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## Path of Thorns Leads One to a Bed of Roses

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Tulasi is a beautiful girl of seventeen. Her charm and charisma could captivate any man to become passionate about her beauty and adore her. But, at home how she was treated is in quite contrast. She is a burdensome and unwanted child to her father Srinivasa Iyer, an orthodox Tamil Brahmin and her step mother Kamamma. Iyer is the bread winner of the family by serving as a priest in four or five temples in the vicinity and his son Arjun assisted him. Tulasi's mother Kamamma is a housewife who sells homemade pickles in the neighbourhood. Theirs is a below middle class family which toils to make both the ends meet. That was the last day of Tulasi's school.

She said, "Mom, today I'll come late. We friends have planned to go to a movie after the completion of our exams".

"What makes you to enjoy like this, when there is so much work to be done at home, you no need to go to a movie" Her father added, "These days girls roam outside and get ruined, they have least inclination towards family and their responsibility".

Mother continues, "Pick up orders for our pickles in the neighbouring houses on your way home". Poor girl Tulasi cannot say 'no' to their parents and obliges their commands. Poverty, domestic chores in a loveless family are the demons that subdue Tulasi and make her submissive. Her two sets of clothes is a treasure to her because it is always Arjun who bought a new dress for every birthday and not Tulasi. The privilege gained by Arjun at the cost of Tulasi's subservient position exacerbates her inner angst that has no emotional outlet.

Though Tulasi's home made pickles were discarded by many in their vicinity Ramanathan accepts it by all means, not because of the taste of pickles but because of the bewitching beauty of the girl. He proposes her at the first sight, "Tulasi, I'll buy all of your pickles, you look so beautiful, so attractive, you are my dream girl, will you marry me?..... I want to join hands with you forever and ever..."

Being a girl from an orthodox set up Tulasi could not respond to Ramanathan's proposal and quits the place abruptly.

Next day Ramanathan walks straight to Tulasi's home with fruits, betel leaves, coconut etc and asks Srinivasa Iyer, "Would you please give me your daughter in the ritual of marriage; I don't require any dowry and even marriage expenses in a temple will be borne by me. The proposal is something that the priest and his wife did not expect, but it made them to go into raptures. The very thought of giving away Tulasi and thereby snapping her affinity sounds delighted to them. They unanimously say, "Yes, sure, you can marry her". Marriage date is fixed without even probing into Ramanathan's background or identity.

Tulasi pleads her parents, "I want to study a course in fashion designing pa, I am very interested in tailoring and stitching clothes. What is the necessity of marriage; just now I completed my 12th standard. Please pa.....try to understand my feelings. I'll not be a burden to you. I'll prepare pickles, sell it and gain you income".

"Shut your mouth, how dare you speak against our decision. In these days no fool will come forward to accept a bride without dowry". Kamamma added, "the guy is generous enough to bear marriage expenses too....you should be more lucky to have such a man. He is more worthy than your father who demanded an amount of Rs 5000 in those days to marry me as his second wife".

Tulasi has no other go but to bow down her head and accept *mangalsutra* as a price to her charismatic beauty. That is the first night of her marriage. Tulasi is overwhelmed by the words of applause showered by Ramanathan. He said, "I am the king of this world as I have joined hands with the elegant, exquisite, divine, winsome, pretty, charming..... queen Tulasi. I am very lucky to have you....."and so on and so forth.

Words of love and embrace are something strange to Tulasi as she has come across only disgust and loathing since her childhood. She felt congenial in the new environs of her in-laws house.

Everything appeared to be fair and well. A week passed on. On that night when Ramanathan came towards Tulasi an obnoxious and foul smell hits her.

*Mangalsutra- Considered to be a sacred thread according to Indian custom and tied to the bride's neck with three knots as an indication of marriage ritual.*

He said, "I slightly drank. I'm not a habitual drunkard. This will not continue in future".

Tulasi's innocence and her spotless love make her to believe his words. But as days passed on Tulasi could not come to terms with the hard reality that hit her to the core.

His friend Ranjit's words appalled and horrified her. "Ram always relishes in intoxication, never takes care of his mobile shop. The moment he gets money by performing black magic he's out of this world and sinks in the world of drunkenness."

"Black magic! What is this?" cried Tulasi.

"Yes sister, Ramanathan is highly skilled in performing rituals that can kill many or even ruin many families, he gets lump sum amount through this. No one knows his other side except me, don't worry, don't cry, your pure love and prayers will rescue him from all such baseless things".

Here starts Tulasi's journey on the razor's edge where every moment of it demanded perseverance and patience. Tulasi's pleadings and Ramanathan's transient promises were the rule and order of their life for five long years. Meanwhile as a mark of their love and lust the couple

was gifted with three children. Though Tulasi spared every effort to prevent the birth of second and third child Ramanathan was very adamant and manhandled her. Tulasi can no more sustain. As an ideal wife she makes every effort to preserve the sanctity of the marital knot with much endurance but as things went beyond her control she quits her husband's house and goes to her natal home.

Ramanathan rushes to his in-law's house, he assures her of a good life saying, "Tulasi, how callous you are! Don't you feel that you have left a man who has so much love and affection on you? I swear, I'll not drink, I'll not indulge in black magic, it's an oath on you, on our children, come back to our home.....please".

Tulasi has become wretched by these reiterated words that have been exasperating and vexing her since five years. "No, I cannot believe your words, leave me alone along with my children, I can win bread by being a servant maid in four or five houses and feed my children. I've warned you many times that the sin you accumulate by ruining innumerable lives through the practice of black magic will annihilate our life, but your deaf years paid no heed to my words. No more I can bear the bruises and pains you made on my body during your intoxicated state. It has deteriorated my sanity and physical health too. I cannot make my children to subdue their hunger, without a penny at home for many days. I can be much safer and secured here rather than leading a life with a sinner like you".

Tulasi's father interrupted, "who assured you a promising life here, the moment you got married all your affiliation with this house is snapped, its better you quit our house and move along with your man".

Kamamma appended Iyer's words, "After marriage, it is husband's home that a woman is supposed to live, this is the custom of our culture, cultureless people may not understand this".

Tulasi wiped her tears, resolved to quit her father's house and marched ahead to lead a life of her own. She stubbornly refused to move along with Ramanathan.

A woman with three children not with much education to resist and withstand this competitive and hostile world had a weapon called confidence which she felt assuredly would lead her to climb the ladder of success.

Her elder daughter Lavanya asks, "amma, what shall we do now? You don't have money".

"But I have self-assurance and trust, it will fetch you food for survival". The girl wipes the tears of her mother, "you don't worry amma, I will help you and take care of my brother and sister".

Tulasi hires a house and gets a tailoring machine by pledging her *mangalsutra*. She stitches blouses, frocks etc to the neighbourhood houses. During night times she prepares pickles and markets it to her customers. Soon Tulasi's new models and designs in stitching clothes becomes an object of fascination to many women. Years passed by.

A reputed garment shop owner in the town asks her, "Will you stitch for our garments? I will give you a full time job and further send you abroad to study fashion designing course."

Tulasi recalls the words from the Bible that her teacher taught during childhood days, "Ask you shall receive and knock you will get it".

Tears trickled down from her eyes. She accepts the offer saying, “Sure sir, I’ll work for your company and accept the offer.”

The garment shop owner Sudhir Narayan who exports stitched clothes to foreign countries, is an old and kind gentleman who comes forward to give money to her children during Tulasi’s sojourn to abroad, which in turn she has to repay the debt after her return by working for his export company.

The day has come where Tulasi has to move abroad in order to get certified in a course related to fashion designing. She is much worried about her children’s protection during her absence. Mr and Mrs Rao, the house owners of Tulasi’s house were childless and kindhearted couple, they assure to take care of her children’s safety. Lavanya who is 14 years old, by now, catches hold of her mother’s hand saying, “You don’t worry about us. I am here for my brother and sister. I’ll get money from Sudhir uncle, take assistance from the house owner and can survive here educating myself as well as my siblings”.

Though the words consoled Tulasi it did not regulate her feelings that throbbed with love, affection and care for her children. But she is helpless. She leaves abroad, speaks to her daughter once in a week. Though tears overwhelmed her she manages to set her misery aside and toils to upgrade herself.

On her return after a year, Tulasi is filled with joy to see her children. Lavanya says to her mother, “Ma, open this gift and see. It will be a pleasant surprise to you”.

Tulasi could not control herself. She unwraps the gift packing that has Rs 600 inside it.

The girl continues, “Ma, I saved 50 rupees every month in order to gift you on the occasion of your birthday.”

The bliss and contentment attained by Tulasi is boundless and has no parallels.

Tulasi’s firm hope, perseverance, her foreign education, talent, hard work blended with Sudhir Narayan’s kindness has elevated her to climb the ladders of success and reach a higher plinth. Accomplishment and achievement becomes the dictum of her life. The clothes designed by her had a great craze in the market.

She tells her children, “Though childhood and marital bliss are evanescent in my life god is generous enough to pay price to my endeavors...here is a glad news...we’re going to construct a small house”.

Children responded, “yes, it is quite happy to hear this news, when are we going to shift?”

“The work has been left to the contractors and it may take six months for completion”. Six months passed. Mother and three children shifted to the new house.

One Sunday Tulasi was astonished to see her parents at the doorsteps of her house. She extended a warm welcome saying, “Come, come inside, this is your house, don’t feel embarrassed”.

Her father said, “sorry for the....”

Tulasi interrupted, “please, don’t speak about the past”.

“No, I did not even take care of your children when you were not here, I am ashamed to stand in front of you, expecting a favour and I require your help”

“Oh! By all means pa, what do you want?”

“Your brother wants to start a business, we want 50000 rupees.”

“Wait for a while, I’ll discuss with my children and respond”.

Lavanya says, “You should definitely help Arjun uncle ma”, the other two joined, “yes, if someone is in need of help we shouldn’t say ‘no’, it is not good manners”.

Tulasi felt the reiteration of her own words. She feels pleased of her children’s generous nature.

She hands over the amount to her parent. Srinivasa Iyer says, “Tulasi, you should prepare yourself to hear the news of your husband’s death. He was killed by the mystical powers of black magic.”

Drops of tears trickle down from Tulasi’s eyes but she wipes it out and becomes resolved the next moment. Life has taught her much in terms of adversity, poverty and betrayed state. Her access to happiness and placidity are denied right from the days of her girlhood. But she feels proud thinking about her children. She assures that she has attained success not only materially but also in bringing up courageous, confident at the same time kindhearted children. The path of thorns that she has travelled has certainly led her to a bed of roses.

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Dr. V. Sunitha presently works as Asst Professor in English at Sreenivasa Institute of Technology and Management Studies in Chittoor situated in Andhra Pradesh state, India. She has 12 years of teaching experience and more than 50 publications to her credit. Her poems, short stories, articles on English literature and English Language Teaching have been published in national and international journals. She has contributed 21 chapters in 18 text books on Indian writing in English. She has made paper presentations in 13 national and international conferences. She has attended 15 training programmes and a member of 20 professional bodies. Her articles titled, “Is it a School or Jail?” and “Where are our Ethics” published in The Hindu won good response.