

ON EQUAL FOOTING

“Hey, what’s going on? I know you will never visit me without a good reason; who’s this boy?”

“He’s my nephew, Madhav. He’s recently finished his MBA.”

“Come in; please sit down; young man, you too may take a seat. What’s the case about; something to do with love?”

“Why do you always assume we want to see you only for some legal problem? You are acting like a jaundice patient who sees yellow everywhere. Is the devil whispering something in your ears or you lawyers can always divine what’s going on in our minds?”

“Where’s the need for the devil or divine revelation here? This is your visit after a long time and you have also brought your nephew along. You told me about his education but not if he has found a job. The boy looks intelligent but also seems a little worried. That’s the reason I threw in bait.”

“Well, you’ve guessed right, but now the real problem has to do with something else: he is leaving for Bangalore. We heard the train was two hours late, but we wouldn’t be able to come back in time if we returned home. Why should we bore ourselves to death by waiting at the station or wandering on the streets to while away our time? I remembered I have not seen you for a while, so I made this unexpected visit; hope you are not too busy. . .”

“Look at me; I have nothing else to do at present except offering you my help.”

“I am afraid this is not a proper case for you.”

“Still, what’s your problem? Hope it is not a secret.”

“Maybe it was before, but now it is public knowledge after coming to my attention. This poor fellow loved a girl and wants to marry her, but his parents are objecting.”

“Well, this is typical; parents always disapprove of love but, even when the couple eloped and got married, they will mellow and come around; it would have been better if they had gracefully accepted the outcome, but they never do.”

“The situation is not as simple as you think; not only this boy and his girl-friend do not belong to same caste, they also don’t belong to the same religion.”

“We both belong to no caste or religion; it is only the elders who are concerned with them.”

“Madhav, keep quiet. I am on your side. This matter wouldn’t have come to a marriage if you and your girl friend thought differently. I was talking about your families only.’

“Is the girl – legally, an adult?”

“Of course; they are both classmates.”

“Her parents – are they too traditional or orthodox?”

“That’s what makes the whole thing interesting. The girl – did I mention her name? - It is Elena- and she lives with her uncle in a portion next to Madhav’s. That uncle has two adorable

grandchildren who are always playful. The grandson's pet name is Moz, the real name Moses. His sister's is Mary. The family invariably spends a lot of its time at Madhav's home – often playing and even sharing the family lunch and dinner. There was constant exchange of soups, dishes, *curries*, *chutneys*, snacks, and pickles from one house to the other. Elena used to live in a hostel and her uncle was her guardian. Elena's parents live in Bangalore; the father works in Railways and, because he is getting frequent transfers, they put Elena in a hostel. Once the two families became closer Elena too started visiting Madhav at his home; soon Madhav too got close to her uncle's family – first he liked the grandchildren and then fell in love with Elena. Still, nobody else found out about their romantic love; for that matter, there's not even a suspicion – that's how Madhav and Elena conducted themselves – as two decent teenagers. But they never suspected their parents would oppose their marriage. Madhav's parents were very fond of Elena – they used to present her with gifts on her birthday and Christmas. Madhav often told his friends in the university how liberal and broad-minded his parents were; he told them his mother used to sing *Vaishnavo Janato* at home and even taught the song to the girls.”

“The other day, when the family was celebrating *Ugadi*, Madhav's mother was saying, ‘I wonder where Elena would be celebrating *Ugadi* next year?’, when Madhav casually told her, ‘Hereafter, won't she be celebrating *Ugadi* at our home?’ With that

revelation his parents felt the soup turn bitter; still, everybody acted polite and finished the rest of the meal in silence.”

“Then, suddenly, the next evening, Elena got a telegram at the hostel saying that her father was seriously ill asking her to rush home; her uncle and Madhav saw her off at the rail station.”

“And that's the last thing one heard about Elena; she didn't return for the exams; she wasn't allowed to take them. Her father is now fine. Maybe the parents thought, being a girl, Elena could afford to give up her education and, with that, any chance for a good job. She lived under house arrest. The pressure was mounting on both sides: Elena's uncle's family has vacated their rented home and moved away to some far off place; it has taken Madhav two months to find out where they moved. Meanwhile, he had to prepare for his exams. He's young, ambitious and worked hard to do well in the exams and land in a good job. He was also making enquiries about Elena, but nothing came out of it. Madhav came to know that Elena's parents too changed their residence. When he went to see Elena's uncle – he tried this a few times – he met with cold reception; he was turned away with nobody ever speaking a word to him. When he approached Moses – the grandson – they thrashed the boy and dragged him inside the house. A few days ago Elena managed to send a message to Madhav through her cousin - about her situation and whereabouts – and that's the reason Madhav is now going to Bangalore. Madhav came down here for an interview but now, instead of returning home, he's

determined to travel to Bangalore and 'rescue' his girl. I have been telling him, 'Why bother? You are buying trouble and only alienating your parents,' but he wouldn't listen."

"Why don't you personally meet with Madhav's parents and persuade them?"

"That's not as easy as you think. Madhav's mother is not my own sister, she's a cousin. Not that she would act upon my advice if she were my sister. My brother-in-law, Madhav's father, is very persistent; he's not someone who could be easily swayed. Both parents, by nature, are easy-going and friendly. By outlook they are modern – but they are clinging to tradition. I don't understand why any religion that fosters friendliness and goodwill between people could be a hindrance to a love marriage. We hear people saying humans should deal with others on the basis of equality; I don't understand why they always draw a line and refuse to cross it."

"That's not the case; the real reason has nothing to do with their different faiths. It's only a pretext."

"Why don't you stop your discourse and tell us what's the reason?"

"The real reason has to do with power – the authority the parents exercise over their children. The children owe their birth to their parents, so the parents assume they are endowed with an inherent right to control their offspring. They claim they have brought up their children and contributed to their lives by hard

work and even beyond their means. They are the elders and believe they should prevail over their brood. They wield the weapon of filial love and keep their offspring under control."

"You are actually defending injustice – and you are a lawyer. You have no experience in these matters. Please reconsider your opinion; it seems one-sided."

"One needn't get hurt to claim personal experience; I have been observing people around me for the last fifty years and understanding them. My knowledge comes from detachment and close scrutiny; my judgment is impartial."

"So you are siding with Madhav, and this is your unbiased opinion?"

"Yes. I will repeat what I said earlier. It is not merely a question of disparity in religion, caste or the family's financial status. The truth is in every family, where the question of marriage is concerned, the parents want to have their own way; it is not that they simply believe they are right; they are mainly interested in their own dominion and social status and scarcely interested in their children's progress and independence. That's where the conflict begins."

"Can anyone avoid conflicts in life?"

"How can you avoid conflict as long one individual tries to exercise his sovereignty over another? Conflicts are inevitable as long as a husband exercises dominion over his wife, the parents on their children, the elder sister on the younger, the elder brother on

his younger, the mother-in-law on her daughter-in-law, the employer on his employees, and the haves on have-nots. And, one day, the conflict gives rise to rebellion. There's no way to get around the conflict, rebellion, their dire consequences and tears."

"Are you saying people have to live like enemies – hating one another?"

"When afflicted with a disease one learns how to find a cure and escape its brunt. Why do we find it so difficult to love and respect someone without exercising our authority?"

"How could lawyers like you survive if the world is free from conflicts? The answer to your question should be put on hold; otherwise we will be missing our train. We want to take leave of you."

"Sir, see you later; thank you very much."

"Madhav, wish you all the best; feel free to ask me for any help. Be brave and don't rush into a hasty decision. First you have to look for a job."

(Original title: *Samataa Rekha*)