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A Wad of Notes

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Money involves sensitivity for each other's confidence. It not only stains one's reputation but also damages a relationship however close. So one should always be very careful about giving and taking money, no matter whether it is between a parent and his child, and if possible avoid becoming too close to a rich person because a rich man does not truly trust lower classes on matters related to money. 'A Wad of Notes' is a story of a conscientious college lecturer who meets one such situation and consequently his idealistic way of thinking gets shaken off and what is more, he is mortified every time when he happens to remember those incidents.

Middle-class people generally cover a wider area of a society but as for their situation, they are often like the cat that jumps again and again to reach the bowl of milk hanging from the high ceiling. Some of them are snobs, some groan under the weight of loan, some are effortful to make friends with a rich person; however, most of them are scrupulous, God fearing and methodical. You can hear them telling a very common lie that they could not see you last evening because they did not find time, even though they were then spending their time unproductively. On the contrary, if a rich person had invited them, they would have gone round to see them an hour earlier and obeyed him like a good servant without feeling embarrassed.

Joining high societies is good to some extent because you can then boast that Mr So-and-so is your friend, and you can at least aspire to rise to their level. But in most cases you will feel uneasy with them and you will not be able to anticipate a situation which may cause you a shock.

In the town of Paraspur lived a college lecturer named Simeran. He was a righteous and religious man.

He believed that if he picked up a one rupee note lying somewhere on his way, he was sure to drop one hundred the next day; and so he often said that the money which did not belong to him was like the poison. In his twenty years of service with the college, no guardian had ever succeeded in inducing him to accept any sort of gift. If a shopkeeper mistakenly refunded him more money than was payable by him, he would soon return that to him. He held the view that his salary was enough for him to live on, so he did not concern himself with any more money. Strictly speaking, he was so apprehensive about his character that he even avoided taking a look at the face of a girl.

Now that he believed that knowledge is power and superior to all other things, he had built up a library in which he enjoyed spending his spare time, reading books, magazines and newspapers. He more or less behaved like an intellectual snob.

He kept company with either intellectual sort of people or those who were engaged in some religious and social activities. In the latter group, there were a few wealthy persons in the town who loved organizing religious conferences and also visiting holy places.

Often they offered to take him to a holy place in their conveyance which he sometimes accepted but never allowed them to spend any money on him. However, if someone paid for his fare or food, he would soon jot that down secretly and after completion of the journey, settle with them for all that, despite their refusal.

One day he agreed to accompany one of his wealthy friends on a trip to a famous ashram at Sijayee. On the day when they had planned to leave his friend arrived at his house by a big luxury car early in the morning to pick him up. According to his nature, he was all set ahead of time with his bag and suitcase at the ready; so as soon as the driver sounded the car horn, he came out of the door.

He asked them both to have a cup of tea and then led them to the drawing room, where they sat and started talking about their journey. A little while later his wife appeared with a tray. Then, while they sipped their tea, the rich man pulled a thick wad of 1000 rupee notes out of his pocket. 'Friend, keep it in your pocket,' he said to Simeran. You know, I still have a lot more of them on me. I think it safer to divide up the money in different places.

Simeran felt flattered at being trusted by his friend. He placed it in the inside pocket of his jacket very carefully, then got up from the chair, lifted his bag and suitcase and handed them to the driver.

They strode briskly to where the car was parked at the main gate. The driver, having put the luggage in the boot, came back to the door, opened it and sat on his seat. The car started and soon it was on the move.

It was the time of awakening morn; the air was cold and damp but exhilarating. The road was nearly empty of traffic but bumpy. Simeran was walking on air. He was elated that his rich friend trusted him and treated him with respect and therefore he behaved like he was the owner of the car. If by chance it hit a pothole in the road, he was shocked and soon instructed the driver to drive it slowly.

Devotional music was drifting from the car stereo which kept him engrossed except for during the spasmodic talks that he held with his friend sitting in the rear seat. The red sun turned white, the moist windscreen began to evaporate; and with that, pedestrians, bikers and vehicles started to appear on the road in ones and twos. They drove along that road slowly but as they reached where the road met the highway, the car pulled away on it and picked up speed.

Simeran felt pleasantly drowsy but soon remembered that the person sitting by the driver should not sleep. He gave his head a shake, sat upright and was determined not to let his eyes close. But for all his efforts, he could not restrain himself from doing so. He kept sleeping till he felt a sharp tug and when his eyes opened, he found that the driver had braked to a halt behind a traffic jam and switched off the engine. He turned to look back and saw that his friend was sleeping, reclining on the seat.

The day had turned hot by now and, as a result, he felt a bit uncomfortable. He asked the driver why those motorists had jammed the road. The driver replied that there was a railway crossing. A train soon went past, whistling shortly afterwards. But several

minutes passed before the vehicles budged. The driver closed the glasses of the doors with an automatic device and turned on the air-conditioning system after he started up the engine. The atmosphere in the car became pleasant and Simeran was happy again.

After an hour's drive, the car reached a city square where a group of police were checking out the vehicles. They motioned to the driver to pull off the road and as he did that, they quickly gathered round it, asking for the papers. One of them standing on the left side of the car came forward and asked Simeran to get off it. He shivered at the thought of the unusually large amount of money he had in his pocket. However, he had no choice but to carry out his instructions. The policeman then leaned through the open door and started looking at everything inside it inquiringly. Meanwhile the rest of them led the driver to the boot and asked him to open it. When it opened, they started checking the luggage.

He stood gazing at them reflectively and also waiting for them to check his clothes. 'What will I say to them if they happened to find out the notes?' he mused. 'They may accuse me of having black money and may also take me to the police station for interrogation.' He prayed to God.

A little while later, the policeman turned to him. 'Where're you going?' he asked in an unfriendly voice.

'On a pilgrimage,' he replied timidly.

Fortunately, the officer made no further inquiry; instead, he turned round and walked away with his fellow officers to check another one. Simeran thanked God and got into the car, breathing a sigh of relief. His friend, however, kept sitting in his seat, his face unmoved. The driver, too, got in and put the car on gear.

Now Simeran was anxious to get rid of the money but he did not know how and when it would happen, nor was it possible for him to ask his friend to take that away from him. Anyway, he forgot everything else as he succumbed to the glory of Lucknow: wide and smooth roads, numerous sorts of vehicles running along the various roads, gorgeous parks, squares, high-rise buildings, flyovers, glistening shops, marts everything looked quite different through the windscreen of the big luxury car running fast on the highway that crossed the city; and all the more, he was so proud of the car that he did not fail to compare it with other similar ones coming and going in front of him.

Suddenly the car slowed and turned to the left into a lane. It kept moving on for a few minutes, then slowed down, and finally came to a halt in front of a big building. The driver got out and opened the back door for his master.

Simeran was amazed because he did not know what they wanted to do there. Just then his friend beckoned to him, whereupon he too opened the door and joined him. Then they walked together towards the gate of the building and as they reached there, a guard saluted them. He, however, could not understand where he was being led, so he halted to look at the big white building, then followed his friend mechanically through it and up the step into a large hall, where a good many young girls and boys were busy at their desks. When they stood up and bowed to the man, Simeran guessed that it must have

been one of his offices. The furniture, the floor, the cabins, everything was gleaming, and apart from that, the entire office was air conditioned. On the whole, the grandeur of the office led him to feel a sense of inferiority.

They kept walking till they entered in a well-appointed room adjacent to the hall. It was very charming and richly decorated, with carpet underfoot, ceiling of fine plasterwork, oak-panelled walls and double-glazed windows. There was a comfortable settee in a corner of the room and a long table in the centre with a computer, two laptops, phone sets and other office stationary arranged on it with a leather armchair in front of it and two other chairs positioned on the opposite side.

The boss of the office asked Simeran to sit on the settee and he himself went towards the table followed by two well-groomed blokes and the driver carrying his suitcase. He finally sat in the armchair and the two gentlemen who looked like his managers sat facing him on the other chairs. The driver, having put the suitcase on the table, walked out.

Simeran felt a bit awkward in that room because it was too plush for him and not only that, he also felt inferior even to the employees there. He could not afford to sit there for long so he got up and asked an office boy to lead him to the washroom. He spent half an hour there and after coming out, he preferred to go out in the lawn rather than into the room again.

A few minutes later the boy came looking for him and told him that the boss wanted to see him. Simeran felt flattered at the thought that his friend preferred him to be in the comfort of the room. He hurried in but as he entered the room, he was asked to return the money. He was nonetheless happy to throw away the unnecessary burden, so he reached into his pocket, withdrew the wad of notes and walked forward to hand it to him. But his friend motioned him to give it to one of the managers sitting on the other side of the table.

After taking the wad from him, the manager started counting the notes and when he finally finished the counting, he declared that there were 99 of them in all.

‘No, no,’ the boss said, ‘I’m sure there must be exactly 100 notes.’

Simeran was shocked to listen to that. He checked the pocket of his jacket stealthily, but there was nothing in it. By then, a second one had started to count those notes again, and this time he fixed his eyes curiously on him in the hope that it might prove the previous one wrong. But ultimately the number of notes did not increase.

Now Simeran was perplexed about what to do about that and how to prove his integrity to his friend. He stood thinking until his friend took the wad from the manager and then he fixed his eyes on him tallying the notes up by turning them over one by one. He was hopeful that two notes would be stuck together, or one of them folded. The process was slow but accurate. Every note slipping from the sheaf was of great consequence to him. The counting reached 50 but nothing, as expected, came of it. His heart began to beat wildly as the sheaf dwindled. Now there remained only a few notes to be counted, and with that his hopes began to crumble away. When at last he saw only two notes to three, he felt sweaty with embarrassment, and the face of his friend, as he examined, bore an

unusual expression, too, though he was trying to keep up appearances. He was sure that his friend already has had a very bad opinion of him, all the more because he was out of the room for about half an hour. He therefore thought he had better ask him to check his pockets but it was quite an odd thing, particularly, when there were the ties of friendship.

He felt so hurt that he desired to postpone the journey and to go back home, but soon thought that it would be unseemly for him to leave somebody in the lurch. However, he accompanied them on the onward journey unenthusiastically as his friend no longer looked to him like a friend or the driver like his employee or the car his own. It seemed to him that he was doing something which he should not have chosen and that he would have been comfortable on his journey a great occasion had he made it by bus or train with his peer group.

Whatever he thought finally concluded with his friend's impression of him. Even after returning home he could not forget all that had happened. If only I had counted the notes before putting them in my pocket, he said to himself. He thought and thought but could never find a way to prove his honesty to his rich friend.