

Out of Business

Little over a year ago Rama Rao went out of work when a gramophone company, of which he was the Malgudi agent, went out of existence. He had put into that agency the little money he had inherited, as security. For five years his business brought him enough money, just enough, to help him keep his wife and children in good comfort. He built a small bungalow in the extension and was thinking of buying an old baby car for his use.

And one day, it was a bolt from the blue, the crash came. A series of circumstances in the world of trade, commerce, banking and politics was responsible for it. The gramophone company, which had its factory somewhere in Northern India, automatically collapsed when a bank in Lahore crashed, which was itself the result of a Bombay financier's death. The financier was driving downhill when his car flew off sideways and came to rest three hundred feet below the road. It was thought that he had committed suicide because the previous night his wife eloped with his cashier.

Rama Rao suddenly found himself in the streets. At first he could hardly understand the full significance of this collapse. There was little money in the bank and he had some stock on hand. But the stock moved out slowly; the prices were going down, and he could hardly realize a few hundred rupees. When he applied for the refund of his security, there was hardly anyone at the other end to receive his application.

The money in the bank was fast melting. Rama Rao's wife now tried some measures of economy. She sent away the cook and the servant; withdrew the children from a fashionable nursery school and sent them to a pre primary school. And they let out their bungalow and moved to a very small house behind the Market.

Rama Rao sent out a dozen applications a day, and wore his feet out looking for employment. For a man approaching forty, looking for employment does not come very easily, especially when he has just lost an independent, lucrative business. Rama Rao was very business-like in stating his request. He sent his card in and asked, 'I wonder, sir, if you could do something for me. My business is all gone through no fault of my own. I shall be very grateful if you can give me something to do in your office

What a pity, Rama Rao! I am awfully sorry, there is nothing at present. If there is an opportunity I will certainly remember you.'

It was the same story everywhere. He returned home in the evening; his heart sank as he turned into his street behind the Market. His wife would invariably be standing at the door with the children behind her, looking down the street. What anxious, eager faces they had! So much of trembling, hesitating hope in their faces. They seemed always to hope that he would come back home with some magic fulfillment. As he remembered the futile way in which he searched for a job, and the

finality with which people dismissed him, he wished that his wife and children had less trust in him. His wife looked at his face, understood, and turned in without uttering a word; the children took the cue and filed in silently. Rama Rao tried to improve matters with a forced heartiness. 'Well' well. How are we all today? To which he received mumbling feeble responses from his wife and children. It rent his heart to see them in this condition. There at the Extension how this girl would sparkle with flowers. She had friendly neighbours, a women's club, and something to keep her happy there. But now she hardly had the heart or the need to change in the evenings, for she spent all her time cooped up in the kitchen. The house in the Extension had a compound and they romped about with a dozen other children: it was possible to have numerous friends in the fashionable nursery school!. But here the children had no friends, and could play only in the backyard of the house. Their shirts were beginning to show tears and frays. Formerly they were given new clothes once in three months. Rama Rao lay in bed and spent sleepless nights over it.

All the cash in hand was now gone. Their only source of income was the small rent they were getting for their house in the Extension. They shuddered to think what would happen to them if their tenant should suddenly leave.

It was in this connection that Rama Rao came across a journal in the Jubilee Reading Room. It was called *The Captain*. It consisted of four pages and all of them were devoted to crossword puzzles. It offered every week a first prize of four thousand rupees.

For the next few days, his head was free from family cares. He was intensely thinking of his answer. Whether it should be TALLOW or FALLOW, whether BAD or MAD or SAD would be most apt for a clue which said, 'Men who are this had better be avoided'. He hardly stopped to look at his wife and children standing in the doorway, when he returned home in the evenings. Week after week he invested a little money and sent down his solutions, and every week he awaited the results with a palpitating heart. On the day a solution was due he hung about the newsagent's shop, worming himself into his favour in order to have a look into the latest issue of *The Captain* without paying for it. He was too impatient to wait till the journal came on the table in the Jubilee Reading Room. Sometimes the newsagent would grumble, and Rama Rao would pacify him with an awkward, affected optimism. 'Please wait. When I get a prize I will give you three years' subscription in advance.' His heart quailed as he opened the page announcing the prize winners. Someone in Baluchistan, someone in Dacca, and someone in Ceylon had hit upon the right set of words; not Rama Rao. It took three hours for Rama Rao to recover from this shock. The only way to exist seemed to be to plunge into the next week's puzzle: that would keep him buoyed up with hope for a few days more.

This violent alternating between hope and despair soon wrecked his nerves and balance. At home he hardly spoke to anyone. His head was always bowed in thought. He quarrelled with his wife if she refused to give him his rupee a week for the puzzles. She was of a mild disposition and was incapable of a sustained quarrel, with the result

that he always got what he wanted, though it meant a slight sacrifice in household expenses.

One day the good journal announced a special offer of eight thousand rupees. It excited Rama Rao's vision of a future tenfold. He studied the puzzle. There were only four doubtful corners in it, and he might have to send in at least four entries. A larger outlay was indicated. 'You must give me five rupees this time', he said to his wife, at which that good lady became speechless. He had become rather insensitive to such things these days, but even he could not help feeling the atrocious nature of his demand. Five rupees were nearly a week's food for the family. He felt disturbed for a moment; but he had only to turn his attention to speculate whether HOPE or DOPE or ROPE made most sense (for 'Some People Prefer This to Despair'), and his mind was at once at rest.

After sending away the solutions by registered post he built elaborate castles in the air. Even if it was only a share he would get a substantial amount of money. He would send away his tenants, take his wife and children back to the bungalow in the Extension, and leave all the money in his wife's hands for her to manage for a couple of years or so; he himself would take a hundred and go away to Madras and seek his fortune there. By the time the money in his wife's hands was spent, he would have found some profitable work in Madras.

On the fateful day of results Rama Rao opened *The Captain*, and the correct solution stared him in the face. His blunders were numerous. There was no chance of getting back even a few annas now. He moped about till the evening. The more he brooded over this the more intolerable life seemed.... All the losses, disappointments and frustrations of the life came down on him with renewed force. In the evening instead of turning homeward he moved along the Railway Station Road. He slipped in at the level crossing and walked down the line a couple of miles. It was dark. Far away the lights of the town twinkled, and the red and green light of a signal post loomed over the surroundings a couple of furlongs behind him. He had come to the conclusion that life was not worth living. If one had the misfortune to be born in the world the best remedy was to end matters on a railway line or with a rope ('Dope? Hope?' his mind asked involuntarily). He pulled it back. 'None of that', he said to it and set it rigidly to contemplate the business of dying. Wife, children ... nothing seemed to matter. The only important thing now was total extinction. He lay across the lines. The iron was still warm. The day had been hot. Rama Rao felt very happy as he reflected that in less than ten minutes the train from Trichinopoly would be arriving.

He lay there he did not know how long. He strained his ears to catch the sound of the train, but he heard nothing more than a vague rattling and buzzing far off... Presently he grew tired of lying down there. He rose and walked back to the station. There was a good crowd on the platform. He asked someone, 'What has happened to the train?'

'A goods train has derailed three stations off, and the way is blocked. They have sent up a relief. All the trains will be at least three hours late today...?'

'God, you have shown me mercy!' Rama Rao cried and ran home.

His wife was waiting at the door looking down the street. She brightened up and sighed with relief on seeing Rama Rao. She welcomed him with warmth he had never known for over a year now. 'Oh, why are you so late today?' she asked. 'I was somehow feeling very restless the whole evening. Even the children were worried. Poor creatures! They have just gone to sleep'.

When he sat down to eat she said, 'Our tenants in the Extension bungalow came in the evening to ask if you would sell the house. They are ready to offer good cash for it immediately'. She added quietly, 'I think we may sell the house'.

'Excellent idea,' Rama Rao replied jubilantly. 'This minute we can get four and a half thousand for it. Give me the half thousand and I will go away to Madras and see if I can do anything useful there. You keep the balance with you and run the house. Let us first move to a better locality...'

'Are you going to employ your five hundred to get more money out of crossword puzzles?' she asked quietly. At this Rama Rao felt depressed for a moment and then swore with great emphasis, 'No, no. Never again'.

- **R.K.Narayan**

About the Story

'Out of Buisness', written by R.K.Narayan, narrates the story of Rama Rao who becomes jobless because the company he works for as an agent, collapses. Unable to get any job, he baffles himself with crossword puzzles which never win him prizes. Subsequently, he decides to put an end to his life but by God's grace the train is late and he gets sufficient time to change his mind and decides to begin his life afresh.

The author R.K. Narayan is one of the most renowned Indian writers writing in English. The setting for most of his stories is the fictional town of Malgudi. His novel *The Guide* won him the Sahitya Academi Award in 1960.

Glossary

inherit: obtain from someone after his/her death

bolt from the blue: a complete unpleasant surprise
 collapse: an abrupt failure of function
 elope: run away secretly
 invariably: always
 feeble: weak
 palpitate: beat(heart)rapidly
 buoy: make one feel cheerful in a difficult situation
 quail: draw back with fear
 pacify: appease, to make calm
 to wear one's feet out: to walk a lot
 atrocious: shockingly cruel
 speculate: to believe with an element of doubt, to guess
 mope: to be in sad, gloomy mood
 loom: appear threateningly
 rattling: a rapid series of short loud sound
 jubilantly: in a joyous manner
 fray: when fibres or threads start to come apart from each other

COMPREHENSION

(A) Tick the correct alternative:

- The protagonist of the story is-
 - Rama Rao
 - Rama Rao's wife
 - Rama Rao's children
 - the financier
- The company Rama Rao works for is-----
 - Rama Rao
 - a mobile company
 - a gramophone company
 - a television company
 - none of these
- Rama Rao's wife is always waiting at/in
 - the door
 - the street
 - the house
 - the railway station

(B) Answer to the following questions should not exceed 10-15 words each:

- Why does Rama Rao's wife withdraw her children from expensive nursery school?
- Where does Rama Rao start investing his money after his business gets ruined?
- "All the losses, disappointments, and frustrations of the life come down on him (Rama Rao) with renewed force." Why?
- Who does want to buy Extension bungalow?
- What does Rama Rao want to do with the money he is going to get after he has sold the house?

(C) Answer to the following questions should not exceed 20-30 words each:

1. Why do the children of Rama Rao wait for him with eager faces?
2. Why does Rama Rao demand money from his wife?
3. Why does the train get late?
4. Why is Rama Rao very happy when his wife informs him that the tenants are ready to buy their bungalow?
5. What does Rama Rao decide to do after he has got money by selling the house?

(D) Answer to the following questions should not exceed 60-80 words each:

1. Write a note on the unstable world of commerce hinted at in the story.
2. Attempt a character sketch of Rama Rao.

(E) Say whether the following statements are true or false. Write 'T' for True and 'F' for False:

1. Rama Rao's wife feels happy when her husband invests money in cross word puzzles. []
2. Rama Rao commits suicide. []
3. The wife and children of Rama Rao have faith in him. []
4. Rama Rao has a loving wife. []
5. Rama Rao is hopeful every time he sends the solutions to the puzzles. []