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THE OLD MAN'S DREAM

ON a night, a week before Republic Day, the old man could not get to sleep. The world was too much with him. To the usual public worries that oppressed him—he was fortunate enough not to have any private ones (health was of course quite a problem but at four score that was to be expected and scarcely occupied his mind seriously or for more than a few minutes occasionally)—were added Bihar and Assam. In both he could sense deterioration, not improvement and the position was already grave enough to have caused deep anxiety to even the best administrators of the past. Sir Henry Knight, Sir Hugh Dow or even humble he himself would never have let things get to this stage in either case. This etceterad woman, gallivanting all over the country, making speeches full of platitudes and lies, thinking all the time only of her own private interest, the maintenance and increase of her own personal power, seemed not even to realise the extremity of the condition in the two states. And there was nothing he could do about it, or indeed nothing anybody could do about it. "Lord," he muttered, "guilty we certainly are, readily I confess it, but we did not deserve this. Have mercy upon Thy ancient land," and he recited in a low tone the two short first prayers of his faith. Gradually his eyes closed, sleep came to him and he ceased tossing and turning. And then he dreamt.

He was in the P.Ms. room at her residence. She was at her table and opposite her sat a particularly egregious Chief Minister, to whom she was saying sharply, an angry frown upon her face, "But you are an utter sycophant, and you tell lies by the dozen besides." The C.M. stammered, "But Madam, I am your most devoted and loyal follower, and I am most attentive to your every word, and...." She broke in "get out now." And as the very bewildered creature stumbled to the door, added "you are also quite corrupt. See that you let me have your resignation before you leave Delhi." The battered miscreant turned round, his mouth open, uttering meaningless sounds, then his knees gave way and he collapsed on the carpet. She left the table, walked upto him, saw that he was breathing regularly and had only fainted, returned to her table, pressed the bell for her secretary and when he entered said, "Revive that and take it away. No, no doctors are needed; just a little eau de cologne or sal volatile below the nostrils. Get it from the medicine chest in your room. Don't forget to take his resignation before he leaves Delhi, and come back when you're through with this business. I've a lot of things to be attended to, so don't take too long." The secretary rushed out,

rushed in again, and quickly got the C.M. on his feet and out of the room.

The P.M. got up and began walking up and down. "To think that I am responsible for such types being in authority throughout the country! Mea culpa! Not one among them honest! And whose fault is that? Why my own. How I have hated that word honest? I couldn't help it; it was a constant reproach to me, for truth to tell, I have hardly ever been honest myself. And that word truth, that's another I've always hated and avoided. Truth and honesty, so ugly and uncompromising; how much easier, more convenient, to let slip out the smooth lie, take refuge in the equally smooth dishonest trick! But no longer. Now my feet, and my mind, are set on the strait and narrow path, and no backsliding, girl, do you understand" looking at her image in the mirror on the wall.

The secretary having re-entered, she said "take this down Priorities: Bihar, Assam, finding honest C.M. in place of that scum, which reminds me, get letters of resignation from Central Ministers X, Y and ... I'll tell you later. These are dishonest, aren't they to your knowledge?" "I have heard so" stammered the secretary, taken aback by this sharp questioning "Of course I don't know for sure, you will understand, madam." "I understand only too well," smiled the P.M. "Now as between you and me, you will henceforth answer every question I put clearly and without reservation, to the best of your knowledge and ability. No holding-back, no half-answers. If you think that's too dangerous, go your ways and become a Commissioner of Stamps and Excise somewhere and I'll find someone else." "Certainly Madam, I'll serve the person you are to-day as you direct with pleasure. Only before, tact seemed to be essential for just survival." "Put that in cold storage. For the future, straightforwardness always. Tell me if you think I'm wrong and why. Then I'll decide and say what I want done. And pass this on to the Ministries and Secretaries. No saying what they think I want to hear. We're not paying people four thousand a month for hiding their real views and being just tactful. If I wanted that, why not double their number at six hundred a month?

"Next Bihar: Immediate Governor's rule. Prepare papers for President's approval and sanction. Legislature to go. Far too much hanky-panky between legislators and gangsters on the one side and between legislators and officers on the other. This must stop. We need a strong governor, fortiter in re even if not altogether suavitor in modo. Actually the state needs pacification, the break-up of gangs, the restoration of ordinary law and order, the teaching of a sharp lesson to recalcitrant guardians of the law, both on the police and the civil service side. Justice must be done and must be seen to be done. Otherwise, we may find ourselves with a whole province in conditions alike to those before the British took over, anarchy tempered by personal strength mostly, for 'He shall take who has the power and he shall keep who can.' The old ICS breed is no more; what I'm thinking of is not the mere pen-pushers

we've generally known, but the men who besides pushing their pens quite effectively could lead as readily an attack upon a cattle-thief's stronghold or an armed gangster's lair. So for the Governor a retired Lt-General I suppose, still active physically and mentally, a man of principle and determination prepared to turn his hand and mind to anything circumstances may demand. Let me have the list early with all relevant details. For the new head of the police, a retired chief of the BSF, I should think. I can almost name the person, but let me consider all the possibilities. In view of the existing tie-ups between district and secretariat officers on the one side and influential non-officials, mostly of the same or similar castes on the other, a good deal of importation from outside in the official cadres may be necessary. A Chief-Secretary for instance bred in another atmosphere may be essential, so too may District Magistrates and DSPs of specially-afflicted districts. For these latter posts, retired Lt-Cols. from the Army should not be left entirely out of consideration. The thing that matters is the *man* for the job; his origins are of secondary importance. If they raise the whole question in Parliament, as they are bound to, I shall quite frankly put my cards upon the table, say I didn't realise until recently how grave the situation was, and am now trying my best to remedy it. The alternative to what I am doing now is to let Bihar opt out of Modern India. Surely they won't want that to happen.

"Next Assam. Here I'm afraid I've been very wrong. Misled by that old fault of the British, regard for prestige. What, was I, the enormously popular Prime Minister of All-India to give way to a bob-tail and raggle-taggle agitation of a band of provincials, who did not even seem to understand that one of the great glories of our culture was our ancient policy of welcoming with open arms all who came to us peacefully and wanted to live in peace? It could not be. I would not be so illeliberal as they wanted me to be. Now, I have come to realise that if migration alters the whole balance of some constituencies, the local people have a right to protest against it and to be protected from its effects. Also it is only recently that I have fully appreciated that the Assamese complaint is not against any nationals of India, but only against those who can according to Indian law rightly be regarded as foreigners. The question that remains is from what date should foreigners who have entered the country be regarded as foreigners and deported or deprived of electoral rights. I have already accepted that those who came after 1971 should go. For the rest, we must get the agitating representatives to Delhi, and settle the affair in a fortnight."

The secretary left the room at this stage to set the Bihar matter moving, and then the Assam business. The P.M. sank into a profusely-cushioned arm-chair on the other side of the table, and began to reflect. "They say I have an inordinate love of power and want to concentrate it all in my hands, to be an untrammelled dictator in fact. Well, they're not far wrong. I love power. If anybody gets in the way of my having

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it, I resent it and deal with him or her accordingly. Now, am I right ? Upto now, my actions have been solely guided by what I like. What in fact I don't like is wrong. But I realise now this is not so. Right and wrong are independent of my likes and dislikes. I must obey in future the law and follow the constitution, and in doing so, I actually lose very little power. I cannot be the Vozhd, the sole chief, whose word is final on everything, but in effect it makes not much difference so long as I retain my Parliamentary supremacy. And of losing that I see no likelihood. If in spite of all my errors, I continue to have such strong support, I don't really need to be a dictator. Good, farewell dictatorship! I shall be content with being the most powerful Prime Minister in the world. Once in five years let the people decide, that is I get the people to decide. No one can object to that. My critics' guns are spiked, and I am still triumphant. Of course, there is always the risk of an unexpected loss some time. But then I am 63 now. By the time of the next election I shall be 65. Five years more in power and I shall be seventy, long enough in all conscience to have been at the top of everything. Yes, then I shall make my soul and pass away in the most fragrant odour of sanctity. Ha, ha, they call me Durga already. Well, why not an avatar of another of the great goddesses too ?

"Now that I have taken to the path of honesty and have set my face against corruption in all its forms, I have no doubt the country generally will follow me, first the officials and then gradually the rest. In ten years, our ethical standards will be better by 50 per cent, not a mean achievement, one of which anyone could rightly be proud. But in my new devotion to truth, I had better tell Brezhnev and his people that their occupation of Afghanistan is down-right aggression, that no excuses will hold water, and that they had better get out very soon. It will be very awkward, but it has to be done. I must be true to my reborn self." The old man applauded enthusiastically and lay quiet, wrapped in sleep.

Next morning to his horror and disillusionment, on looking at the papers, he found Indira very much her old self, more strident and lying, if it were possible, than before, more than ever determined to be not only sole dictatress, but even to found a dynasty on that basis.

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