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A Memoir of 'Chalak' Om

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Detective Chalak Om has decided to retire since there are no mysteries any more around, only scandals. His friend and Boswell chronicles the last mystery he solved-The Case of the Missing Tiger Cub, or why the tiger is no longer the national animal.

Those that have followed the exploits of the world's foremost consulting detective will recall that it is on the website of *The Wire* that the chronicles of my illustrious friend and colleague, Om Prakash, first appeared. Known to an admiring public as 'Chalak' Om on account of his astuteness and acumen in disentangling mysteries, he had a long and distinguished career, which he however brought to a premature end for reasons that may be understood from this lament of his:

Crime no longer requires the services of a trained investigator. We live in a time when its uncovering requires no particular ability of ratiocination or logical deduction, for all the world knows that in an overwhelming number of cases the perpetrators of crime are the guardians of the law: what we have are not mysteries, but scandals-which we have now grown too blasé to be even shocked by. I would rather retire from my chosen vocation, return to my village, and devote the rest of my life to the cultivation of *mooli*.

This, in fact, is what he did. What follows is an account of the final chapter in the casebook of 'Chalak' Om.

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His Last Namaste

As I go through my notes on the concluding phase of the illustrious career of Mr 'Chalak' Om, I find here a reference to the macabre affair of the Kombai of Bhaskar Vilas; now an allusion to the sinister case of the Saffron-Hooded League; here again an account of the Scandal in Brahmania (in which Om caught a Member of Parliament in the act of stealing a temple-idol); there a memorandum on the Mastgarh Ritual, a case in which we nearly lost our lives in the uncharted territory between Uttarakhand and China; and elsewhere, a record of the extraordinary episode of Hysteria Lodge, in which the owner of the television channel *The Nation* was discovered one day at his official residence, foaming at the mouth (on general principle) while simultaneously eating a copy of the *Mumbai Jail Manual*.

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Every one of these cases-not to mention scores of other instances of the bizarre and the *outré* which are a hallmark of the innumerable mysteries disentangled by 'Chalak' Om-deserves to be brought to the attention of the reading public. But there are things for which the world at large is not yet prepared; it is not the easiest of things to get Om to release me from my promises of confidentiality made at the time these cases occurred; and I myself grow old, with diminishing resources, at my disposal, of the energy and the mental capacity that are needed for the arduous tasks of recalling and recording. With age and the burdens of the troubled time in which I play out the evening of my life, I find that weariness besets my efforts, ardent Boswell though I am of my admired Johnson's. It is therefore with a sense of the task virtually done that I pick up my pen this one last time to chronicle an adventure of 'Chalak' Om.

Mrs Hardhan had just cleared away the breakfast dishes on a hot and sultry morning of June of the year `21. 'Chalak' Om stretched himself out on his chair, lit one of his noxious Kajah *bidis* (which I knew from long practice that he favoured over his customary Langar Chhap *bidis* when he was in a querulous mood), and addressed me thus: "Tell me, Vatsan, what do the newspapers say of how the world is faring? What statue has been unveiled? Which place of religious worship has been destroyed by what brigade of patriots? What case has been determined in the Highest Court by a sealed envelope, and who has been summoned for contempt? Which actress has been charged with immoral trafficking in *ganja*?"

"My dear Om," said I, "it is not what the papers tell me about the things you mention that I find so intriguing as what they do *not* tell me about certain other things. Such as the actual number of Covid deaths; the real size of the Covid fiscal stimulus; the rates of unemployment and poverty; the factor by which national income has declined; the magnitude and sources of the PMCares Fund-"

"Desist, Vatsan!" said Om. "I was speaking of things which actually matter, of things which shake the earth. What we need to be informed of is that the Principal Minister frequently communes with peacocks in his garden; that his Minister of Interior Affairs has been admitted to the National Hospital because of an unspecified accident in which he hurt his hand and that it is now in a sling; that the tiger has been replaced, as India's National Animal, by the cow-"

At this point, we heard a rattling of feet upon the stairs, a loud banging upon our door, and the raised voice of Mrs Hardhan in argument with an unknown person, when the door suddenly burst open, and we were confronted by the sight of a young man pleading with our landlady, running his hand wildly through his unkempt hair, breathing hard and sweating from every pore of his exposed skin. Gently informing Mrs Hardhan that it was all right, and only a client in distress. Om laid a kindly hand upon the shoulder of our agitated visitor and led him to a chair, even as I ministered to him with our standard therapeutic remedy for souls in a state of shock-a stiff measure of Old Monk rum.

The young man gratefully accepted the glass of restorative medicine with shaking hands and gulped down its contents. "Come now," said Om in a reassuring voice, "pray compose yourself and tell me, in your own words, what brings you here in a state of such extreme nervous prostration."

"You must know, Mr Om," said our client, "that I am the unhappy warden of the Tiger Enclosure in our City Zoo. Two nights ago, finding my room too hot and stuffy for comfort, I went out on the campus and slept under a tree not far from where the tigers are. In the early hours of the night, I was roused from my slumber by the fearful roars of an enraged animal from the direction of the Enclosure. Rushing thither, and shining my torch in the darkness, I found the tigress Rani roaring in her locked cage. Next to her cage was that of her little offspring, our prized cub Rajah. Conceive of my shock and disbelief, Mr Om, when I beheld a cage with its lock forced open, the door ajar, and no sign of little Rajah within. The cub had vanished clean away! I immediately alerted the police." Raising his voice in an agony of importuning, the young man said: "Please Mr Om, you must believe me, and having believed, you must save me. I had nothing to do with this. I love the animals in my charge, and especially Rajah the cub. I would allow no harm to come to him. But I know that the police are trying to pin his disappearance on me. They are after me. Why, I shouldn't be surprised if, at this very moment-"

Just then we heard a sound of steps upon the stairs. "This does not bode well," groaned Om. "That ponderous creak is the trademark stamp of an ill-conditioned policeman with an excess of *avoirdupois*. It can belong to but one man-Jauns. Give me Inspector Grikshan any day. He is your unadorned fool-" (at this point I thought I heard a sort of strangled cough from behind the curtain)-"but Jauns is a fool with some pretensions to wit, and there is no fool less bearable than that kind of fool!"

I should explain that it was the solid Inspector Jauns at the door. His parents had named him Atal Nibin. He certainly lived up to his first name: his immense bulk made him an apt candidate for the title of Immoveable Object. As for his second name, it is doubtful that a bully deserves to be seen as a hero. However that may be, his doting parents had joined his two names and contracted the conjunction to 'Atalni'. The name stuck. He was known to the police force simply as Atalni Jauns.

Jauns walked into the room uninvited. His small, porcine eyes darted here and there, as his gaze travelled from the zoo warden to Om and back from Om to the zoo warden. With a smirk upon his face, he said: "Up to our fancy theories again, Mr Om, are we? Spinning fairy tales out of stardust and moonshine, are we? It's not a luxury that the professional force can afford to indulge in. Honest policemen must base their findings upon evidence. Evidence, Mr Om, evidence! And all the evidence points in the direction of this cowering rat. Steal priceless tiger cubs, would you? Come quietly with me, my man, or it will not go well with you." With that, the policeman advanced upon the cringing zoo official.

"One moment, Atalni Jauns!" 'Chalak' Om's voice rang out loud and clear. "You have made mistakes-no, costly blunders, I should say-in the past, and there is no reason why you should not be expected to repeat them. I do not mean simply errors of inference, I mean errors of judgement and of moral reasoning. I believe I have every reason to think that you are on the brink of committing a grave official misdemeanour."

"Care to be clearer, Mr Om?" enquired Atalni Jauns, with a sneer in his voice which could not, however, quite conceal an underlay of either doubt nor fear.

"Come, come, Atalni Jauns, it is no use. I am aware of the wholesale complicity of the police in this business, and of your own nefarious role in it, in particular. I assure you it is useless to dissemble. But if you will insist on explanations, who am I to complain? Explanations will certainly be of assistance to Vatsan here, who I see is wearing a puzzled frown upon his face. See here, Vatsan, it is like this.

"The disappearance of the tiger cub and the subsequent effort to implicate the zoo warden in it come as no surprise to me. Throw your mind back to those observations I made a while ago about the important news events of the recent past. You will recall my mentioning the Principal Minister's affinity for holding concourse with peacocks. What is good for the Principal Minister, the Minister for Interior Affairs reasoned, could not be bad for himself. If it is the Principal Minister with peacocks that makes the headlines and the social media images today, why not the Interior Minister with a tiger cub tomorrow?

"In pursuit of this alluring thought, what more logical than to get the Zoo's warden to lend the cub for a day or two? Unfortunately, he could not be found in his room, as he had slipped out, because of the heat, to sleep in the open under a tree that night. Being impatient to get on with their job, and having got accustomed to the employment of *force majeure* when the observance of due process was not possible, or desirable, the Minister's devotees decided to break in on the Zoo's Tiger Enclosure, force the lock on the tiger cub's cage, and spirit the little fellow away-for a photo-shoot the following morning in the Interior Minister's company.

"A charming sequence of pictures of a Minister cuddling a tiger cub to win the hearts and minds of a sick and starving populace-thus did the Interior Minister and his advisers calculate. Alas! The best-laid plans of mice and men…What we hear on the following day is not any of this, but only news of the Interior Minister's hand in a sling, followed by a displacement of the tiger from its pedestal of National Animal. Can you not see the chain that links these events together in a logical sequence? You know my methods, apply them!

"Rajah, being a creature of taste and discernment, does not take kindly to the notion of being abducted for the benefit of a Minister's photo-shoot. Rather than rub its nose obligingly against the Minister's, it does something altogether more sensible from its own point of view: it bites the Minister's hand, fiercely and well, thereby causing the man to be admitted to the National Hospital where his hand is placed in a sling. With its customary sense of the correct order of priority of the state's concerns, the ideological wing of the ruling party holds an emergency meeting to discuss the question of how an Antinational Tiger can possibly continue to be a National Animal. The tiger is accordingly stripped of the privilege and replaced by the cow. Meanwhile, the doctors in the National Hospital are-ah-persuaded to the wisdom of silence on the nature of the Minister's accident.

"What happened to Rajah? The little tiger cub, in the immediate aftermath of biting the Minister's hand, ran away and escaped. I know, because I am always the first to know of anything strange or off-beat that occurs in this city, thanks to the intelligence unit I run-I mean the Bekar Street Irregulars. Yesterday morning, I heard from Vigan, the leader of my boys, that they had found the cub in a garbage dump not far from the Minister's residence. A tiger cub in the vicinity of the Minister's home; the desire for visibility and image-making; the apparent appeal of photo-shoots in the company of Nature's fauna; the suggestive hurt to the Minister's hand; the sudden, abrupt and petulant downgrading of the tiger's status-all of these had already formed a sequence of cause to effect in my mind. I knew that the police complaint would have to be dealt with. Whether or not the tiger cub was found, what more convenient than to implicate the warden in its disappearance? I anticipated that I would be the final court of appeal for the warden, and that you, Atalni Jauns, would pursue him here. Well, I was right, and here you both are. And here, indeed, in light of my anticipation, is Inspector Grikshan, behind the curtain. Pray step forward, my dear Grikshan! You see, Atalni Jauns, Grikshan has seen and heard everything from behind that curtain. That there is still an honest man in the police force is reason for satisfaction. He will bear witness to the evidence. Be on your way, Jauns, and let my client be."

"Evidence?" sneered Atalni Jauns. "What evidence? The stories you spin are not evidence, Mr Om."

"Very well, then. What would *you* consider as evidence? Would you say that the person in whose possession Rajah the tiger cub is found is the culprit? Would that constitute evidence?"

"I don't know what you are getting at, but all right, I'll accept that."

"Did you leave your duffel bag in the parlour before you came up?"

"I did, but what has that got to do with anything?"

"We shall see in a moment," said Om, and rang the bell for Mrs Hardhan. Very shortly, our landlady was in the room, with Atalni Jauns's duffel bag in her hand. "Pray give it to him, Mrs Hardhan," said Om. "Is that your bag, Jauns? Yes? Will you now do me the great favour of opening it?"

Jauns tapped his head with his finger, and with a tolerant smile, he opened his bag. Out peeped the head of the jauntiest little tiger cub you could hope to see in this world!

"Here, what's this?" shouted Jauns, springing back. "What accursed trick are you up to, Om?"

"Two can play at that game, Atalni Jauns," said 'Chalak' Om very sternly. "By your own admission, evidence of the cub in your possession should be evidence of guilt on your part. Grikshan, could you kindly do the honours with your handcuffs upon the wrists of Inspector Atalni Jauns? Dear me, such language, Jauns, and that too in the presence of a lady! No, no, this just will not do, you know, it will not do. Very well, then, let me put it to you like this. Grikshan here will stand witness to the fact that the cub was found in your bag. Leave my client alone, Jauns, or it will all come out. All of it. The Minister is unlikely to forgive you for the adverse publicity this will assuredly fetch him. Would you agree? Very well. In that case, leave now. Take him away, Grikshan."

Handing over the tiger cub to a now-smiling zoo warden, 'Chalak' Om herded him, the two Inspectors, and our landlady out of the front door.

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Vatsan poured out two celebratory pegs of Old Monk, and the two friends toasted each other with a clink of their glasses.

"Stand with me here upon the terrace," said Om, "for it may be the last quiet talk that we shall ever have."

> There's an east wind coming all the same, such a wind as never blew on India yet. Can you not see the signs, my friend?

The companions spoke with each other for some moments, recalling their years of friendship and the adventures they had shared together in the past. As they eventually turned back to their room, Om pointed to the horizon, and said, with a pensive shake of his head:

"There's an east wind coming, Vatsan."

"I think not, Om. It is very warm."

"Good old Vatsan! You are the one fixed point in a changing age. There's an east wind coming all the same, such a wind as never blew on India yet. Can you not see the signs, my friend? We live in a time when statesmen have no use for their country; judges have no use for justice; jurists have no use for the Constitution; policemen have no use for the law; the purveyors of news have no use for the truth; universities have no use for education; scientists have no use for knowledge; logicians have no use for reason; holy men have no use for God; and ordinary men and women have no use for kindness toward each other. Yes, a wind is coming. It will be cold and bitter, Vatsan, and a good many of us may wither before its blast. But it's God's own wind none the less, and a cleaner, better, stronger land will lie in the sunshine when the storm has cleared. We have had a long, hard day. Let us put it behind us. The Ustaad will render his incomparable version of *raag jhinjhoti* at the India Habitat Centre this evening. Having nourished our spirit there, I suggest we then proceed to nourish our bodies with a spot of *mughlai* dinner-while we are still allowed these delights."

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I lay my pen down now as I write my last few words on the best and the wisest man I have ever known. I may not write of him again, but in the time that is vouchsafed me, I shall ever remember that keen face, that iron grip upon the shoulder, and that peerless voice telling me, even as I thrill to those undying words: "Come, Vatsan, the game's afoot!