Thanks for giving me a choice, darling !

Tantrums from the wife are common enough, on issues wide and varied. This latest one is on a sticky subject... ■ **by D. P. Sabharwal**

"The way you were joking, gigling, laughing and dancing, I thought you really enjoyed the party."

"Yeah, I did," she replied curtly.

"Then what has gone wrong ever since we thanked and bade farewell to our hosts? Why this sullen look?" I asked.

She kept quiet.

I had witnessed such scenes in the past. And I had to spend a lot of time and use much persuasive skill to find out the reason for her strange behaviour. Every time the reason used to be different although falling into a familiar pattern of complaining and cribbing. The first time it was the host's bone-china dinner-set—we did not have one. Then it was the host's noiseless airconditioner; our household was yet to acquire such a gadget. Another time it was some guest's diamond necklace. And the list can go on increasing.

This time the reason for her unhappiness was apparently something else. Thus she remained unresponsive to all my queries.

Fed up with the futile exercise, I said in disgust, "I can't carry on with the guessing game any more. If you have any reason, however strong or stupid it may be, you will have to tell me."

"I thought you had guessed it," she said breaking her golden silence.

"What else have I been doing for the past half an hour?" I asked. And after a moment, addressing myself, I spoke feebly, "It is rightly said that it takes two to make a quarrel, but only one if it is a woman."

"Don't be sarcastic," she said. The next moment she changed the track abruptly, "You were highly appreciative of the food served today. Not only that, you went out of the way to express your appreciation to the hosts in no uncertain terms."

"Well, the food was really good and tasty."

"Then does it mean that mine is never good?" she asked casually.

"No, it is not so. You too cook nice food."

"How come then you never appreciate my food?" she asked and, after a pause, added, "But you heaped a shower of praise for that none-too-good food at today's party. Did you notice that chicken was over-cooked, rice under-boiled, *naans* were sticky and...."

"Ah! that's the reason for my dear wife's unhappiness," I muttered to myself and added, "Jealousy, thy other name is woman!"

"No, I am not jealous," she retorted, "I just asked you a genuine question, which I am repeating. Why did you praise Manju's ordinary cooking so vociferously while you have never praised even my best preparation?"

"LOOK darling, I have no intention of hurting your feelings," I said earnestly. "Even if I accept your viewpoint that the food wasn't all that nice and tasty, still I had to say all those pleasant words?"

"But why?"

"Because that is what etiquette and decency demand."

"Ah! I see," she said sarcastically and asked, "Since when have you become a diplomat?"

"Don't mix decency with diplomacy; the two are poles apart from each other, like the two banks of the Brahmaputra at the point of its widest flow. And for your information, dear, diplomacy is doing and saying the nastiest thing in the nicest way," I said, quoting Issac Goldberg. "And I don't even possess 1% of that splendid quality," I added.

She looked at me and nodded her head slightly. I instantly knew that something was brewing in her mind, for her nodding had never meant that she was in agreement with me. It had always been a ploy of hers to distract me and then to attack me when I was unguarded. This time was no exception. She virtually shot an arrow at me when she said in a really sweet and musical tone, "I am happy that you are not a diplomat."

And that floored me. I could not decipher as to whether what she said was a compliment or a statement indicating lack of worldliness and wisdom on my part.

Seeing me quiet she said, "Don't be silent, say something."

"What do you want to hear from me?" I said playing safe.

"I know you can never praise me but you can at least be honest. Tell me one thing. Do you still love and enjoy my cooking the same way as you did in those initial days?"

"Oh yes," I said earnestly and truthfully.

"Then how come you never say a word in appreciation as you used to do in those days?"

"Are you talking of those days when even an ugly ass appeared to be a beautiful thoroughbred mare?" I asked. "Gone are those days, madam."

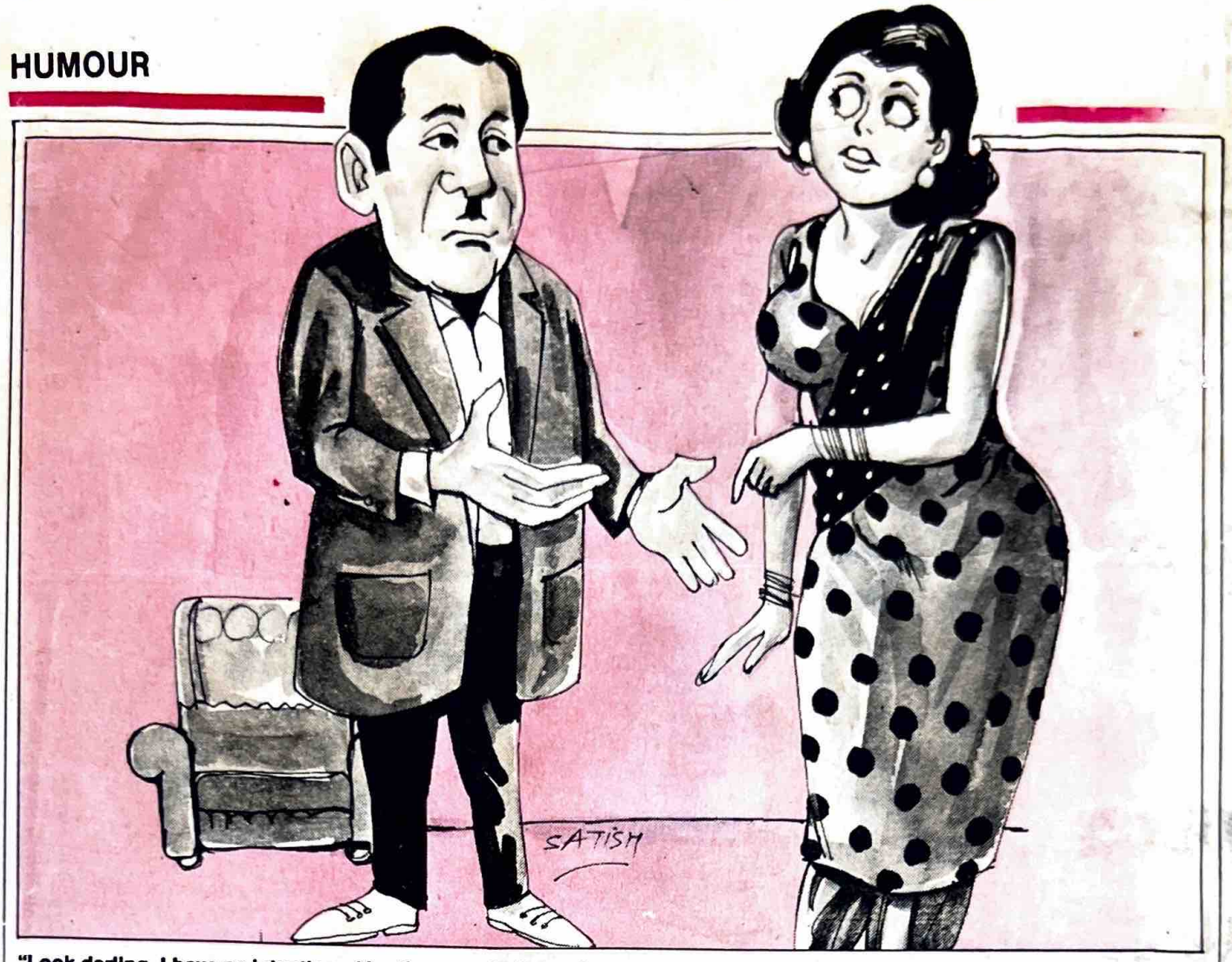
"I agree the days are gone, but the feelings and love have not deserted you, I suppose?"

Ignoring her question, I said, "The moon hasn't changed over the last 15 years, but during the last so many years, has a look at it ever aroused the same feelings and passion in you?"

She did not say anything. Instead, she just kept looking at me. Thinking that the iron was hot and I must strike it again to make an impact, I said, "Those days you loved to get wet in the rain. I haven't seen you doing it during the last decade. May I know why?"

"Because you haven't pulled or pushed me into the rain as you used to do then," she said winking at me.

That left me speechless. She had floored me again. Instantly I remembered what I had read a long time back: When a girl's nose itches, it is a sign that her



"Look darling, I have no intention of hurting your feelings..."

boy-friend has a moustache.

Similarly her winking at me conveyed to me that she was ready for the kill and I had to do something to save my skin. Remembering the military dictum that offence is the best form of defence, I said, "Look, every bright thing has a darker side as well. So don't think that your cooking is all nice and tasty. There are days when the food is really unpalatable."

"I appreciate your honest views. But I am wondering from where you got the guts to be honest," she said tauntingly. "And, why didn't you ever say so?" she asked. "Even during those early, sweet days when you used to appreciate my food, you never uttered a word whenever the food was bad. Why?"

"Because I never wanted to hurt your feelings."

"And what prevented you from saying so in the later years?" she wanted to know.

"Because I did not want to get myself hurt."

"Is that what you really think of me? I never realised that you have such a poor opinion of me."

She started sobbing. And the intensity of her sobs increased every moment.

It all happened too suddenly and unexpectedly, just like a heavy pre-monsoon shower in the thick of summer, when one is caught unawares and invariably gets drenched. The same was my plight when she started sobbing. I just did not know how to face that flood of rolling tears. So I let it pour, hoping that like the thundering rain, it too would stop sooner or later. And when that moment arrived, I said, "I did not mean it, darling. I was just joking. Believe me."

She looked at me suspiciously. Perhaps she could read sincerity in my eyes. "Hope you were serious when you said you were joking," she said.

"Yes, I am always serious about lighter things," I laughed.

After a moment, I added, "There is a reason why I never praise you, dear. And for you to appreciate it you must always remember this French proverb: He who fondles you more than usual has either deceived you or wants to do so!"

"But I know you are not capable of deceiving anyone, definitely not your wife."

"Thank you dear for this confidence in me." As I said this, I realised I was getting trapped, for she never praises anyone for nothing. And the next moment I found the noose around my neck.

"You will have to pay for this confidence," she said. "Your praise will not be misunderstood, your critique may be ignored, but your silence will never be tolerated or pardoned."

"Silence about what?" I asked trying to be ignorant.

"Don't be naive," she reprimanded me. "Henceforth you will have to offer your comments about my food preparations, be they good or bad."

"Will it be all right if after meals I show you a card with the inscription: Really tasty food, darling."

"No. That would be flattery and I hate it because flatterers are cats that lick before and scratch behind," she said.

"Is there no other way out?"

"There is one but I am not sure whether that is going to be any easier for you," she said. Then, looking straight into my eyes, with a smile on her face, she added, "You should not praise others' food."

She was right. That definitely was not the easy way out. But then I found one. I stopped accepting invitations.

And since then, peace has prevailed in our home, at least on this issue. □□