

The Gold Frame

The Modern Frame Works was actually an extra-large wooden packing case mounted on wobbly legs tucked in a gap between a drug store and a radio repair shop. Its owner, Datta, with his concave figure, silver-rimmed glasses and a complexion of seasoned timber, fitted into his shop with the harmony of a fixture.

He was a silent, hard-working man. He gave only laconic answers to the questions his customers asked and strongly discouraged casual friends who tried to intrude on his zone of silence with their idle gossip. He was always seen sitting hunched up, surrounded by a confusion of cardboard pieces, bits of wood, glass sheets, boxes of nails, glue bottles, paint tins and other odds and ends that went into putting a picture in a frame. In this medley a glass-cutter or a pencil stub was often lost and that was when he would uncoil from his posture and grope impatiently for it. Many times he had to stand up and shake his dhoti vigorously to dislodge the lost object.

This operation rocked the whole shop, setting the pictures on the walls gently swinging.

There was not an inch of space that was not covered by a picture; gods, saints, hockey players, children, cheap prints of the Mona Lisa, national leaders, wedding couples, Urdu calligraphy, the snow-clad Fujiyama and many others co-existed with a cheerful incongruity like some fabulous world awaiting order and arrangement.

A customer standing outside the shop on the pavement, obstructing the stream of jostling pedestrians, announced, 'I want this picture framed.' Datta, with his habitual indifference, ignored him and continued to be engaged in driving screws into the sides of a frame.

'I want a really good job done, no matter how much it costs.' The customer volunteered the information, unwrapping a faded newspaper and exposing a sepia-brown photograph of an old man. It was sharp and highly glazed in spite of its antiquity.

'What sort of a frame would you like?' Datta asked, still bent over his work.

'The best, of course. Do you expect I would stint where this great soul is concerned?'

Datta gave a side glance and caught a glimpse of the photograph: just another elderly person of those days, he told himself; a standard portrait of a grandfather, a philanthropist, a social worker, with the inevitable whiskers and top-heavy cascading turban—it could be any one of these. At least half a dozen people came to him every month bearing similar portraits, wanting to demonstrate their homage to the person in the picture in the shape of a glittering frame.

The customer was describing the greatness of the old man: extravagant qualities of nobility, compassion and charity were being generously attributed to him in a voice that came close to the chanting of a holy scripture. . . . If this world had just a few more like him, believe me, it would certainly have been a different place. Of course, there are demons who may not agree with me. They are out to disgrace his name and destroy his memory. But he is God in my home!"

'What sort of a frame do you want?' Datta interrupted. 'Plain, wooden, lacquer, gold, plastic or just enamel painted?' He waved a casual hand towards the pictures on the wall. The customer silently surveyed the various frames. After some time Datta heard him mumble, want the best .

'I don't have any second-rate stuff in my shop,' Datta said.

' How much will that gold frame cost? enquired the customer.

He was shown a number of samples: plain, decorative, floral, geometrical, thin, hefty and so forth. The customer was baffled by the variety.

He examined the selection before him for a long time as if he was unsure of his judgement and was afraid of enshrining his saviour forever in some ugly cheap frame.

Datta came to his rescue and recommended one with a profusion of gold leaves and winding creepers and, in order to clear any lingering doubt he might still harbour in regard to its quality, added: 'It is German! Imported!'

The customer at once seemed impressed and satisfied. Datta next asked, 'You want a plain mount or a cut mount?' and watched the puzzled look return. Again he helped the man out by showing his various mounts and suggested that a cut mount looked more elegant.

'All right, let me have a cut mount then. Is that a cut mount?' he asked, pointing to a framed picture on the wall of a soulful-looking lady in an oval cut mount. I like that shape. Will it cost much?'

'No. Frame, mount, glass—all will cost seventeen rupees.' The customer had expected it would be more. He pretended to be shocked all the same and tried to bargain. Datta withdrew to his corner without replying and began to cut a piece of plywood. The customer hung about uncertainly for some time and finally asked, 'When will you have it ready?' and barely heard the reply over the vibrating noise of the saw on the plywood, 'Two weeks from today.'

Datta had learnt by long experience that his customers never came punctually. They came days in advance and went away disappointed or came months later, and some never turned up at all and their pictures lay unclaimed in a box, gathering dust and feeding cockroaches and silver fish. Therefore he made frames for those who came to him and visited him at least twice before he actually executed their orders.

Ten days later the tall, rustic-looking man appeared and enquired, 'Has the picture been framed? I was passing by and thought I could collect it if it was ready.' Datta cast a side look at him and continued with his work. 'I know I have come four days early,' the customer grinned nervously. 'Will it be ready by Tuesday?' Datta merely nodded without shifting attention from a tiny nail which he, with precise rhythmic strokes, was driving into a frame, but sensed the man's obsessive attachment to the photograph. He told himself there would be trouble if he did not deliver the order on the promised date.

Next morning he made that his first job, keeping aside all the others.

The photograph was lying on a shelf among many others. He took it and carefully kept it on a wooden plank on the floor. Then he looked for the pencil stub for marking the measurements. As usual it was missing. He swept his hand all round him impatiently, scattering fragments of glass and wood.

False shapes that he mistook for the pencil harassed him to no end and stoked his anger. Frustrated in all his attempts to find it, he finally stood up to shake the folds of his dhoti—an ultimate move which generally yielded results. But he shook the folds so violently that he upset a tin containing white enamel paint and it fell right on the sacred photograph of the old man, emptying its thick, slimy contents on it.

Datta stood transfixed and stared at the disaster at his feet as if he had suddenly lost all faculty of movement. He could not bring himself even to avert his eyes from the horror which he seemed to be cruelly forced to view. Then his spectacles clouded with perspiration and helpfully screened his vision.

When at last he fully recovered his senses he set about rescuing the picture in such desperate hurry that he made a worse mess of it. He rubbed the picture so hard with a cloth that he peeled off thin strips of filmy coating from its surface. Before he realised what he had done half the old man's face and nearly all of his turban were gone.

Datta helplessly looked at the venerable elder transformed into thick black specks sticking to the enamel smeared on the rag in his hand.

He sat with both hands clutching his head: every nerve in his head throbbed as if it would tear itself apart if he did not hold it down.

What answer was he going to offer to the customer who had a fanatic devotion to the photograph he had just mutilated beyond recovery?

His imagination ran wild, suggesting nightmarish consequences to his own dear self and to the fragile inflammable shop.

He racked his brain for a long while till sheer exhaustion calmed his agitated nerves and made him accept the situation with a hopeless resignation. Meanwhile the

plethora of gods, saints and sages gazed down at him from the walls with a transcendental smile and seemed to offer themselves to him to pray to. With a fervent appeal in his heart he stared at them.

In his state of mind it did not register for quite a while that a particular photograph of a person on the wall had held his attention rather more than it was qualified to do. It was an ordinary portrait of a middle-aged man in a dark suit and striped tie, resting his right arm jauntily on a studio prop made to look like a fluted Roman pillar. Datta was amazed to see that he had a faint likeness to the late-lamented old man. The more he gazed at the face, the more convincing it appeared to him. But he dismissed the odd resemblance he saw as one of those tricks of a thoroughly fagged-out mind.

All the same, at the back of his mind an idea began to take shape: he saw the possibility of finding an acceptable substitute! He brought down the old wooden box in which he had kept all the photographs unclaimed over the years. As he rummaged in it, panicky cockroaches and spiders scurried helter-skelter all over the floor. Unmindful of them, Datta anxiously searched for the brownish photographs of the old man's vintage. Soon there was a pile before him: he was surprised he could pick up so many which qualified to take the old man's place.

But he had to reject a lot of them. In most of the portraits the subjects sported a very conspicuous flower vase next to them, or over-dressed grandchildren sat on their laps and therefore had to be rejected.

Luckily, there was one with which Datta felt he could take a fair risk; the print had yellowed a bit noticeably but he calculated that the total effect when put in a dazzling gold frame would render it safe.

After a couple of hours' concentrated work he sat back and proudly surveyed the old man's double, looking resplendent in his gold frame. He was so pleased with his achievement that he forgot he was taking perhaps one of the greatest risks any frame-maker ever took! He even became bold enough to challenge the customer if his faking was discovered. 'Look, my dear man', he would say, 'I don't know who has been fooling you! That's the picture you brought here for framing. Take it or throw it away!'

The days that followed were filled with suspense and anxiety. Datta feared that the customer would surprise him at an unguarded moment making him bungle the entire, carefully-thought-out plot. But the man turned up promptly a couple of days later. At that moment Datta was bent over a piece of work and slightly stiffened as he heard the voice, shrill with expectation, ask, 'Is it ready?'

Datta's heart began to race and to compose himself, he let a whole minute pass without answering. Then he put aside the scissors in his hand with slow deliberation and reached out to take the neatly wrapped package in a corner.

'Ah, it is ready!' the customer exclaimed with childish delight, at the same time mumbling flattering tributes to Datta for his promptness and so on. He spread his arms widely with dramatic exuberance to receive the photograph as if it was actually a long-lost person he was greeting.

But Datta took his time removing the wrapper from the frame. The customer waited impatiently, filling in the time showering more praises on his worshipful master who was to adorn the wall of his home.

Datta finally revealed the glittering frame and held it towards him.

The customer seemed visibly struck by its grandeur and fell silent like one who had entered the inner sanctum of a temple. Datta held his breath and watched the man's expression. With every second that passed he was losing his nerve and thought that in another moment he would betray the big hoax he had played. Suddenly he saw the customer straighten, the reverential look and benevolent expression vanished from his face.

'What have you done?' he demanded, indignantly. For Datta the moment seemed familiar for he had already gone through it a thousand times night and day since he splashed the white paint on the original photograph.

Several times he had rehearsed his piece precisely for this occasion.

But before he could open his mouth the customer shouted with tremendous authority in his bearing, 'Now, don't deny it! I clearly remember asking for a cut mount with an oval shape. This is square. Look!'

- **R. K. Laxman**

About the Story

'The Gold Frame' written by R.K. Laxman is the story of a frame maker who is asked to frame the photograph of a revered elder. The customer who brings this photograph is very particular about the frame as the elder is his patron. In a very light hearted humour, Laxman satirises the way the customer gives excessive importance to the frame.

Rasipuram Khrishnaswamy Iyer Laxman (R.K. Laxman) is a well-known Indian cartoonist, illustrator and humorist. Laxman has also written short stories, travelogues and a novel: *Sorry, No Room*. He was honoured with the prestigious Magsaysay Award in 1984.

Glossary

wobbly: inclined to shake;shaky

concave: Curved in, hollow

laconic: using few words/short answers

hunched: not erect

medley: assortment, a collection
 Mona Lisa: a famous portrait of a lady by Leonardo da Vinci
 calligraphy: decorative handwriting
 fujiyama: a volcano in Japan
 incongruity: strangeness, to be inappropriate
 fabulous: extremely pleasing
 Jostling: pushing and shoving
 sepia-brown: a photographic technique which produces prints in shades of brown/brownish shade of old photographs.
 antiquity: the distant past, olden days
 stint: spell, period
 Philanthropist: someone who gives charity to increase human well-being
 scripture: any writing that is considered as sacred by a religious group
 plethora: overplus, extreme, excess
 jauntily: in a fashionable manner
 rummaged: searched haphazardly
 helter-skelter: not organized
 resplendent: having great beauty
 exuberance: joyful enthusiasm

COMPREHENSION

(A) Tick the correct alternative:-

- The frame maker is _____
 (a) hardworking.
 (b) idle.
 (c) talkative.
 (d) gossipier.
- The answers that the frame maker gives to his customers are _____
 (a) long.
 (b) confusing.
 (c) brief.
 (d) puzzling.
- The frame is to be made of the customer's _____
 (a) patron.
 (b) grandfather.
 (c) mother.
 (d) uncle.

(B) Answer to the following should not exceed 10-15 words each:

- What task is given by the customer to the frame maker?

2. What is the relationship between the customer and the man whose photograph he wants to get framed?
3. Why does the customer want a cut mount for the frame?
4. Why is the customer so particular about the frame?
5. How does the frame maker make a worse mess of the photograph?

(C) Answer to the following should not exceed 20-30 words each:

1. What, according to the customer, are the qualities of his patron?
2. How does the frame maker manage to replace the spoiled photograph?
3. Why is the frame maker anxious?
4. Why does the frame maker discourage the idle gossipers?
5. Why is the customer not satisfied with the frame in the end?

(D) Answer to the following questions should not exceed 60-80 words each:

1. Attempt a character sketch of the frame maker.
2. Write a note on the satire in the story.

(E) Say whether the following are true or false. Write 'T' for true and 'F' for false in the bracket.

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| 1. The customer wants a plain mount photo frame. | [] |
| 2. The photograph of the patron is sharp and highly glazed. | [] |
| 3. The customer gives excessive importance to the frame. | [] |
| 4. The original photograph does not get spoiled. | [] |
| 5. The customer wants a cheap frame. | [] |