

## Violin

### Gigglananda

The radium dial of Romanath's wrist watch indicated it was half past eleven, another half an hour to go for Christmas. He liked the melody of the beautiful orchestra emanating from the adjacent church. On the south corner of the church there was a huge lake. A man-made jogging track encircled the garden like a garland. On the other side of the track, thick bushes, shrubs and trees stretched as far as the creek. Entrance to the joggers' park was closed at 10pm. But it being Christmas Eve, the entrance would remain open until the midnight mass got over.

It was a little cold. But Romanath liked winter. Of course, in Bombay, the winter hardly produced much effect. Romanath was a software engineer working for an American company. The park was Romanath's favorite place. Often he visited the park for an evening walk. He stayed nearby, in a rented apartment.

Though the park was open to the public, Romanath did not see any visitor. Obviously, people were thronging inside the church. Romanath walked on idly. Suddenly some beautiful music alerted him. It was different – a solo violin, and not coming from the church. Someone was there, playing a violin. Following the music he came to a bench overlooking the lake. There was the musician, a man, engrossed in his music. He did not notice Romanath occupying the other end of the bench. Although the jogging track had lights at regular intervals, the man's figure was not clearly visible, as at this part only a very faint light reached from the nearest lamp post which stood some distance away.

"Hello!" greeted a voice.

Romanath started. He was so absorbed in the music that he did not even notice when it stopped. It was the musician who greeted him. He had laid the instrument beside him.

"Hello! It is superb. I don't know how to compliment you."

"Thanks. I can read your feeling."

"Er... Looks like you are a professional violin player. I mean to say, the kind of mastery you have. I do not understand much about it though."

"Sort of... Though violin is not my profession... Ha-ha! Do you play any instrument?"

"I do play guitar and harmonica. Music is my obsession - though it is absolutely my hobby. I have never given any performance except in college functions, you see. But music takes me to some other world."

"How true! It is really otherworldly. Who knows, you may become a musician yourself one day. You never know what hidden talents you have."

"My name is Romanath Mazumder. Do you stay nearby?"

"I am Durgaprasad. Well, I do not stay nearby; I am coming from rather a far off place. Why do you ask that?"

"Honestly, after listening to your music, I was toying with the idea of learning the instrument from you. I stay here, a kilometer away. But since you do not belong to this area..."

"I can understand your passion for music. Though I am not in a position to teach the instrument to you myself, I can give you a proposal if it suits you."

"...and what is that?"

"See, as I told you, I don't belong to this place and I have to leave shortly. I intend to leave my instrument to you as I am not in a position to carry it with me. This instrument has a magic which you will get to know later. I suggest you get hold of some violin player; I am sure you will come across one, who can teach you the basics. Then you will be in a position to manage on your own. You have the talent inside, and the instrument has its own. The duo will work out nicely. Tell me, is it acceptable to you?"

"But how is this possible? How can I accept this from you?"

"Look, take it this way. At the moment you are doing me a favor. This is a beautiful, rare piece of instrument which I just can't afford to lose. Try to find out its present market value from a music dealer and you will get to know. Such an instrument is hardly available these days. It will remain safe in your custody and will be utilized properly, I know."

"This sounds all the more impossible. How can I keep such a valuable thing with me?"

"Look, Romanath. At the moment I am in a mess and not in a position to discuss things in detail. I assure you that I will visit you again and tell everything – but not at the moment. It will give me a lot of peace if you keep it in your custody and use it. Please do not hesitate. You are a gentleman, I know, and precisely that is the reason I can leave it to you happily."

"Are you in... some kind of trouble? I mean, if I can be of any help..."

"Thanks much. At the moment it would be of much help if you accept this and use this."

"Very well, if you insist. But wait.... let me give you my visiting card so that whenever you want, you can come and collect your belonging from me. I assure you, being a music lover myself, I will take good care of the instrument. And... yes, if possible learn it too."

Romanath started groping for his visiting card. But he realized he had forgotten his wallet at home. The cards were inside his wallet.

"Sorry, I have left my wallet at home where I had kept my cards. So please note down my cell number. If you give me a ring I will tell you my address."

"I have no pen or paper with me. Don't bother; we will meet somehow."

"Normally I come here for evening walks on alternate days and weekends."

"That's great."

The church bell struck twelve. Durgaprasad got up.

“I think we should part now. It is quite late.”

“Yes I suppose so,” Romanath said, rising up. “Thanks for your beautiful music and this.” Romanath indicated at the violin.

“My pleasure. Thanks for your support. Good bye.”

Durgaprasad waived at Romanath and left.

Romanath picked up the instrument and the bow with care. It gave him a feeling of joy. An instrument which can produce such a beautiful piece of music. Romanath had heard violin many times before. But the sound of this instrument was something different. He decided to learn the instrument.

Sudden work-pressure at the office made Romanath forget everything for a couple of weeks. He had to go on a tour also. After many days on a Saturday at noontime he suddenly remembered about the violin which he had packed nicely and kept in a cupboard in his bedroom. He opened the pack and saw the instrument in broad day light. It was made in Italy, the famous violin making country. He thought of getting its valuation checked as suggested by Durgaprasad. As such he had nothing much to do at home; he set out along with the violin.

His head reeled when a few shop keepers gave a very rough estimate. This ancient piece would cost nothing less than a crore, minimum. Some experienced shop owners even asked him from where he procured such a rare piece, saying that he should better try to put it up on auction. Satisfied, Romanath returned home purchasing a beautiful case for the violin and learning about its upkeep.

About a week's enquiry here and there for a good violin teacher brought Romanath the reference of a good music artist and teacher, Seshagiri, who used to play in the radio and television once upon a time. He came to know about him through one of his colleagues whose father was a friend of Seshagiri. He lived about 14 kilometers away from Romanath's place at Chembur. Romanath decided to ring him up before visiting.

“Hello, am I speaking to Mr Seshagiri?”

“Speaking,” answered an aged voice.

“Look sir, I have a very good piece of violin and I want to learn to play it from you. I have heard about your fame and proficiency in violin from Sudhir, my friend. Sudhir Desai.”

“Sudhir... Oh, yes, Krishnakant's son?”

“That's right sir. I would like to come down to meet you along with the instrument.”

“Well Mr...”

“Please call me Romanath.”

“Well, Romanath, I have stopped giving tuitions because of my age. Now I play at times only for my own satisfaction. Sorry, my health does not permit to take the strain of giving

tuitions. And my way of teaching was quite different and hence strenuous. I used to toil for hours together behind serious students and I used to take only a few and selected students. So you understand now, why I can't accept your proposal."

"I see. I am sorry to hear about your problem. But if you kindly permit me, I would like to show you the instrument. It is a very rare piece. Perhaps you would like to play it once and I would love to listen to your music."

One Sunday afternoon Romanath visited Sheshagiri. He lived with his family and two grandchildren in an apartment. It was quite spacious. The elderly gentleman received Romanath in the balcony where he was sitting on a *jhula*. He was clad in white pajamas and *kurta*, and wore golden framed glasses. His hair was totally white, neatly combed. Next to their building was a big garden with quite a large number of trees. This made the entire ambience very good and apt for music, and so did Sheshagiri's personality, too. Sheshagiri mentioned that it was there that he used to teach students. Romanath handed over the instrument to him.

"Oh, god! It is a dream instrument! Made in Italy! I can't believe I am holding such an instrument in my hands! Where did you buy it from?"

Romanath narrated the incident in a nutshell.

Sheshagiri tightened the bow, tuned the instrument for a while and started playing *Dhrupad*. In a short while both of them went into a different world. The music lasted perhaps for an hour.

"I can't refuse you. Just for this instrument I can't refuse you. It is amazing. Though I must say I can only give you time on Sundays."

Meanwhile Sheshagiri's wife had brought cold drinks for both of them. She also joined in affirmation that the instrument was really very good.

Romanath's tuition started from that very day. He decided to pay double the amount of what Sheshagiri usually took as tuition fee. Romanath considered it a great blessing that he could get in touch with such a good violinist, so apt for the instrument too.

*Four Years later...*

Romanath had become an expert violinist. He managed to give a few public performances that Sheshagiri had arranged through his contacts. Sheshagiri expressed his belief that Romanath had the talent. Romanath was also approached by a well-known Recording Company. After a few months his first album came out and it was very well received in music world. Sheshagiri's health deteriorated. He suffered from gout. Still Romanath paid a regular visit to him, and when health permitted Sheshagiri would sit with the violin. Often the duo played *jugalbandi*. Romanath felt perhaps it was the most ecstatic moment of his life when he was able to play with his master. However, stage performances with Romanath were out of the question for Sheshagiri. Meanwhile Romanath received invitation from some music lovers from London. He was nervous, but Sheshagiri forced him

to accept the proposal. A visibly tensed Romanath went to his first abroad trip as a violinist along with his small group of musicians. The venture was successful and he was well received by the audience.

Upon returning, Romanath resigned from his company. Violin had already become his obsession by that time. Almost whole day he played. His parents in Kolkata were anxious to get him married. But he was addicted to the violin.

*Ten years later...*

Romanath had become a famous name in the world of music. The film industry in Mumbai knew Romanath very well, as he composed the background music to quite a few films which became a hit. Sheshagiri was no more.

Money and fame poured in. Romanath stayed at Devlali near Nasik, in his own huge beautiful bungalow along with his aged parents. He kept on postponing his marriage; his days and nights were mostly spent with the violin. One thing he realized that though he had the talent and expertise of playing the violin, he could not play just as well on any other instrument. His own instrument really had some magic. The moment he picked it up, the bow started moving – as if on its own – on the strings. Many a times Romanath had experienced this.

It was a Saturday night. Romanath was alone, playing his violin sitting in his garden. The water fountain behind him, emanating from a beautiful Venus statue, provided the background music. The whole house was dark, which meant his parents were asleep, household helps retired. Only two faint lights barely illuminated the surroundings, one that streamed from his bedroom, and the other, that alight at the security cabin near the main entrance some distance away. The night guard Jhundu was on duty. It, being the month of December, was rather cold outside, but Romanath enjoyed it. He was trying to compose a new song based on *Kafi*.

“Good evening Romanath-ji.” A voice almost frightened Romanath. “Do you recognize me? Durgaprasad?”

In the fraction of a second Romanath recollected him. Standing in front of him was Durgaprasad, the owner of the violin.

“What a nice pleasure Durgaprasad-ji. Please do sit down.”

“Thanks. Tell me how things are going on? I understand that you have become a famous violin player now?” muttered Durgaprasad occupying a seat near Romanath.

“Well ... May be... yes. Thanks to your instrument and my guru.”

“It is nice that you have the heart to acknowledge. Such qualities are becoming so rare these days. I came to meet you as I had promised. Today I would like to share some thing which I could not the other day.”

“Okay Durgaprasad-ji. But let us go inside the house. It is cold here. We would have some coffee. Have you taken your dinner?”

“Don’t bother Romanath-ji. It is nice out here. Please do not bother about anything. I am full. Today just let me talk to you.”

“But you have come after such a long gap. And that, too, coming to my house for the first time. How is it possible that you will not come inside? By the way how did you get my address?”

“Well, it is not difficult to collect. You are a famous person now Romanath-ji,” laughed Durgaprasad. “I am perfect here; please do not bother about petty things. Our world... Our world of music and musicians are different... isn’t it?”

“As you wish Durgaprasad-ji, but you are a very insistent type, I must say.”

“Ha-ha-ha... But that is for your good only, isn’t it?”

“Have to accept that.”

“Well then. Let us start. Now I will tell you about this instrument... Its story, I mean, and my story, too, of course. Tell me, have you – over all these years – managed to discover the magic in the instrument?”

“Yes, very much. As if the instrument guides me, or rather the instrument plays on its own. Even Sheshagiri-ji, my master, mentioned the same.”

“Precisely. See, this piece is more than 250 yrs old. My great-grandfather used to play it. Generation-wise it was being handed over to the descendants and I learnt to play from my father. It was made by Antonio Stradivari, the world famous violin maker. In fact, at present, it is worth a few crores. My great-grandfather was very fond of this instrument. He was a chieftain at Parichhatgarh near Meerut. We were Gurjars. I am talking about 18th century. He was very fond of music and dance. I admit he had other vices also. He learnt violin quite at a late age after crossing forty. I heard that he received this piece as a gift from one of the British officials in return to some favor done to him. My great-grandfather became very efficient in playing the instrument, and it became almost like an obsession for him, just as it has become for you now. He played it for ten years, when he was killed in a duel.

“My grandfather learnt to play from him. After my great-grandfather’s demise, my grandfather had become the chief; he was a big hunter but inherited his passion for music from his father. During those days, as you know, music and dance were very common and practised in palaces. My grandfather became a master violinist at quite a young age, around thirty. He started teaching my father while he was a small child. However, my grandfather could only play the instrument for ten years before his life ended suddenly. Once he was out for a hunting game. He killed a tiger. But he was mistaken, as the animal was badly wounded, but did not die. It was twilight. Thinking the animal to be dead, he approached to have a look at it. The tiger pounced upon and badly injured him. He was rushed to hospital which was quite far off, but it was too late.

“My father had two half brothers, but being the eldest, he became the chief. Sadly, the property and the seat became the bone of contention. It was around 1920. I was in the UK

for my studies. Posts from my father revealed his mental stress as my other uncles were conspiring against him. This violin was his only solace, he used to mention. I finished my education and returned home to remain with my father and assist him. The situation had turned very hostile by then. My uncles and their team had really made our lives miserable. Finally they managed to kill my father. He was poisoned while I was away for some business to British Capital, Calcutta. It was 1930. My father had played the instrument for ten years.

“Rushing back home, I had to take care of a lot of things including my mother who could not bear the shock and became bedridden. Hiring some British lawyers I tried to settle the dispute. But it was not so easy for me. My uncles had built up a strong team and forged documents to prove that they were the rightful owners of the sovereignty. Two-three years went like that. Meanwhile I lost my mother. Constant tension made me turn to the violin one day, which though I learnt to play at a young age, I never pursued later as I went abroad. I had rediscovered it in my father’s room, and started playing it. To my surprise, after a few days of practice I found that I could play it well. Music was in my blood. Slowly the violin became an obsession. By that time I grew a little accustomed to our territory related issues and was able to build up a strong team. I was then determined to teach my uncles a lesson even it meant killing them. However, I did not have to reduce myself to such a level. My spies managed to collect all information from them and recover all the original documents at gun point. They were sent to jail for further trial. Happy with the developments, one evening I was sitting in my palace garden playing the instrument. Suddenly a thought came to me like a flash. Right from my great grandfather, whoever played this instrument, everyone got obsessed with it. But each one of them could play it only for ten years. Was it a coincidence? I could feel that I was addicted to the violin. And I realized that by then I, too, had completed ten years of playing it. I had started playing it from 1932-33 after my father’s death, and it was then the end of 1942.

“But before coming to that part I want to tell you something else, Romanath-ji.”

“Yes?”

“You have completed ten years of playing the instrument. I have a request for you which you have to keep. After all, this instrument is our ancestral property.”

“Sure.”

“You have to destroy the instrument. I cannot do it myself, hence the request to you. You have to do it for me.”

“What! Destroy this beautiful piece? For what? Just for a few coincidences? All those incidents had nothing to do with the instrument. They were just your imagination Durgaprasad-ji. Of course, it is your property and I have to hand it over to you as I was only the custodian. But I am willing to purchase it from you at any price you quote, though I know it is priceless.”

“That is not possible, Romanath-ji; else I would have suggested that to you already. The incidents which you think as coincidence are not; they are facts. And it is also a fact that the instrument plays on its own, it has some force working through it. It is the force of my

ancestors' souls who were obsessed with it. And their spirits are hovering around stuck in the attachment for this instrument. There is no other way but to destroy it. And you don't understand that your own life is in danger, Romanath-ji. I can't let that happen. You are young, a talented musician. You have a long way to go in the world of music. You have much to contribute to the musical world."

"Look, Durgaprasad-ji. I understand your feelings and your concern for me. Perhaps, as you think, the incidents that happened in your family had some connection with the violin, agreed. But I do not belong to your family. This instrument is in no way going to harm me. Not at all."

"Romanath-ji, try to understand. It is not regarding ancestral lineage. What I mean to say is, this particular instrument is cursed. It is cursed that whosoever played it would die in the next ten years. Perhaps it all started with my great grandfather who was greatly attached to it."

"How can you say that? You said that you played it for almost ten years. And you are still living."

"I AM NOT, ROMANATH-JI... I AM NOT A LIVING BEING... WHAT YOU SEE IS JUST A REPLICA OF MY PHYSICAL BODY WHICH I MATERIALIZED FROM THE ETHER IN ORDER TO REACH YOU... MY SOUL, JUST LIKE MY ANSCESTORS' SOULS, IS HOVERING AROUND, ATTACHED TO THIS INSTRUMENT... I DIED IN A ROAD ACCIDENT IN THE MONTH OF DECEMBER 1942... THERE IS NO WAY OF OUR ASCENSION OTHER THAN DESTROYING THIS INSTRUMENT WHICH IS OUR ATTACHMENT..."

Guard Jhundu discovered Romanath's body early next morning lying in the garden, dead. The violin was beside him destroyed, shattered into pieces. It was 25th December.