the door, so that the clerk could go out without knocking his head against the door or falling down. As Srijut Sharma emerged from the General Manager's office, involuntary tears flowed from his eyes and his lower lip fell in a pout that somehow controlled him from breaking down completely.

The eyes of the whole office were on him. In a moment, a few of the men clustered around his person. One of them took the case from his hand, opened it and read the inscription out aloud:

'In appreciation of the loyal service of Mr Sharma to Henry King & Co., on his retirement.'

The curiosity of his colleagues became a little enthusiastic as the watch passed from hand to hand.

Unable to stand because of a wave of dizziness, Srijut Sharma sat down on his chair, his head between his hands, and let the tears roll down. (One of his colleagues, Mr Banaji, the accountant, patted his back understandingly) But the pity was too much for him.

'To be sure, Seth Makhanji, the new partner, has a relative to fill Sharma's position,' someone commented.

'No, no,' another refuted the suggestion. 'No one is required to kill himself with work in our high concern. We are given the Sunday off! And a fat pension in the years ahead! The bosses are full of love for us, indeed!'

'Damn fine gold watch, but it does not go!' said Sriram, the typist.

Mr Banaji took the watch from Sriram and putting it in the case placed it before Srijut Sharma and signalled to the others to move away.

As Srijut Sharma realised that his colleagues were gone, he lifted his morose head, took the case, and began to

walk away. Mr Banaji saw him off to the door, his hand on Sharma's back.

'Sahibji,' the Parsi accountant said, as the lift came and the liftman took Srijut Sharma in.

On the way home, Srijut Sharma found that the gold watch went only when it was shaken. Obviously, some delicate part had broken when he had dropped it on Mr Acton's table. He would get it mended; no, he must save all his cash – he could not afford the luxury of having a watch repaired. He should not have been weak with his son and given him his old silver watch. But as there would be no office to go to any more, he would not need to look at the time very much, specially in Jullundur where time stood still and no one bothered about keeping appointments.

### Glossary

betokened	: indicated, suggested
surmise	: to guess
fawn upon	: to speak flatteringly, try to win someone's favour by praising or by servile behaviour
condescend	: to behave in a way that shows one's feeling of superiority
monopoly	: complete control not shared by others
marmalade	: a clear, thick jam or jelly made with citrus fruits (i.e. orange) also containing the shredded peel of the fruit
morose	: sullen, gloomy
conscientious	: careful, meticulous
monotony	: repetitiveness, dullness
anonymous	: unknown, mysterious
empire	: kingdom, domain
bickerings	: fights, squabbles
snub-nosed	: button-nosed, or to have a blunt nose
prematurely	: too early, in advance
agility	: quickness, alertness

Mem Sahib	: form of address used in colonial (British-ruled) India to refer to a European woman
slave driver	: an unsympathetic person who makes employees work hard like slaves
white sahibs	: European masters
reprimand	: rebuke, speak severely
incarnation	: embodiment in flesh, living type
<i>grihastha</i>	: person living a married life
ambivalent	: having both contrary or similar values, feelings, etc; love and hate at the same time
Ravana	: Ravana is the ruler of Lanka in the Hindu epic, the Ramayana
simmer	: boil, cook slowly
cauldron	: large vessel for cooking
Surpanakha	: King Ravana's sister whose nose was cut off by Lakshmana for her misbehaviour in the Ramayana
sola topee (pith helmet)	: a lightweight helmet made from the pith plant used to shield the wearer from the sun
sahib	: a form of address used in colonial India for a European man meaning sir or master
Buick	: an American car
grimness	: coldness, severity
demeanour	: manner, behaviour
benumbed	: to feel numb
palpitate	: to race or pound
gait	: manner of walking
incantation	: chanting
equanimity	: calmness or self control
impetuously	: spontaneously, immediately, with haste
endorsed	: approved
sugarcoat	: to make an unpleasant thing seem a little less so
pious	: religious
invocation	: prayer or chant
abject	: deserving contempt, low
facade	: front or face; outward look, appearance