

The Scandal at the Club

On New Year's Day, Ramulamma got up early, bathed in a bucket of very cold water under cover of the woven grass curtains she had hung on poles at the back of her hut, and with chattering teeth changed into a new sari, applied a large red kumkum to her forehead, and sallied out to attend on a few pregnant patients of hers. If she helped to deliver a child, especially a bouncing boy on this holy day, she would be blessed in the coming year. When some people said New Year's Day was not a holy day, she hotly contested that impious view, for if it was not, why was it always declared a holiday? And why did the sahibs the previous night do all sorts of bad things – only to be rid of bad things at one go, and start the year with a holy day, when they behaved in an exemplary manner, staying home with their families mostly.

So, she was particularly annoyed on returning home to hear impious caterwauling soiling her ears from under the peepul tree that faced her hut. Munnuswamy was weeping and wailing and drinking seendhi date-palm toddy, and it was not even noon.

“Munnuswamy, this is a very bad way to behave on holy New Year's Day,” she said sternly to her old friend.

“Ayyo! Ramulamma! I am ruined! My name in the world has been destroyed! The Devil has finished me off! I should have died only yesterday!” The thin old man, still wearing the Steward's jacket of the Club, rolled about on the ground, getting his proud uniform all dusty. Ramulamma looked at him with a mixture of disgust and pity.

“Go round to the back and wash your face,” she said at last. “You drank too much last night, and instead of being ashamed, you have the face to drink toddy in broad daylight and make a noise. You should be dismissed from your precious Club.”

“I have been dismissed! I have been dismissed! And without a chitti – without a character, and after forty years of loyal service. Me! Munnuswamy! Yesterday Chief Steward, and today, a nobody, kicked out like a dog!”

Ramulamma pulled him up sternly, and took him to the back, and splashed three tin mugs of water on his face, leaving him looking like a wet rat. She then dragged him back, sat him down, and put an earthen pot of hot sweet tea into his hands.

“Now tell me, what did you do to get dismissed from that stupid Club after forty years of service?” she asked, when he had noisily gulped down some tea. His story was as inexplicable as it was pathetic. Last night, he had very carefully locked up the Club, with the special tamper-proof Godrej lock, after all the sahibs had left for other parties. He had supervised the cleaning himself, and seen every other servant out, before locking up. Then, he had gone home to sleep. He had got up early enough to be present in his uniform at the Club, before Srinagesh Sahib, the Secretary, came around for his morning game of tennis with the marker. But the Secretary Sahib was

already there with a face of thunder, looking at the shambles left inside the Club. Almost every precious bottle from the bar had been taken out, the whiskies, the rums, the vodkas, the gins, the expensive liqueurs, some had been emptied, a few were rolling about on the parquet flooring and the whole place was reeking with alcohol. Munnuswamy had had no answers to the stern questions that shot out of the Secretary Sahib like bullets from a machinegun. Yes, he had personally closed and locked the Club doors as he had always done. Yes, he saw that the Club had not been broken into by miscreants. Yes, he knew that only the Secretary Sahib and he had keys to the Club. No, he had sworn by Yesu, Mother Mary and God Himself, he had not held a party there last night with his disreputable friends – he had no disreputable friends – not since his wife died – no, she was not disreputable, but a good woman, but he had meant he had no friends since she died. He lived for the Club; he did not understand how such a calamity could have happened.

“You know me, Ramulamma! You know I live for The Club! My izzat – my honour is tied to keeping The Club spotless, and maintaining strict control over the other servants. And now this! Only the Devil could have done such mischief, I am sure,” wailed Munnuswamy afresh.

“There is no Devil anywhere, Munnuswamy, be a man, act with courage,” counseled Ramulamma. “You are Steward of your Club, some miscreants have done this to give you a bad name, we will find them out and have them properly punished. Don’t cry like a woman, I am a woman, have you ever seen me cry? Now tell me everything, slowly, and in detail.”

He repeated the story more slowly this time, but it still remained a complete mystery. The doors of the Club had been opened by someone who had the key, and this person, or persons unknown, had gone in and held a wild party. Then he, or they, had left in an inebriated condition, without bothering to clean up, in fact how could anybody clean up after all that mayhem?

Ramulamma looked closely at her unhappy friend. “Tell me truthfully, Munnuswamy, what happened last night? Are you absolutely sure that you did not go in for a last drink, men do that when they are feeling lonely, maybe you thought of your wife, that is but natural on the last day of a year, and you said you must cheer yourself with a drink. Then somehow it got out of hand?”

Munnuswamy leaned forward and beat his head on the earthen floor till she pulled him up.

“Ayyo! Ayyo! Ayyo! When even my friends doubt me, why am I alive? God, take me to your bosom!” cried Munnuswamy in agony.

“All right! All right! All right!” said Ramulamma impatiently. “But we have to solve this mystery like sane people, and not blabber about Devils.” She was struck by another thought. “You know what could have happened, Munnuswamy,” she continued slowly, “someone could have drugged you. It happens to young girls all the time, and when they wake up their honour is gone. So why not to an old man? Anyone can buy these bad things for a few rupees these days, and then they put it in a paan or a glass of sherbet, and rob you. One of your ‘boys’ as you call them played a foul trick

on you. That fellow, David, for instance, I never liked him, I am sure he is a crook – what do you say?”

Munnuswamy drew himself up. “Do you think I would ever demean myself, Munnuswamy, Chief Steward of The Antlers Club, by being chummy with one of my boys! Never!”

“Then, the answer is simple,” suggested Ramulamma. “One of those rascals followed you home, waited till you were asleep, took the keys, had a drunken party, the pigs, and then replaced the keys before you were awake. I see it all clearly now, it was not just a party, it was a strategy to get you dismissed so that that David could be Chief Steward!”

Munnuswamy permitted himself a small bitter smile. “You think, Oh Ramulamma, that all this has not crossed my mind? But that is impossible. You know why? I put the Club keys at the bottom of my steel trunk every night; double-lock the trunk, and keep its keys under my pillow. You know why I do this? The creaking of the trunk would wake the dead, that’s why. No one stole any keys from me, no one can!”

But Ramulamma was not so easily baffled. “Then the only other possibility is that the keys were robbed from the Secretary Sahib’s house. His servants, or even his sons – I have never trusted these wild rich kids. They are not moral like us poor people.”

Munnuswamy now looked down pityingly on Ramulamma. “You don’t know The Secretary Sahib. I have worked with him for five glorious years. He is a very strict man. Remember, he was Colonel of the Armoured Corps before he retired. Such men keep strict control. The Club Key is always kept in his wallet, and that is ever in his hip pocket, or in his bush jacket. And don’t tell me they took it away when he was bathing – don’t talk foolish women talk about the Secretary Sahib.”

“Oh, Ho! And this Great Sahib fired a good man like you after forty years service, without any compunction,” shot back Ramulamma angrily. “Perhaps, the truth is that he wanted to get rid of you and put a favourite in your place.”

Munnuswamy got up with dignity. “If you are going to talk nonsense about the Secretary Sahib, I shall leave. You women know nothing about such men. Understand, there was nothing else he could do than fire me. It must have hurt him, but he is a Colonel from the Armoured Corps!”

“Where do you think you are going, you fool?” asked Ramulamma pleasantly. “Sit, sit, sit down. We must get to the bottom of this. Maybe you don’t know, but there must be a third key. Try and remember. Who has the third key?”

Munnuswamy sat down slowly, shaking his head. “There is no third key. The whole point is to have control, so you can’t have millions of keys floating around. The Secretary Sahib, rightly has one key, to keep overall control, and I as Chief Steward...” his voice faltered, “as Chief Steward that I once was, had the other. No one else. When old Banerjee Sahib died suddenly of heart attack five years ago, we all had such a problem, I can’t tell you. He was Secretary then, and we couldn’t find his key. So, I gave mine to Srinagesh Sahib who assumed charge, and till a new key came from

Calcutta, I had a devil of a time, locking up, rushing to Srinagesh Sahib's house at dead of night to deliver our sole key, rising before cock-crow to collect it again from his bungalow, and have all things ready. I was so glad when the second key arrived. No, there never was any third key."

They both sat silent for a bit, immersed in speculative thought. "Perhaps, someone in old Banerjee Sahib's household...?" ventured Ramulamma.

Munnuswamy shook his head sadly. "He had no one. I myself supervised packing his things, he was such a good, simple man, and sending the boxes to his brother's children. He had designed the Club Blazer, he was so proud of it. I brought it back as a keepsake, and kept it in the pantry, but white ants got at it, and cut the sleeves to shreds. You are right I will have to get rid of that lazy son of an owl, David...what am I saying? I am no one at the Club now! I was heartbroken when I saw the state of the Banerjee Blazer, and gave it away just two days ago to that boy, Benjamin, from the Boys Home... he comes around to collect cast-offs, you know... one of boys can still make use of the blazer, Banerjee Sahib would like that, one of those orphans may become a great man like him one day..."

Ramulamma had some hot kunjee simmering on the stove. She dished out some into an aluminium bowl, added a dash of salt and pepper, poured in a timpleful of milk, and gave it to Munnuswamy. "Eat that, it will give you strength. You need to be strong, old Munnuswamy, if you are to get back your position. Remember, the Colonel from the Armoured Corps will not like weaklings." Munnuswamy looked up suspiciously to see if she was poking fun at him, and then dipping his fingers into the gruel, ate a few mouthfuls with satisfaction.

"Come, let us go to the Boys Home," said Ramulamma when he had finished. "You are no longer Chief Steward. You may as well give your jacket to the boys; who knows one of them may take your place one day?"

Mannuswamy nodded glumly. "Yes, one of them would be worthier of trust than I am. Yes, I shall give it to them."

They took a circuitous route to avoid the painful vision of the Club, most probably already in the 'hands of strangers,' and pushed on to the outskirts of the town where kindly missionaries had built a Boys Home a century ago. It was a ramshackle barracks-like double-storeyed structure, built on three sides of a quadrangle, which served as a playground for the boys. The tattered volleyball net, the broken basketball hoop, and the large cracks in the walls were mute testimony to the drying up of donor funds. As they went round the back, and climbed the steps to the verandah, they could see straight across the quad into the assembly hall, where the portrait of Dr. Ferguson, the founder, hung at a crooked angle.

"Oh, so beggars have come to look for cakes on New Year's Day! You will get nothing here, Munnuswamy!" cried a loud angry voice, and Josephine came out of the large dining room area, waving her empty hands. "I know you have been fired for drunkenness, and I am going to be fired very soon, I assure you. What do sahibs care for us poor dalits, anyway?" And Josephine started to weep spectacularly into the paloo of her sari, blowing her nose into it. Then she sat down on the stone floor of the

verandah and signaled them to do the same. She was a large blowsy woman who till that fraught moment had never admitted that she was also a dalit.

“You know me! Like Munnuswamy here, I give my life for others! I am meticulous in my work!” She was shouting, clearly hoping her strident voice would carry to the ears of Mr. Daniel, the Superintendent, who had taken refuge in his study upstairs. “You know how I look after these boys, like my own sons, though Lord God never made my womb fertile. I am their mother! Would a mother ever harm her sons? Never! She would sooner die! And Mr. Daniel – he knows me – did I not treat him night and day for three weeks last year when he was down with brain malaria? If I had not tended him, God Forbid, something bad might have happened. But I am like a rock, like Good Lord Yesu says Saint Peter was – this place will not run without my slaving. Where is the money? Good fathers have all gone home because of this Hindu government – now Ramulamma you don’t take offence, you know Josephine celebrates Dussera as well as she celebrates Christmas – who can deny that? Who dares deny that?”

They tried to calm her down. Josephine clung to Ramulamma and wept on her shoulder crying, Sister, Sister, We are all handed over to the Pharisees. When she recovered her breath, it became clear that someone, or a boy, had complained about the food that morning.

“No! No! It was Mr. Daniel himself! I could not believe my ears” wept Josephine, beating her breasts. “He says several boys are ill, and it must be something in the food! I watch over the pots and pans like a hawk, I tell you. He accuses me that maybe a lizard fell into the curry! Is that possible when I am in the kitchen? I know these characterless girls we get these days, they would run after with any male in pants, I tell you. I protect the boys, and see that the girls cook properly. Boys are ill! Who else would be ill, cows? Boys play, they fall ill, just like Mr. Daniel himself, last year, whose life I saved. And this is the thanks I get – to be accused of poisoning my boys!”

Some of the kitchen maids were standing shyly behind the door giggling. Ramulamma gave them such a stare they scurried back in. “Come, Josephine, let us go and see the boys who are ill,” said Ramulamma in calm reasonable tones. “Only you can help them get better, you know them like your own sons, as you say. Come let us go.”

Josephine bubbled. “They are in the infirmary, all laid out in white beds. God! Take my worthless life! Spare my boys!”

They made their way to the narrow ‘sick-bay,’ as Dr. Ferguson had named it, which for the first time in its century-old history was full of patients. The Home’s single orderly had been sent post-haste on his bicycle to fetch the Assistant Civil Surgeon from the District Hospital, and Josephine herself had given all the boys an emetic to bring out whatever poisonous thing they had eaten. The room reeked of vomit, and all the dozen boys or so were limp and miserable. A scared young maid was in attendance acting as impressed nurse. Her face brightened on seeing Ramulamma, who though officially only a village dai, was known to all as more capable than any two doctors from the hospital.

Josephine stood aside, half in hope and half in fear, as Ramulamma went from bed to bed to make her professional examination. She beckoned to Munnuswamy from Benjamin's bedside. "Does anything strike you about these cases, Munnuswamy?" she asked.

The Chief Steward looked around him with dawning comprehension. "These boys are having the mother of all hangovers," he said in wonderment.

Ramulamma sat down on Benjamin's bed, and stroked his head. "It's aching badly, isn't it?" she asked gently. "I know what happened, but you tell Josephine everything, shouldn't you all? She is like your mother – you all have no mother but her. Should you get her into trouble with Mr. Daniel? Don't be afraid, nothing will happen to you. You are just poor boys, and you didn't know what you were doing, right?"

The boys were silent, looking uncertainly at each other and groaning. "Look Benjamin, I know you found that key in the old blazer Munnuswamy gave you, right? You had seen a similar key with Munnuswamy here, and you knew it was the Club door key, right? See, I know everything. Then you boys went there at night, without telling Josephine, and that was a very wrong thing to do, but she already forgives you, in the name of the Lord God, don't you, Josephine, and you boys wanted to see what a whisky was like, right?"

The boys cried out at this, and vigorously shook their heads, wincing with pain, and in tears. The truth came out in bits and pieces, each boy adding to the story or correcting another. They had never set out to drink, they swore by Lord God, and Ramulamma said soothingly she believed them. It had started with a dare. They wanted to play a game on proper courts, at night, like real sahibs. They had gone looking for balls and rackets. They knew it was wrong, but it would be just a short game. And if markers' children could play on the courts, why couldn't they? They had seen the bar, they had admired the beautiful cut glasses. Someone was thirsty, and they tried to drink water from a bottle, but it was like fire, and they dropped the bottle. There had been an argument. They had dared one another to take a sip out of the coloured bottles. They tried to change the bad taste by mixing the colours, and then it all got quite hazy, no one could quite remember how they got home. When they woke they felt like death.

Munnuswamy's eyes bugged out in horrified amazement. "You are all lucky to be alive! You mixed whisky, and gin, and Grand Marnier, and God knows what else in tall glasses like sherbet, My God!"

Ramulamma knew what kind of decoction to make for the boys. Fifteen minutes later she came back from the kitchen and made them all drink the bitter potion, and lie down in the darkened room. Two hours later, they would be in a condition to go up and confess to Mr. Daniel. She got them to promise that later that evening, they would all go in a body, under Josephine's protection, and tell the Secretary, Srinagesh Sahib at the Club, what exactly had happened. They would be given punitive tasks both by Mr. Daniel and Srinagesh Sahib, and they must perform these penitently. All the boys promised solemnly they would carry out whatever tasks were given to them in punishment.

Two days later, Ramulamma found Munnuswamy strutting about in his Chief Steward's jacket, buying provisions for the Club. She asked him if everything was all right once again.

“Oh! These sahibs are such wonderful people. I thought those boys were in for a savage beating. But no! The sahibs roared with laughter at the boys mixing vodka with whisky, and said Benjamin could be their barman anytime after he grew up! These sahibs, I tell you!”