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Minister-civil servant relationship

Short Story

The Metamorphosis

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THE FEARFUL APPREHENSION that more and more people were growing crazy, if not quite mad, began to darken, like chunks of aggressive clouds, the otherwise sunny mind of Pratap Singh.

All that he had asked his colleague, Hemant Babu, was, "You don't seem to suffer from any kind of cold. Why then have you started coughing at both the beginning and the end of every sentence you mumble out?"

That made Hemant Babu, known for his sobriety, blurt out menacingly, "What then do I do if not cough? Yes, what else is there to do?"

Pratap Singh's was nothing more than a casual query. He was, naturally, surprised and embarrassed at that old familiar voice raising the issue to the lofty plane of the very basic whys and whats to which there were no answers. Walking along the river-bank in the evening, he had observed no less than five pedestrians angrossed in soliloquies. One of them was engaged in a loud argument with himself, gesticulating in a defiant manner. Pratap Singh hoped that the man, who otherwise looked a decent clerk behind some glass counter or an affable broker, would come to his senses if he knew that someone was observing him. Pratap Singh walked closer to him and deliberately goggled his eyes at

him. But the man did not even look at him and went his way, as charmed with his own voice as a musk-deer was of its own fragrance.

It was getting dusky. Pratap Singh stopped near a kiosk and asked a young trio buying cigarettes, "When did you learn smoking?"

"Well, we didn't record the date. Say, a year or two ago!" they replied, a bit intrigued.

"My young friends, long before that the cartoons had begun carrying the legend that smoking was injurious to your health. It may be all right with those who had already grown addicted to smoking before the warning became statutory, but what about you? Why did you pledge your health to the monster of this habit?" he demanded.

The one who looked like the male monkey in the troop retorted with a sneer, "Whose health, yours or ours?"

"You think yourself very clever, do you?" shouted an irate Pratap Singh. "Tell me, are you the maker of your health, your body? Did you know whether you'll be short or tall, fat or slim, dark or fair? Is it you who gave your body the immunity against the effects of adulteration of food and pollution of the atmosphere? Must you vaunt it as your health?"

Pratap Singh seemed to have well impressed his small audience, including the shopkeeper, with his harangue. But the one who looked a real nin-compoop among the three asked in a deceptively calm tone, "Pardon me, Sir, but are you married?"

"What do you gain by putting such a question to a man of your father's age?" Pratap Singh sounded exasperated.

"I gain nothing. But you could have gained from the statutory warning against sex given by the seers and sages for thousands of years. I wonder what made you ignore that!"

The audience, led by the shopkeeper, burst into a guffaw. There was nothing surprising in the shopkeeper's elation, for Pratap Singh's stand went against the chap's interest, but why should the others prove so irreverent?

"Listen, young man," Pratap Singh assumed the most sagacious tone possible, "What you advance is hardly an argument. Nature has endowed all creatures with certain instincts. They were there even before the creation of man. Can you say the same thing about the cigarette? Can you classify smoking as an instinct? Don't make faces. Argument must be met with argument and not with giggles and guffaws!"

"Will you please tell us what it is that inspired you to come out with such sermons against smoking?"

"What inspired the authorities to print the warning on the cigarette packet? The sense of duty. Am I clear?"

"Please go on doing your duty!" The young men hopped on to their bicycles and pedalled away.

Pratap Singh was extremely vexed. He remembered that five kinds of people were not expected to be governed by reason: the child, the stupid, the wicked, the lunatic and the mystic. These young men were neither children nor stupid nor mystic. They had to be either wicked or lunatic.

He would prefer them to be lunatic rather than wicked. That way there was some hope for the humanity.

He remembered his destination—a bookshop. It was closed. But the airport was nearby. He could perhaps buy the book he needed at the stall inside the airport. He bought an entrance ticket. Book or no book, he could relax for a while in the air-conditioned cool.

An important flight had been delayed. People

waiting to receive the passengers of the incoming flight mingling with those meant for the next destination of the flight crowded the lounges. Pratap Singh saw no vacant chair. And the bookshop had hardly any elbow-room in it.

But he did not mind walking up and down for a while, through the rows of comfortably seated men and women.

Suddenly his eyes fell on a young man in an exquisite suit and glittering shoes whose foot-long necktie looked like a tiger's tail at the wrong place, but whose glistening hair was in a total disarray.

Pratap Singh felt uneasy. To be that careless with one's hair one should be in soiled pyjamas and a cheap shirt. What sense is there in being so tiptop right from the boots to the necktie and then leave the hair dishevelled?

In an effort to forget the nagging question he stepped into the bookshop once again but the realisation that it had not been a wise course dawned on him in no time, for he had the misfortune to see an elegantly dressed old man, at least twenty years older than he, turning the pages of a recently published pictorial edition of Vatsayana's *Kamasutra*, the two thousand year old manual of sexology. His walking stick hanging from his left elbow exaggerated the unsteadiness of his hand because of the weight of the book.

"Well, Sir, of what practical benefit is the book to you at your age?" Pratap Singh managed to stomach his surging question and hurriedly came out of the bookshop, in the process forgetting the very purpose of his coming into the airport.

But once again his attention went over to the young man—and his eyes rested on his hair. It was fast becoming a puzzle for him. The young man could not have left his hair like that for the sake of style. What then could it be?

He found a hopeful answer. The young man, late for his plane, had left home in a hurry. There was nobody to remind him that his hair was uncombed. By the time he remembered it, only after coming to learn that his flight was delayed, he found to his dismay that he had forgotten his pocket-comb on his dressing table. What could he do?

The argument calmed Pratap Singh. He went over to the small stationery shop and bought a plastic pocket-comb paying four times more than what he would have paid for it at a roadside shop.

He waited for an opportune time. It came