

AN ASTROLOGER'S DAY by R K Narayan



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One of the priorities of the National Association for the Teaching of English's Multicultural Committee is to encourage the reading of literature in other versions of English from other cultures. We are working currently on making short stories accessible. They are quick to read and often provide interesting insights into other cultures.

Indian short stories are written in one of India's many languages and then translated versions are often produced in other Indian languages and/or in Indian English. You get the impression from these stories that India has a love hate relationship with English so quite often the versions move away from the version of English we are familiar with, but not so far as to be unintelligible.

So this version is only one version of the story and we would encourage you to try telling this story orally to others in your own English or any other language where you feel confident to be a good story teller.

Currently you can find an excellent new film based on this story on YouTube in Hindi but with subtitles in English:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TkfrjYFQoZA>

Please let us know if the link disappears.

Webaddress: <http://www.collaborativelearning.org/astrologersday.pdf>

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Good for all pupils!
Vital for EAL pupils!

**Basic principles behind our talk for learning activities:
Oracy in curriculum contexts!**

It's empowering to talk an idea through before you write about it!

Build on children's own prior knowledge.
Move from concrete to abstract.
Ensure everyone works with everyone else.
Extend social language towards curriculum language.
Provide motivating ways to explore and question the same knowledge more than once.

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING PROJECT

Project Director: Stuart Scott

We support a network of teaching professionals to develop and disseminate accessible talk-for-learning activities in all subject areas and for all ages.

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PUNCTUALLY at midday he opened his bag and spread out his professional equipment, which consisted of a dozen cowrie shells, a square piece of cloth with obscure mystic charts on it, a notebook, and a bundle of palmyra writing. His forehead was resplendent with sacred ash and vermilion, and his eyes sparkled with a sharp abnormal gleam which was really an outcome of a continual searching look for customers, but which his simple clients took to be a prophetic light and felt comforted. The power of his eyes was considerably enhanced by their position placed as they were between the painted forehead and the dark whiskers which streamed down his cheeks. Even a half-wit's eyes would sparkle in such a setting. To crown the effect he wound a saffron-coloured turban around his head. This colour scheme never failed. People were attracted to him as bees are attracted to cosmos or dahlia stalks. He sat under the boughs of a spreading tamarind tree which flanked a path running through the Town Hall Park. It was a remarkable place in many ways : a surging crowd was always moving up and down this narrow road morning till night. A variety of trades and occupations was represented all along its way : medicine sellers, sellers of stolen hardware and junk, magicians, and, above all, an auctioneer of cheap cloth, who created enough din all day to attract the whole town. Next to him in vociferousness came a vendor of fried groundnut, who gave his ware a fancy name each day, calling it "Bombay Ice-Cream" one day, and on the next "Delhi Almond," and on the third "Raja's Delicacy" and so on and so forth, and people flocked to him. A considerable portion of this crowd dallied before the astrologer too. The astrologer transacted his business by the light of a flare which crackled and smoked up above the groundnut heap nearby. Half the enchantment of the place was due to the fact that it did not have the benefit of municipal lighting. The place was lit up by shop lights.

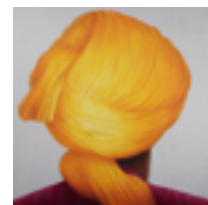


mystic chart

cowrie shells



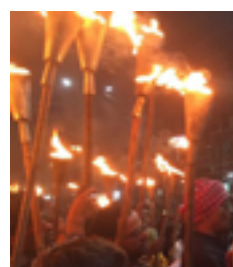
saffron: yellow



palmyra writing



groundnut seller



flaming torch

One or two had hissing gaslights, some had naked flares stuck on poles, some were lit up by old cycle lamps, and one or two, like the astrologer's, managed without lights of their own. It was a bewildering criss-cross of light rays and moving shadows. This suited the astrologer very well, for the simple reason that he had not in the least intended to be an astrologer when he began life; and he knew no more of what was going to happen to others than he knew what was going to happen to himself next minute. He was as much a stranger to the stars as were his innocent customers. Yet he said things which pleased and astonished everyone: that was more a matter of study, practice, and shrewd guesswork. All the same, it was as much an honest man's labour as any other, and he deserved the wages he carried home at the end of a day. He had left his village without any previous thought or plan. If he had continued there he would have carried on the work of his forefathers namely, tilling the land, living, marrying, and ripening in his cornfield and ancestral home. But that was not to be. **He had to leave home without telling anyone, and he could not rest till he left it behind a couple of hundred miles.** To a villager it is a great deal, as if an ocean flowed between.

He had a working analysis of mankind's troubles : marriage, money, and the tangles of human ties. Long practice had sharpened his perception. Within five minutes he understood what was wrong. He charged three pies per question, never opened his mouth till the other had spoken for at least ten minutes, which provided him enough stuff for a dozen answers and advices. When he told the person before him, gazing at his palm, "In many ways you are not getting the fullest results for your efforts," nine out of ten were disposed to agree with him. Or he questioned : "Is there any woman in your family, maybe even a distant relative, who is not well disposed towards you?" Or he gave an analysis of character : " Most of your troubles are due to your nature. How can you be otherwise with Saturn where he is? You have an impetuous nature and a rough exterior."



shrewd: clever

why?



tilling fields



three pies: a small amount of money

impetuous: reacting without thinking first

This endeared him to their hearts immediately, for; even the mildest of us loves to think that he has a forbidding exterior.

The nuts vendor blew out his flare and rose to go home. This was a signal for the astrologer to bundle up too, since it left him in darkness except for a little shaft of green light which strayed in from somewhere and touched the ground before him. He picked up his cowrie shells and paraphernalia and was putting them back into his bag when the green shaft of light was blotted out; he looked up and saw a man standing before him. He sensed a possible client and said:

"You look so careworn. It will do you good to sit down for a while and chat with me."

The other grumbled some reply vaguely. The astrologer pressed his invitation; whereupon the other thrust his palm under his nose, saying:

"You call yourself an astrologer?"

The astrologer felt challenged and said, tilting the other's palm towards the green shaft of light:

"Yours is a nature . . ."

"Oh, stop that," the other said. "Tell me something worth while. . . ."

Our friend felt piqued.

"I charge only three pies per question, and what you get ought to be good enough for your money. . ."

At this the other withdrew his arm, took out an anna, and flung it out to him, saying:

"I have some questions to ask. If I prove you are bluffing, you must return that anna to me with interest."

"If you find my answers satisfactory, will you give me five rupees?"

"No."

"Or will you give me eight annas?"

"All right, provided you give me twice as much if you are wrong," said the stranger. This pact was accepted after a little further argument. The astrologer sent up a prayer to heaven as the other lit a cheroot. **The astrologer caught a glimpse of his face by the matchlight.** There was a pause as cars hooted on the road and jutka drivers swore at their horses, and the babble of the crowd agitated the semi-darkness of the park.



one rupee - 16 annas
1 anna - 12 pies
1 rupee - 192 pies



cheroot



jutka

The other sat down, sucking his cheroot, puffing out, sat there ruthlessly. The astrologer felt very uncomfortable.

"Here, take your anna back. I am not used to such challenges. It is late for me today. . . ."

He made preparations to bundle up. The other held his wrist and said :

"You can't get out of it now. You dragged me in while I was passing."

The astrologer shivered in his grip ; and his voice shook and became faint.

"Leave me today. I will speak to you tomorrow."

The other thrust his palm in his face and said:

"Challenge is challenge. Go on."

The astrologer proceeded, with his throat drying up:

"There is a woman . . ."

"Stop," said the other. "I don't want all that. Shall I succeed in my present search or not ? Answer this and go. Otherwise I will not let you go till you disgorge all your coins."

The astrologer muttered a few incantations and replied :

"All right. I will speak. But will you give me a rupee if what I say is convincing ? Otherwise I will not open my mouth, and you may do what you like."

After a good deal of haggling the other agreed. The astrologer said :

"You were left for dead. Am I right? "

"Ah, tell me more."

"A knife has passed through you once ? " said the astrologer.

"Good fellow ! " He bared his chest to show the scar.

"What else?"

"And then you were pushed into a well nearby in the field. You were left for dead." "I should have been dead if some passer-by had not chanced to peep into the well," exclaimed the other, overwhelmed by enthusiasm.

'When shall I get at him ? " he asked, clenching his fist.

"In the next world," answered the astrologer. "He died four months ago in a far off town. You will never see any more of him."

The other groaned on hearing it. The astrologer proceeded :

"Guru Nayak "

"You know my name ! " the other said, taken aback.

"As I know all other things. Guru Nayak, listen carefully to what I have to say. Your village is two day's journey due north of this town. Take the next train and be gone. I see once again great danger to your life if you go from home." He took out a pinch of sacred ash and held it to him. " Rub it on your forehead and go home. Never travel southward again, and you will live to be a hundred."

"Why should I leave home again ? " the other said reflectively. " I was only going away now and then to look for him and to choke out his life if I met him." He shook his head regretfully. " He has escaped my hands. I hope at least he died as he deserved."

"Yes," said the astrologer. " He was crushed under a lorry."

The other looked gratified to hear it.

The place was deserted by the time the astrologer picked up his articles and put them into his bag.

The green shaft was also gone, leaving the place in darkness. The stranger had gone off into the night, after giving the astrologer a handful of coins. It was nearly midnight when the astrologer reached home. His wife was waiting for him at the door and demanded an explanation. He flung the coins at her and said : " Count them. One man gave all that."

"Twelve and a half annas," she said, counting.

She was overjoyed. " I can buy some jaggery and coconut tomorrow. The child has been asking for sweets for so many days now. I will prepare some nice stuff for her." "The swine has cheated me ! He promised me a rupee," said the astrologer.

She looked up at him.

"You look worried. What is wrong?"

" Nothing."

After dinner, sitting on the pyol, he told her :
"Do you know a great load is gone from me today?
I thought I had the blood of a man on my hands all
these years. That was the reason why I ran away
from home, settled here, and married you. He is
alive."

She gasped. " You tried to kill! "

"Yes, in our village, when I was a silly youngster. We
drank, gambled, and quarrelled badly one day. Why
think of it now ? Time to sleep," he said, yawning,
and stretched himself on the pyol.



pyol: raised porch

