

Out of Business

-R.K. Narayan

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 North 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 a 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 free primary school. And then 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 businesslike 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 fulfilment. 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. At the Extension how this girl would sparkle with flowers and a bright dress; she had friendly neighbours, a women's club and everything 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. And then the children. 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 back yard 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 condition 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 thinking intensely of his answers: whether it should be *TALLOW* or *FOLLOW*. 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 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 his 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 a warmth he had not 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.’