

A Study In Still Life--my Tailor

He always stands there--and has stood these thirty years--in the back part of his shop, his tape woven about his neck, a smile of welcome on his face, waiting to greet me.

"Something in a serge," he says, "or perhaps in a tweed?"

There are only these two choices open to us. We have had no others for thirty years. It is too late to alter now.

"A serge, yes," continues my tailor, "something in a dark blue, perhaps." He says it with all the gusto of a new idea, as if the thought of dark blue had sprung up as an inspiration. "Mr. Jennings" (this is his assistant), "kindly take down some of those dark blues.

"Ah," he exclaims, "now here is an excellent thing." His manner as he says this is such as to suggest that by sheer good fortune and blind chance he has stumbled upon a thing among a million.

He lifts one knee and drapes the cloth over it, standing upon one leg. He knows that in this attitude it is hard to resist him. Cloth to be appreciated as cloth must be viewed over the bended knee of a tailor with one leg in the air.

My tailor can stand in this way indefinitely, on one leg in a sort of ecstasy, a kind of local paralysis.

"Would that make up well?" I ask him.

"Admirably," he answers.

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I have no real reason to doubt it. I have never seen any reason why cloth should not make up well. But I always ask the question as I know that he expects it and it pleases him. There ought to be a fair give and take in such things.

"You don't think it at all loud?" I say. He always likes to be asked this.

"Oh, no, very quiet indeed. In fact we always recommend serge as extremely quiet."

I have never had a wild suit in my life. But it is well to ask.

Then he measures me--round the chest, nowhere else. All the other measures were taken years ago. Even the chest measure is only done--and I know it--to please me. I do not really grow.

"A *little* fuller in the chest," my tailor muses. Then he turns to his assistant. "Mr. Jennings, a little fuller in the chest--half an inch on to the chest, please."

It is a kind fiction. Growth around the chest is flattering even to the humblest of us.

"Yes," my tailor goes on--he uses "yes" without any special meaning--"and shall we say a week from Tuesday? Mr. Jennings, a week from Tuesday, please."

"And will you please," I say, "send the bill to--?" but my tailor waves this aside. He does not care to talk about the bill. It would only give pain to both of us to speak of it.

The bill is a matter we deal with solely by correspondence, and that only in a decorous and refined style never calculated to hurt.

I am sure from the tone of my tailor's letters that he would never send the bill, or ask for the amount, were it not that from time to time he is himself, unfortunately, "pressed" owing to "large consignments from Europe." But for these heavy consignments, I am sure I should never need to pay him. It is true that I have sometimes thought to observe that these consignments are apt to arrive when I pass the limit of owing for two suits and order a third. But this can only be a mere coincidence.

Yet the bill, as I say, is a thing that we never speak of. Instead of it my tailor passes to the weather. Ordinary people always begin with this topic. Tailors, I notice, end with it. It is only broached after the suit is ordered, never before.

"Pleasant weather we are having," he says. It is never other, so I notice, with him. Perhaps the order of a suit itself is a little beam of sunshine.

Then we move together towards the front of the store on the way to the outer door.

"Nothing to-day, I suppose," says my tailor, "in shirtings?"

"No, thank you."

This is again a mere form. In thirty years I have never bought any shirtings from him. Yet he asks the question with the same winsomeness as he did thirty years ago.

"And nothing, I suppose, in collaring or in hosiery?"

This is again futile. Collars I buy elsewhere and hosiery I have never worn.

Thus we walk to the door, in friendly colloquy. Somehow if he failed to speak of shirtings and hosiery, I should feel as if a familiar cord had broken;

At the door we part.

"Good afternoon," he says. "A week from Tuesday--yes -- good afternoon."

Such is--or was--our calm unsullied intercourse, unvaried or at least broken only by consignments from Europe.

I say it was, that is until just the other day.

And then, coming to the familiar door, for my customary summer suit, I found that he was there no more. There were people in the store, unloading shelves and piling cloth and taking stock. And they told me that he was dead. It came to me with a strange shock. I had not thought it possible. He seemed--he should have been -- immortal.

They said the worry of his business had helped to kill him. I could not have believed it. It always seemed so still and tranquil--weaving his tape about his neck and marking measures and holding cloth against his leg beside the sunlight of the window in the back part of the shop. Can a man die of that? Yet he had been "going behind," they said (however that is done), for years. His wife, they told me, would be left badly off. I had never conceived him as having a wife. But it seemed that he had, and a daughter, too, at a conservatory of music -- yet he never spoke of her--and that he himself was musical and played the flute, and was the sidesman of a church--yet he never referred to it to me. In fact, in thirty years we never spoke of religion. It was hard to connect him with the idea of it.

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There is, I am certain, a deep moral in this. But I will not try to draw it. It might appear too obvious.

(The end)

Stephen Leacock's essay: Study In Still Life--My Tailor