

Ramanujan Varadachary, the reclusive, spiritual-revolutionary centenarian, was all that Sharmaji imagined he would be – spare and fit, bright-eyed and clear-headed, dressed in a simple white cotton *dhoti* with a blue border, and a cotton singlet, and living in a small ill-lit lower middle-class house, tucked away behind a neem tree and on the edge of a school building. What was unusual was the lively sparkle in his host's eyes as he carefully read the label of the red-wine bottle, he had been instructed to present as a gift before the interview.

“Made in India, from French grapes grown in a vineyard near Bangalore, very good,” commented his ancient host. “We will let it breathe for a while, and then taste it, we'll see what wine we can make – it's a lost Indian tradition, destroyed by the uncultured British, and now restored to us by the French! Wonderful! Let me get two wine glasses, which I have not used for the last 32 years.” With that, the old man scuttled off inside, to emerge polishing carefully two wine glasses, and clutching Sharmaji's letter.

“Yes, certainly I can tell you a great deal about Sri Arobindo, and his Ashram, and even more about his younger revolutionary days. He took over where Vivekananda left off; he fired the patriotic zeal of all young men of this country – I left the Madras Presidency College after listening to his speech, and followed him to Pondicherry – the French gave us all shelter, from where we could attack the might of the British Empire!”

Varadachary carefully uncorking the bottle with a venerable corkscrew, poured out the wine, swished it around, sharply breathed in the bouquet, swiveled around a small mouthful between his perfect teeth, and gulped it down. “Not bad at all, it will do, it will serve. Yes! A very good beginning! It is totally against our ancient culture to deny a place for wine on our tables. What do you think *soma* was? Not some kind of medicine as these theologians make out, but wine, sir, wine, from the southern slopes of the Hindu Kush mountains, grown and drunk by our great vedic forebears! It was the source of their good health, and if I have lived to be a hundred, it's because of the French wine we drank in Pondicherry!”

“We are bringing out a collection of essays dedicated to harmony among all religions,” broke in Sharmaji mildly. “We in civil society want to be proactive in this climate of communal violence. Several great people are sending us ‘messages’ for inclusion, but our publication will not be complete without a short message from you, Sir. You are the last of our great freedom fighters, and more – Sri Arobindo called you a Spiritual Soldier of India, and my request is...”

Varadachary waved him into silence. “Of course, I shall write out a message, today, right now, as we drink this bottle of wine which you very thoughtfully brought along. The import of all real wine was stopped a long time ago... and I didn't even know we had started to make our own, I must tell my grandson to send me another bottle along with his money-order. Don't drink it like whisky – savour the bouquet, roll it round your tongue!”

Sharmaji dutifully tried to comply with these instructions, while Varadachary took up an old ruled notebook and blunt pencil and started to write. He put both down after writing a couple of sentences, and started to speak dreamily, pausing to sip his wine between sentences.

“This is the first Sunday of February, do you know where I was exactly 80 years ago to this day? In Paris! Sunday, the first February, 1925! It was my first winter there and it was dreadfully cold. I was not yet a French citizen then and the British were asking for my extradition to stand trial for

sedition, so the Prefect of Police in Pondicherry told me to leave quietly for France. It was on this day, 80 years ago, that I met the greatest chess player of all time – and saw him lose! Are you interested in this story; do you play chess?”

“ I was chess champion in my school days,” said Sharmaji insincerely, trying to ingratiate himself with his host.

“ Then, I shall tell you the full story,” said Varadachary, pouring himself another glass. “Now that Vishy Anand is well-known there is some interest in chess, but for decades no one in India cared for this king of games, invented by us, of course. This is good wine, and you deserve to hear this good story. Alexander Alexandrowitsch Alekhine, the great Russian, was in Paris, and he declared he would break the world record for blindfold chess by playing against 28 players, 28 groups of players, if you please!

“ How did I meet him, you ask? Émigrés tend to gather together – to explore, to help each other. I was from India, the home of chess, from a very well known family, and so was he, the son of a Marshall and a member of the Duma, his people had been wealthy, but in Paris we both had to make do somehow – but we were young, and what exploits we had in that queen of cities!”

Minutes passed as Varadachary was lost in earlier more gallant times.

“ But to return. He already had a reputation as a ladies man – but only for older, wealthier women. He had already divorced two such women, and he would divorce two more rich older women, so people gossiped that he was after their money. But, No! Alekhine was a great romantic at heart, otherwise he could never have been the champion he was – he was drawn to women of experience, of mystery, as they were to his matinee idol looks and his piercing gaze. You do not believe? Behold! I tell you of a little affair, conducted blindfold, in front of all, with one very young and most beautiful!

“ On that record-breaking day, I was his second, to take charge of his Turkish cigarettes and see that he had a constant supply of hot black coffee. The day was cold; we made a dramatic entry into the great hall of the Petit Parisien, in our black cloaks and large felt hats pulled down, and everyone applauded. The newspapers! The cameramen! M’sieu Fernand Gavarry, the President of the Federation des Esches, were all there to greet us. Laying aside our gloves, hats and cloaks on the side-table, Alekhine went from table to table shaking hands punctiliously with all the contenders. He could hardly leave Table 11, the young people from the Ecole Polytechnique Paris. Among the shy students stood this girl, with clear green eyes, and a rosebud mouth, her close black knitted cap pulled over her pale blonde curls, a tight dark pink pullover shaping perfect breasts, her soft white hands, like lily stems, with long elegant, aristocratic fingers. I could tell my friend, Alexander Alexandrowitsch, was powerfully affected. He was breathing with passion even as I blindfolded him.

“ As he went mechanically from table to table, outwitting almost absentmindedly the rest of his opponents, his mind, his heart, was always at Table 11, with this beautiful girl, whom he could see perfectly in his mind’s eye. ‘She is an unfortunate émigré like me, Rum,’ he would whisper, when we paused for a cigarette, or some coffee – he would eat no food during a contest, and he called me Rum, y’know, for Ramanujan, ‘she is a Russian princess, I am absolutely sure, and I

have to be silent for hours, blindfolded, when I should be gathering her in my arms, consoling her!’

“ Or, he would say, ‘ I bent over the board just now, and I could smell her breath – it’s of the cherry blossoms over the Neva, that much of the real Russia she has brought with her!’ Between rounds, I had to whisper to him how she was looking, whether I thought she had sensed his great attraction for her, and of course I had to say truthfully that not only she but others nearby also sensed his desire, for he trembled whenever he was near her. I consoled him by saying that she blushed whenever he drew near.

“ ‘ Rum, I am going to marry her the moment this game is over,’ he said mid-way through the games. ‘ But how can I go empty handed to her, to ask for her? I have to give her something, something great, that history will record as a mark of my great love!’ Remark! He was in love, deeply, like only a Russian can be, in a moment, as happens in Paris, even in February. This is very good wine, and you are a very good fellow.”

Varadachary had finished over half the bottle, and he filled another glass, not seeming to mind that Sharmaji was still sipping his first glass. “ Where was I? Yes, he was playing Queen’s Pawn Opening against her team. Conventional moves on both sides, nothing more. She was the lead player of Table 11, of the Ecole Polytechnique. She, quite rightly, playing against a great master, had castled defensively on the sixth move. He, in a frenzy on the eleventh, to hint how he felt bottled up away from her! The eager lover he was, he sent out his cavaliers on the queens side; and she, she had opened up her file on the bishop’s column. On the twenty-first move, his heart lay open to her Queen. He sacrificed his knight to her bishop. But this he would have done even for a tavern girl. A supreme sacrifice was needed. The great Alekhine must surrender all, show he was vulnerable to her, only to her!

“ As we neared to make our twenty-third move, I knew, instinctively, Alekhine would stake all, even his reputation for his love, which was maddening him! He sacrificed his Queen! He was bent low over the board, his fingers lingered, brushed against hers and even as she removed his piece, he murmured: ‘ Ah, Mam’zelle! You have won my Queen, and you have conquered me! Only a Russian princess was destined to do so! And here I am your slave!’ Who could resist? I was moved. Even M’sieu Gavarry, the President of the Federation des Esches, wiped away an emotional tear!

“ The lady was totally overcome. She blushed brighter than the pullover she wore. She let Alexander Alexandrowitsch take possession of her hand. ‘ Hi! I am Cathy Ferrel, from Iowa,’ she said brightly looking up into his blinded face. ‘ And my husband Jim is over at the next table. We are here in Paris for six weeks for French immersion.’ Alekhine brushed her hand with his lips, ‘ Enchanted, Madame, enjoy your stay, and command me while you are in Paris,’ was all he could manage to say, as we moved on.

“ The rest of those tedious hours were passed in silence. Believe me, it took me days to cajole Alekhine back to good humour. ‘ Iowa! Iowa?’ he would say, ‘ Incredible! How can there be such a place?’”

Varadachary drained the last of the wine. “ This is the truth how the great Alekhine lost a match in 1925 to rank amateurs. It also proves that had the right girl come along, someone not in blessed

Iowa, Alekhine might, just might, have married someone young and beautiful, and been happy forever.”

The old raconteur leaned back in his cane chair, his eyes and his mind faraway. After a few minutes, *Sharmaji* reminded him of the still unwritten message.

“ You want harmony between all peoples, and that is a very good thing,” said Varadachary kindly. “ But how do we harmonize with people with closed up souls, who are afraid to drink wine? This is just not possible. They must first learn to open up, to others, to Nature, to le bon Dieu, who has made us all. I will tell you what I will do, without being false to myself. I will think about something appropriate, and send it to you. I want to rest now.”

So, *Sharmaji* reluctantly took leave of him, and published the collection of messages for communal harmony without a contribution from the only living spiritual-revolutionary centenarian of our times.