

The Shadow

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PROFESSOR Anjan Sharma was on the ascent as a scientist, a thinker and an articulate orator when, within a rather short span of time, he practically disappeared from the public view and, before long, from the public memory too.

The three independent incidents that brought this about, when viewed retrospectively, seem to have had a fearful method behind them, as if aimed at destroying him. To begin with, the middle-aged Professor whose only love hitherto had been his laboratory, fell madly in love with a truly charming and kind-hearted young lady. Secondly, his laboratory went up in flames. Thirdly, the charming wife died as suddenly as she had come into his life.

Like most of his younger admirers I too had forgotten him and could not have dreamt of waking up to his existence after thirty years and that too in a remote Himalayan valley. It was a discovery to reckon with.

A chance meeting with a classmate of mine at Shimla brought me to the guest house not quite far from Manali. The experience was exciting. My friend had been an artist. Coming to the Himalayas in search of inspiration he had stayed put, almost hypnotized by the region and had perhaps forgotten his art. For a living, he looked after this solitary summer mansion of a Raja built on a lovely lake and generally passed his time, clad in a

shawl, gazing at the snowy hill-tops, the lush green forest often bursting into different hues, and the sky. He had hardly any work to do.

The Raja had sold the mansion to a wealthy merchant soon after the abolition of the feudatory states. Lately it had been acquired by the tourism department of the government. My friend had been allowed to stay on as its manager, but rarely any tourist availed of its comforts, despite the authorities advertising it, through expertly coined phrases, as an ideal health resort with swimming facilities and the breeze and sunlight that acted like a tonic.

"Only once in a while I receive visitors who love solitude for the sake of it. I thought of proposing to the government to close it down, but then where would Professor Anjan Sharma go?" mused my friend, drawing my attention to the lonely figure on the other side of the lake.

"Does he never come out of this seclusion?" I asked my friend, looking at the lovable man in tattered pajamas, stooping rather prematurely, ambling towards the hills. A mild gust of wild wind would be enough to sweep him into the lake, I feared.

Only once before had I seen Anjan Sharma and that was when I was in the college. "If any Indian scientist deserves Nobel Prize for his original research today, it should be Professor Anjan Sharma," our Principal had observed to our great amazement by way of introducing the speaker.

The Professor had just made public some hints on his revolutionary concept of harnessing the law of gravitation for running factories, trains and all kinds of engines. His highly sophisticated technical thesis covered a couple of thousand pages and, what was encouraging, an inspired millionaire friend of his had already come to his aid, financing him to make a few primary model instruments necessary to prove his point. But soon it had been realised that the fabulous amount of money required for the fruition of his project could be provided only by an affluent Western country or some world organisation. The Professor's well-wishers began exploring such possibilities.

But catastrophe struck all on a sudden. A fire destroyed his laboratory, along with all the documents and instruments he had prepared over the years.

The Professor's shock was beyond description. The irony was, he had seen the arsonist moving about in the moonlight and knew that he was no ghoul or zombie, but a human being. He had even seen the fellow sprinkling petrol into the laboratory. But too superstitious about man's goodness, he had failed to imagine that the stranger's action could be anything but constructive.

Many of his friends felt that they could see the reflection of those flames in his bewildered eyes for days thereafter. He hardly spoke and then resigned his job.

For sometime the arson was the talk of the town. From the petty jealousy of a colleague to an international conspiracy, many were the causes imagined. And then the incident was forgotten.

The millionaire friend sent the Professor and his wife to the mansion in the Himalayan valley. Despite the changes in the ownership of the mansion, the Professor was not asked to leave the small suite he occupied in the upper storey of an outhouse. The millionaire paid his bill which in any case did not amount to much.

He had just settled down to a different plane of living, serene and peaceful, and the tranquillity was beginning to inspire in him some other kind of creativity, when his wife died. It was impossible for my friend to gauge the Professor's reaction to the tragedy, for there was no reaction!

The Professor's last companion was a faithful and intelligent dog nurtured by his wife. Depressed, the creature gave up eating and died after a month. The Professor broke his stoical poise and cried loudly.

And this is the summary of the subsequent events, as narrated to me by my friend—

At times Anjan Sharma took walks amidst the woods, totally oblivious of the world around him. Anybody could feel the

impenetrability of the wall of silence surrounding him.

Days passed. One afternoon, during one such outing, he suspected that someone was following him. Needless to say, there was none to do so but his shadow. And he suddenly burst out, casting a stern look at his shadow, "Why must you keep me company when everybody else has deserted me? Get lost, I say!"

Such were the poignancy and intensity of his admonition that his shadow got detached from him and sprang up and ran away and hid in a bush. The Professor could hear its faint cry, like that of a timid child, for a while.

My friend was the only man whom the Professor had narrated this unusual incident. The Professor stopped coming out into either sunlight or moonlight. He ventured into the valley only after the dusk or if the sky was clouded. If he observed the clouds receding, he literally ran back into his suite. If anyone knocked on his door in the evening or at night, he switched off the lights before opening the door, if at all.—

"Why this caution?" I asked.

"He did not wish anyone to know that he was bereft of his shadow!"

"But you know the absurdity of the proposition, don't you? Why didn't you flash a torchlight and convince him that his shadow was very much there with him?"

My friend, to my surprise, gave such a start that as if I was guiding him to an act of treachery! I explained, "I mean, someone should have put an end to his weird delusion!"

"Delusion? Weird?"

"What else? Surely you don't believe that one's shadow could desert one! You must have seen him with his shadow intact!"

"How could I?"

I grew impatient. "What do you mean? You might not have seen his shadow because he did not come out into light! That did not prove his having cast his shadow away!"

My friend remained silent. I repeated my observation, hiding my uneasiness as best as I could.

"I don't know," he hissed reluctantly.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I have never put the proposition to any test!"

"Good heaven! Where is the need for any test on this issue? What does your commonsense say?"

He fell silent again. Normally it should have irritated me. But somehow it did not.

There was no exchange of words between us for a while. Evening was giving way to night. A little moonlight on the nearest peaks created the illusion of their being the frontiers of some floating isles of gold. I tried to divert my attention to the strange chirpings and whistlings of birds unknown to me. Then, looking at my self-absorbed friend I told myself that one needed some quaint notion, some fantasy, to pass one's days in this uncanny solitude.

The next day I took leave of my friend. I had a great desire to see the Professor once more, but there was no chance.

Five years later I ran into my friend once again. He had retired from his Himalayan sojourn and devoted himself to agriculture in his native village. He told me in a very natural tone, "Life became intolerable once Professor Anjan Sharma was gone!"

"Where did he go?"

"In search of his shadow. That is the message he left for me."

"Then?"

"How far could he go? We found him lying unconscious at the farthest end of the valley, at the foot of the hills. He died a little later."

"And then?"

"We cremated him."

"I hope he found his shadow!"

"Oh no."

"How did you know? Did you observe his body casting no shadow even after you found him?"

"The sky was clouded all the time. We were shivering under our heavy overcoats."