CHAPTER II
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Narayan's first novel *Swami and Friends* was published in 1935. Swaminathan, the protagonist of this novel, was a student of Albert Mission School in Malgudi. The novel is an episodic comedy which projects patterns of loyalty and authority through the eyes of a child. The typical Narayan technique of reporting a trivial incident with unusual detail as it stems from the intense personal experience of Swami is clearly seen both in *Swami and Friends* and in the short story "A Hero" in which the fears and fancies of a child and Hindu orthodox traditions are vividly portrayed.

R.K. Narayan's first novel *Swami and Friends* not only created the now famous Malgudi novels but has also paved the way for a fine comedy in which the fantasies of the child, the evocation of an atmosphere of family ties, and idealized memories centring round the grandmother are created. The probings of psychological factors, the crisis in the individual soul and its evaluation, and above all,
detached observation - these, Narayan said, were the concerns of the fiction writer in India.¹ The narrative art of Narayan takes into its sweep a limited canvas. He is content, like Jane Austin, with a little bit of ivory two inches wide. He senses the atmosphere of the place that he is depicting and catches the oddities and angularities of a small group of characters through whom he would reveal the uniqueness of the ordinary. If this pattern is perceptively in evidence in Swami and Friends, the same pattern of the uniqueness of the ordinary, fantasies and spells, and superstitions is found in abundance in one of the Swami stories, "A Hero." The story traces how events took an unexpected turn for Swami following his father's reading of the newspaper account of the tale of bravery of a village lad. The story inspired the father to instil in his son a spirit of courage. The father felt that this spirit of courage was independent of the requirements of either strength or age. He therefore puts a frightful proposition to the son. Herein lies the typical Narayan mode of investing the ordinary and the seemingly ludicrous with a frightening significance for the protagonist of the story. Swami who always
slept beside his grandmother in the passage was suddenly asked to sleep alone in the father's office from that fateful night. Swami's attempts to change the subject and expatiate upon cricket prove futile, given his father's tenacity. He attempts to avoid sleeping alone in the father's office room by pretending to be asleep beside his grandmother. But the father remained unbudging. As a result, Swami had to retire to the father's office room. In spite of his attempts to avoid the event, Swami was forced to sleep on a bench in the father's office room without even having a lamp burning in the room. His reaction to this was somewhat exaggerated, as the following words of the narrative voice would reveal:

Swami felt cut off from humanity. He was pained and angry. He didn't like the strain of cruelty he saw in his father's nature. He hated the newspaper for printing the tiger's story. He wished that the tiger hadn't spared the boy, who didn't appear to be a boy after all, but a monster.\(^2\)

A sense of ominousness is built into the next part of the narrative by means of a resort to familiar tales
of the devils which one usually hears while a child. The drawing upon of popular superstitions and demonological accounts enhances the atmosphere of fear in which Swami is caught. After building up this atmosphere of nightmare comes the unravelling of the secret behind the accidental rise of Swami to heroic heights. A vivid description is given of the sense of fright which gripped Swami. But ironically, in an incident which is perhaps beyond the bounds of probability, Swami bites into the flesh of the burglar who is caught. The suggestiveness of the Narayan tale is illustrated in the foregoing quotation from the short story wherein there is a reference to the tiger story in the newspaper. Like the tiger, Swami pounces on his victim and uses his teeth as a mortal weapon. Thus, as Swami discovers later, his victim happened to be one of the most notorious housebreakers of the district. For the sake of politeness Swami even agrees to join the police when he is grown up, though he says these words with a tendency to shrug off his heroism.

The irony of the whole story, after such a build up of an atmosphere of devilry, nightmarish happenings, and finally heroism, lies in the fact that
Swami sleeps the next night beside his grandmother as usual. The father's protest against it is of no avail because the whole family is against Swami risking his life any longer. The story concludes with the following words from the narrator:

Swami, following the whole conversation from under the blanket, felt tremendously relieved to hear that his father was giving him up.\(^3\)

In another story, "Father's Help," the element of surprise is presented in an entirely convincing manner. Here Samuel is deliberately provoked to justify his reputation. To his utter consternation, Swami finds that Samuel is the person who is going to receive his complaint because the head master is on leave and Samuel deputises for him. These things are regarded as part of the irony of life. The letter given by Swami's father remains undelivered. As Swami's father tells him at the end, he deserves his teacher Samuel. The ironic mode and tone of detachment have often been seen in the novels as well as the short stories of R.K. Narayan. R.K. Jeurker points out that Narayan's themes are essentially ironic "in their structure and thought."\(^4\)
This statement has been called in question by David and Abidi who underscore the point that the narrative devices employed by a writer and the treatment of the subject matter give the theme its ironic ring.\[^5\]

A short story which testifies to Narayan's mastery of the complex and varied use of irony is "Half a Rupee Worth." The central character in this story is Subbiah, an unscrupulous and greedy rice merchant. The story depicts how Subbiah made his profit even through the vicissitudes of fortune relating to grain trade. Subbiah's avarice and his parsimony are suggested in the story in terms Chaucerian. It looked as though his profit-making would go on through eternity:

There seemed no reason why it should not go on through eternity - the same set of activities and interests, going on and on, money piling up and rice coming in and going out, and then one or the other of his sons to acquire his shape and appearance and continue the family business. This seemed, for all practical purposes, a region beyond life, death, and change.\[^6\]

Through dexterous comic touches Narayan shows how Subbiah was "swollen with money." And then came
the war piling up profits for him as never before. But with the introduction of price and food control, there seemed to be an initial slump. Subbiah knew the tricks of the trade and hence the philosophic reflection: "God arranges everthing for the best" (p.177). As a result, even the scarcity caused by war comes in handy for his black-marketing to flourish. One evening Subbiah encounters a person who sought rice from him after his shop was closed. At first Subbiah refuses to give him any rice, but lured by the half-a-rupee coin offered by the customer, he goes, under the pretext of bringing rice from elsewhere, to his own secret godown in a back street where rice bags were piled up from floor to ceiling. This godown was supposed to be a storehouse of waste-paper and rag to be supplied to the paper mills. The irony of it is that the store, "something to eke out my meagre livelihood" (178), sounds the deathknell of Subbiah. Subbiah fails to return with rice for a long time. At last with the help of his wife the secret godown was located and the search revealed Subbiah dead under the weight of the fallen bags of rice. Narayan sums up the whole happening in a simple utterance giving a touch of detached but curiously journalistic account of it:
In a corner they saw an electric torch lying on the floor and then a half-rupee coin, and a little off a hand stuck out of a pile a fallen bags. At the inquest they said, "Death due to accidental toppling off of rice bags and suffocation." (p.180)

The death of Subbiah is described in terms which brings out the strange turn of fate. The description is free from the touch of the pathetic. A superb irony is seen in the report at the inquest: "Death due to accidental toppling off of rice bags" (p.180). The effect of the whole story is comical rather than tragic.

Yet another story in which irony is handled with deftness is "Another Community" which probes the psychology of the communal riots in the immediate after-math of the partition of India. The narrator spells out explicitly that he would not either name the community involved in the trouble or the hero of the story. The nameless hero is a clerk in an office engaged in insurance business. He is middle-aged and leads a contented life in his profession as well as with his family. But October 1947 brings
about first a fear psychosis and then a lurid, nightmarish dream of damnation in him. The narrative strategy here involves first a visualization of the evil of communal riots followed by a blow-by-blow happening of men organizing themselves and gathering for instructions at the hero's uncle's house. A sickening feeling overwhelms the protagonist as he hears accounts of assaults and police helplessness and contemplates the fate of his own family. The nightmarish images of violence affect the peace-loving protagonist so much that "He secretly resolved that he'd fetch the wood-chopper from the fuel room and keep it handy in case he had to defend his home" (p.69). On the fateful day, even as activity had risen to a feverish pitch in his uncle's house, the unnamed hero drowns himself in work in his office till it was past 7.30 P.M. and in his anxiety to reach home quickly by the shortest route, he enters a dark alley where, by sheer accident, he and the cyclist who comes opposite him tumble down on the road and pick a quarrel which goes far beyond the dimensions of a street corner verbal engagement, given the atmosphere of communal frenzy. That fateful day thus produced the event which sparked a furore, leading
finally to an assault on the helpless protagonist. Peace-loving that he was, the protagonist feebly mumbles words out of what R.K. Narayan regarded as an "access of recklessness" but uttered with a "lot of detachment." This nameless hero who wants to save the city from the fury and the destruction of communal riots utters these dying words:

"But I will never, never tell my uncle what has happened. I won't utter the word that will start the trouble, that will press the button, so to say. That'll finish up everybody, you and me together. What is it all worth? " (p.71)

The dying words of the protagonist contain a concern for fellow humanity which transcends narrow, parochial considerations. Narayan flashes across through the protagonist "the apocalypse of the ordinary." The heroic effort of the protagonist to see that his uncle did not "press the button" which would unleash the Frankenstein's monster proves futile because the button did get pressed and the protagonist's lie does not save the city because it remains unspoken. By not naming the hero and by keeping the location and the incidents unidentified, Narayan shows his typical
sense of detachment. The hero is an innocent victim in mob violence where it is the innocent who are the sacrificial scapegoats. The short story, "Another Community," enacts the irony inherent in the situation of mob fury. That the protagonist is after all one of the ordinary through whom truth is thus demonstrated is made clear towards the end of the story:

His body was found by the police late next afternoon in a ditch in that wretched alley, and identified through the kerosene ration coupon in his breast pocket. (p.72)

The ending of the story is like that of "Half a Rupee Worth." While Subbiah's death in "Half a Rupee Worth" is due to the accidental toppling off of rice bags, revealing a superb touch of irony in the way greed brings about the end, "Another Community" shows how innocence and honesty are at times in situations of frenzy unrecognised and trampled upon. The short story reveals further that Narayan is not merely a comic ironist but one who reconciles the tragic and comic elements in his short stories. It is further observed that one of the persistent concerns of Narayan is to present the predicament of the middle
class individuals in a changing society. His tolerant vision of the absurdities and the foibles of the individuals reveals the efflorescence of the very human urges and impulses which make man.

Another interesting story is "Gateman's Gift." This is a story in which a subtle, ironic treatment of slavish, mechanical adherence to routine professional preoccupations is given. Some of the short stories of Narayan are about the ignorant, the illiterate and the hopelessly poor. Govind Singh, the protagonist of "Gateman's Gift," is a faithful gateman who, after service in the War during 1914-1918, became a gate keeper in England's. He served as a gateman for 25 years and always looked upon his General Manager as a God. During his entire service in England's, he spoke to his master only twice: on the day of his joining service, and on the day he was to be pensioned off. In his retirement he lived a contented life, but he made a discovery about the hidden artistic sensibility in him when he started making clay models in his backyard. The fascinating model of the miniature universe which he made attracted everyone's attention. He was so ecstatic about it that on a pension day he carried
to his office a street scene which he ranked as his best and handed it over to the accountant with a request that it be given to the Sahib whom he adored. Month after month Govind Singh repeated this exercise of gifting to the master his master pieces in which he displayed the skill of a cartoonist for capturing human faces. These models drew everyone in the office to them, so much so that for just some time on every pension day there was a mild flutter in the office. One day Govind Singh received a registered letter which he innocently thought was the instrument of his ruin. With the receiving of this letter, gradually Govind Singh descends to a temporary fit of insanity. He wandered about unkempt saying the same thing, with the letter in his pocket. He lost his taste for food. His hair was standing up stiff — an unaccustomed sight since his years in military service gave him a habitual tidiness. His wife lost all peace of mind and became miserable on account of him. He stood at the crossroads, clutching the letter in his hand. He kept asking everyone he came across, "Tell me, what is there in this?" but he would not brook the suggestion to open it and see its contents." (pp.22-23)
Govind Singh is so ignorant that for him a registered letter is always one sent by a lawyer and therefore it foredooms ruin. Narayan enacts in this short story how the letter in the pocket of Govind Singh shows itself to be an instrument of doom rendering him near insane till the moment of reversal when, the same accountant who took from Govind Singh his artistic masterpieces to be passed on to the master, tells him that the letter contains no message of evil but a cash reward as a tooken appreciation of the artistry demonstrated by him. Thus from a situation of near tragedy there is a movement towards the recognition of the comic strain inherent in a given situation. Govind Singh's ludicrous visit to the city x-ray institute and his pathetic appeals to people to let him know the contents of the letter without opening it are all part of the narrative framework in which, by an exaggeration of the ludicrous length to which innocence can be drawn, Narayan drives home his lesson of the tragic trap that lay before innocence and the final resolution whereby the triumph of innocence is asserted. But the assertion of the triumph of innocence is achieved not by integrating
the protagonist within the framework of his newly discovered artistic potentialities but by a confinement of the man to his domain of loyalty and servitude reiterated all through his service and beyond. It is perhaps this narrow framework in which Govind Singh is fitted that is suggested by the military bearing of the man. In reply to a question as to what toys he was making, Govind Singh replies thus:

"Nothing, sir, Never again. It is no occupation for a sane man...."
he said, received his pension and walked stiffly out of the office.(p.26)

An interesting story with a twist at the end is to found in "An Astrologer's Day," a short story in a collection under that title. This story narrates the tale of an astrologer who sits under the bough of a spreading tamarind tree flanking a path running through the Town Hall Park. A surging crowd moves up and down this busy street and hence the shade of this tree is a suitable place for this pedlar in the fraudulent art of forecasting one's future. The astrologer transacts his business by the light of a flare here because the place does not have the benefit of municipal lighting. This feeble
light provides scope for the astrologer to read his customer's minds and give them their forecast on the basis of what they inadvertently divulge to him in the course of their session with him. Portraying the Astrologer's bent, Narayan says thus:

He was as much a stranger to the stars as were his innocent customers. Yet he said things which pleased and astonished everyone: that was more a matter of study, practise and shrewd guesswork. All the time, it was as much an honest man's labour as any other, and he deserved the wages he carried home at the end of a day. (p.4)

The Astrologer who thrives by his native wit and a capacity to perceive the tangled web of human relationships is confronted with a challenge. As he was about to bundle up for the day, a stranger poses a challenge to him that he should either answer him correctly or accept defeat and pay him back his money with a huge interest. The Astrologer at first shivers in his shoes and is hesitant to accept the challenge but comes out with a vivid, accurate account of the past about which the customer was worried. He convinces the customer that he knows everything
and tells him that he should give up the path of
vengeance and live peacefully because the opponent
he is in search of was crushed under a lorry. The
question is, how did the Astrologer, who was a
stranger to the stars, predict so accurately? The
story has an almost O'Henry ending. Back at home,
the Astrologer recapitulates to his wife his truant
and criminal past and tells her that a great load
is off his chest now. Thus Narayan links up a
seemingly harmless profession taken up by the
Astrologer to a criminal event in the past. Seen
from this angle, the sacred ash and the vermilion
which the Astrologer wore on his face are marks of
a hypocrite.

This story gives us not only sustained
delight but also a successful illusion of authentic
social reality. The story centres round the little
world of Malgudi and reveals Narayan's unique comic
vision of life. The fantasies and frustrations,
the illusions and ironies and the hypocrisy of
everyday life, especially the life of a common astro-
loger, are vividly described in this story. The very
first description which Narayan gives us of the
Astrologer contains hints of what he is going to dig
up about the Astrologer's past:
His forehead was resplendent with sacred ash and vermilion, and his eyes sparkled with a sharp abnormal gleam which was really an outcome of a continual searching look for customers, but which his simple clients took to be a prophetic light and felt comforted. (p.3)

After this subtly ironic account of the Astrologer's posture, Narayan gives us an account of the scene where the Astrologer's foretelling of the future takes place. Narayan's portrait of the Astrologer with a skeleton in his cupboard is sympathetic. He says that the Astrologer earned "as much an honest man's labour as any other, and he deserved the wages he carried home at the end of a day" (p.4). After giving a graphic account of the probable conjectures which an Astrologer makes, Narayan proceeds straight to the unravelling of his past by the device of a ghost from his own past running into him and thereby provoking him to travel down the memory lane. The customer who comes to the Astrologer now is an old, inveterate enemy of his who is actually in search of him to fulfil his mission of revenge. The comic irony here is that the Astrologer recognises this customer,
and the customer himself cannot recognise the Astrologer because of the faint criss-cross pattern of light and shadows under which the Astrologer sits under the tamarind tree. For the customer Guru Nayak's question whether his enemy could be found out, pleasingly to his ear, the Astrologer assures him that he was crushed under a lorry some months ago, as if nemesis worked itself out, bringing about retributive justice. Commanding Guru Nayak to go home and not to travel south again, the Astrologer goes home with a great load off his chest. He tells his wife that he no more had the blood of a man on his hands. This gives him a reconciliation with himself so that he yawns and stretches himself on the pyol. One of the qualities of this short story is that it is devoid of any touch of the didactic. Nevertheless, it deals with the themes of retributive justice and the secret workings of guilt on the conscience provoking a confession. All these dark recesses are explored without the corrosive power of irony affecting the comic vision.

"Second Opinion" is yet another short story significant in the Narayan canon. This was serialized in *The Illustrated Weekly of India* during the months
of January and February 1982. One of Narayan novels, The Painter of Signs and this short story have certain things in common. The characterizations of Daisy and Raman in The Painter of Signs and of Sambu and his mother in "Second Opinion" are elements which show how Narayan is not merely a comic ironist. In The Painter of Signs there is a negative ending with Daisy and Raman parting company. This negative ending has been necessitated by the very decisive character of Daisy. Raman who is dependent is left alone by this independent, purposeful and new woman. "Second Opinion" also produces the same kind of "drifting hero and determined woman." ¹⁰

The short story describes Sambu's ambivalent attitude and incertitude. His indifference to the question of his own marriage shows a lack of purpose and determination in him. Towards the end of the short story, although Sambu agrees to go to the bus stand to meet his relative just to please his mother, one cannot be sure about Sambu's arriving at a sense of purpose. The widowed mother is exasperated by the drifting, evasive attitude of the son which implicitly is an ironic comment on the moral
turgidity of the situation. The suffering of the widowed mother in her illness, her anguish at the awareness of the son's ambivalence, and the theme of loneliness explored in the short story show its kinship with the absurdist vision rather than with that of a comic ironist, as Vimala Rao analyses the short story. Just as in the novel *Dark Room*, a vision of the dishevelled hair of the small daughter, Kamala, has made Savitri, the mother, return to her home, so also the dishevelled hair and unkempt appearance of his self-possessed mother disturb Sambu out of his inertia so that he becomes at least less selfish than before. Though an underlying tragedy of chaos in human life is hinted at in the depiction of the disparate approaches of mother and son, the impression that the reader gets of this short story is that it balances the comic and the serious aspects and thus shows Narayan to include the tragic component in an essentially comic vision. The short story shows Narayan's capacity for a more comprehensive picturization of life's varied rhythms. There is here no exclusion of the comic for the sake of an introduction of the absurdist. The serious vein overtakesthe narrative at places,
but Narayan's tolerant vision of the absurdities, the foibles and the touching human urges of the individuals he depicts is clearly inscribed, as in the following passage:

She begged, "Meet him, bring him home, eat with him, talk to him and then leave if you like. I'll see that he doesn't mention his daughter, you don't have to bother about the marriage. Do what you like, become a sanyasi or a sinner, I won't interfere. This is the last time. I'll not try to advise you as long as I breathe; this is a vow, though let me confess my dream of seeing grandchildren in this house is —" She broke down before completing the sentence. I felt moved by her desperation and secret dreams, pushed her gently back into the house and said, "Get in, get in before anyone sees us. I'll go to the bus-stand and bring him here. I couldn't see him clearly the other day, but I'm sure to recognize him by the tuft."
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