

AN ASTROLOGER'S DAY  
and other stories

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## THE DOCTOR'S WORD

PEOPLE came to him when the patient was on his last legs. Dr. Raman often burst out, "Why couldn't you have come a day earlier?" The reason was obvious—visiting fee twenty-five rupees, and more than that people liked to shirk the fact that the time had come to call in Dr. Raman; for them there was something ominous in the very association. As a result when the big man came on the scene it was always a quick decision one way or another. There was no scope or time for any kind of wavering or whitewashing. Long years of practice of this kind had bred in the doctor a certain curt truthfulness; for that very reason his opinion was valued; he was not a mere doctor expressing an opinion but a judge pronouncing a verdict. The patient's life hung on his words. This never unduly worried Dr. Raman. He never believed that agreeable words ever saved lives. He did not think it was any of his business to provide unnecessary dope when as a matter of course Nature would tell them the truth in a few hours. However, when he glimpsed the faintest sign of hope, he rolled up his sleeve and stepped into the arena: it might be hours or days, but he never withdrew till he wrested the prize from *Yama's* hands.

Today, standing over a bed, the doctor felt that he himself needed someone to tell him soothing lies. He mopped his brow with his kerchief and sat down in

the chair beside the bed. On the bed lay his dearest friend in the world : Gopal. They had known each other for forty years now, starting with their Kindergarten days. They could not, of course, meet as much as they wanted, each being wrapped in his own family and profession. Occasionally, on a Sunday, Gopal would walk into the consulting room, and wait patiently in a corner till the doctor was free. And then they would dine together, see a picture, and talk of each other's life and activities. It was a classic friendship standing over, untouched by changing times, circumstances, and activities.

In his busy round of work, Dr. Raman had not noticed that Gopal had not called in for over three months now. He just remembered it when he saw Gopal's son sitting on a bench in the consulting hall, one crowded morning. Dr. Raman could not talk to him for over an hour. When he got up and was about to pass on to the operation room, he called up the young man and asked, "What brings you here, sir?" The youth was nervous and shy. "Mother sent me here."

"What can I do for you?"

"Father is ill . . ."

It was an operation day and he was not free till three in the afternoon. He rushed off straight from the clinic to his friend's house, in Lawley Extension.

Gopal lay in bed as if in sleep. The doctor stood over him and asked Gopal's wife, "How long has he been in bed?"

"A month and a half, doctor."

"Who is attending him?"

"A doctor in the next street. He comes down once in three days and gives him medicine."

"What is his name?" He had never heard of him. "Someone I don't know, but I wish he had had the goodness to tell me about it. Why, why, couldn't you have sent me word earlier?"

"We thought you would be busy and did not wish to trouble you unnecessarily." They were apologetic and miserable. There was hardly any time to be lost. He took off his coat and opened his bag. He took out an injection tube, the needle sizzled over the stove. The sick man's wife whimpered in a corner and essayed to ask questions.

"Please don't ask questions," snapped the doctor. He looked at the children who were watching the sterilizer, and said, "Send them all away somewhere, except the eldest."

He shot in the drug, sat back in his chair, and gazed on the patient's face for over an hour. The patient still remained motionless. The doctor's face gleamed with perspiration, and his eyelids drooped with fatigue. The sick man's wife stood in a corner and watched silently. She asked timidly, "Doctor, shall I make some coffee for you?" "No," he replied, although he felt famished, having missed his midday meal. He got up and said, "I will be back in a few minutes. Don't disturb him on any account." He picked up his bag and went to his car. In a quarter of an hour he was back, followed by an assistant and a nurse. The doctor told the lady of the house, "I have to perform an operation."

"Why, why? Why?" she asked faintly.

"I will tell you all that soon. Will you leave your son here to help us, and go over to the next house and stay there till I call you?"

The lady felt giddy and sank down on the floor,

unable to bear the strain. The nurse attended to her and led her out.

At about eight in the evening the patient opened his eyes and stirred slightly in bed. The assistant was overjoyed. He exclaimed enthusiastically, "Sir, he will pull through." The doctor looked at him coldly and whispered: "I would give anything to see him through but, but the heart . . ."

"The pulse has improved, Sir."

"Well, well," replied the doctor. "Don't trust it. It is only a false flash-up, very common in these cases." He ruminated for a while and added, "If the pulse will keep up till eight in the morning, it will go on for the next forty years, but I doubt very much if we shall see anything of it at all after two tonight."

He sent away the assistant and sat beside the patient. At about eleven the patient opened his eyes and smiled at his friend. He showed a slight improvement, he was able to take in a little food. A great feeling of relief and joy went through the household. They swarmed around the doctor and poured out their gratitude. He sat in his seat beside the bed, gazing sternly at the patient's face, hardly showing any signs of hearing what they were saying to him. The sick man's wife asked, "Is he now out of danger?" Without turning his head the doctor said, "Give glucose and brandy every forty minutes; just a couple of spoons will do." The lady went away to the kitchen. She felt restless. She felt she must know the truth whatever it was. Why was the great man so evasive? The suspense was unbearable. Perhaps he could not speak so near the patient's bed. She beckoned to him from the kitchen doorway. The doctor rose and went

over. She asked, "What about him now? How is he?" The doctor bit his lips and replied, looking at the floor, "Don't get excited. Unless you must know about it, don't ask now." Her eyes opened wide in terror. She clasped her hands together and implored: "Tell me the truth." The doctor replied, "I would rather not talk to you now." He turned round and went back to his chair. A terrible wailing shot through the still house; the patient stirred and looked about in bewilderment. The doctor got up again, went over to the kitchen door, drew it in securely and shut off the wail.

When the doctor resumed his seat the patient asked in the faintest whisper possible, "Is that someone crying?" The doctor advised, "Don't exert yourself. You mustn't talk." He felt the pulse. It was already agitated by the exertion. The patient asked, "Am I going? Don't hide it from me." The doctor made a deprecating noise and sat back in his chair. He had never faced a situation like this. It was not in his nature to whitewash. People attached great value to his word because of that. He stole a look at the other. The patient motioned a finger to draw him nearer and whispered, "I must know how long I am going to last. I must sign the will. It is all ready. Ask my wife for the despatch box. You must sign as a witness."

"Oh!" the doctor exclaimed. "You are exerting yourself too much. You must be quieter." He felt idiotic to be repeating it. "How fine it would be," he reflected, "to drop the whole business and run away somewhere without answering anybody any question!" The patient clutched the doctor's wrist with his weak fingers and said, "Ramu, it is my good

fortune that you are here at this moment. I can trust your word. I can't leave my property unsettled. That will mean endless misery for my wife and children. You know all about Subbiah and his gang. Let me sign before it is too late. Tell me. . . ."

"Yes, presently," replied the doctor. He walked off to his car, sat in the back seat and reflected. He looked at his watch. Midnight. If the will was to be signed, it must be done within the next two hours, or never. He could not be responsible for a mess there; he knew too well the family affairs and about those wolves, Subbiah and his gang. . . . But what could he do? If he asked him to sign the Will, it would virtually mean a death sentence and destroy the thousandth part of a chance that the patient had of survival. He got down from the car and went in. He resumed his seat in the chair. The patient was staring at him appealingly. The doctor said to himself, "If my word can save his life, he shall not die. The will be damned." He called, "Gopal, listen." This was the first time he was going to do a piece of acting before a patient, simulate a feeling, and conceal his judgment. He stooped over the patient and said with deliberate emphasis, "Don't worry about the will now. You are going to live. Your heart is absolutely sound." A new glow suffused the patient's face as he heard it. He asked in a tone of relief, "Do you say so? If it comes from your lips it must be true. . . ."

The doctor said, "Quite right. You are improving every second. Sleep in peace. You must not exert yourself on any account. You must sleep very soundly. I will see you in the morning." The patient looked at him gratefully for a moment and then closed his eyes.



The doctor picked up his bag and went out shutting the door softly behind him.

On his way home he stopped for a moment at his hospital, called out his assistant, and said, "That Lawley Extension case. You might expect the collapse any second now. Go there with a tube of . . . in hand, and give it in case the struggle is too hard at the end. Hurry up."

Next morning he was back at Lawley Extension at ten. From his car he made a dash for the sick bed. The patient was awake and looked very well. The assistant reported satisfactory pulse. The doctor put his tube at his heart, listened for a while, and told the sick man's wife, "Don't look so unhappy, lady. Your husband will live to be ninety." When they were going back to the hospital, the assistant sitting beside him in the car asked, "Is he going to live, sir?"

"I will bet on it. He will live to be ninety. He has turned the corner. How he has survived this attack will be a puzzle to me all my life," replied the doctor.