

The Stupid Man and The Cap

THE stupid man has slept. Hey ! ... stupid I why are you sleeping? The train is also running slowly. It halts mid way in the forest for unknown reasons and then continues. Sometimes one has a doubt whether the train is continuing or has halted forever. Filled with dampness in the dark compartment, the man starts remembering about his cap. Where has he lost his cap?

Suddenly the man decided to sit with the cap on! It's a cap or flower? He has a bouquet on the hand. He touched his head to find the whereabouts of the cap. Whose cap is this? Is it of Gandhiji, Nehru or some Pathan? Hurriedly he touched the flowers in hand. By the fragrance of them, he started thinking about a beautiful girl at some distant town for whom he was taking them from Bhubaneswar. These impolite flowers have started withering midway. They have folded their heads and thrown the petals around like the fallen crown of a defeated king. He was carrying these dying flowers for a marigold colored girl. What shall he carry for that beauty if everything starts withering midway? Can he offer his love in empty hands? On the beginning of this expedition, the florist had advised him, "Sahib, if you can save them from the smoke of the engine and fire in the air, then you don't have to speak up anything. That marigold colored girl shall turn into a china rose only on the view of these flowers" Like time distances itself from the walls of age, these heartless flowers have started withering after so much care.

He has to catch a train to south from the next station. As he has spent his teen-age in a cycle in this town, he started believing that excluding Marwaris, Ganesh Puja and political riots in Jatni, a bouquet of flower should be available for his girl friend. There was still sometime for the next train. So a bouquet could be purchased ' May be his in the next train with fresh flowers shall make him arrive near that marigold girl in

right time. "Hey! Dear! Are Aparajita (Amaranth) flowers available here?'

"Which flowers did you say "Aparajita"

He could see the man giving a big laugh at him. "Aparajita is the name of a flower or film heroine?"

She may be a film heroine, maybe a squint eyed or lame woman. There is nothing to feel bad about it. What he did not appreciate was the way the man laughed at.

"I don't know about a flower of such kind. Better you can ask the florist near the over bridge. As he sells flowers, so also romantic he is ". The man threw these words before leaving the platform.

He knew this town for a long time. Still, being hesitant he started to the town with a telenga rickshaw puller. He was vexed by the overgrown beard and tobacco smell of the rickshaw puller. He saw a large congregation at the heart of the town

"Is there a fair going on here?" He inquired. Lights of variegated colors glimmered around.

"Fair? Yes, you can call it a fair, Babu!" reiterated the rickshaw pller.

"What do you mean by calling it a fair? I couldn't get you?"

"What is there to understand in it, Babu! It is not a big puzzle. Earlier there used to be a great fair here. Everything including large pandals, swings, death wells, opera, magic feats and Akshyaya Mohanty's melody were held here. The loafer songs of Akshyaya Mohanty were repeated over public address systems and the teenager girls were enjoying the whistling in the tune of those songs behind them.

He wanted to ask something different but changed his mind and decided to peep in to the pandal from the rickshaw, that passed through the crowd and went further. He could only see a cap on the pandal. The noise of the crowd thinned down after sometime but suddenly he felt as if the whole crowd of the fair had started chasing him, lamenting on a high pitch. He looked back through the backdrop of the rickshaw. Very few people were walking around on the black road. The rickshaw puller also remained silent for sometime. After few moments of silence he felt being lost in the crowd like an orphan hero in a movie. He was not lost but had lagged behind hundreds of miles. The life ran on the wheels of the rickshaw. Finally the rickshaw stopped at the market.

There was a bigger crowd in the market. People were returning amidst processions and slogans. Happiness did lurk somewhere in the town. The swelling crowd could also mean that India against Pakistan won another cricket match.

Walking little further he felt like being strangled. All the happy people marching in the town were engaged in bating. Two cocks were fighting with sharp knives on their legs. Bleeding on each attack, the cocks were crying loudly but the people were dancing in joy. Suddenly the fat cock lolled the red one and half of the people died on the spot. The fat cock was also bleeding profusely with frustrations of success.

The stupid man wanted to vomit but could not. The knife was somewhere near the throat. At least he had such a feeling. He decided to return after buying flowers from the shop. Everything including the market, the cockfight, people busy in speeches and clapping remained the same. In a heavy heart, he was surprised to find the same cap on the pandal earlier over the heads of million spectators. The man of the pandal during last trip had been able to make the crowd wear the cap of his choice.

The crowd started looking back. Everybody had tears rolling down the eyes towards the nearby river. The women and children were sobbing and crying aloud. The man on stage turned into a falcon and laughed ha-ha-ha.

The stupid man started remembering his maternal uncle, his school holidays, the pond, the straw-ghost on the fields and lightless nights. He was in deep love with his maternal uncle who had a sheep called 'Ram. One day the neighbor's sheep injured Ram in a small fight. His uncle didn't take food for ten days. While searching for his uncle in one afternoon, he witnessed a peculiar sight. His uncle has forcibly held the ship and Ram was bashing at it. He developed a sense of hatred towards this man there after.

The stupid man hurriedly ran into the platform. A fear of loss overpowered him. He felt as if uncle's sheep was bashing below his ass. God knows where he lost his soul and childhood. Probably it was lost amidst thousand and lakhs of people. He stood lonely, helpless and besmeared into mire of abasement and humiliation. The train was yet to arrive. He had thought that the train would reach in time and submitting the flowers at the feet of the marigold beauty just at the dawn, he would say in a happy and complacent mood," I am

yours and you are mine for ever! Aimlessly he gazed into the platform, which was slowly being painted black by darkness. Shockingly enough, he found the platform full of torsos. Not a single man with the head intact was available.

A mongoose of man's size came to his front. He tried to seek refuge in the incidents outside but everything looked pensive and insipid.

"Babu, give me a coin

The mongoose's chain was tied on a person's waist. He had a begging bowl in his hand which contained some coins.

Hey! Where is your cap?"

"Where is your own cap? Somebody asked within him.

"I have thrown my cap, Babuji", said the mongoose and removed the cover from the head immediately. Neither it nor the master had head on top!

"Babuji, you need a head for a cap. We are poor people. We have carried cap for last fifty years and in return lost our heads! Where shall I get a cap for the headless?" the mongoose said.

The stupid man still had some doubts. The master must have hidden the cap somewhere. Can someone live without a cap? Every one of us has a cap - of parochialism, selfishness, ignorance, pride or prejudice. You are not allowed to remove the cap because the people, who permitted you to wear this cap, themselves are wearing caps of different colors and desires. One above the other ... of varied interests. So you, me and all or us are torsos, headless. We have no courage to have a cap of our own choice, hat of our own color and wishes.

"Give me a coin", the mongoose asked again. His master gave a hopeful look. 'Me look made him feel as if a dagger was waiting to cut him into pieces and roast in the furnace of badly desires.

Forcibly he got his eyes back from the man and skipped into the train of his destination. The train started running with an echo, matching his heart beats. chhuk... Chhuk... Chhuk Chhuk Chhuk Chhuk...

Suddenly the thought of a man called Ghana Panda disturbed him. His wife had given birth to twins when he was sixty-five. The son played with the stupid man in the day and the daughter in the midnight dreams. She was catching birds and running behind squirrels' in deep forests. Riding the tiger of black desires she roamed with him in the dark forest. He murmured an old song "*De, de mera bis rupeya* (Give me my twenty rupees)

"Hey bastard! Are you coming back or not? This thunder voice of Ghana Panda would always come to break his dreams with that girl. He falls down from the bed on the floor and the derailed train of dreams starts marching directionless to the wild forest. Since the kids were late born, Ghana Panda had doubts about his wife's character.

Another mongoose entered in and turning his face started begging, "Give me a coin !" All the passengers looked towards him. He gave an ear to the whistle and rhythm of the

train. They echoed, "Give me a coin!" The whole train started begging to him, Give us coins!"

The stupid man was surprised to find everybody's hands were palmless

"Where are your palms?"

"Give us coins, Give us coins!"

"How they were chopped off "

"Give US coins, Give us coins?"

"Have you put your hand in a grinder or oven

"Give us ... "

"Are you leprosy stricken or cancer hit

"Give us ...",

He started thinking about Ghana Panda's son who came to beg some money after the death of his father. The stupid man had asked, "Do You feel miserable over your father's death?"

"....."

"Your Father was a very angry man. You had told before about his cruelty and selfishness. He was taking the best of food available in the house while the plain stuff was left for others. Now you should feel happy that he was no more.

The stupid man couldn't recall the color and size of the cap, Ghan Panda's son was wearing on that day. He reiterated, "No, my dear friend! I am feeling very bad because I administered poison to him in his favorite chicken *masala* and he slept forever. He was my genuine father although he didn't believe it in his lifetime!

The train stopped with a jerk. The stupid man could feel the bashing of uncle's sheep below his ass. Everything started in a chorus inside the compartment. We lost our palms only by caring for our cap and protecting our head from illusions, frustrations and duality, he thought.

He closed his eyes for few minutes. A deep silence prevailed over this period. He opened the rear window and looked outside. Instead of reaching at the desired station on the morning, the train had stopped midway and turned into a Rock Hill. Up above, the clouds were chasing to catch the moon. He was alone, midway, on the Rock Hill, inside the dark forest. There were caps all around. Taking the advantage of darkness, the co-passengers have got down to become frozen trees in endless forest of selfishness. He threw the flowers towards the downhill and felt relieved.

The stupid man turned into an intelligent man... of course he had his cap on.