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Belief

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BELIEF

FOR MANY YEARS I had been having my clothes made by an old man who sat on a flimsy wooden bed-frame in an obscure lane. The old man did the cutting, tailoring, buttoning, button-holing, everything himself. He was not a bad tailor—he made a shirt look like a shirt and trousers look like trousers. But obviously his tailoring lacked a certain expertness. He charged less than the shops. Probably that was why I always went to him without a second thought. But with this new piece of cloth, I went to a new tailor. I didn't know how good he was, but the shop was very impressive. The sign-board read: "Raosons, Bangalore Tailors." Bangalore tailors were supposed to be very good. And I had seen people from Bangalore wearing well-tailored clothes.

It was about eleven when I entered the shop one morning. There was only one person in it. It must have been Rao the father. He looked like a Rao, about 50 years and very dark. Seeing me, he said, "Come in, sir. Come in." There were half a dozen sewing machines, and one portion of the shop was run as the laundering section. The laundry racks were full, but the shelves on the sewing side were mostly empty.

I took out the piece of cloth and said to him, "I want a shirt."

He said, "Please sit down, sir." I sat on a chair but nothing happened, and after a couple of minutes I looked at him. He caught my look and said: "My son has the tape measure, sir. He will come now. All the tailors have gone for tea." Then he shouted to no one in particular, "Arre, Ramu!" I was startled by his shouting.

I looked around. There were half a dozen pictures of Hindu deities on the walls. Then, as inevitable, a large photograph of the owner, the man who was standing before me. I also noticed another picture that was wiped clean and was adorned with fresh flowers. I knew who it was. Some hundred miles from Bangalore there is a village where lives a holy man, a mahatma. At a very early age, occult powers were manifested in him and he became quite influential with his innumerable miracles. And he effected a number of impossible cures. The number of his devotees grew to many thousands and a big organization sprang up. From the proceeds were built a hospital in his village, and also a high school. Much philanthropic work was being done. But now the mahat-

ma did not perform miracles as much and as often as in those early days. He talked to the needy and provided some kind of solace and relief to them. I hadn't myself gone to the mahatma's village but had had his *darshan* a couple of times when he visited Madras. So when I saw the picture in the tailor's shop, it caught my attention. The mahatma had a very beatific smile. There was an air of peace and benevolence about him.

"So you are a devotee of the mahatma?" I asked.

"No, sir, no. I used to go to him some years ago. I went three times. Now I don't go," he said.

"They say he is a great soul and a benefactor."

"No, sir, no. He had powers once. Now they're all gone. He only talks."

It was a very big picture and out of the five or six other pictures hanging on the walls, it was the only one free from dust. The sandal paste and vermilion marks must have been applied only that morning—they were fresh. The flowers must have cost not less than half a rupee.

The tailor shouted again, "Arre, Ramu." This time I was not startled. The tailor himself went to the entrance of the shop and looked this side and that side. Now he shouted, "Arre, Chottu!"

Two boys came running into the shop. One was about five and the other three. Both of them wore only shirts and were bare from waist down. The tailor shouted to those children in a language I could neither understand nor identify. The children ran into a small street. I inferred that the tailor's house must be nearby. Those children could be his. But more probably, they were his grandchildren.

"I came away from Town, sir," the tailor addressed me. They call the big bazaar of Madras the Town. To run a shop in Town, one must have a substantial capital.

"I ran the shop for three years, sir. Somehow I did not like that area. I wanted to close down all business and retire. But I had to get my son started in business. It was for him I opened the shop here. Not even a month ago."

He looked at me as though to make sure I was listening.

"Nobody ran a shop as I did, sir. All the other tailors take three yards for a shirt, but I can do it in two and three-quarters. Of course, people will bring me three yards. I don't say anything. I give them the shirt. After a week or so, when I see them going somewhere, I will call them and give them the extra bit of cloth saying, 'Here is the piece that was left over out of your shirting cloth.' That is how I run my business, sir."

Still I could not think of anything to say. Should I say, "Then cut out a quarter-yard from my cloth and give it to me now," or should I wait until he called me from his shop a week after my getting the shirt? Again the picture of the mahatma drew my attention. The mahatma by himself was a very gracious personality. But that picture—it was fascinating. It was shingly cleaned and the sandal paste and vermilion marks had been applied to the mahatma's forehead with great care and artistry. The flowers were fresh, and the whole atmosphere seemed heightened by the picture.

"But what customers we have, sir!" the tailor began again. "I will stitch exactly as they instruct me and everything will be done in up-to-date fashion. Not merely fashion, it will be very comfortable too. They will come again and give me more cloth for stitching. I will already have their measurements, instructions, everything, sir. But when they leave the shop they will say, 'Give me a good fit now.' How do you suppose I feel, sir? How would any honest workman feel if the customer says *that* knowing fully well that the workman will do the job perfectly?"

He was not angry, only disgusted. I asked him irrelevantly, "Where is your son?"

"I have sent for him, sir. He has taken the tape measure home. The tailors have also not come. These tailors are hopeless, sir. When they can do six shirts in a day, they do only three. They are so indifferent. If I scold them, next day they don't come for work. As it is I have only three people working whereas there are six machines. Of course, there are not many orders now but people will start coming. But the dry-cleaning section is going full-swing."

"What do you do for washing? Do you give the clothes to the dhobies?"

"No, sir. I do it all at home. My wife, my daughter, my daughter-in-law and the children do it, sir. We never send the clothes outside."

"How much do you charge for Gwalior rayon pants?" I asked him. At home I had a pair of trousers to be washed.

"One rupee, sir," he replied. "There are people who do it for 75 paise but I charge one rupee. The washing will be first grade and the clothes are not handled by anybody other than my own people."

Just then a young man of about twenty entered the shop. I could see that it was the son. The tailor exclaimed, "Arre, Ramu!" and started off in his language. The son took out a measuring tape from his pocket and

gave it to his father. The father would not stop and the son said something stinging. That stopped the father at once. Both were put out a little but the father composed himself quickly and he said to me, "Come inside, sir."

I went inside the enclosure and the tailor took my measurements. He noted them down in a big fat notebook. I gave him some directions and he made a note of them also. He asked me, "When shall I have it ready, sir? Next Sunday?"

That was a full week. I said, "No, no. I want it earlier."

"Then I will give it to you day after tomorrow, sir." I was startled for a second time.

I could have gone away but something made me look at the mahatma's picture once again.

"He is a great soul," I said. I knew that the mahatma was responsible for a lot of benefits for the people in his neighborhood. I have known at least two families shattered by calamities go to him and start life afresh. He did nothing to them except talk to them for a few minutes. It might be through supernatural powers or it might not be. But it was a fact that the families got cheered up and they were now doing very well. Since I knew all this myself, I could not go away without telling it to the man who said of the mahatma, "No, no. He only talks."

"Maybe, sir. To me he didn't do anything. He only helps the rich."

"Don't say that. I know of a number of people, very poor people, who have had his grace. Besides, what do you expect mahatmas to do? Give you gold bars?"

The tailor was silent for some time. The son took no interest in our conversation; he was fixing tags on the laundered clothes.

Then the tailor spoke again. This time he spoke very softly. "Maybe he is, sir. He has helped some people. Even in my case, on the first day he picked me out from a big crowd and called me to him and gave me a small image of Lakshmi which he produced from air. But what is the use, sir? He didn't tell me about my son. He didn't do anything for me."

"Why, what's the matter with him?" I asked. The son still had a number of clothes to fix tags on.

"Not him, sir. My eldest son."

"What happened to him?"

"He died three years ago."

"Oh. How old was he?"

"Only twenty-two, sir."

“How did he die?”

“Nothing, sir. Just three days’ fever. Even the doctors did not know it was so serious and that he was going to die.”

Now I wanted to leave the shop. I wasn’t feeling very comfortable.

“I was not even by his side when he died. He died with none of us to give him even a dose of medicine.”

“Why, where did he die?”

“He was in Madras, sir, and we were all in Bangalore. My business was in Bangalore then. My son was married only the previous year and he was in his father-in-law’s shop in Madras. One day we got a letter that he was having a slight fever. Two days later there was a telegram that he was delirious. The next day he died.”

“Couldn’t you have started immediately after the telegram? It is only a night’s journey from Bangalore to Madras.”

“That was the tragedy, sir. My wife was in bed with a heart attack and I was in the shop. The telegram came at eight o’clock in the evening. As soon as I saw the telegram I went to the bar and gulped four pegs of brandy.”

I could see his agony. For a moment I was angry with myself for having started it all.

The tailor commenced again with his narration. “Then I told my wife that I was going to Madras and I started out on my motor-bike.”

He paused again. I tried to visualize him on a motorcycle in the dead of night with a son in Madras in a delirious condition and he intoxicated with anxiety and four pegs of brandy.

“I did not know anything, sir, except the single thought of my son, unconscious in bed with only some strangers to take care of him. Even though they had given their daughter to him, would that be like a father or mother by his side? I was racing on the road and I really did not know how I managed without any accident. Suddenly near a village I saw four or five people standing across the road and waving their hands to stop me. And I had to stop. One of them asked me, ‘Are you mad?’

“I replied, ‘My son is lying unconscious in Madras.’

“That might be but you will kill yourself if you go this way on a motorcycle. We have been hearing the noise for the past fifteen minutes and we all woke up in a fright wondering what the terrible noise could be. Only a few minutes back we realized that it was the sound of a motorcycle. We thought someone had gone crazy and so came out to stop him. At night there are so many cattle on the road. The buffaloes

particularly lie right out in the middle of the road. If you hit even a calf, your family will not have a single whole bone of yours to bury. So we stopped you.'

" 'What time is it?' I asked them.

" 'It is midnight.'

"Only then did I begin to feel the fatigue. My whole body was aching in its joints and my head was reeling like a top. It was the brandy that had kept me going till then. I had driven for two hours and must have done nearly eighty miles. And I felt a parching thirst for the first time that night. I asked them, 'Could I get some tea?'

" 'There is a tea shop on the other side. But he will be closing down soon. You must hurry if you want to have tea.'

"I asked for the directions and went to the tea shop. As they had said, the shop-keeper was closing down for the night. I went in and asked him for a cup of tea.

"He looked at me and must have judged from my condition that I needed something to drink and eat very badly. He immediately prepared some tea and also brought me a bun. I ate the bun and drank the tea. He had by then closed the shop and was preparing to go to bed. He must have been lying in the shop itself.

"I felt dog-tired. The pain all over my body was unbearable. My head felt a little better but my eyes were getting heavy as lead. I tried to fight off my sleepiness but I could not. I asked the shopkeeper, 'Is there a place here where I can rest for ten minutes?'

"I knew I did not have much time. The picture of my son lying unconscious in his bed never left me. But my body just begged for rest. Just ten minutes. Just ten minutes.

"The shopkeeper said, 'Yes,' and took me to another small room and pointed to a bench. It was there he had stored his provisions and things.

"I stretched myself on the bench."

Here the tailor stopped the narration. I do not think he was even conscious of my presence any longer. He seemed suddenly more sad.

"And then, sir, I closed my eyes. That was all I knew of that night. And when I woke up it was nine in the morning."

He stopped again. His suffering was evident and awful. But I could not stop him. Nobody could have stopped him. He was right back in those hours of his calamity.

"First I did not know where I was and what I was doing. But in a flash the whole thing came to my mind. I rushed outside. I had left the

motorcycle in the middle of the road, with the key in it. I had stopped just for a cup of tea and I had slept away a whole night and till nine in the morning. Again I raced the rest of the distance. I had to fill up my tank once. And I reached Madras at noon. I raced through the streets of Madras and reached my son's place. But my son had died at five that morning."

I moved towards the nearest chair. But the tailor stood firm. At that moment, one would think he was just recounting a story he had read in a magazine the previous day.

"That was all, sir. The next week I closed my business in Bangalore and came away to Madras. Madras was full of my son's memories but I came to Madras mainly to punish myself every minute of the rest of my life. If only I had not slept in that tea shop, my son could have at least seen me in his last minutes. Then somebody said there was a magician in Vellore who drew the spirits of dead people on himself and made them communicate. I went to the magician and he was able to bring on my son and make him talk to me. My son said something about his clothes in a trunk, about a tennis racket and went away. What is the use of that, sir? He was not going to get back his life. I did not go to the Vellore magician again. Then I opened the shop in Town and have been in Madras since that time."

His story was finished. He turned towards his younger son who was now beginning to stitch the trousers he had been cutting for the past few minutes. He told him something in his language. The son said something, stopped stitching and went out. Perhaps he was going to get the other tailors.

It was now past noon and it was definitely getting late for me. I said to the tailor, "I shall come day after tomorrow."

He mumbled, "All right, sir." Unintentionally I looked at the mahatma's picture again.

The tailor must have noticed my looking at the picture. He spoke to me again, "Nobody can alter our fate, sir. Nobody, not even the most powerful mahatma. He might have hinted to me about my son and I would have kept him in Bangalore itself. But he didn't. It was all fate. Nobody can alter it." He now spoke in a completely detached manner. I felt greatly relieved.

I said, "I shall come day after tomorrow," and unlocked my bicycle.

I went to him two days later and as he had promised, he had the shirt ready. It was excellently done. But he had not carried out one of my instructions. That apart, it was very good workmanship.

He was about to wrap the shirt when I pointed out his lapse. He was thoroughly taken aback. He said, "Sir, please come tomorrow evening. I will have it altered."

"No, it is quite all right. I would have preferred it that way but this is all right too. It is perfectly all right."

"Are you sure you are not dissatisfied, sir?"

"No. Not at all. It is very well done. The rate is six annas more than what I usually pay for my shirts but you have done a very fine job. It is perfectly all right."

He wrapped the shirt very neatly in a large sheet of newspaper. Then he spoke severely to his son and to the three or four tailors who were with him. Happily there was no other customer in the shop.

As he gave the packet to me he said, "I would have altered it, sir, if you had wanted it to be. But it would be nearly a day's work, sir. I would have to remove the buttonholes. To remove buttonholes without damaging the cloth, it would take more than half a day. You are very kind, sir."

"No. It is perfectly all right."

Again I looked for the mahatma's picture. And it was wiped clean and the sandal paste and vermilion marks applied freshly with the same tender artistry. Again, nearly half a rupee worth of fresh flowers.

I had not brought my cycle. As I walked homewards I could not help thinking about the picture. Every day the tailor cleaned the picture and applied the sandal and vermilion marks carefully and lovingly. That itself would take about fifteen minutes. Then fresh flowers every day. He didn't very much bother about the other pictures though they were all of gods and goddesses. But this picture he attended to every day. And yet he said he didn't believe in the mahatma. He didn't hesitate to tell a rank stranger that all the mahatma did was mere talking and if he did anything at all it was only for the rich!

A week later, I was cycling to the vegetable-market when I heard somebody call, "Sir! Sir!" I had by that time quite forgotten about the tailor and his story. It had gone out of my mind altogether. The "Sir! Sir!" continued and I turned and saw the tailor calling me from his shop. He was standing at its entrance, and when he saw that I had heard him, his face brightened. I had to make a full turn with my cycle, and I went near him. He said, "Come in, sir. Come in, sir." I could not imagine why he should have called me.

But when he took out a bit of cloth, I remembered. It was quite a

large piece and I could easily make two big handkerchiefs out of it. And without the slightest trace of expression, he said, "This is what was left over after preparing your shirt, sir." Just as he said.

As I walked out of the shop I looked at the picture of the mahatma. Yes, it had been dusted that day also, sandal paste and vermilion freshly applied, and there was a garland of roses around the picture. A few minutes later I remembered. It was the birthday of the mahatma.

translated from Tamil by the author