

R. Rama Varma – Chettiar Heirloom

It was only later, when she stopped to collect her blood pressure medication from Kannan Pharmacy that Mami learnt about the loss of the Chettiar heirloom from Seth Dharamchand's jewellery shop.

That morning, she had stood at the gate wondering why her maid, Bangaru had not turned up. Even on the occasion when Bangaru's son, Arasu, had lost his job in the paper mill, she had hurried in around half-past eight and picking up the broom, fiercely attacked the leaf-strewn yard. It was not particularly untidy today, but a faint impression of the previous day's Rangoli showed inauspiciously through a thin layer of dust.

The smell of the fresh earth dissipated quickly. With a sinuous motion of her hand, Mami paid out a thread of white Rangoli powder on to the wet earth. Her hand was not as steady as it once was and she could no longer bend low. Nevertheless, her designs could still draw gasps of admiration from the ladies of the neighbourhood.

There was a sudden assault jasmine perfume as Mrs. Rangarajan walked up to the gate. Her silk sari rustled and her designer necklace dazzled as it caught the morning sun.

"You shouldn't be doing this," she chided her, "Where is that maid of yours? Don't say I didn't warn you. She and her son have the word thief written across their foreheads. Why, he told me this necklace is an imitation. Nonsense! It is 22 carat gold and cost a fortune."

Arasu was a skilled goldsmith and the late Seth Moolchand, Seth Dharamchand's father, had been very fond of him. When Sethji had died suddenly, Dharamchand had taken over the business and Arasu began to skulk. According to Bangaru, Sethji's son would give him nothing but the most menial jobs. It was an insult to his craftsmanship. It was only because of his loyalty to the late Sethji that Arasu stayed on.

Mrs. Rangarajan came closer, holding her necklace up for scrutiny. She had gone to Sethji's the previous week to see if she could exchange it for

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the latest design. Seth Dharamchand being away, she had asked Arasu. According to him, she would be lucky to get five hundred rupees for it.

Mrs. Rangarajan tried to catch her reflection in the window of the veranda.

"I could have slapped him," she said, "Seth Dharamchand made it especially for me."

She waved an invitation card. A dark blue background with a golden Ganesha etched in front. Mami had heard about Chettiar's daughter's wedding next month. She was yet to receive an invitation. Mrs. Rangarajan could barely conceal her happiness.

"He is a big man now," said Mami, smiling, "Perhaps he has forgotten his old Maths teacher."

Later, on her way back from the temple, Mami asked the auto-rickshaw driver to stop at Kannan pharmacy, which he did, grumbling about the waiting time.

As she hobbled up the steps, she noticed the Policeman stationed outside Seth Dharamchand's jewellery shop.

"Sethji's son," said the pharmacy proprietor, Kannan, wrapping the medication in a strip of newspaper and tying it with a piece of twine, "is too generous for his own good. How many times have I warned him about Arasu! "Mr. Kannan', he would say respectfully, 'if I dismiss him, what will he do for a living?' Alas, it is such people that get punished in this world."

Seth Dharamchand had been working on a family heirloom for Chettiar. Fixing a clasp might be a small job; that Chettiar had trusted old Sethji's son with it was an honour. For generations, girls of the Chettiar family had worn it for their weddings. It was a family tradition.

This morning, it had gone missing. Seth Dharamchand had run across the street in tears. When Kannan had calmed him down, he explained what had happened.

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He was at the back of the shop when Arasu came in, late as usual and in a bad temper. Someone had called from outside. It was the Secretary of the shop owners association. The council van was refusing to collect rubbish from their doorsteps. Instead, they were being asked to carry it a couple of streets away to the corporation bin. While he was still talking to the Secretary, Arasu rushed out with his cloth bag, mumbling. When he returned to his workbench, the Chettiar heirloom had gone.

Kannan had immediately called the Police. Both Kannan and the Secretary had corroborated Dharamchand's story.

"Not even a fly moves this side of Koil Street without my knowledge," declared Kannan, "Why, even when I am with a customer, one of my eyes is always roving."

From the urchin who slid his hand into the sweet jar to the vegetable seller who dropped a couple of potatoes back into the sack while the lady looked in her handbag, Kannan's hawk-eyes missed nothing.

Across the street, the Policeman was idly watching as a rag-picker shooed away a mongrel and poked a stick into the rubbish bin.

"That rag picker, for instance," Kannan continued, "this is the second time I have seen him this morning. He was poking in that rubbish bin when the Police came."

And from under those very eyes, Arasu had walked away with the Chettiar Heirloom.

Kannan sighed. When old Sethji had died suddenly, everyone pitied the young Dharamchand. He was young and irresponsible - old Sethji never let him anywhere near the shop. Surely, he would squander the family business?

But in the year after Sethji's death, he had silenced the wagging tongues. True, he took forever to craft them, but his designer necklaces were the rage with school girls and grandmas alike. And while old Sethji was as

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approachable as a rhino with a bad cold, Dharamchand could charm a Chennai auto-rickshaw driver into dropping him home for nothing more than his witticisms.

"One tablet three times a day after meals...don't worry, these days blood pressure is a status symbol. Worry leads to BP and BP leads to worry, that's what I have told Seth. They will find Arasu soon enough," said Kannan.

Mami paused at the bottom of the steps. They seemed steeper than ever before.

Sethji's son said something to the constable, who straightened up and saluted. He took a few steps towards the rag picker, who threw something into his cloth bag and fled.

It occurred to Mami that she had been seeing that rag picker in Koil Street for years. He must live around here somewhere, stitching clothes from the scraps of cloth he could find, eating the leftovers that even the mongrels refused. Say you assured him food and shelter for the rest of his lifetime. Would he keep off the streets?

We are creatures of ritual, decided Mami. Just as she had her morning visit to the Hanuman temple and Mrs. Rangarajan her weekly makeover sessions, he had his rubbish bins to poke. But why come back to one twice the same morning? What could he hope to find that he had not already done?

When Mami returned, she was not surprised to see Vicha, her younger brother, pacing up and down the yard.

"Mind the Rangoli," she warned as he trod dangerously near her painstaking design.

"My reputation is at stake and all you can think of is your Rangoli!"

Bull-dog Vicha, as he was respectfully known amongst the criminal fraternity, was the Chief Inspector of the Mylapore Police Station.

This morning, his reputation was facing its severest test yet. None less than the Chief Minister had called. Apparently, Chettiar had complained that

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due importance wasn't being given his missing heirloom. Everyone knew who had taken it. So why hadn't Arasu been arrested? Perhaps he was the Chief Inspector's man? After all, there were rumours that it was he who recommended Arasu for the job. Vicha ground his teeth.

"Why did I ever listen to you?"

"I merely mentioned to you that Arasu was an excellent goldsmith," said Mami.

"And it so happened that the late Sethji was looking for an assistant at that time."

Mami's eyes twinkled.

"You can't blame me for that," she said.

Vicha's face had become grave.

"You know what will happen to me if I don't get it back, don't you? Six months short of retirement and not a paisa to show for it. You will have to feed me out of your pension. Thank goodness Saraswati is not alive to see me in this state."

One could have mistaken him for Shivaji Ganeshan in one of his famous 60s tragedies.

"You should audition for Mrs. Rangarajan's next Women's Association play," said Mami, "She is looking for someone to play Karna. You will be ideal for the chariot scene."

Vicha's mobile phone rang. He took it and brightened up visibly.

"You have got Arasu? Good work! He was carrying a lot of cash? Did he say who he sold it to? Won't talk? Ok, hold him, I am coming. A good trashing and he will sing like a parrot."

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In the afternoon, Mami would recline in her armchair on the veranda, fanning herself with the morning newspaper. Sundaram Colony was well away from the main road, so there was little to break the silence, apart from the squeals of the children in the school playground a few blocks away and the occasional barking of a distant dog. As Mami dozed in her chair, she became increasingly aware of some other sound. It was Bangaru, silently sobbing at the gate and wiping her reddened eyes with a corner of her sari.

At length, she sat on her haunches in the shade of her veranda, sipping Mami's decoction coffee. Her daughter had made a bad marriage. Now they were asking for more money. A few days before, Arasu had promised to pay off his sister's dowry. When he came home with the cash that morning, Bangaru did not dare to ask him where he got it. Her worst fears had come true when she saw the Police jeep drawing up. Arasu was packing an overnight bag. They found in it twenty thousand rupees in five hundred rupee notes. Then, despite her protests, they had overturned the one-room hut. It had yielded nothing.

"Please, Mami, tell your brother...let me talk to Arasu."

To Arasu, old Sethji was a veritable God. If it hadn't been for his generosity, his sister would never have been married off. He wouldn't do this to old Sethji's son.

"Don't fret yourself, Bangaru, I will see what I can do," said Mami.

Vicha returned, more miserable than ever.

"So the parrot refused to sing," said Mami with a smile.

"Short of torture, we have tried everything," he said. "He insists he didn't take it. Says the heirloom was still on the work table when he left. But he won't tell where he got the money."

"Did he say why he left so abruptly?"

"He claims he merely came to collect his bag. Apparently, he had asked Dharamchand for a holiday, but the latter denies it. Dharamchand was

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talking to someone when he left, and he couldn't wait. It is obvious he took it, but unless we can trace it, what will we say in court? I can't hold him forever."

The heirloom was very distinctive - Andhra design, mid-18th-Century - pure gold, encrusted with gems. Every jeweller in the area had been alerted.

Of course, Koil Street was always full of tourists. He could easily have slipped it to one of them. Airport and Customs were on the lookout, but they had to be careful. The last thing they wanted was a call from some embassy complaining innocent tourists were being hassled.

Later in the afternoon, Mami heard angry voices from Mrs. Rangarajan's house and then a loud slamming. She braced herself. For a while, Mrs. Rangarajan sat sullenly on the ledge of the veranda. It was about her daughter, Rekha.

"Everyone knows who is spoiling her. She will learn when she goes to her mother-in-law's house. Will Mr. Rangarajan accompany her there as well?"

She always referred to her husband as Mr. Rangarajan. Initially, perhaps, it may have been out of respect. Now she uttered with such disdain as only twenty years of marriage could bestow.

Mrs. Rangarajan had gone to Sethji's again about her necklace. It was crawling with Police, so she decided to borrow her daughter's instead. Not finding it in its usual place in her locker, she questioned Rekha. She evaded the question initially, but later admitted that she had lost it.

"It would have been safe in the bank locker. It was Mr. Rangarajan who insisted she should have it. He has pampered her since she was a baby."

Mami shuddered to think what would happen when Mr. Rangarajan got home. Sure enough, later that night, there was a knock on the door. It was nearly ten. If there had been another row, she hadn't heard it. Perhaps they had found the necklace.

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It wasn't Mrs. Rangarajan. It was her daughter. Rekha was a slim, mousy girl, with large, frightened eyes.

"Mami, I need to talk to you," she said, "Can I come in?"

"Of course, you can, child," said Mami.

That night, Mami stayed up late, thinking. It was the small variables in the equation that caused most bother. For instance, why did Arasu tell Mrs. Ragarajan her necklace was imitation gold? If he wanted to rip her off, couldn't he simply have sold her a replacement and charged extra? And how did he get rid of the heirloom so quickly? Did he have a pre-arranged buyer?

Next morning, on her way back from the temple, Mami got the auto-driver to stop at Chettiar's house. She laid a gnarled finger on the watchman's chest. There was a certain imperiousness in the tone of this white-haired, stooping lady that sent him scurrying inside to find his master.

In a few minutes, Chettiar himself came hurrying down the gravel path, followed by the apologetic watchman.

"I was about to come over myself to tell you about the marriage. Why didn't you tell me? I would have sent you my car," he chided as he helped Mami up the stairs of the mansion.

At length, the subject of the heirloom came up.

"I can still remember my mother giving it to my wife on our wedding day," said Chettiar wistfully. "Old Sethji would never have let this happen."

"I have a theory about this," said Mami, "can you throw us a party?"

He listened to Mami attentively. When she had finished, he nodded vigorously.

"Of course, we can arrange that," he said.

There was one more stop for the auto-rickshaw driver, who no longer dared to grumble about the waiting time.

Kannan frowned at Mami's question.

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"What exactly did Arasu do when he left the jewellery shop? Why, he walked rapidly towards the north end of Koil Street."

"Was he carrying anything with him?"

"His cloth bag, of course...and as he passed the rubbish bin he threw something in – it was a plastic bag, I think. But that's beside the point - we want to know what he did with the heirloom."

Why was she harping on these trivial matters? He had heard she was once a clever woman. Perhaps it was age. He dreaded to think how he would turn out in twenty years.

Mrs. Rangarajan came running to tell her the news. Chettiar had invited them to bless the bride. She was crestfallen to learn that Mami had been invited too.

Mami suggested that she should wear her designer necklace. She had seen Jyothika wearing a similar one in the recent blockbuster, "Chennai Blues". That pleased Mrs. Rangarajan so much that she forgot to ask where Mami, of all people, had seen Chennai Blues.

A marquee had been erected in the grounds of Chettiar's mansion. Liveried footmen, bearing samosas and soft drinks were scurrying to and from the catering van. Chettiar himself was welcoming the guests.

Kannan looked out of place and kept sipping from an empty glass. Sethji's son, resplendent in a richly brocaded silk kurta, was flirting with the women. Mr. Rangarajan trailed behind Mrs. Rangarajan, looking cross.

"Mrs Rangarajan," said Chettiar, "I was just remarking to my wife how beautiful your necklace is."

She blushed.

"Why, Dharamchand, made it for me."

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"I did, indeed," said Dharamchand, joining them, "and Mrs. Rangarajan heavily beat me down on price. Of course, it looks fabulous on her."

"How much did you pay for it, Mrs. Rangarajan?" asked Chettiar.

"Oh, forty-fifty, it was very expensive," said Mrs. Rangarajan.

"You do me a disservice," Dharamchand admonished, "For you, I quoted a special price of thirty eight thousand. It hardly covered my labour."

"And I would have thought such craftsmanship would fetch at least sixty...wait a minute. There is someone here who can tell exactly what it is worth," said Chettiar.

"No, no, what is the point?" said Dharamchand hastily, "It was my special gift to Mrs. Rangarajan."

Dharamchand shifted uneasily, as though there was gravel trapped in his shoe.

"You are too modest," said Chettiar, "but I insist. Let me introduce you to my friend, Mr. Vummidi, the owner of Vummidi & sons, the famous jewellery chain..."

There was a collective gasp in the marquee. It was not every day that they got to hobnob with the likes of Chettiar, and now here was one of the most prominent businessmen in all of Tamil Nadu.

Mrs. Rangarajan lapped up the attention. Mr. Rangarajan had completely dissociated himself from the proceedings. Mr. Vummidi took the necklace, weighed it in his hand and frowned. As Dharamchand took a glass of water from a passing waiter, his hand shook.

Just then, Chief Inspector Vicha hurried to the tent and whispered something in Chettiar's ear. He brightened visibly.

"This is good news indeed," said Chettiar, "I cannot wait to see it."

Addressing Dharamchand, he continued, "You will be relieved to know the Chief Inspector has found our family heirloom!"

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Dharamchand half-rose in his chair, but sat down again and two policemen appeared, dragging the bewildered rag picker of Koil Street between them. He had been washed and made presentable, but some of the guests later complained that they lost their appetite after that point.

"Show them what you found," said the Chief Inspector.

He held up a beautifully designed gold necklace, encrusted with what looked like red rubies. Chettiar rushed towards him and excitedly took it in his hands to examine it.

According to the rag picker, he noticed something glittering amidst a pile of newspapers. He was frightened away by a Police van, but he returned a while later to find the necklace. It looked pretty, so he threw it into his bag along with numerous other odds and ends.

An excited murmur rippled through the guests. Why would anyone in their right minds throw away something so valuable?

"Did you see the person who threw it in the bin?"

The rag picker looked at those present and nodded.

"Can you describe him to us?"

"Young, dark man, with a moustache and a cloth bag on his shoulders. He shouted something to this man," he said pointing to Seth Dharamchand.

"I knew it!" cried Dharamchand. "It was Arasu, there is no mistaking it. That's what I have been saying all along. He did it to sully my name, the rascal."

"Sheer spite, if you ask me," Kannan whispered to Mami. He looked at her with a new admiration. Perhaps old age was not so bad after all.

Meanwhile, Mr. Vummidi, oblivious to all the excitement around him, was bending over Mrs. Rangarajan's necklace with a lens. Then he sat bolt upright.

"This is a Copper alloy!" he declared suddenly. All eyes turned to him.

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"In my forty years in the business, I have never seen such a clever imitation! But look at it through the lens, and you can see a faint tarnishing, especially around the clasp."

Mrs. Rangarajan had turned livid.

"Dharamchand, what is the meaning of this?" she cried, "You assured me it was 22 carat gold!"

It was only Vicha's intervention that saved Dharamchand's silk kurta.

"Perhaps Mr. Vummidi should also examine the heirloom too," said Vicha quietly.

Chettiar handed it to him and looked on in disbelief. Vummidi examined it for a while, muttered to himself and looked up puzzled.

"The work is very good. It is difficult to say without testing. But didn't you say the clasp on the original had broken? Normally, when you fix jewellery, there is a slight irregularity on the surface. This clasp doesn't look like it ever been broken before."

Dharamchand roughly pushed aside a couple of waiters and ran towards the gates. Displaying an alacrity that belied his years, Vicha tackled him from behind and pinned him to the ground. Two constables escorted Seth Dharamchand to the Police jeep outside.

"We have done Arasu a grave injustice," said Vicha, panting slightly.

Even in mufti, he looked grand. The fervour with which Mrs. Rangarajan looked at Vicha filled Mr. Rangarajan with a forlorn hope. The Inspector was a widower, after all.

"It was only because of Arasu's loyalty to the old Sethji," continued Vicha," that he stayed with Dharamchand. Last week, he found out that Mrs. Rangarajan's necklace was an imitation. It suddenly dawned on him why he was being given the most menial jobs. Dharamchand did not want him to find out that he was passing off his clever imitations as real gold! When he realised that Dharamchand was working on an imitation for the heirloom,

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Arasu was in a dilemma. Should he tell the Police? But he had to protect old Sethji's son. So he grabbed it on his way out and flung it in the bin, hoping it would force Dharamchand to return the original. There was less than a month to the wedding, so he did not have time to craft another duplicate. And Arasu could always try to put some sense into him later. For Dharamchand, however, it was the ideal opportunity to get rid of Arasu. Who would believe him even if he told the truth?"

Kannan's jaw dropped.

"No wonder old Sethji never let Dharamchand anywhere near his shop," he said, "He must have known he was rotten."

The papers were full of praise for the Chief Inspector. A Police raid had revealed the Chettiar Heirloom in Seth Dharamchand's loft. One editor argued that "Miracle Vicha" should be persuaded to stay on for a couple of years.

"I am still puzzled," said Vicha, sipping Mami's decoction coffee, "why doesn't Arasu say where he got that money from?"

Mami smiled. "I will leave you to work that one out for yourself."

She left him scratching his head. Later, Mrs. Rangarajan came over to say she had found Rekha's necklace. It had slipped to the back of the drawer. At least, that was not an imitation – it was it was crafted by the late Sethji.

"Good for him that he isn't alive to see how his son has turned out," said Mrs. Rangarajan.

So Arasu had redeemed Rekha's necklace from the pawn shop. Mami wondered how she would break it to Mrs. Rangarajan that Rekha was in love with Arasu. Perhaps she should wait until he became Mr. Vummidi's top craftsman.