

# The Creative Launcher

An International, Open Access, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

UGC Approved

## Maupassant Restaurant

**Original Odia Story: Chandrasekhar Dasburma**

(Odisha Sahitya Akademi and Central Sahitya Akademi Award Winner)

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Finally, Chandrabhanu Patnaik took the decision. He went on ten days leave and did a lot of calculations. Nobody knew what he was doing inside the room with a number of newspapers. However, Bipasa was very happy. She had never seen him spending such a long time at home. But, he was getting unnecessarily angry with the children.

Bipasa told him, “Does someone feel irritated if he stays at home? Don’t behave like that with the children.”

In truth, he could never get angry with Bipasa. He had gone on such a leave for the first time since joining the post. He was certainly writing something important. That’s why Bipasa didn’t disturb him. He always thought, “What was the need for so many holidays?” During his marriage, he had gone on leave only for four days. Despite Bipasa’s repeated requests, he had never taken her outside. At times, Bipasa would find him disappear from home for a few days. On being asked he would respond, “I work in a press. There’s so much work to do. Every secret can’t be revealed.”

The paper for which he reported was the largest circulated daily in that town, Chandrabhanu was the head of the reporting section. Once wrong news was published, there was every possibility of his losing the job. The owner of the newspaper was a close friend of Bipasa. Hence, he had left all the responsibilities on Chandrabhanu’s shoulders. He came to the office at times for inspection; otherwise Chandrabhanu managed everything in the office. Chandrabhanu was instrumental behind the current popularity of the newspaper. There was a time when he would move on a bicycle, in empty stomach, throughout the night to collect news. He even had to sleep on the floor. Now, the newspaper had its own office, vehicle, telephone. Chandrabhanu had himself established the newspaper. His relationship with Basant Ray Choudhury was very deep. Did the M.D. Sri Ray Choudhury depend on him heavily? Would it be proper to submit his resignation? Confused, yet he decided to submit his resignation.

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Chandrabhanu put on his usual dress. He hung a bag from his shoulder. He placed his resignation letter carefully in it. He came out to the main road. It was not at all difficult to know time. This was the time for him to go to office. The sky was clouded. The road was wet. Perhaps it had rained some time ago. However, he didn't feel the need of carrying an umbrella as the sky had cleared up. Very few people carried umbrellas. There was a heavy rush of vehicles and rickshaws. There was also the rush of students going to school. It was time for the shops to open. Chandrabhanu pondered a moment what he would do the next morning. Bringing an abrupt end to his thoughts, he walked towards the office. He had hardly reached the office when it suddenly rained. Oh! he was destined to get wet today.

He started with someone's gentle touch. "Oh! is it Mr. Chandrabhanu? How surprising! Are you going to join today? The office looks uninteresting without you." His colleague Mrutyunjayababu remarked while inviting him to get under his umbrella.

Flashing a smile, Chandrabhanu joined hm. He thrust his hand into his pocket. The resignation letter was still there. The two lined resignation letter contained the message that he was resigning due to personal reasons. It also contained a request to accept it. He would directly inform the M.D that he could not be compelled to give exact reasons for the resignation. He was expected to come to the office today. He knew people would question his move as he had worked there for ten long years. Everything including the building, the chairs, the tables bore imprints of his hard work. How could Basant Ray Choudhury forget everything? There was a time when the newspaper didn't even run for a day without him. How did things change so suddenly?

The two friends reached office. He was ushered in with words of welcome. News of his arrival spread throughout the office. Chandrabhanu replied to their welcome, as usual. He went to the table and sat on the chair, where he sat everyday. On the table were kept some news items for his scrutiny. Only after he went through all those and edited them, they would be taken to the composition desk. Earlier, they had to work with a treadle machine; now it had been replaced with an offset machine.

Chandrabhanu summoned the peon.

Peon reported, "Sir has already arrived."

He asked the peon to get him a glass of water. He glanced through some past issues. The M.D.'s room was in front of his. The name plate hung outside. The peon fetched him a glass of water. He wrote his name on a piece of paper and handed it over to the peon.

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“Sir, what is the need of a visiting card for you? Chandrabhanu flashed a smile but it lacked luster. There was only pity. The peon went away with the slip.

“Arey, Chandrabhanu, Come, come. I was waiting for you.” Chandrabhanu’s boss Basant Ray Choudhury extended his hand. Chandrabhanu extended his own, as usual.

“Arey! Why is your handshake so feeble today? It is as if there’s no energy. Ok, Ok, Sit down.” The peon brought in two cups of tea.

Basant Ray Choudhury got up and pulled the curtain aside.

Chandrabhanu saw fresh rain approaching.

“Sir, the weather is pretty bad today.”

“I know. It has been drizzling since the morning.”

“It would be nice if it rained heavily at one go and then, got over.”

“Tell me... what’s the matter? Is everybody fine at home?”

“Yes Sir... except me.”

“Why? What happened to you?”

It suddenly started raining heavily. Chandrabhanu took out the paper from his pocket and handed it over to him.

“I know pretty well. This must be your resignation letter.” He kept the envelope on the table, unopened. “Otherwise, you would never have taken ten days leave. The reason behind all this must be Chitragada.”

Chandrabhanu didn’t react. The rain had subsided. He got up to go.

“Is that the reason or something else?”

Chandrabhanu remained silent, even though he knew everything.

“Hey, is it your final decision? Do you demand pay hike, other allowances, or some loan? I have already arranged a special cabin for you.”

“Sir, only please accept my resignation...” said Chandrabhanu.

“Ok. I give you three days time. Please reconsider your decision.” Basant Ray Choudhury suddenly got up and went out. He didn’t wait for Chandrabhanu’s reply. From outside, came the sound of an engine starting.

Basant Ray Choudhury and Chitragada. Chitragada and Basant Ray Choudhury. Impossible woman!

Since the day she had joined office, sleep eluded Chandrabhanu. What strange powers the woman possessed in her eyes! She had enticed Basant Ray Choudhury. The M.D. obeyed her dictates

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earnestly. Chandrabhanu was the head of the news section; his news was to be checked by Chitragada. Chandrabhanu was surprised. Earlier, Basantbabu came to office only once a week but now-a-days he came almost daily. Chitragada carried information about his entire day's activities. She accompanied him when he went out on a tour.

He didn't realize for how long he had been standing outside the room. He could hear the noise of the machine...the fan...the telephone... the teleprinter. The workers were busy. He contemplated if he should return to his chair. The M.D had allowed him three days time. Chandrabhanu left office and came out.

Day had progressed. People could now feel the intensity of sunlight. Rain had subsided. It might not rain any more. The weather gave rise to a mixed feeling. What might be the M.D's intention in leaving the office midway the discussion? Perhaps he couldn't digest Chandrabhanu's decision easily. He had marked some sort of helplessness in his voice. Should he return home now? No final decision was taken ... by Basant Ray Choudhury.

The Maupassant Restaurant stood in front of him. An aristocratic restaurant. The owner, Mr. Bijaya Arora, was a fashionable gentleman. The restaurant was named after a renowned English writer. The owner was a friend of Chandrabhanu ... also a friend of Basant Ray Choudhury. In front of the restaurant, there spread a lawn, full of flowers. It must have been designed by a renowned architect. A circuitous route led inside. Vehicles could be driven straight inside and parked in the portico. Some rooms were specially reserved for the guests. The restaurant was towards the inner side ... what a crowd it invited! The restaurant and the newspaper had begun operation at the same time. Chandrabhanu's job with the newspaper started almost at the same time.

What was that? Why was he standing at the same place? Someone called him by his name. He looked around, startled. Bijayababu was calling him ...the owner of the restaurant. He asked, "Sir, how come you are here at this odd hour? Please get in and have a cup of tea from this poor man's restaurant." At times, Bijayababu would discuss matters related to the newspaper with Chandrabhanu. Chandrabhanu couldn't say 'no'. Flashing a smile, he entered Bijayababu's Maupassant restaurant. He enjoyed unrestricted entry here. Everybody knew him well. Today, there was hardly a crowd. He looked at his watch; it was hardly twelve o' clock. The 'lunch hour' was still an hour away. He could spend one hour there.

Bijayababu welcomed Chandrabhanu and offered him a seat inside. He passed some instruction to the waiter before disappearing.

The waiter came and saluted him.

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“Bring a cup of tea today, nothing else.”

“Impossible! It’s impossible!” Chandrabhanu remarked on his own. The face of Chitrangada danced before his eyes. Was it the same person whom he had met during his college days?

The waiter came and placed the cup of tea before him. While sipping tea from the cup, the old face danced before his eyes. Was it Chinmayee? Then, who was Chitrangada? Chandrabhanu’s thoughts went topsy-turvy. Exactly that face ... that manner of walking... those attractive eyes... fair body. While she was a student, she wouldn’t hesitate to answer on the face. She was the only daughter of a rich family; richness was always reflected in her manner of talking. Only, she didn’t answer back Chandrabhanu. This was because Chandrabhanu was the college topper. Chinmayee took his notes and copied answers in the examination. When other girls wanted to befriend her, she would maintain some distance. She belonged to an aristocratic family but Chandrabhanu didn’t have any such lineage to boast of. He came from a modest background.

A few days after Chandrabhanu started working with the newspaper, Chinmayee’s father came to Chandrabhanu with proposals of his daughter’s marriage. Chandrabhanu politely refused the proposal. He said the alliance was impossible as both families would hardly match. He belonged to a modest family whereas Chinmayee belonged to an aristocratic family. Between them, this status stood like a stumbling block. Chandrabhanu stood awe-struck when he heard that Chinmayee herself had sent the message. Chinmayee’s father went away without protest. This had happened ten years back. Now, Chandrabhanu was married. He lived his life comfortably with Bipasa and had two children. Today, after watching Chitrangada, he remembered Chinmayee more. What differentiated them was, whereas Chinmayee kept long hair, Chitrangada had bob-cut hair that fell around her neck. Chitrangada wore high-heeled shoes. Earlier, she walked slowly but now, she walked very fast. He hadn’t cared to keep any information about Chinmayee. She must be living comfortably somewhere with her children. But still then, why was there such similarity between Chitrangada and Chinmayee? Chandrabhanu was lost in thoughts for a long time. Time had passed. Maupassant restaurant was getting crowded. It was lunch hour. Now many people, flaunting different styles, would arrive. The hotel would be completely filled soon.

“Sir, should I serve lunch?”

“No. don’t. You can bring me another cup of tea.” The waiter went away, with empty cups and plates, to bring another cup of tea.

Some of his office staff would soon arrive. At times, Basant Ray Choudhury also came here. Last time when he had seen him, Chitrangada accompanied him. Oh! It was as if Basant Ray

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Choudhury was entirely hers. Her hands were placed around his waist. She wore a thin nylon saree that stuck to her body, and therefore, her figure bulged out. High buttocks, high breasts – as if she had just returned from the studios after shooting a film. They went inside the cabin behaving as if they had not seen him. Chandrabhanu didn't complain. His only complaint was – why he was placed at number two? What was his mistake? Was it a mistake that he worked from the very beginning with this newspaper? Was it a mistake that he worked wholeheartedly to increase the circulation? He worked for twenty four hours –throughout day and night. For nights, he didn't go home but stayed back in the office. Was it a mistake that he worked as the only companion of Basant Ray Chaudhury? Never ever for a day he had felt that he was an employee and others were his subordinates. Had his M.D. Basant Ray Chaudhury, been enticed by beauty and charm of that enchantress, Chitrangada?

Two cups of tea had been consumed. He didn't mark when the hotel boy had come and removed the empty cups. Now he had to get up. His hunger had dissipated – it didn't matter much either. The restaurant was getting crowded. His colleagues from the newspaper might be coming. They would surround him if they found him there. He was thinking of getting up when he heard a murmur near the main gate. "Hey Friends, here comes the queen... has she just returned from the shooting?" The restaurant had some regular customers and it was one of them who passed the comment. Chandrabhanu's eyes were directed towards the main gate. Chitrangada Samantray came in... forcefully... she wore a red saree, red blouse, red bangles, red bindis, red high heels. Everything looked red about her. It really looked as if a fairy had descended down on the earth. Even God's penance would be smashed at the sight of such beauty; the *brahmacharya* of any sage would be shattered. This beauty of women has always attracted men... since ages. But what was that... Why was Chitra alone today... For the last few days they were coming together...he must have some important work.

Ah! The poor girl was alone today.

Chitrangada Samantray came in through the crowd. The hotel boy opened the door of the special cabin... but surprising... was she coming towards him?... Chandrabhanu got up... he left the chair to go.

"Are you Chandrabhanu?"

"Yes, madam. But what have you got to do with me? You please sit down and let me go."

Chitrangada stood blocking the way. "I knew you would be scared of me. But, you didn't ask me where Basant Ray Choudhury had gone?"

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“I don’t possess the right to ask that, Madam. I am his employee. I have no right to ask such a question.”

“You are the head of the office.”

“My asking like that is unjust. Please let me go.”

Chitrangada pulled the chair lying in front of him and sat there.

“Today, you have to answer all my questions.”

Chandrabhanu got really scared. Today, there was trouble in store for him.

“Don’t you recognise me, Chandrabhanu? I am Chinmayee.”

A sudden gust of wind entered the restaurant. All closed doors opened.

Chandrabhanu looked into her face... straight. He had never looked at her like that. “I can’t remember anything.”... Chandrabhanu wanted to avoid her.

“Look into my face carefully... I can recognise you quite well. You studied with me but you were more interested in books. You couldn’t recognise human beings. Therefore I have changed my name from Chinmayee to Chitrangada Samantray. I have also brought in changes in my appearance. Please take yourself ten years back. My father went to your home with the proposal for my marriage and you rejected it forthright. You told society would not accept our marriage. Reason, you belonged to a conservative family whereas I belonged to a modern family. There existed hell and heaven difference between us. Please remember, a woman is always loving and affectionate. She might appear very hard outwards but there hides in her, a delicate feeling of love, which she doesn’t express easily. Your refusing my proposal deepened my love that had just sprouted for you. Today, I stand on my own legs... I have the capacity to take a decision on my own. I have gone wherever I wished to. But I haven’t sold my heart to anyone. A man may love many women but a woman doesn’t forget her first love easily. I have searched for you. I have searched for my love. After much search, I came to this town. When I knew you were working in this newspaper office, I decided to surprise you by getting a job in your office. I wanted to show you what I could do. It didn’t take much time to entice Basant Ray Choudhury. I didn’t take much time to come to the number one position in this newspaper. My beautiful appearance attracts many young men and causes excitement in them. It causes vibrations in their hearts. I know you are married; you have a happy family. I am unmarried... still looking for that vibration of life. Let me feel it...” Chitrangada tried to inch closer to Chandrabhanu.

Chandrabhanu didn’t answer... couldn’t answer.

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The fragrance of Chitragada's saree reached him. Oh yes... there was no change in her manner of talking... only her appearance had changed.

Chandrabhanu said, "Stop it, Chitra. Let the bygones be bygones. Now, you are my boss."

"Oh!" Chitragada laughed loudly. "Oh... you are scared. Despite all that Chandrabhanu, I am the same Chinmayee for you. I could not win over you despite the best of efforts. But, I could not forget you. I don't know whether I can forget you in this life or not. Whatever happened... was only but a drama... I have got you very close, may be for a very short period. I'll preserve my associations with you dearly in my heart. Convey my gratitude to your M.D. on my behalf. Please hand over this letter to him. Good bye... Chandrabhanu... Good bye."

Before Chandrabhanu could raise his hand to say good bye, Chitragada Samantray had already bade good bye to Maupassant Restaurant.

The blue envelope lay on the table. Unable to keep his curiosity under check, Chandrabhanu opened it ... it was Chitragada's resignation from the newspaper.