JATADHARAN AND OTHER STORIES

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

PAPER BOATS.
ON THE SAND-DUNES.
MURUGAN, THE TILLER.
THE NEXT RUNG.
A DAY WITH SAMBHU.
RENASCENT INDIA.
KANDAN, THE PATRIOT.

JATADHARAN AND OTHER STORIES

BY

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MYLAPORE, MADRAS

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TO

MANJERI S. ISVARAN

PREFACE

THESE are sketches rather than short stories, more like wild creepers on jungle-growth. Kind reader, search not for fragrant flowers among these leaf-buds.

Some of these stories were written as early as 1915 and 1925. How many years of honest vintage! It may be that I have in my juvenile enthusiasm for storage cellared not the grape juice of life but mere *aqua*—tap water, at that. In any event, kind reader, taste it in a generous mood before declaring your verdict.

These sketches and stories appeared more or less in their present form in Journals and Annuals. Now I have revised them during snatches of varying mood and leisure without changing appreciably their original structure or movement.

On reading the final proofs of this collection I am myself surprised to find that almost every story, each written at different intervals of time, ends in a pial school. I myself wonder and am unable to explain why. Kind reader, kindly ask the Time-Spirit for a reply to the query. I can offer you none. When I think of a story, I have a vague central idea awakened by a contact, incident or experience. I cherish it for a long time

with the mother's joy of the artist. Stroke after stroke of pain and pleasure slowly and sorrowfully takes me to the end. Almost unconsciously I find I develop a didactic tail which my compassion for all life refuses to clip. Some like a tail. I like it; many don't. Our refined citizen blessed with sartorial excellences does not like a tail, especially a tail which would like to wag. As in life, so in story.

Indumati first appeared in the Literary Journal; *Destiny* under a different name in the Indian Express Annual; *In Quest of Power* and *Jatadharan's Marriage* in the Madras Mail; *Jatadharan* and *Illumination* in the Hindu; *The Collision* and *The Bride Waits* in the Triveni; and *A Fractured Arm* in the Short Story.

Mylapore,
7th April 1937.

K. S. VENKATARAMANI.

FOREWORD

A FRIENDSHIP of some twenty-five years' standing, and a chance suggestion which bore fruit, that he should write short stories, Mr. Venkataramani considers sufficient warrant for these few words by way of introduction to his collection of tales and sketches. I may claim this advantage over most of his readers that I have had ample occasion to watch his mind in undress as it were, and see his fancy assiduously licking its material into shape. He belongs to the class of writers for whom the themes of early youth have a perennial fascination. His *motifs* are few, but there is endless ingenuity of variation in the decorative pattern, as in the art of the silversmith of which his own is strikingly reminiscent.

The Indian types to which *Paper Boats*—his earliest book—gave memorable expression will, some of them, be recognised in this his latest; the old Registrar of Assurances appears in another guise as the Sub-Inspector of Excise, and the Vedan of *In Quest of Power* is unmistakeably of the category of valiant beggar. But there is a remarkable difference in treatment; the characters in these stories are not types but individuals. They are not circumstantially sketched in. A vivid detail

fixes the man in your memory— the rich Mudaliar in *Collision*, for instance, " whose proud boast is that he signs his name in such a way in Tamil that it is easily mistaken for English," or Subramanya Sastri who dreamed of a fine career at the bar, for " he had a stentorian voice, and he thought that it was the ripest qualification for a successful advocate." More often, when the details are forgotten, there remains an impression as of a warm splash of colour, like a garden in sunlight seen from the window of a passing train.

Venkataramani's talent is essentially lyrical. It is more successful in conveying an immediate apprehension of Reality than in producing the illusion of verisimilitude. The stylised dialogue and the conventional situations are those of the ancient Indian fabulist; and in his gentle humour and unobtrusive irony he declares these affiliations even more strongly. But there is sophistication in the wealth of incidental comment and in the conscious art with which every rift is loaded with ore. Take for instance this description of Ramanujam's feelings towards Lakshmi in *Collision*: " He appeared to himself as a slender stream of water oozing from obscure depths by the side of a mighty river which moved with all the majesty of a mountain-birth and inborn motion. He dared not break the lofty bunds of reserve and mix with the moving stream his humble offering of love.

He was content to crawl along by her side obeying instinctively her sweeping curves of gesture and high turns of mind." Venkataramani's similies, like those of the Sanskrit poets, do something more than illumine the particular theme; they reveal unsuspected affinities and confess the oneness of things. "In those spacious days the Salt and Abkari departments went together like sisters on a festive occasion." Kittu in *A Fractured Arm* viewed marriage "with a palpitating heart as a tiger would a torch-light in the deep glades of the forest". Of Jatadharan greeting his mother we read, "The boy stood erect with lowered eye-lids like a pilgrim in worship before the tribal shrine". In the more formal descriptions, too, there is often this touch of the unexpected which lights up the landscape vividly. The little lemur "was a small, misshappen, brooding creature, wrapped in reverie with bowed head and pensive looks, its tiny arms clasped together strangely over its slender neck. It seemed a little reservoir of melancholy distilled from the blue of the sky." Who can forget "the comely, graceful and lance-like figure, and clear-shining Brahmin face of Subramaniam", or his daughter as "she stood lovely, gazing at her father, like a pomegranate in its ripening hour", or wonder that, coming home unable to find a bridegroom, "Subramaniam's heart sank within him as if changed to lead at this sight of gold"?

The conceit in those last words is in keeping with the exotic bloom of Venkataramani's style. When an Indian writer writes of the Indian scene in English he is at work translating in two planes simultaneously—fitting idea to idea as well as word to word. Absolute fidelity to the English idiom, apart from the difficulties it offers to the foreigner, may often convey a strangely distorted view of the characters and the incidents thus transplanted from an alien *milieu*; whereas the alternative way, which Venkataramani adopts, of subordinating the strict claims of idiom to the search for exact analogues not stripped of overtones often justifies itself triumphantly by the results. Note the rich suggestiveness of the last two adjectives in this sentence: "Already the ants are at work trooping out in a line of winding grace carrying to their holes each a white particle of rice with the gay steps of easy plunder". And see how effective, if rather unusual is the description of the flying squad of ticket examiners confronting *byragis*: "They click their fingers before them as so much time and money wasted".

A certain lack of invention—the pial school is depicted, with a fine disregard for aptitudes, as the salvation of the most diverse types of men, and star-lore casts its mystifying shade over most of these tales,—a strange indifference to construction, a too easy resolution of difficulties by the interven-

tion of a convenient god-in-the-machine, a devotion to the cult of universal benevolence which does credit to the humanitarian rather than the artist in Venkataramani—these are flaws which may be more legitimately pointed out in these sketches, some of which are not short stories at all in any strict sense. But what does the name matter? Every reader is bound to have his own personal preferences,—I myself like *A Bride Waits* best of all, for its unfailing lightness of touch and lambent irony,—but the charm of these tales and their unforced humanity will make themselves felt by all who care for the play of a civilised mind.

Mylapore,
13th April 1937.

N. RAGHUNATHAN.

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I

Jatadharan, The Pial Teacher

(1)

JATADHARAN is my ideal pial teacher. By an irrelevant though remarkable coincidence which eventually meant nothing to his career, he was born in the stormy days of the Great Indian Mutiny which resulted in the transfer of India from the Company to the Crown.

Though Jatadharan was ushered into the world under such auspicious significance with the citizenship of an empire on which the sun never sets, his praying mother prayed not for prosperity and fame but for only a long lease of life to her darling. For, the eleventh in a maternal career of wonderful fertility, he was the only one left to her, in this country of terrific infant mortality. As for a child's bread in this sacred land of Bharatavarsha flowing with milk and honey, the Hindu conviction runs perennial in the maternal bosom: "Will He who

has planted the tree forget to send the showers in season?" Jatadharan's mother did not think of the morrow.

Jatadharan's family was the poorest of the twenty-five houses which made up the beautiful little village of Kakalani. These twenty-five families fell into three broad agnatic groups, one divided from the other sub-communally. Each claimed superiority and this claim furnished ample scope and material for idle discussion during moments of leisure.

Jatadharan traced his ancient pedigree to the celebrated Rishi Kausika, regenerated from Visvamitra by his own sterling efforts. It is one of the rare records of vertical ascension in caste, by self-effort and exceeding *tapas*. The Kausika strain is an excellent experiment in the eugenic line. For one thing, it is the most prolific of all clans, excelled if at all, only by the Bharadhwaja. The Kausika breed is noted for its fine keenness, abstract intelligence and dogged industry; sterile independence and unworldly ways; clear insight and calm cynicism; its success at home and failure abroad; and a total incapacity to balance the budget both in adversity and in prosperity in all stages of life. Jatadharan had been graciously blessed in full measure with all the qualities of this ancient

stock and the last gift proved to be the most presiding. But I shall not anticipate the story even to point out a eugenic triumph.

Jatadharan first saw the light of day according to Hindu custom, in his maternal grandfather's house. That grandfather was a renowned astrologer who could in his days of active practice reel off in sonorous majesty the whole of the Brihat Jataka. He was dreaded more for the vitality and terrible accuracy of his evil predictions than for the success of his lukewarm auspicious sayings. His face had a hollow, eddying profundity, and he was extremely forbidding to look at. His pock-marked face added to the incisive terrors of his clear-cut sentences of adversity. Like all nature-forces he was a power when roused and the whole village wooed him in vain for a smile and a benediction. But it was all past history. Now he was decaying at the farthest end of the pial, quite like the screen of plaited ripe-and-dry cocoanut fronds that was supposed to shade him from the sun and the rain. He was slowly preparing for his exit from this star-crossed world, which kindly exit was not a little being hastened by the profound neglect at home.

But the old man heard the infant cries of Jatadharan fill the air with a rhythmic roll that

seemed to partake more of the innocence and freedom of the songs of birds than the clearness and the cunning of the human voice. There arose a general shout of joy in the home. The maidservant informed the old man that it was a boy. The old man became young. A grandson's pealing voice is a powerful rejuvenator of old age. He took the almanac from behind the pillow and a bundle of cadjan leaves frayed with the use and abuse of years. He cast the horoscope with eyelids glued to eyes and hands trembling with joy. He moved to the right end of the pial near the threshold where he once presided quite like a king in the prime of his life, and began spelling out with the faint light of the stars the future of his grandson, with all the vigour and vision of youth.

He broke out into an interpretative soliloquy: "The constellation is *Sravana*, my grandfather's who built up this fame for my family; *Sravana* is the best of the twenty-seven constellations, and it means massive learning in all the arts and sciences. This newborn babe will be like him; a great pundit and a polyglot, a master of four languages and a minister of kings."

He paused for a moment eagerly scanning the chart and then continued with a decided

nod: "The boy is sure to become the finest flower of Kakalani; Sani and Budha in happy conjunction in trine to the Lagna!"

But soon a dark cloud swept over his aged face. "But, alas, the lords of six and eight afflict the clear Rajayoga, and my boy though fit to become a High Court Judge or a Collector will be content to be a poor pious pial teacher. The Moon shines sadly and alone in Cancer and receives no benefic aspect."

The aged man was getting more and more absorbed in the chart so that he almost forgot that it was his grandson's, and continued to decipher with abstract joy and agony the mysterious code of the planets to which he had devoted with sovereign love a lifetime of unwearied labour.

"Thank God, the lord of eight is so strong that long life at least is assured to the boy. But, alas, the lord of two is cut and scarred all over with deep and malefic lines of aspect. There will be a violent form of small-pox in the house, and a death soon after the birth, perhaps all in a month, and perhaps the grandfather, me—"

An anguished voice came from within, of one who heard it all from the other side of the wall. It was his daughter who prayed for the silencing of the old man's ominous voice in this

hour of joy and triumph. Her maternal bosom revolted at her own father's unnatural love for this twilight science of the stars.

Hardly had the words been uttered when the almanac was torn off the aged hands by a middle-aged widow whose clear voice and firm steps had made her a power in the village in all the affairs of birth, death, and marriage. The prophet was peremptorily asked to shut up his prating mouth, and was soon restored to the other end of the pial to keep communion as usual with dilapidated walls and tattered screens.

But infant Jatadharan continued to cry lustily all the ten days filling the old man's ears with joy, who still kept on 'working' at the grandson's horoscope but only murmured his predictions to himself, and to the shining stars, and to the free wind that blew on him in mocking sport.

Jatadharan's proud mother eagerly awaited *punyahavachan* on the eleventh day when the confinement ceases and the mother is free to bask in the full glory of her darling.

In the house all was bustle with work for the happy day even from before the break of dawn. And the first faint streaks were slowly flooding the end of the pial where lay the aged astrologer

weary of a long life's labour in occult things and the exciting work of reading his new-born grandson's chart at the age of eighty-five.

The usual cry of *'Sivoham! Sivoham!'* which had greeted the morning air, crisp and solemn, for at least half a century was not heard. Not even the tattered cocoanut leaves of his screen seemed to move before the lazy wind of early morn. The servantmaid, nearly as aged as he, carried in the news that the old man looked like dead. Yes, it was true. Soon there was a little wailing in the house, as convention required this official mode of conveying such news to the whole of the village.

But Jatadharan's mother heaved a sigh of relief. For she had the rooted conviction that the inveterate star-gazer was responsible for the continued ill-luck of the family and her own for over two generations because of his impious scrutiny of divine secrets. She hugged her screaming little child to her bosom and heaved a sigh of relief.

But the first part of the prophecy had come true strangely enough, and a secret tremor quaked the heart of Jatadharan's mother.

Jatadharan appeared to be a handsome little babe. His forehead was broad and smooth, crowned with curling black hair. His infant

eyes, wandering and innocent, already glowed with the strange purity and fire of a bright intelligence. The nose was tender and aspiring but the receding chin spoke of a retiring disposition and a taste for meditation. His complexion glowed like copper, and it divided the verdict of the house. His aunt declared that copper would slowly change to black. But his mother's sister countered and declared that the infant colour of copper always ripened with years into a golden yellow.

But this minor prohecy could not be verified. For it was swallowed up by the major. There was an outbreak of small-pox in the house; the crowded ceremonies of birth and death brought in the contagion, and babe Jatadharan was affected so severely that it ruined his face and complexion for ever, and left deep pit marks all over, disfiguring him for ever.

So the second part of the prediction also came true. The rest indeed of his grandfather's dying declaration must simply follow. Have the stars twinkling in the cosmic void decreed for Jatadharan only a princely place on his own pial? Everyone wondered again at the terrible gift of the old man for evil predictions, and that his last should so deeply cut himself and his own grandson.

But Time, the great healer, sweetened the memory of all with the day's never-ending daily changes. Even his own mother soon forgot the great old astrologer and his malefic powers. His dying words of prohecy were never communicated to 'child' Jatadharan.

(2)

Jatadharan grew into a very promising lad. He was keen and active, and carried an enquiring and observant mind into all the affairs of life. He showed great proficiency in Mathematics, and an early and decided taste for English and Astronomy. His school and college career at Kumbakonam was indeed brilliant. He was one of the early boys who had gone in definitely for English education in the Tanjore district. Everyone prophesied for him a distinguished career under the British Raj. For he was the 'pet' of Porter and Gopal Rao. And they taught him more than his textbooks. Their magnetic personality and devotion to their work taught him a higher lesson in life. He imbued with his studies and from his great teachers so fond of him a divine passion for the work of a teacher.

His pock-marked face haunted Jatadharan

in a strange way all through life. He knew not why. It set his whole being in a reverie as to what passers-by and crude fellow-pupils might think and say. He loved flowing water with all the love of a fish for water. But his bathing hours in the Cauvery gave him the most exquisite pain. What would the fair, bathing, sporting, and gossiping groups in the river, young and beautiful, and so near him, say and think of him?

The goddess of small-pox who had cradled him at birth for twenty-one days gave him the most beautiful cradle-gift, an introspective mind. He dreamed many painful and ugly dreams in the finest hours of youth. It made him shy for ever. He felt he was not meant for the sweet primrose paths of life, hung with honeycombs at every step in the way. He was not meant for the high offices of the world. The gaiety of life was not for him. Deep reveries, like whirlpools in the river sucking flowers in, sucked his self deep to the bottomlands of the Spirit.

Jatadharan had just finished his final year university examination in the B.A. The whole college expected for him a triple first class, and he himself felt that he had done full justice. To the hearty chorus of good wishes both from

friends and professors he bade farewell to Kumbakonam, and returned with real delight to his native village of Kakalani to spend a proud month of real rest with his mother, after fifteen years of hard study.

(3)

The little village of Kakalani had an enviable reputation in the matter of population. The Bharadhwajas and the Kausikas predominated, and vied with each other in a matter which is after all the most capital point of human endeavour and existence. They yearly added, true to the prolific instinct of the stock, with unceasing freshness and variety, to the gay group of little children that thronged the street.

Jatadharan for the first time gave himself the privilege of arriving at his own village in a bandy drawn by bullocks. It is an event in any Indian village and at Kakalani it was unique. All the houses were emptied of their children at the rumbling of wheels and the tinkling of bells. A streaming troop of young boys and girls gave him a royal welcome to his own place. The sight deeply touched him. The children were wasting their precious youth in the poorest and the rawest of rustic games. He reached home in the

midst of a carnival of shouts of joy from children who escorted him merrily to the very threshold of his house. His own pial was as clean and beautiful as ever; cool, smooth, and shining as marble, polished with care by the hands of his own mother every Friday.

This hilarious welcome and the sight of trooping children going to waste put him in a reverie the whole day. A branch of the Cauvery, the Veerasholan, irrigates and flows by his little village. He repaired thither for his evening walk and prayers. He did his *sandhya* with redoubled piety, chanting the *gayatri* a thousand and eight times. He sat under a peepul tree.

The crescent moon with hushed majesty shone in the west, peeping through the camel-neck of a cloud. The Veerasholan lisped, smiled, and eddied and moved on to the sea. Jatadharan rose out of a deep reverie. An illumination, a divine message came to him. God had whispered into his ears the real mission of his life. Next morning he summoned all the children to his house and the pial hummed like a beehive. It became a place of pilgrimage to the young for nearly fifty years. And Jatadharan became my ideal pial schoolmaster.

A month after the foundation of the pial

school came a telegram from Mr. Porter announcing the splendid success of Jatadharan in the B.A., a triple first class and the Presidency First in English and Mathematics, with the offer of a nice job in the Government Secretariat at Madras. The telegram lay idle on the pial, and fluttered in the corner like a dry leaf in the wind.

(4)

Jatadharan laboured for fifty years as a pial schoolmaster but continued his interest in higher studies. His favourite subject was Astronomy and he would give anything for the latest book on the subject.

Fifty years of service is double the period for pensions under the Indian Civil Service Regulations. But Jatadharan was content to take only the voluntary gifts of the parents and lived a life of plain-living and high-thinking. In his fifty years of work he produced many collectors, clerks, vakils, and judges. But not one he moulded became a teacher, much less a pial teacher.

"Why?" I asked him with a real sadness when I met him last, now several years ago.

A shade of sorrow crept on his face and his

eyes moistened a little. "That has also been my greatest grief in life. My work does end with me. That is my fate and the sweet will of the stars. The lords of my second, ninth, and tenth houses have joined lots with six, eight, and eleven!"

He cleared his throat a little, and the timbre of his voice changed to a solemn note which seemed to come from the very depths of his being. "My pock-marked face, my unmarried life, and my honest hard labour which has not produced another like me from among my own pupils all alike trace their higher cause to the great cosmic twist of the stars at the hour of my birth. My grandfather, it appears, knew it all. Astronomy, the pet of my college days, pales before this grand science of the stars: the Science of Sciences, whose rhythmic voice of song all cannot hear and joy. It is the first aid to *atmagnanam,* self-realisation. The twinkling glow of the stars throw a flood of light on the narrow spiral flights of the ever-ascending soul. I have solemnly and dutifully worked out my tendencies helped by this faint, guiding light of the stars. I have rendered my Karmic burden into action at the very base of social life, as a pial teacher. That gives me a true peace, an inward joy, a sense of *shanti* that nothing else could give me."

A teardrop stood on his eyes that glistened with a strange purity and fire.

I did not know till then that Jatadharan the great grammarian, polyglot, and astronomer and my ideal pial teacher was also a great astrologer and *advaitin*. I prostrated myself before him and prayed for his blessings.

(5)

Jatadharan died only a few months ago, a *sanyasi*, a fitting end to a life of true and selfless labour. No newspapers chronicled his death. No tears followed him to the grave. But the sun shone in a cloudless sky, and the evening breeze gently stirred the river and chased the birds that flew from tree to tree.

His *samadhi* rests on a fine eminence of sand-dunes on the banks of the lower Cauvery, at an arching and gracious bend of the river. The sacred and majestic *arasam* tree on the banks of the Cauvery at this beautiful spot throws a solemn shade of green and sacredness all over. The murmur of the trembling leaves of the *arasam* tree blends almost into a human voice chanting the rhythmic glory of Jatadharan's life.

II

Jatadharan's Marriage

(1)

It was very early dawn and an infinite quiet ruled over land and sky. Venus the bright morning star had just risen above the paddy fields and the low tiled roofs of the village of Kakalani, throwing an arc of mellow light on the horizon. And the suffused glow of the morning twilight was slowly spreading like celestial milk spilt in the sky.

Only one soul had a sleepless night. Venus saw Seshi awake and at work, polishing the pial and the mudfloor of her house with a mixture of cow-dung. The flattened floor gleamed like marble, smooth and shining, and soon it was embellished with rice-flour in many patterns of intricate artistry. The twilight broadened into daylight. Already the ants were at work trooping out in a line of winding grace carrying to their holes each a white particle of rice-flour with the gay steps of easy plunder.

But Seshi had finished her work long before the ants began theirs. She was quiet, richly lost in expectation. The break of dawn that day seemed to her a truly glorious hour.

For she was expecting her boy, Jatadharan, in half an hour, for the Christmas vacation.

But Seshi's neighbour, Visalakshi, was heavily rolling in her bed coughing deep discontent. Her sound sleep was disturbed by the rumbling noise of low rubbing work nearby. Like all lazy, under-worked but over-fed ladies, Visalakshi's soundest hour of sleep was early dawn.

Visalakshi rose petulantly and asked her neighbour in a tone of suppressed ire, "What, Seshi, has the devil possessed you, to work at midnight like a ghost?" Her hissing voice conveyed bleaching scorn. She further mocked at her, and asked, "Is there any auspicious function to-day at your house?"

Visalakshi was the wife of a "performing," peripatetic *purohit*, who had to go abroad on his roaming, priestly work twenty-five days out of thirty to every nook and corner of the neighbourhood ten miles around. But he was a cheerful pleasant young man well-versed both in the *sastras* and in the ways of the world, with a real turn of mind to listen to and profit by curtain lectures. He knew well how to lay thick, pure, homespun flattery on the idle rich, and knew as well that his imperious partner liked less his scholarship or the sonorous recitation of the

mantras than the money which they brought though in little driblets.

Visalakshi came of a decent middle class stock, but by some fluke of fortune which so widely prevails over marital affairs she was wedded to a man who was expected to become a sanskrit pundit but who really became only a priest. But he had proved a success in this precarious profession, and in token of it he had recently purchased an acre of first class *nanja*. So Visalakshi used the leisure she had in abundance to cultivate the fine art of speaking which by over-refinement she always carried to the pure skating heights and perilous slopes of satire.

Poor Seshi put up as best as she could with the lofty airs of her neighbour and in an occasional mood of reminiscence pondered over her own "might-have-beens." For, her husband, though poor, had been something of a power in the village. He was a rowdy and a fine cattle-broker and a versatile hand at many things. But he was cut off at the prime of life by a cruel cobra-bite: he, who had the most venomous tongue and the most daring hands, he who could set people by the ear by a wink and a smile, and earn a penny by it to relieve the poverty at home. Seshi was thus thrown upon

her own resources. But still she was proud of her poverty and gift for hard work. For, her darling, Jatadharan, was in the final year B.A. class. At the time of his father's death Jatadharan had been but seven years old. He was a model of gentle kindness even as a little boy, a case of extreme reaction to the father, reflecting the mother's longings.

To Visalakshi's biting question Seshi returned no immediate answer but kept on polishing the floor and completing the intricate embroideries of the *kolam*. She knew well Visalee's evil tongue that stung everything like a scorpion in fright. So she kept herself calm with collected joy and one-pointed devotion to her darling, Jatadharan, now in the final year B.A., at Kumbakonam.

But Visalakshi curled her tongue with more of scathing sarcasm and asked, "Well, Seshi, your pial looks as if it were Jatadharan's wedding to-day!"

"Well, I wish it were, Visalee. And idle jokes sometimes come true. What do you care for the worried lot of poor people like me? I envy your leisured and rich life, and your lord is away twenty-five days out of thirty. But we poor folk—"

"You poor folk! Wherefrom this mock

modesty? There isn't another boy at Kakalani who is anywhere near the B.A. class. You are rightly proud of your boy; and you get a horoscope a week for his marriage from Vakils and Collectors, Magistrates and Mirasdars—and you merrily fix a price on your boy that goes rising ten per cent a week."

"Visalee, don't state the case so badly against us. True, my boy gets a horoscope from a decent place now and then. He is hard-working at college and I'm proud he is the first boy in the class, and the pet of his teachers."

"But how do you manage his boarding and fees, Seshi?—and town life must be a very costly affair."

"Why, by my own hard work day and night. The two buffaloes and the cow support me and my boy, the pies gathered every day from the sale of ghee and milk and curd are slowly piled till they change to rupees which are in turn gathered more slowly till they reach the figure of ten for being sent by money order. And you know Jatadharan holds a scholarship that pays his college fees. But, Visalee, all this hard labour of fifteen years for me at the cattleshed and the dairy, and for my boy at the desk and at borrowed lamps will be over in three months."

Seshi's face was radiant with a joy which only a mother knows at the success of her son.

"Yes, Seshi, your boy is a rare one among many—so gentle, quiet, and charming. But for his pock-marked face he should have been married well long ago."

There was for a moment an angry flush in Seshi's face at the cheeky words of her neighbour but her prudent soul soon melted into kindly words. "Yes, you are partly right. But I thank the Goddess Mariamman that she spared the life of my boy. Though she spoilt his face, she spared his eyes and life. Visalee, this reminds me of the wonderful prediction of my father on the very day of Jatadharan's birth that the Goddess Mariamman would sport in the house for twenty-one days. Our spirited Ammu Kutti heard with anger these cruel words of prophecy and tore from his aged and trembling hands the bundle of cadjan leaves from which he was spelling out these dire words of prophecy."

"What more did he say, Seshi? He was indeed a great astrologer. When did he fix the auspicious year of marriage of your boy?"

"All that I didn't hear in the crowded hour and in the tumult of my own heart. He was prating to himself the whole week. I was lost

in the joy of my darling. It's a pity, Visalee, that you don't know as yet the deep, trembling joy of what it is to become a mother—it is just a drop of nectar from Heaven that sweetens an ocean of world's tears. But may the Lord of the Seven Hills at Tirupati bless you soon with a child."

Seshi cleverly touched, not without design, the most tender chord in Visalee's heart, and it vibrated from the depths of her being to the strange music of an unknown measure of joy, the joy of a child from one's own loins. This eternal void made her lonely hours bitter and painful while her *purohit* husband trudged weary hours in sunshine and sand and slept on strange pials in far away villages just to bless alien couples and invoke the grace of God for the perpetuation of their families, all in return for an indifferent bit of silver or perishable things in kind.

That was why Visalakshi, the broad-eyed, rolled her sharp tongue and beautiful eyes in anger when her husband came late at night, the five days out of thirty, after weary hours of wandering, seeking in vain quiet and rest in his own home. The Eternal Feminine rages at the sight of married love that has not yet blessed the womb. And Seshi's calm and sweet words

of invocation came like ambrosia to her bleeding heart.

"My grateful thanks, Seshi, for your blessing lips," exclaimed Visalakshi with beaming eyes. "But when is Jatadharan's marriage? Will you care to marry my sister to him? I'm in earnest—and Jaya is a nice and lovely girl, you know."

At the bottom of her heart Visalakshi loved Jatadharan as much as she hated Seshi.

"Yes, if that be the pleasure of the stars."

"That pleasure is but man-made, you know, Seshi. I'll give you two thousand rupees. That would see Jatadharan safely through life and the B.A. And Jaya is coming here this morning."

Visalee herself had loved Jatadharan with a pure affection through all her wedded life these seven years ever since she came to Kakalani. The joy that could never be hers she was eager that her sister at least might have.

"Is Jaya coming here now? Delightful indeed! Jatadharan too will be here in half an hour."

"Jatadharan too coming here to-day! That's the greatest luck, and it shows the smile of approval even of the stars," cried Visalakshi in glad surprise.

"The train reaches Manganallur at six and my boy will soon come home speeding over fields and by-ways in half an hour. That's why I have swept and cleaned the house, and I've got the *iddly* and the coffee ready for my boy."

"The whole affair looks so auspicious and ready, Seshi. What I said in fun a few minutes ago of the pial being got ready for your boy's marriage would now seem to come true. Seshi, settle the alliance even to-day, there's surely the approval of the gods in this, and I'll see the marriage through next month. Jaya and Jatadharan will make a splendid couple in life, and we'll lead the happiest life as neighbours. Seshi, sometimes there's a streak of divine prophecy even in jokes cracked at random."

"Well, Visalee, if that be God's will nothing would please me better." Seshi conveyed her assent scarcely concealing her joy. For two thousand rupees was quite a fortune to her darling. Jatadharan's future was no more uncertain, and Jaya's parents came of a superior stock, and her father was the leading man of his village.

Both Seshi and Visalakshi dropped the conversation so that their thoughts might take their own inner flights. But both kept on craning their necks and looking out, Seshi for her dear

boy and Visalakshi for the proud and shy lad of nineteen who for all his pock-marked face carried the light of purity and grace, and the shine of intelligence in his face, and the sweetness of angels in his voice. His eyes were pools of calm in which all the whirling eddies of Visalee's heart seemed to lose for a moment their torments.

(2)

Jatadharan, a lovely puritan lad by nature, raised to austere levels by adversity, had an affectionate corner for two things in this world, the stars in the sky and his own mother at home. On both he gazed with silent eyes of wonder, mystery, and reverence and a tenderness that was known only to his Maker. And this devotion reached the heights of expression at the meeting-time when the boy returned to his village for the vacation thrice a year.

True to her expectation Jatadharan arrived at seven with traces of mud and mire at the ankle and the feet which showed how eagerly he had speeded home. The mother sobbed for joy at the ever-fresh sight of her son. The boy stood erect with lowered eye-lids like a pilgrim in worship before the tribal shrine. It was a

sacred moment between mother and child. But Visalakshi from her own pial stole a look of joy with prospective glances of plunder and annexation.

Jatadharan this time as an extra act of filial love had brought with him a little basket containing a few oranges, pomegranates, and that strange English fruit called the apple, of which his mother had heard.

"Mother, this is the famous fruit called the apple, mother. It's not a very sweet thing like our own mangoes but taste it, mother, it is very healthy."

Seshi accepted the basket of homage very proudly and said, "Jatadhara, how I wish your father and grandfather were alive and here today, alas, if only to see for a moment how you have grown into a handsome lad,—an honour to our house and a pride to our village."

"Handsome lad—did you say, mother? Really so? I rather thought with my fellows at college who cracked no end of jokes at me....." Jatadharan with a look of introspection unconsciously passed his palm over his rough face.

The mother, wrapped in love, tenderly gazed at the deep pit marks in which little beads of perspiration had already gathered like drops of pearl. The pits no doubt disfigured a face

of fine outline. But therein shone true intelligence and the subdued spiritual lustre of a pure soul. But the eyes glowed with a rare cosmic melancholy like fires languishing in a far too narrow grate for lack of God's air.

"Mother, when had I this small-pox, mother? No vaccination in your days?"

"Dear child, the Goddess Mariamman played in our house for twenty-one days from the eleventh day of your birth. But for the austere vows I had taken for your dear sake she might have snatched away even your eyes."

Jatadharan shuddered.

"There is an ancient curse, Jatadhara, that has befallen our house. Your forefathers were great astrologers and they never predicted anything but evil. This has provoked the ire of Mariamman. I pleased her by my vows, and she gave me back your life which we all at one time thought was lost. What of the marks, dear child, you are indeed the most beautiful and the brightest lad in the village."

"In your eyes truly, mother. But was there no vaccination in those days?"

"Child, what could vaccination do against the ire of Mariamman?"

Jatadharan kept silent for a minute and asked, "Mother, you say that your father was

a great astrologer. What did he predict for me?"

"Yes, he said that you would be a great scholar in the foreign tongue and a good man; a minister under kings or a Collector." Seshi hesitated for a moment and then added, "That you would marry a rich and beautiful heiress at the age of nineteen and luck would begin for you from that day."

Jatadharan's heart pulsed for joy. For he was in love with Mangalam, a gentle girl of his choice at Kumbakonam. "Marry a rich and beautiful heiress, never, mother, impossible. And become a Collector—even more impossible. I would rather become a pial-teacher here, mother. Look at our village: there are thirty girls and twenty boys—all roam at large like calves and know neither to read nor to write. This pial, mother, looks so beautiful, fresh, and clean that I would gladly set up a pial school here and make it truly more beautiful."

"Dear Jatadhara, you are filling your mind with strange and ruinous ideas. You are meant for the biggest things. And I know as your mother, unlettered though I may be, that you don't know your own powers or destiny. Already princely horoscopes are coming in shoals for your hand. Why, but half an hour

ago, Visalee, our proud neighbour, offered to give her sister, Jaya, in marriage to you with two thousand rupees—and that is no joke, Jatadhara, Jaya is a beautiful girl and comes of a fine aristocratic stock, normally far beyond our reach."

Jatadharan laughed tenderly and there was a tragic note struggling with the laughter. "Mother, I've but two months more for the examination and this is hardly the proper time to think of marriage for me."

It sounded reasonable to Seshi.

"Well, then, let it be after the examination. I've fixed Jaya for you, and the next time you are here, this pial shall ring with the marital music of the *Nayanam*. Not till then will my heart throb with peace and joy. I'm sure you, Jatadhara, won't make me break my word."

Jatadharan went into a dream and the tense voice of his mother sounded as if from another land.

(3)

The Government College at Kumbakonam is beautifully situated on the banks of the Cauvery in a spacious mango grove. It is an ideal

spot for the training of the young and growing mind if only the eyes are not, for the sake of text-books, screened off the beauties of Nature all around, the shady grove, the flowing river, and the ever-smiling paddy fields.

Jatadharan was an observant boy. He loved tenderly, next to his mother, the sacred Cauvery and the starlit sky. He played no games that encouraged many minor industries, but in the evening took a stroll on the banks of the Cauvery watching the twig and the flower that struggled with every turn and eddy of the current. That seemed to Jatadharan to reflect only the tangled life on the banks, and his own. He usually did his evening *sandhya* in the river and the *japam* on the granite flight of steps. It filled him with peace and joy.

The B.A. examination was just over. It was an evening of rare calm. Thought seemed to sit on the brow of Nature. Even the rolling eddies of the river seemed to pause for a while to whisper a word of love to the flower that came floating along before they sucked it in. Jatadharan's mind roamed pensively all over from land to sky, from river to fields, and his eyes mirrored this wandering state of the mind. Jatadharan's life-long friend and admirer,

Kittu, was there with him as usual like his shadow. He was his chief solace.

It was the farewell evening to the sacred river and the only friend. Their college days together were over. The time for the parting of the ways had come. They knew that life would see them flowing apart, leaving behind but the old memories of some common days of sport in the valleys higher up the hills.

Kittu noticing the deep gloom in Jatadharan's face asked in a gentle voice of worship, "Jatadhara, pardon me, it's more than farewell sadness that clouds your face. Some secret grief is gnawing at your heart. Is it still round Mangalam that your mind is wheeling in worship? She can never be yours. She is another man's by to-morrow morning. The river that has reached the sea is never more fresh water till another birth. Even as I passed that way this evening the morrow's festive gaiety was already in the air in Mangalam's house. Think no more of Mangalam, forget her. There's as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it."

"That's the only girl, Kittu, that ever drew me like a magnet, and the only girl I ever loved. Alas, it adds acid to my grief that she is to be thrown on that rake and scoundrel, Mani. You don't know the charm, Kittu, of that girl. You

think I over-rate her. You should have been her tutor as I was for six months to know the gentle curves and depths of her mind and the infinite graces of her soul. She is rare among girls of her age. The Feminine has reached the peak of perfection in her, the sweet and noble mingling of the East and the West. But how could I, a poor ugly thing, deserve her?"

Jatadharan passed hastily his palm across his face and continued, "Mangalam, this lotus-bud has not yet seen the rays of the morning sun of life, and, alas, it never will. She will be frosted in the bud. Mani's touch, you know, will wither the fairest flower. Kittu, what is God for up in the starlit sky if not to mismate men and things in this world?"

"Why not, Jatadhara, stay a day longer and attend Mangalam's marriage? We have an invitation from both. Why don't you take a last look at her ere you bid Kumbakonam farewell for ever?"

"Ah, Kittu, that's too much for the human flesh. I can't bear the pain. You have never been in love, fortunately you were married while quite young. I can't bear it. I'm leaving to-night for Kakalani. There my aged mother waits for me counting the hours."

"Dear Jatadhara, I'm sure you will take a

triple first class in the B.A. I wish you as a true friend as glorious a career in life as you have had at college. Farewell for the present till we meet again." Kittu spoke with a lump in his throat and tears in his eyes.

"Dear Kittu, life has shrunk to an oyster's narrow length for me, and I'd gladly spend the rest of my life on the pial of my own village house, all alone living on the doting love of my mother. No such glorious life as you wish or predict for me. The ambition and the conflict of years have calmed down. I'll write to you, Kittu. Words are painful to me to-day. Pray, remember me; your friendship had been the chief solace to me till now, next only to my mother's love and sacrifice. Yes, farewell for the present!"

Kittu and Jatadharan were locked in a hearty half-embrace. And the rolling river washed ashore at their feet a tiny red flower that blossoms only at evening time.

(4)

The next morning at eight Jatadharan arrived at Kakalani. This time he gave himself the luxury of a drive in a bandy drawn by two bullocks. The tinkling bells travelled ahead

of him. The moment he had turned the corner and faced the full length of the street, the twenty boys and the thirty girls of Kakalani came trooping to give him and his bandy a hilarious welcome. They shouted for joy and escorted Jatadharan to his house.

The pial was as clean and fresh as ever. The sight of these young boys and girls going to waste deeply sank into him, touching a new chord of love for the enrichment of the young. A deep reverie already sat on his eye-brows, and wrinkles of thought furrowed his broad and tender forehead. A new message seemed to descend on him from above, and a new mission of work to wait for him ready on his arrival.

Seshi was standing at the threshold feasting her eyes on her son. And Visalakshi stole as usual eyefuls of pleasure, and Jaya stood by her, shy and meek, trembling at the dawn of a new life for her. The whole village was full of nothing but talk of Jatadharan's marriage to Jaya. Even the date had been fixed. And Jatadharan's mother, Seshi, carried about her a new-born sense of pride and pleasure, a proper reward for a life-time of utter love and sacrifice in the noblest cause.

(5)

"Mother, mother, marriage for me! Alas, in your doting love for me, you don't know your own feminine world. Are you sure, mother, there is a single girl in our Tamil land who would be content and happy to spend her life with me, as I choose? Impossible."

"Dear Jatadhara, gentle boy, wherefrom this strange twist of mind in you? Yes, there are hundreds of girls in our Tamil land who would be proud to be my daughter-in-law, and your wife. The whole thing has been settled and the date has been fixed. Jaya is ready, and both the sisters are keen on you"?

"They won't be keen, mother, if they come to know my mind, that I've renounced the game of power and pelf, and am content to be the pial teacher of Kakalani. Ask Visalee now if her sister would care to wed a pial teacher."

"Jatadhara, there is a strange fever in your voice, I don't understand your words. If you say 'no' it would break my heart and I should die in a week."

"Ah, dear mother, you don't know how much I love you! You have not understood your own boy—and the mist of tears in which the stars have shrouded him in the very hour of

birth. I'm meant to wheel my course in life like the lonely stars rounding theirs in lonely splendour amidst the trackless glory of the sky."

Seshi stood bewildered.

"Don't think me unkind and not loyal to your words, mother. I can never repay all your love and sacrifice for me. But there is a higher Voice from within and above which tells me that I am meant for things different from what you mean for me, mother. Marriage for me, mother, would but break two souls—an earthen pot that floats down the river of life best reaches the sea unblest by the touch of another."

Jatadharan sobbed, seeing his sobbing mother.

(6)

On the very auspicious day fixed for Jatadharan's marriage, the pial school at Kakalani was opened by Jatadharan on his own pial, ever fresh and clean, with the festive rejoicing of the whole village which was no less intense or full. And this greater marriage of the mind of the teacher with the soul of the taught lasted for two generations carrying bliss and knowledge to hundreds of boys and girls round about

Kakalani. And Jatadharan became my ideal pial-teacher, and his name is now a household word in the jealous land of the Tamils.

III

In Quest of Power

(1)

It was a hamlet on the banks of the Cauvery. The time was midsummer. The day was hot. The wind was from the west, blowing sand and dust all over. The river was dry. Life was empty everywhere. It was vacation time for me. I was idling away in perfect discontent. I was young bursting for expression like a monsoon cloud.

I pined for work and great deeds in vacation time even as I always pined for rest and contentment in the working months of the year. The postman was the only link between idle me and the busy world. He came thrice a week. He seemed to me the friendliest creature on earth. I had sent a couple of months ago a perfect *ms.* across the blue waters to a land where they pay a shilling a word. I gleefully affixed the six-anna stamp in stealth in the darkest corner of my room to evade the vigilance of my mother. For, she always protested against these paper ventures as money wasted, which in

homely terms meant so much of milk, curd and ghee—real nourishment lost to the family. But a strange ambition poisoned my blood—lead poison, the love of fame that comes of the printed word.

Week by week, I watched and waited, eager at the sight of the ill-clad messenger of news, local for many but international for me. Still in vain. But no news was good news—most certainly in the case of manuscripts. At least there was hope so long as the sickening, long, long cover, with something due for unpaid or underpaid postage, did not catch my quick glancing eye only to pass into my perspiring hands, like an unmarried daughter on her mother's hands.

Still waiting, I received one day, an invitation from a distant, inland cousin, informing me of the arrival of a great Sadhu as his guest, who could foretell the future. Nothing moves a literary aspirant so much as a chance of knowing his future. I accepted the invitation and hurried over country tracks by forced marches by night.

The Sadhu was indeed a real devotee of God, but a very indifferent diviner. He stuck to foretelling as piety does not pay in the busy round of modern life. His prediction of a fine

future for me was a matter of courtesy promoted by the generous fee and my intelligent appreciation of his difficulties in an age of increasing sceptism. His praise made me the focus of attraction for the day. I stood high in my cousin's esteem.

(2)

Rather a late dinner was just over to which over a hundred guests, invited and uninvited, had responded. It was mostly a miscellaneous crowd of country people attracted by the prospect of free food for a day. The orthodox diners streched themselves out on the pial of the house engaged in post-prandial conversation, leisurely chewing the *pan* and aspersing the facile promises and predictions of the astrologer and the pungent quality of the free food.

Just then, a Vedan by caste, one of the nomadic tribes of India, who live by hunting small game and digging up medicinal roots and herbs and by gathering honey for others, came on the scene attracted by the plentiful crumbs and refuse of the feast. He clamoured for food "for one mouth," weary and hungry. All were indifferent, but I alone cast on him a glance of pity which the trained eyes of the

born beggar caught with instant hope. My shining spectacles seemed to him the emblem of both compassion and riches. How true was the first part of his guess ! He interrupted my musings with a straight appeal, as if he read my thoughts in a crystal.

"O Swami, I'll help you in the high mission of your life. Your shining face and calm eyes tell me of a great future for you though you are now in distress. I'll make you the master of a great secret. I'll give you as your constant companion and friend, a favourite prince of the underworld, sturdy and loyal, to obey your behests at a moment's notice, and satisfy your needs and pleasures even from the ends of the earth. The *jin* will fetch you a damsel fairer than a water-nymph or an Ariel, and build you a palace nobler than ducal mansions, quicker than the wink of an eye."

The Vedan danced for joy as if his were to be the happy fulfilment of these age-long ambitions and pleasures of man.

I was happy beyond measure at this prospect. I thought I could then at least charm the editors and make them read my mss. It chimed in with the rosy predictions of the *Sadhu* in the forenoon and seemed the beginning of its fulfilment. Even if I did not fully believe the ill-

clad but brawny Vedan, I was curious and in the mood to learn. I rated always these poor wandering sons of India as the custodians of some precious secrets of Nature not yet touched by Science.

(3)

"What is your name, Veda?"

"People call me, Irulesan, the Lord of Darkness." He smiled at himself and said, "I am indeed the Lord of Darkness—he who can deliver the prince of the underworld for the service of man."

Irulesan cleared his throat and continued in a merrier tone, "It is not a herbal recipe, nor a talisman to ward off evil but a real live servant, a true spirit, the lord of the underworld, who will build a palace of pleasure for you even in imperial Delhi, procure for you the choicest of things, and even bend the knees of kings before you. I have in this little basket the creature which enslaves this spirit, the chief actor in the drama of conquest who charms to eternal bondage the *jin* of the underworld."

I rejoiced at the prospect of a materialising vision and offered him money to appease his hunger though at the same time, with a fail-

ing heart. I felt my purse—then at its lowest after the morning bequests.

Irulesan repeated himself as if to enhance the magic of his words. "It is not a paper recipe. It is not a dead talisman to ward off evil. It is not a mere *mantram* which you must recite with failing tongue and sore throat, weary eyes and aching limbs, a crore of times before you feel its power. It is a true and live thing. Give me five rupees, I'll make you the master of the world."

A little introspection and the feeling that my purse did not contain even one-fifth of the contract price for the mastery of the world made me reflect for a moment. I did not want to be duped.

"Well, Irulesa," I inquired mildly. "Why do you want to part with such a precious thing for such a trifle? Why don't you yourself—"

"Alas, sir," rejoined Irulesan shrewdly catching the drift of my query. "A Vedan by caste—not in this birth. Many more I need before I can hope to use my own treasure. The secret is within me only like a pearl in the oyster! My only duty is to deliver it up at the appointed hour. Some one else more evolved at birth should use it for the commonweal. It is not for me!"

"But, Irulesa, how am I to believe you? These people will laugh at me." I was eager to drift into a negative and probing mood, for my purse carried a little less than what I needed even to take me back home and allowed me no margin for any adventure.

Irulesan spoke no more but simply acted. He took out of his little bamboo basket a strange, little creature, eighteen inches high, a tiny little ape—an infant lemur. It was a small, misshapen, brooding creature, wrapped in reverie with bowed head and pensive looks, its tiny arms clasped together strangely over its slender neck. It seemed a little reservoir of melancholy distilled from the blue of the sky. It sat still with evershut eyes, seemingly brooding in penance over the darkest problems in all the three worlds.

I was transfixed in wonderment. Strange feelings quickly came over me when I looked on this little, live statue of misery. An old Sastri who was dozing at the farther end of the pial, belching out in sympathetic recollection of his recent dinner not yet well digested, cried out in a faint and sleepy voice, "It is all humbug, the old, old story."

"Pray, Sir," he turned on his belly to me and said, "Be warned. It is a fraud, very old

to us, but new to you. You may well distribute with merit that money among these poor Brahmin worthies and receive their surer blessings in return."

(4)

The little ape-like creature was then sitting on the palm of the hunter and looked like a little monkey-child taken out of the womb. It opened not its eyes nor raised its head. But a gently pulsing life heaved its frail body up and down. The Vedan stroked it lightly on its head and continued in a changed and solemn voice.

"This little creature is a rare thing, the rarest in all the three worlds, rarer than the civet-cat. It is known as 'Thevangu' and is neither man nor beast. It is the transmigrated soul of some ancient Rishi who, in search of perfection, has taken this little misshapen body to do penance in these low jungles of the Eastern Ghats. Hence its spiritual power is immense and its sovereignty over the three worlds. Its powers are for those who know them. Alas! I can only point out the way but never can tread it myself. I am coming straight from the western hills. I am hungry beyond words. It is three days since I tasted food or I would not

part with this for even twice the amount." Irulesan continued, suddenly raising his tone to inspired accents, "Young sir, something tells me the Gods means you for many things great. This secret power will render your ascent safe and easy. Give me but five rupees, I'll make you the master of the prince of the underworld."

"Irulesa, I am really moved by your tale of hunger and by the rare melancholy of this little prisoner. If I had five rupees, I would gladly pay you, at least to ransom this poor creature and set it again free in its native woods. I have but a rupee. Take it. Satisfy your hunger. But promise me to set free this poor little thing."

Irulesan took the rupee but beckoned to me with mystic charm in his gesture to follow him. He took me alone to the shade of a banyan tree on the river side, away to the north of the village and began in an excited voice which calmed to a gentle stream of eloquence as he progressed.

"Noble and young sir, I am not telling you an idle tale. I will doubly bless my gift to you. I too have some occult powers. Show me your palm. Yes, as I thought, you have both the straight line of the man of action and the streaming line of the man of thought. Your

soul is gentle and true. And my tribal God tells me that you are a fit recipient. Hear me with care and faith."

Irulesan tranquilised himself to a real calm and spoke in a voice of prophesy, "Watch for a cloudless and sunny evening in the month of Phalguni when the air is rich with the scent of the ripening corn, when beasts and birds are merry, when the village herd returns home, crowded and gay, sleek and bellowing, along the slender and winding tracks among the paddy fields; wait by the side of some water or running stream with this priceless creature by your side. The spirit Prince, powerful and popular, of the underworld rides on such an evening on the horns of the first bull that leads the herd. Tap this little creature on the head just then and it will open its ever-shut eyes. The leading bull will then dance and bellow as if it had seen its celestial lover and the little ape will weep as if the worlds came to an end. Try to please the weeping love."

Irulesan paused for breath. "Soon the spirit-prince who rides on the horns of the leading bull will pass on unseen into the slender hands of the little creature a visible magic wand nine inches long. Pounce upon this precious little stick with which you can beat the world

into any shape you choose. At once liberate your captive, little "Thevangu" to its native wood again, run into the adjacent water knee deep and mutter these prayers with the magic wand in hand. Soon there will be singing and weeping close to your ear, most charming, most melting of its kind. Be stout of heart and resist these seemingly angelic tears begging for the magic wand. In an hour the invisible being will come to terms. Take from him an oath of eternal service as a loyal slave who will fetch you your heart's desire quicker than your thought even from the ends of the world—spirits are more loyal to their vows than men. When he swears upon water with the splash of an invisible hand, ask for the magic key words that will never fail to bring him to you. He will whisper them into your ears, sadly but truly, the secret words of his own bondage. Then fling back the magic wand with a word of thanks. Tax him not often—never for mere curiosity or for idle pleasure but for common good and most urgent personal needs. Treat him well. He is a great gift. He will serve you with pleasure and help you on the rough roads of life. The new born power will intoxicate you at first. But if you are wise, be moderate in your use of this newly won

ally. You will never regret this alliance with the great and unseen power. Your science is but a pigmy by the side of this Nature force. Noble young friend, I will add to this a small gift of my own. You will have the power to utter one wish invoking me, at some future time, not now. Wherever I am, your one named wish shall be fulfilled. May my tribal God bless you!"

Before I could recover my breath or tongue, the Vedan had left me with rapid steps leaving the little creature by my side. Every word he had uttered burnt itself into my memory. For he spoke in such a way. I stood puzzled. I debated for half an hour—to try or not to try. I was half-ashamed of my over reaching ambition and the base love of power and dark magic it underlined. One half of me pointed the finger of scorn and ridicule at the other. The month of Phalguni was yet eight months ahead. It was a delicate task to keep alive this frail creature till then. The whole affair seemed even to me a hoax in the day light of reason. Even if true, had I the nerve to stand it to the end? Now the village will laugh at me, a student, trying in stealth to catch a devil instead of studying prescribed books!

And the witness to all this reverie was there,

the little creature by my side with the still looks of captive melancholy and an air of penance. My compassion for this little voiceless prisoner increased tenfold. My heart beat nobly by the river side. The adjoining wood seemed a proper place to set it free at once. I did so promptly. And in celebration of this friendly act, I washed my hands and feet in the river and thanked God with a palmful of water down my throat.

(4)

I walked back the twenty miles to my village—true penance indeed for my vague ambition and sentimental charity. But on the way I was still uneasy. I regretted my haste in getting in and out of the affair. My science and my ambition alike mocked me. I felt I should have put the whole thing to proof, cost what it might. It vexed me that I had lacked courage at the supreme moment. Sentimental pity was out of place in life, and in the pursuit of knowledge. I strongly resolved that the next chance I had to explore the mysteries of life, I should not and would not let it go so timidly and in such haste.

When I returned to my native village on

the banks of the Cauvery after an absence of a fortnight there was change everywhere. The monsoon had begun on the Western Ghats. The river was flowing full, the merry foam kissing the little eddies. The village tanks smiled with plenty. The sky was big with rain-bearing clouds. The trees waved their branches expectantly. The breeze was cool and gentle. The children playing in the streets greeted me with aimless songs and shouts. My mother called me home with joy. I flung my shirt and towel into the greeting arms of my reading chair and joined with a wild though elderly cry of joy the children's fairyland in the streets, where everyone was in quest of nothing, where life was a play as motiveless as the waves that ride for joy from sea to shore.

But, alas, that innocent childhood was no more mine. I stood a stranger in the wonderland of the young. They moved on happy in quest of nothing, leaving me alone in a corner of the street even as the sea would wash ashore a broken ship as alien to its fluid mirth.

In this sad moment of exile, Irulesan's face came to me smiling like a star in the sky. I heard a clear voice behind me. I turned round in wonder. The postman smiled the most auspicious smile. He handed to me a letter joy-

ously stamped with penny stamps. It was a letter and not a packet open at both ends revealing the frayed edges of a manuscript tired of sea-voyage and alien hands. I broke it open. A cheque on the Westminster Bank fluttered down. It was my first conquest and a conquest across the seas! Silver and gold out of lead, the faint lead of pencils! The alchemy of Letters indeed! In quest of power, verily!

IV

Collision

(1)

The beautiful, little railway station of Akkur, new model, stands in a shady grove on an arching curve of the track, like a bird on the leafy branch of a mango tree. It is a beauty spot on the short branch line from Mayavaram to Tranquebar, the Queen of the Coromandel Coast.

The soil is fertile. All around the vegetation is rank and luxuriant though so near the sea. The cocoanut trees peer into the sky. Giant banyan and stately mango cover the earth with a deep shade of solemn green. Life in Akkur seems a little idyll. The railway line gives it only a fresh charm and a snake-like fascination.

The little dots of fresh white buildings in the railway compound look like huts in a hermitage. The station seems a place for reverie, and no wonder even the trains move so dreamily, whistling a love tune to the bracing winds from the sea.

(2)

The sky was almost free and the crescent moon seemed to crawl and play with the wayward, floating shapes of thin cloud. A steady breeze from the sea was blowing in, and Akkur, standing on a little eminence of its own, received it to the full.

No. 8 had just left for Tranquebar leisurely winding her way to the lull of the evening sea.

The clock struck eight. Ramanujam had finished his work, and rose to go to his quarters near by, blithe as a bull to its feed after the day's hard work.

"I knew of this fate for me even on my wedding day," growled Lakshmi greeting her lord coming home after the day's work.

The growling voice was soft and rich but it was loaded with a heavy charge. The station-master, young and alert, quick of sight and sound, felt danger in the rumbling voice.

Will the peace of the night be disturbed? How best to avert a collision?

But with Lakshmi at home everything went wrong, from the broomstick to the well. For, the broomstick was rough and long, and looked more like an instrument of chastising power. And the well stood in lonely splendour a little

way off; the South Indian Railway rejoiced in using rubble everywhere within its sacred precincts, which hurt Lakshmi's tender, unprotected sole. A bruised sole puts the feminine in revolt.

"What is the trouble, dear? Everything here seems lovely and quiet. Why even on the very first day you are complaining?" Ramanujam ventured to ask in a kindly and conciliating tone after a long pause, "Look round, the place is magnificent. The station stands in a pretty garden on a little eminence of its own. . . ."

"What is the trouble!" Lakshmi cut short the glowing description. "In this forest none but bears and monkeys live. Not a soul or sound for miles around but the screech of owls, the hiss of snakes and the croaking of frogs. I can't live here a day longer. Either get a transfer by wire to-night; you have been good at telegraphing all your life others' weal and woe, pray do it now once for yourself. Signal at once your distress to your officer, and get a transfer. Or send me home to Guntur to my brother by the night train which catches the Boat Mail. Enough of this arid life!"

Lakshmi finished decisively, flinging the silver cup to her lord, which bore as meekly

as he the several dints of her temper. Ramanujam caught it nicely from the googly bowler. Thank God, he had a quick and trained eye for all moving things, from trains that fly at forty miles an hour to domestic furniture that spins eccentric circles.

The cup was meant for Ramanujam's *sandhya* prayers which would be some atonement, Lakshmi held, for his un-brahminical service on the railways. Of course the train timings did not permit of their proper performance at the correct *sastraic* hour of the twilight. But better late than never, Lakshmi thought. Further, the *sandhya* prayers gave her a chance to watch her husband in the restless, meditative pose rather ridiculous in a railway servant. It helped her also, incidentally, to attend at some leisure to the kitchen preliminaries for the service of dinner.

Ramanujam turned up and down the silver cup uneasily in his cooped hands, half afraid to declare by word of mouth that it was empty. Lakshmi shot a look of scorn from the left corner of her left eye, and pointed out the well outside that shone in lonely splendour unconscious of its great part in this little domestic drama. Then she softened a little, and with an air of condescension indicated the tub near her feet.

Ramanujam stole half limping to the tub of water which dimly reflected the lotus-like beauty of Lakshmi. Seeing that things were going too far on the very first day, he mustered a little courage and desired to nip the mischief in the bud and prevent the repetition of the life he had led at the Mayavaram Junction. He had sought a transfer hoping to gain his domestic felicity in the leisured quiet of Akkur.

"You call this a fit place for bears and monkeys. It is the most envied spot, dear, on the whole line. The trains are few. The traffic is *nil*. Tranquebar, the Queen of the Coast, is but a station off and waits for you. Ours is a little paradise, if only we know how to enjoy it well together." Ramanujam broke into poetry. "Enough have I slaved in Junctions both night and day without rest or sleep! Here the work is nothing; indeed my pay is so much pension."

"Yes, indeed, your pay is on the pension scale: twenty rupees a month and no extra income. My brother will be ashamed even to own me. What you get in a month he gets in a day. He rules over the flag in another way." Lakshmi made a very unkind reference to the station-master's cherished emblem of speed and power.

"Yes, yes, he is a very lucky fellow. Whoever thought that Sarangan, the gay, would

bloom into an I.C.S.! Now an Assistant Collector at Guntur! But, dear, all can't be Collectors; then trains won't run." Ramanujam attempted humour to scatter the frown that gathered like bees on Lakshmi's lotus-face, and continued in a slightly ingratiating voice, "But, why, dear, has he not been writing to you of late? When is his marriage? We can travel free to any station."

Lakshmi ignored the question proudly and asked another.

"Why have you spread out to-night so broad a leaf like a professional *purohit?*"

Ramanujam hoping that supper would have an excellent effect on her temper and obviate a domestic conflict whose after-effects it would take a long time of skill and patience to repair, had run through the *sandhya* with great speed letting down quickly much water slip between his fingers. Then he had taken a broad plantain leaf and spread it for his meal. He had sprinkled a little water thereon, watched it scatter to drops of pearl, cleaned the leaf nicely over and over again, and in subdued grunts and with appropriate gestures showing neither patience nor impatience was declaring himself ready.

Lakshmi caught him in the act and put the above incisive query.

Ramanujam dared a straight reply this time. "Because, plantain leaves grow splendidly in our compound. Akkur is a fertile spot, dear, the like of which you don't have for many miles around."

"Then eat the leaves; for rice bags don't grow wild here, and twenty rupees can't feed two souls—that's clear."

"Dear, rice bags too will soon grow wild for us. If you would but learn a little patience and win the favour of God. . . ."

"Learn it yourself and earn first the favour of the railway gods."

"It will come with God's favour. The goods section will soon be opened, and, dear, you will have then everything for the mere asking; the finest table-rice, gram, and pulse. God has fixed a generous scale of fees for the underpaid and overworked dogs of this earth."

Ramanujam replied with cheer hoping for good luck with every word. For, a henpecked husband like a slave nation yields more and more to pressure.

(3)

Ramanujam spoke sitting and polishing his leaf patiently with sprinkled water which rolled

in opulent ease like drops of pearl from end to end. Lakshmi stood like a goddess in a prophetic fit of anger. Peace or war trembled in the balance like the waterdrop on his own fresh leaf. Peace it proved to be.

Lakshmi, capricious to the finger-tip, overwhelmed by a gracious mood, wheeled into the kitchen with a stately motion all her own, and slipped a plateful of cooked rice all over the leaf in such fine disorder as only an angry wife knows how to slip.

The sight of polished rice in plenty in unbroken grains of beauty swept away any inclination Ramanujam might have had for a manly word of protest. He began, in between handfuls, his gentle story of pacification with increased zest, dramatically recounting another chapter of his conquest for his Cleopatra's sake.

"Lakshmi, the local magnate is already my friend. You don't know how mighty rich he is; three hundred *velis,* two thousand acres of first-class *nanja.* Even from the station yard we can see his hayricks and grain-heaps, high as hillocks. Such riches are a sight for the gods."

Ramanujam had read in novels of hysterical women's delight in the tale of rich and powerful men. Why not try the effect of a

neighbour's story on the neurotic mind and mood of Lakshmi?

"Yes, Mr. Mudaliar is already my friend. We owe indeed this railway line to him, and this beautiful little station of Akkur is wholly his creature. It is of no use to others. It is his own. He asked for it and got it. Mr. Mudaliar is a member of the Taluq Board and the District Board. His proud boast is that he signs his name in such a way in Tamil that it is easily mistaken for English. He even thinks of standing for the Legislative Council. A rich man, Lakshmi, can do many magic things in this world."

Lakshmi seemed to listen to the story; Ramanujam chuckled; yes, reading maketh a full man, and novel-reading makes one a good pilot in the stormy seas of married life.

"The great Mudaliar swept into the station in all the glory of the new Auburn sedan this afternoon to catch No. 6. He was dressed like a peacock, and his white teeth shone like lightning in a cloud-spread sky. His body, young and corpulent, gleamed like polished iron rubbed a little with oil. That is the way of all blue flesh."

Lakshmi nodded leave to go on, but hinted that the philosophic bits might be left out.

"Fortunately, No. 6 was late by half an

hour, as the driver was kept a trifle longer by his lady love at Tranquebar. I had the whole time with Mr. Mudaliar. We gave him our best chair. Though it had a broken leg it was well fixed with a country nail—our porter, Karian, is a fine fellow, and he used his inherited skill—his father was a blacksmith—to bring together a broken leg and a chair, and charge a carpenter's fee for the same! Mr. Mudaliar was very kind to me and he promised me his patronage. He will send us in a few days two bags of first-class *eerku semba* rice. That is why I said, dear, that even rice-bags grow wild in Akkur! I understand that the stationmaster is reckoned as part of his household and royal luggage."

Ramanujam boldly spun the tale. Half of it was fact and the other half the legitimate hopes and aspirations of an aspiring, henpecked mind. And Lakshmi's smile was worth any bold venture or gypsy tale. Yes, there were visible signs of returning good temper. Lakshmi's face was lit with a very sly smile.

Ramanujam rejoiced beyond measure. He would have even clapped his hands for joy. But the right hand was busy gathering into a regular mound the fine grains of rice scattered all over his leaf. Thank God, the leaf was broad enough!

"As for the goods section it is as good as sanctioned, it is all a question of days. You will have everything you dream of, dear, from petty greens to lordly cabbage; from choice fuel to table-rice, gram and pulse; of course, all free. Mudaliar himself exports to Colombo twenty thousand bags of rice every year, and imports in return all fruits and flowers, all dainties and luxuries from Kashmir to Cape Comorin. And everything must pass through our hands of course, dear."

"Twenty thousand bags of rice! Incredible, mighty rich he must be for that! What does he do with all that flood of wealth?"

There was a subtle change in Lakshmi's voice and now one understood the native charm of her talk in peaceful moods.

Ramanujam felt the triumph of his strategy. He continued in an absorbed tone, "Yes, yes, marvellously rich these fellows are, and equally idle and vicious. The miser's hoard of three generations of sweated labour of the poor is now seeing the light of day. The young Mudaliar has a nice band of advisers, and I understand that the stationmaster of Akkur has an ex-officio place therein. He has already finished the hoarded, liquid cash of ages. I am told that his gay march this evening was to a

money-lender at Mayavaram. I have tramped from Rameshwar to Peshawar, dear, in my younger days and nowhere are the idle rich so selfish, callous and low as here in our own Tamil land. Rice has cut at the root of all our manly virtues and tamarind has paralysed us for ages and completed the ruin."

Lakshmi was getting more and more absorbed in the story and was just beginning to discover a slender vein of poetry in her lord. Had sylvan solitude and sea-breeze such mystic effects on overworked and underfed men? She wondered.

Ramanujam thought that this mellow mood was a ripe occasion for a favour. He had not made much progress with his meal, still waiting for soup. After serving him with rice so well, Lakshmi had sat down opposite to him intent on the tale with all the grace and majesty of her static pose but dynamic mind.

Ramanujam gently began, "The rice is getting rather cold. The place is as chill as Ooty. Some *sambhar* if you please, dear."

Lakshmi fell from heaven.

"*Sambhar!* Is it a feast day? Why do you love this *sambhar* so wretchedly well? Now I see that it is the tamarind in the *sambhar* that has soured you, indeed, as you say."

Lakshmi repeated herself: "*Sambhar!* Is there a feast today? I have not had time even to set my things in order or wash my face. Is it not enough to get cooked rice on the first day in a new house? Strange indeed are the ways of men! They think us no better than beasts of burden and toys for pleasure."

There was a strange glint in her eyes and a hollow look in her face. The malady of frayed nerves seemed to have a far deeper cause than his mild request for *sambhar*. Every touch of home life seemed to hurt her deeply. Lakshmi was lonely. She was without a child. Ramanujam knew it through the vague instinct of Nature: man is a friend of woman only for one great, divine purpose.

There was hushed silence for several minutes. Ramanujam humbly prayed.

(4)

Lakshmi was of medium stature, her body soft and all curves; it shone like burnished gold and gave her a round-faced, perfect beauty. The high brow, the rising forehead, and the eagle nose and eyes, and the unfading lustre of a high-class brahmin girl gave her a distinction and aristocratic bearing which were no ances-

tral gift. She was of humble birth and her classic beauty was a strange gift of the gods in the infinite mutations of life.

Her father was an agent in the household of one of the leading aristocratic Mahratta brahmin families of Tanjore. Though his pay was only ten *kalams* of paddy and five rupees a month, he was the real master of the household. In such an environment of aristocratic culture and refinement Lakshmi grew till her tenth birth-day.

The great house had a sudden fall. It went bankrupt. Its traditions of hospitality were royal without royal means, and three important law-suits went against it in all the courts. Lakshmi's father died with his chief, a broken-hearted man, when she was just ten. Her mother lived only long enough to see her married at fourteen.

Ramanujam was a remote, poor kinsman of hers. He was a bright boy at college at the time of his wedding. But a strange ill-luck seized him immediately after. A *wanderlust* filled his mind once proficient in geography in the high school. He roamed all over India without a pie in his pocket, as a young *sadhu,* thanks to the beneficent railway system which winks at a free ride by all who care to smear their bodies with

the sacred ash, and tell beads piously when the flying squad of ticket examiners click their fingers before them as so much time and money wasted.

Somehow this roaming life for Ramanujam came to an abrupt end when a kindly and young Assistant Traffic Superintendent, recently and directly recruited to the Service, discovered this bogus young *sadhu* at Madura. He sympathised with the story of Ramanujam's wedded but truant and unfulfilled life, appointed him as a ticket-collector at Mayavaram on his promising that he would take and set up house with his wife.

Ramanujam's record as a ticket-collector and signaller was splendid one of good and earnest work. He kept his promise and set up house. But even on the first day he saw that Lakshmi was too great for him, in every way; indeed, too great for the touch of man. He appeared to himself as a slender stream of water oozing from obscure depths by the side of a mighty river which moved with all the majesty of a mountain-birth and inborn motion. He dared not break the lofty bunds of reserve and mix with the moving stream his humble offering of love. He was content to crawl along by her

side obeying instinctively her sweeping curves of gesture and high turns of mind.

But Mayavaram did Ramanujam one definite good. It gave him back his old schoolboy love of books. And one common trait cheered him, that Lakshmi too loved reading. He became a voracious reader of books, thanks to the Higginbotham bookstall and to the friendly relations he kept up with its clerk, who shared with him the decent view that books are primarily meant for those who read, and only secondarily for sale to those who buy but do not read.

Ramanujam was tired of the strenuous work and night vigils at the Mayavaram Junction. He was sick of his sterile life for five years. When the branch line was opened from Mayavaram to Tranquebar he had his eyes on Akkur, the coveted station on the whole line. He had hoped to win Lakshmi in the quiet of Akkur. But the opening day seemed malicious.

Ramanujam had merits of his own which yielded decisive success in many spheres of life. His was the insinuating way. He had not the frank and striking force or beauty of direct power. He made a point through endless manœuvres. Usually he doubled this skill in the august presence of Lakshmi. That was the fatal

error. Women hate this kind of skill, and Ramanujam had read of it even in the cheaper novels of the bookstall. But in real daily life it was impossible for him to change, by magic or effort of will, his nature or the secret glands that poured continuously this malicious and baffling stream of subtle strategy into his halting blood.

The net result was that Ramanujam was still waiting on this fateful day for his soup while Lakshmi was squatting with the full splendour of her queenly face turned on him like a searchlight.

Time passed painfully and the delicate deadlock continued.

(5)

No. 8 on her return journey from Tranquebar was screaming at the 'outer' as No. 13. Whistles shrieked with a vengeful noise and a petulant ire. Ramanujam was still waiting for *sambhar,* still mounding the scattered pearls on his broad leaf. He broke his fine work at the first scream of the whistle, and scattered the heap of rice all around in anger as the one act of protest, and rushed out to receive the roaring train, crying at the top of his voice, "In

the branch line they have no sense of time. They come and go early and late as they choose. But that shall never be hereafter. Where is the scoundrel, Karian?"

Karian was the prop of the whole station. He was the man whose goodwill was essential to the transit of trains. But he too had for the day his share of domestic troubles. He went home dead drunk, for he had made eight annas more than the usual daily luck from a rustic who came with a gunny bag of more than regulation weight. What should he do in his exaltation but stagger home, break the pots and his wife's head? He too had difficulty in getting food; for his earnings for the week never reached home as the toddy-shop stood on the way. On hearing the screaming train he too came swearing and cursing as if he would blow up everything.

Ramanujam was in a rage. "You rogue, where have you been sleeping?"

"Sleeping! No, master, I was quite awake. I had some trouble at home and my meal was not ready—I beat my wife. The train is roaring before time. Let her roar. The driver is drunk."

"Beating your wife, Karia, to get your food!" Ramanujam wondered how such a thing

was possible. But the train was screaming, and there was no time for a more elaborate investigation of Karian's recipe for meals.

"Go and lower the semaphore and see that the points are in proper position." For, on the second line there were a few empty rakes of a ballast train.

Karian went tottering to the handle to lower the semaphore and the stationmaster cried out, "Karia, Karia, you seem to be dead drunk; take care, don't fall on the line; see to the points."

"Who is dead drunk? Karian? No. The engine driver is," Karian roared to himself at the top of his voice and tried to lower the signal cursing and muttering; "Come, come, you strumpet. I'll break your jaw even as I broke her head just now. Not a moment of peace in this wretched work on railways."

Hardly had the signal been lowered, when No. 13 started thundering along the lines.

The key had barely turned in the door of his office room. Ramanujam had not yet reached for his coat and flag. There was a terrible crash as of engines fighting for way. The little vagabond train ran against the ballast engine and empty rakes on the second line. No. 13 leapt out of the track.

Ramanujam stood thunderstruck. The crescent moon was struggling through a heavy cloud.

Fortunately there was no injury to life except for a hearty shake at a chill hour. No. 13 came almost empty except for Mr. Mudaliar and his gay retinue. But Mudaliar himself did not travel as an ordinary passenger but drove the engine with his mighty hand on the throttle and the driver by his side, presumably for emergencies. He was naturally proud to guide a train himself on a track which was so much his own.

Lakshmi flung aside the conventions of her life at this critical hour. She who was never afraid of collisions at home was rather taken aback at the terrific sight of riding steel and smashed timber before her very eyes. Almost immediately she was seen on the station platform by the side of her lord with a troubled face wherein anxiety shone like the cloud in the moon.

Yes, collision was in the air since eight o'clock in the evening.

Thank God that the whirlwind which sprang at home spent itself abroad!

Thank God that what came to wreck life wrecked only steel and timber!

Yes, collision was in the air since eight o'clock in the evening. Thank God that it wrecked only vagabond trains and empty rakes, and not young and beautiful lives in their first making!

(6)

A year passed. The Senior Inspector of Railways had just finished the final inspection of the track from Mayavaram to Tranquebar and declared it worthy of increased speed. He wondered at the accident of the year before which was inexplicable in a branch line with meagre traffic. Now the little vagabond train, even without Mr. Mudaliar's mighty hand on the throttle, puffed along more merrily and at greater speed to Tranquebar, the Queen of the Coromandel Coast.

The after effects of the collision were many. Ramanujam lost his job on the South Indian Railway. But Akkur found its first pial teacher for its fast multiplying young. Karian became the gardener and care-taker of the first elementary school at Akkur, which stood just where the mighty palace of Kari Kalan Cholan had reared its head in regal splendour two thousand years ago.

The sea breeze blew as lustily as ever. It was a handsome little cottage in a cocoanut garden close to the temple and the village tank of Akkur. From there you could see on the sandy eminence the station buildings of Akkur nestling together like a cluster of bananas on the banks of a river, and the railway track arching into a curve, proud of its way to Tranquebar, the Queen of the Coromandel Coast.

There stood in the cocoanut garden, fresh and lovely, a specially erected hall, mud-walled and mud-floored, polished to the shine and smoothness of marble. It was the newly erected school building fenced with split bamboo and thatched with cool cocoanut fronds. All over, the squirrels ran and played, shy and timid like children. A little group of boys and girls, twenty in number, made the school a little paradise. The hailing, dancing and shouting voices rose in a babel mingling sweetly with the notes of birds. Parrots flew from cocoanut to cocoanut and mimicked the struggling, lisping voices of the learning young. And Ramanujam's voice rose clearly above the juvenile din with a new born power and sweetness. He who was once coaxing branch line trains and lazy pointsmen to keep time was now coaxing the young along the higher path. A sweet contentment and peace

reigned all over the place. A new light shone in Ramanujam's face.

A little away from the school stood the residential cottage in which Lakshmi shone like a Goddess in a forest shrine. A green, beautifully embroidered *saree* was drying in the sun and fluttering in the wind like a flag on a triumphal day. Lakshmi was there in the *koodam* daintily rocking a babe but a month old in the bamboo cradle and at the same time attending to kitchen work with equal speed and joy. She glanced often towards the school nearby where her husband taught the boys single-handed and single-minded, as if she would very much like to go and share in the work. Her lotus eyes now shone with a perfect peace and the little cottage seemed a home of bliss.

Ramanujam returned home after the morning work in the school. Lakshmi asked him in a sweet voice, "What is the name, dear, of the Assistant Traffic Superintendent who gave you the job on the Railway?"

"Why, why, dear?"

"We shall name our boy after him."

"Nataraja. There is a divine justice in your suggestion."

"Yes, dear. Let us show our gratitude to our unknown benefactor. It will please God."

There was absorbed silence for an hour. Each lived in the other. The infant newcomer, Nataraja had wrought a magic change in their lives. A suckling babe is a golden touch of joy to the mother. He, the infant newcomer, was as much a gift of the collision to Ramanujam and Lakshmi as a gift from God.

God fulfills Himself in many ways, strange ways.

V

Destiny

(1)

Muthu is a pearl of a boy. He is a freak of nature—not a cripple, not a genius, but a born philanthropist and a public worker. Muthu is like a flower in the crannied wall, a pearl in the oyster, a pure spring amidst clefts of rock. Muthu is the cleansing agent of his generation—on his martyrdom rests the redemption of the race. He is one among a million.

Muthu's mother was an ideal Hindu woman, refined, patient and all suffering. On the tenth day after his birth she died of neglect and lack of proper nursing. She carried to the grave a heart of unfulfilled longings of home life. Her wedded life was one of misery and neglect, discord, sorrow and suffering. The birth of a son seemed to assure her of a turning in the lane, that led to sunlight and meadows. But the cruel hand of death snatched her away in the hour of fulfilment.

For, Muthu's father was a profligate by birth and a police head constable by profession in the early eighties. He deserted the homely

certainties of wedlock for the charms and excitement of stolen pleasures. Muthu was the stray result of an inevitable but unpremediated moment. And his mother had hoped that he would be the great reconciler, but she did not live long enough to realise the hope. Fortune, however, unkind in one way is sometimes strangely kind in another. At about the same time, Muthu's mother's sister, a wealthy lady lost a new-born babe, not for the first time, and looked around for a darling to soothe the aching, maternal bosom. Providence sent Muthu straight to her heart.

Muthu's father as a gay widower was only too glad to be rid of the thorn that he had run in haste while yet young. Fine in presence, unfailing in courage, soft, wily and attractive of speech, with the accent of a saint and the gleaming eyes of a sensualist, ever apologetic in tone and intriguing in mind and mood, Muthu's father was easily meant for distinction in the police world blessed with the full resources of the British Raj. Power and wealth were easily at his door and even Collectors envied his opulence and daring. But his only boy never crossed his mind even for a moment in the tumult of his gay career. And Muthu too was innocent of his father's pomp and power. He was sur-

rounded in his aunt's wealthy home with luxury and doting affection.

Muthu was growing into a perfect though somewhat dreamy and unpractical lad. He had his share of his father's fine looks and unfailing courage. But as a child in the womb he had sucked in also the infinite compassion of his mother for this all-ailing world.

(2)

Years rolled on. Muthu was taken out of his village surroundings and put to school at Mayavaram with *eclat* in the true aristocratic style. He was loaded with books and stationery that would last him for years and given plenty of pocket money and a bullock cart to drive to and fro. But from the very beginning Muthu showed as great a dislike for slate and books as he showed a liking for and interest in his fellow pupils and teachers.

The babbling waters of the Cauveri or the chirping notes of a bird attracted him more than the droning voice of his teacher. Still Muthu left the mark of his energetic and romantic personality on his class. Though he failed to cultivate a taste for text-books, his general reading was good and varied and his knowledge,

though erratic like his rambles, quite superior. If he could not and did not answer the teacher's questions on text-books, the teacher also could not answer the questions which Muthu raised with triumph in his voice. The teachers held him in awe for his great aristocratic connections. The municipal chairman who presided over the paybill happened to be his first cousin.

But Muthu was a hero among his fellows both for his fancied riches and real generosity of which he gave proof every day in the shape of sweets and biscuits. He was easily their leader. He was popular, for his purse was always for the common good. And a great national event happened when Muthu was promoted to the IV Form showing the first signs of adolescence. The partition of Bengal was announced by a powerful Viceroy and the whole country was in a patriotic fervour of speech and action alike. Muthu thought and felt indignantly with Surendranath Banerjee and would not rest till the partition was rescinded and the bruised heart of India solaced.

Muthu immediately subscribed for the *Bande Mataram,* started a free reading room, organised a monster meeting on the banks of the Cauvery, made himself the chairman and lecturer of the meeting, initiated the boycott move-

ment, opened a swadeshi shop, struck terror into the heart of the headmaster who feared the loss of his reputation for discipline if for little else. Muthu felt the aching patriotic joys of Indian unrest. In the short space of a week he electrified and dominated the place and freshened its slow and sleepy life. He let himself down, for the sake of the country, into the current of world-affairs and educated with world-news both schoolmasters and fellow pupils alike. He lifted the school from a provincial pond to a national fullness and made its life flow like a cataract.

But more terrified than the headmaster or the police was his own sweet aunt who got alarmed at the wayward ways of her son. She most affectionately protested to him against his unworldly and idealistic ways and the perils of his patriotic adventure. She told him how much of money he was flinging away on a very forgetful juvenile world which could not return him a pie when he himself was in need. But Muthu thought that his aunt was quite old-world, not in touch with the time-spirit and that she knew not the generosity of the renascent young. And a mother's protest only emboldens a child's enterprise and a schoolmaster's hasty

frown adds but to the courage and resistance of an independent boy of quality.

Muthu was promoted to the fifth form for all his feverish political activity, but he missed his usual high place, and the love and the regard of his teachers. The teachers, though initially delighted with Muthu for the awkward position in which he placed the mighty head-master, finally found him a rebel and a menace to the discipline so sweet and necessary for their own security. They warned him openly and sometimes by hint that he would soon wreck himself in the rapids of his own headlong vigour and indiscipline. But Muthu felt that his valuable nation-building qualities and activities were not being properly appraised. He took to heart keenly this refusal to understand and the absence of sympathy, the failure of the accredited teachers to teach and shape the young. He felt the world was a bundle of poverty and cowardice. He was divinely discontented with himself.

Months passed on and the annual examinations were held. Muthu was declared unfit to be promoted from the fifth form to the matriculation class. It was a blow to him. This was his first failure and it had a terrible effect upon him and his friends—even more than his failure

to get the Partition of Bengal rescinded in a week. Most of his young friends who had stood by him in his success began now to doubt the wisdom of their allegiance. Failure in an examination brings such an isolation to the sufferer. He loses caste. Muthu's mother was doubly kind at home. For she knew the sensitiveness and excellence of her boy. But Muthu was deeply affected, more than he himself had expected. For this was his first failure in the legitimate line of his activities and, above all, his young friends were falling away from him as if he were a leper or a criminal. This filled him with disgust. All his aspirations stood still.

(3)

It was a July day. The Cauveri was full and glorious, reddish and rolling with the freshes from the hills. Muthu was charmed standing at the water's edge like a snake before the charmer or the sea before the full moon. It was a native and soul-maddening fascination. Muthu thought over and over again. His aunt's sorrowing face haunted his mind. He sobbed for a moment, and then recollected himself. He went home and returned to the river with the

load of his text-books. He felt a deep and quivering joy. He gazed on the gold-dust—laden and sparkling waters of the river merrily rolling down to the sea. He floated down the Cauveri his text-books, one by one, page after page, slow and sure. With a silent and moody brow he saw each page disappear from his view. The eddies gurgled with a strange accent of joy in the rolling plenty. Muthu returned the satisfied smile of the sacred river. Only one friend was witness to this scene, he who had kept to him after his failure. He stood by Muthu on the river bank and watched him in silence without protest. For he knew the deep emotion that stirred Muthu.

Muthu returned home after dusk and announced to his mother his final act of good-bye to schools. She was angry and vexed beyond measure. He silenced her by a boyish speech delivered with a calm decision in his voice far above his age. "School education as we have it now is a waste, dear mother. It makes teachers tyrants and students slaves. It is a soul killer. It benefits none but the bricklayer and the contractor. Life is broad and varied. Nature is real and ever ready with gifts. The true learner learns only from Life and Nature, and never from paid teachers and text-books. The moving

Cauveri has just now taught me more in a brief moment and eased me of my load of anguish. I am fresh as if I had taken a morning bath in celestial waters. I feel ripe for a higher and truer life. Our school life, mother, is a waste, an utter waste. It never moulds the true man in you. And city life is a ruin to all but to hotel-keepers. Let us go back to our beautiful village,—the village of my childhood—and lead there a lovely and a really useful life, a life of service to the lowly and the suffering. Dear mother, I am a changed boy now, if you please, a man. I will be hereafter as docile and as meek as your pet deer. Pray don't say 'no' to me, mother, dear mother; school life is finished for me in this birth. I am leaving for our village on foot even before break of dawn."

(4)

Many years of unceasing toil and service, selfless service to the poor and the low rolled on, adding to the experience, suffering and growth of Muthu. He was now thirty-two years of age. He found at last complete self-expression and a final abode for his temperament, which ached with tenderness for the suffering poor, in the arid Civil Jail of Trichinopoly.

But he regretted it not. He was whiling away the languid hours of the Civil Jail in an absorbed study of the Mahabharata, often breaking into songs of freedom. One day he sat late in the night reading as usual the Mahabharata and a reverie slowly came upon him. He reviewed his life in the dream. When he awoke he seized pen and paper and began to write a letter as follows:

No. 912, Civil Jail,
Trichinopoly,
7th October——.

Dear Ganapathi,

You were my only friend and witness on the fateful day on which I floated down the river all my class text-books (Palmerston, Royal and Ship Readers). And as such you are the fit recipient of the subsequent story of my life.

I was Muthu, a spoilt child and a petted boy when you and I stood more than seventeen years ago on the river bank at Mayavaram at the bathing ghat. I am now No. 912 in the Civil Jail at Trichinopoly. Though we never met afterwards I watched your life at school and college. You were first everywhere as was expected. I hope you have now settled down to

the strenuous work of a lawyer full of honour, wealth and service. I now come to you as a client not for legal redress but that I may share with another the story of my life.

Here it is, taken from where you left me on the river bank on the day I made paper boats of my books and sent them down the sacred river. I left for my village at dawn the next day with mother and all. A quiet, selfish life I resolved to myself to lead as a sharp change from the past. I vowed that I would not vex myself with care for the ailing world but would simply adore my mother, worship my home and my tribal God, be kind to my tenants and be happy for ever undisturbed by love of fame, name or service or even the desire to be good to others.

What am I in the spacious scheme of the universe, a quivering drop in the restless sea of life? All action seemed to me confusing and contradictory and rendered more complex even the good I did. But the compassionate ache was there in my blood as sure and intractable as oil in a mud pot! I longed for action, to do good to others—the only action my simple nature ever knew. One half of the world is always advised to do good to others so that the other half may continue to be the complete scoundrel!

For more than three months I did not and could not keep quiet in my own rural home. My village was going mouldly like old cakes, by over a dozen years' neglect—the temple in decay, the channels silted up, the streets dirty and mounded everywhere with rubbish heaps. The whole thing was an Augean stable waiting patiently to be cleansed. I slowly fancied a hidden purpose of God in my urban failure as a student. The village seemed to wait for my magic touch. I was stirred to work by the deep suffering of the voiceless masses. I resolved to make a little paradise of my village and present it as a tribute to my mother. I went about my work with selfless courage and kindling faith as I did in the days of the Partition of Bengal—all unselfish and holy. God was with me.

The village cheered me to the echo. Every one promised help and his share of money for the common work, if I, the born leader of the village, would but move in the matter and become a shepherd unto the flock. I planned and worked.

I poured new life into the old place—brought light to the temple and oil to the gods, dredged old irrigation channels and dug new ones, kept the streets neat and tidy, planted

cocoanuts in public places, erected small rest-houses for pilgrims, and improved and cleansed the village tanks. I put in all the money required, my mother's money, and the villagers promised their share at the next harvest. My mother protested all along that I was wasting a fine inheritance on loafers, cheats and false purposes. But I thought that one village planted and set working in right fashion functioning well for the peace and happiness of all, was the truest solution of India's problems, worth a mother's anger. I argued: which great deed was done without assembling for its execution some among the many, who were not swindlers and cheats?

I gave three years of my life to this work and spent twenty thousand rupees upon it; the bulk of it my mother's money, willingly sacrificed for love of a dear sister's son treated as her own, and the balance borrowed, borrowed secretly from one of the sowcars in the village who benefited the most from these improvements. When the work was finished, the villagers began to praise and thank me profusely but defaulted in their share of payment. Should I go to a court of law for common good done and throw away more good money?

Then I was sour and vexed for a year and

my mother's anger I lulled by an enforced idleness. But I was getting uneasy. I ached for service. I asked what life was worth if one did not do something for cottage industries and for the depressed classes. Give them at least a well —they died like flies of cholera in summer time —and a handsome, little thatched school, though I myself hated school once. I carried on the whole work in the name of another and evaded the scrutiny of my mother and freely borrowed money in stealth. I was happy with a secret joy and the village world was thankful. I also opened a *swadeshi* shop for clothes and effected good sales on credit every day. I ran it till I lost a good deal over friends who would praise my public work and would not pay for clothes they bought as pretty. I scorned to go to a court of law to recover a pair of clothes from the loins of a fellow being or for the sake of a shirt that kept a kindred body warm.

I wrote some elementary books on sanitation and agriculture and printed them myself and distributed them free in my village and around.

All these activities of course meant money and I borrowed it with and without the knowledge of my aunt. Like the Government I asked for money, and friends gave it to me with

pleasure, not so much as even hinting that it was a loan though they said it had to carry some rate of interest to please the conventions of the world. They said it was a pleasure to help me in such a noble cause. If only I would but pay the interest regularly what did they care? It was safe with me, the darling of such a wealthy aunt.

My difficulties were growing and I seriously thought of closing my world service and activities. My soft nature had already converted my aunt's house into a choultry where all relations who were poor had created a prescriptive right at least for two meals a day. Stories of my good nature seemed to have reached even the ears of my father who, his dashing career in the police service cut off prematurely by the vigilance of a superior officer, was now in difficulties. He applied to me his only son, for funds to save him from the situation in which I am now placed. Though I had only heard of him and never seen him, should I and could I neglect him, my maker, simply because he had never cared for me these years? I did help him with three thousand rupees. Was not the stain on the father a stain on the son?

Soon my aunt came to know of this. To

help one who ill-treated her dear sister was a sin she never could forgive. This kindly act of mine to my father broke her heart. She suffered deep and silent grief. She died ere long and before dying she disposed of by will her entire property—it was *stridhanam*—you are a lawyer —all the fine fifty velis of land in favour of a charity, a free feeding house for all. She converted the little rest house I had built for pilgrims into a pucca choultry and endowed it with the fifty velis worth three lakhs, and left me a scribbled line of blessing and advice. "Darling Muthu, I took you to my bosom as a babe. I am proud of you. You are great in your own way, unworldly way. You are among the rarer souls of this earth. There is something in your blood that is inimical to silver or gold. You are happy only when you are rid of it. You have the spirit of the true *sanyasin* in you. Serve the world in yellow robes after my death. I give away for *annadana* all my properties. It achieves also your purpose in life in a more effective way. Don't consider me unkind. With my blessings."

The short note was a perfect commentary on my life and I was grateful to my mother. I performed the funeral ceremonies on a grand scale, and stinted neither money nor love—I still

enjoyed some credit as the will was not yet known.

Finding that the fifty velis I lorded it over had vanished, my creditors clamoured for my body. I offered them my person meekly, like Christ upon the Cross. I am now proud of No. 912. One month more yet remains of this life. On the 7th of November ends my Civil Jail tenure. On my release, I mean paying you a visit at Mylapore, on my pilgrim way to the Himalayas—Rishikesh and Badri.

With my love and regards,

Yours affectionately,
Muthu.

Muthu received a letter next week. He eagerly broke it open and read as follows:—

No. 913, Criminal Jail,
Trichinopoly.

Dear Muthu,

Your letter reached me just now *via* Madras. It is the most precious human document that has ever come my way. Yes, when I watched you drown your text-books you made me. You became at once my friend, philosopher and guide. The quest for the truth of life and for knowledge of its real values seized me. That impulse kept on fermenting.

I passed through my college successfully but sadly, and my enrolment as a vakil synchronised with the crisis in our national life. The week after I was called to the Bar I was called by the unseen power that moulds our life to the service of our country. I gave up my home and profession, and joined Mahatmaji. Very often prison is the most honest and the freest place in the world. You have rebelled against property. I have rebelled against society. Both have found a fitting abode near each other, only a thin high wall divides us. As class fellows we were together. As citizens God has not kept us apart. My date of freedom is the same as yours! We meet again this time higher up the holy river at Trichinopoly after seventeen years of separation, on the banks of the self-same Cauveri. Wait till the 7th of November.

Let us stand once again by her like children at the feet of the mother and make a surrender of the self once again and evolve a plan of work. The rolling river will give us a fresh and true message for the service of man and the love of God.

Yours affectionately,
S. GANAPATHI.

VI

Indumati

(1)

The north-east monsoon was unusually severe and the night was particularly stormy. The Palar was in floods. Where the trunk road from Madras to Gingi cuts it, the river spreads out to the magnificent width of a mile. On its right bank nestled in perfect security the historic castle of ancient legend and valour. It was a solitary place, a small hill fortress moulded more by Nature than built by man, situated in a narrow defile between two low ranges of hills.

The monsoon was a splendid outburst. The severe storm of the night only added to the wildness of the place. The incessant patter of rain broken into a thousand spluttered sounds over rock and leaf rendered the silence of vast space the more actively terrible. The restless wind seemed to throb in pain smiting trees in agony. Frogs were thrilling the oppressed air. The Palar with ocean-like dignity was sweeping along in majestic beauty. It was a rare interval

of full life and joy for this vast mountain torrent.

From the fortress issued a thin stream of light through an ill-shaped window—an irridiscent and aimless wanderer in that stormy night. Thunder and lightning were alternately playing, adding to the wildness of the scene and celebrating this married hour between the sky and the land.

Indumati sat and mused with her head partially turned towards the pale, flickering, drowsy lamp. She fell into a reverie, a muffled dream of fear and hope. She prodded the wick. The flame rose from slumber like a serpent that was hit. The milky river fretted the sandy edge with increasing violence. There was a long, moaning crash. The lord of wind smote a giant tree. Almost at the same time a quick rap at the fortress door was heard.

Indumati started from her dreamy sleep. For she slept restless and voyaged long into unknown creeks of thoughts and feelings, and dreamt a dream. "Marvellous strange! Am I dreaming still or is it a real knock?" trembled Indumati's voice from within half aloud. The rap was repeated. She went to the door and heaved back the heavy bolt thinking it was her master.

An Englishman, looking more like a messenger of the elements raging outside, staggered in. "Even if you be a ghost from the white race," Indumati cried out half in wonder and half in fear, "you are most welcome."

He gazed at her for a moment. "Beautiful girl! Even if you are an angel from heaven astray on earth, pray, help for a moment a distressed land-dweller—give him shelter and a morsel of food. Are you the only living soul in this terrible place—no sign of life,—or are you yourself but a lovely phantom? If you be of the human kind, tell me, who owns this dreadful house and why are you alone?"

"Are you new to these parts, sir? Alas! This is the fortress of Kambli Naick. You turn pale. No wonder. His name strikes terror."

"Yes. I know him by repute—a cruel man. Is he here now?"

"Bless yourself, he is not here. He is not always kind to your race."

"Where has he gone now?"

Indumati hesitated for a moment and then said, "Against Wandiwash with all his men to help Tippu Sultan and to seize the brave 'Blint' Saheb of your race?"

"When did he go?"

"A week ago."

The Englishman thought for a while and then slowly said, "To seize the Saheb?"

"Already one of the dungeons here is prepared to keep him a captive for life," she replied in a sad tone. "People say that the Saheb is brave and noble, but now the fortune of war no longer smiles on him. The fort cannot stand the siege any longer. May he escape from the fort! Such a night as this would surely shield his way. Do you know him, sir?"

"You are here in this house and speak like this?"

"I am not of this house, sir, no more than a caged parrot belongs to the cage. Do you know him sir, the 'Blint' Saheb of your race. My father helped him in the wars and the daughter is paying for it in these agonised hours."

"You are a prisoner here!"

"Yes, a prisoner. But a brave prisoner who knews how to keep the tyrant at bay. You know the 'Blint' Saheb sir."

"Ah! Yes.—Lt. Col. Flint—unhappy man, I know him a little. Long ago, I was one of his brave band for a short time. Charming girl, you talk nobly beyond your years. What is your father's name?"

"Gopal Naick. My father used to tell me

wonder tales of the daring exploits of the 'Blint' Saheb. How like a prince he stood by his friends!"

There was silence for some time. Indumati broke it, saying with nervous hesitation, "I had a strange little dream just before you knocked at the gate. Shall I relate it to you? I dreamt that 'Blint' Saheb was being chased by mounted men till he ran up to this fortress and knocked at this gate. In the dream I heard the knock. I woke up and heard your actual rap at the door almost at the same time."

"O, marvellous, young girl! What is your name?"

"Well, then, sir, is my dream prophetic? Am I now face to face with 'Blint' Saheb, the friend of my father? That would be a rare joy indeed!"

"No, poor child, I am but an unhappy, homeless Englishman—an adventurer who has fought and failed. I pray that Lt. Col. Flint may never share my fate. I was simply surprised at the coincidence—the knock in your dream and my own rap at the door—I am sometimes vaguely superstitious. I am fast becoming a Hindu. Still, tell me, tell me, your name."

'People call me Indumati."

"Ah! Yes, in such a night—in such a place —good God, Indumati, you are here a victim to your father's help to a friend. You say, you are a prisoner here. But I see nobody in the fort."

"The few attenders left here have run away, sir, hearing that the Company has sent a platoon of infantry to destroy this fortress,—to raze it to the ground, the thorn in the highway to Wandiwash and Ginjee, the fortress of Kambli Naik, the friend of Tippu and the enemy of the British."

Again there was silence for some time. The rain came down in torrents.

The Englishman started suddenly and cried out. "Ah! Indumati, I am uneasy—how musical is your name even to my rugged ear—I shall lock the outer gate as well. This is a good day for ghosts. Who knows one may not choose to peep in."

"Allow me to do it for you, sir. You are new to this place and it is dark."

"I would rather have the ghosts within than trust you into the void. Beautiful girl, I will never forget your sad, calm and lovely face in all the crowded events of my uneven life."

He went out into the darkness only to return white as washed linen, more like a ghost

himself. He roared in a frenzy, he wept tenderly, and spoke aloud. "An hour more I live. Indumati, what does your dream say now? Alas! you are awake and cannot dream. My life is in your hand. My honour I entrust to your scheming head. I must cross the river or fling myself into it—a boat, a boat. Let it not be said of an Englishman that he was cornered and killed like a rat. Don't you hear the tread of feet at a distance—the hoofs of the multitude and of the horses? They will be here in a trice, a thousand strong and squeeze out my life or, oh, make a captive chained and caged for ever! That shall never be. This merciful river has water enough to cover a soldier's honour. Ah, Indumati, what a peril have I brought on you! Think, noble girl, think with all the prophetic energy of your dream, with all the strength and courage of your Naick blood. Help me to cross or float on the river—a boat, a boat! Ah, Indumati, I have drawn you also into the churning stream of my own fated life."

(2)

Half an hour had passed. Indumati and the Englishman were standing on the brink of the mighty flowing river. The sky was still

heavy with clouds and the rain was coming down in torrents. Lightning had disappeared but thunder was still filling the spacious concave with its terrific boom. Indumati broke in whispers the soul-benumbing silence, "Sir, this is an excellent floater—a catamaran made of the light stems of the bannana. You are safe on this. Here is a plank of wood for an oar. Goodbye, sir, I wish you God speed."

"It is cruel of you to talk like this, enchantress of my soul! Great indeed is the Naick clan. Saviour of my life, daughter of Gopal Naik—I cannot leave you like this."

"Don't be anxious on my account, sir. The Lord above judges well. In the fulness of time my day of release will come."

"Ah, day of release! It is now indeed or never. My courage is lost. Indumati, without you I cannot go—not even fly from death. Let me perish where I stand with sword in hand. Sword! Alas, even that I have lost."

Suddenly the crash of a falling door was heard and soon the fort was full of the invaders searching and shouting. The raging elements were too much and Indumati was slowly passing into a state of unconsciousness. With one foot on the catamaran and one on the sandy edge, with a lovely load in hand, the

Englishman pushed the floater quickly into the swift flowing stream. Quick as an arrow it nimbly flew a few yards straight—he almost lost his balance—and swerved in its course abruptly drawn into the heart of the current. All was silence and darkness on the spacious river.

(3)

Nature and their own feelings imposed on them silence. Indumati beat round her little world of ideas and primal emotions. Her unblosomed nature, till now fed on adversity, under the pressure of a single eventful night already unfolded its petals perfuming the neighbourhood with a rich fragrance. She took in readily the new situation.

At last joyous came the twilight of dawn. To Nature it held the promise of a full day after three days' complete absence of sunshine. To Indumati and Lt. Col. Flint, it was also the twilight of their lives. To Indumati it was the morning's promising a life's sunshine. To Flint it was the bright, red, sinking glory of the evening, the one hour of pleasure still left, the last flicker of the flame in whose fading light we decipher strange, unknown scripts and

learn the language of life. Indeed on the bosom of the sacred river it was a twilight of utmost beauty to all the three—Nature, Indumati and Lt. Col. Flint.

(4)

It was nearly midday. The sun shone with temperate warmth. The clouds were scampering off in shapes of unutterable terrestrial beauty and variety. Indumati and Flint Saheb were accomodated in one of the small houses of the village of Amalapuram. Indumati was sitting by his side, pensive and beautiful. He broke the silence, "Indumati, your dream is indeed prophetic. I am 'Blint' Saheb."

"My deliverer, I knew it. What a joy for me!"

"Ah! Indumati, say not so: you are my deliverer. I owe my life to you. And to your father I am deeply beholden. He lost his life fighting with me on the field of battle. And in his dying hour he committed you to my care. Alas, I searched for you in vain—your house was looted by Kambli Naik. I see it all now."

Both took a fill of ardent gazing. And silence spoke more eloquently.

Indumati began, "Tell me, sir, something of your life."

"My vast, varied and star-crossed life would hearten none to hear the whole of it. Tell me something of yours. Its remembrance will sweeten the closing days of my life."

"I don't know much of mine. I was married when—"

"Ah, Indumati; you are married?"

"Yes, sir, when I was a girl of nine. I pray, restore me to my husband and God will requite you."

Lt. Col. Flint was lost in thought a long time. Then pacing to and fro he exclaimed calmly, "If God grants me strength, I will hang this Kambli Naik, the dacoit chief. I will restore you to your husband. But I can never live without you. You are a ministering angel unto me. I love you with the love of a brother, nay the love of a father. If we wait a day or two here I shall have some tidings of the fate of my fort—Wandiwash."

(5)

Neither fortune nor misfortune comes single. The same night a messenger brought news which meant to Lt. Flint the restoration

of his original possessions. The unexpected raising of the siege of Wandiwash and the hasty retreat of Tippu, the fall of the fortress and the death of Kambli Naik—the last and the most ferocious leader of a line of Naiks who played an adventurous and brilliant part for over two hundred years in the ever shifting fortunes of South India—these events belong to history.

A fortnight had passed. It was a strange family group that met in one of the spacious rooms of the fort of Wandiwash. Indumati's husband was there. Lt. Col. Flint was there. Indumati's face now beamed with joy though it still bore the deep mark of sadness and strength of seclusion. Her husband became the *killedar* of the fort of Wandiwash.

Indumati's descendants even today bear the honorary prefix of *Killedar* to their names though the post is as much in ruins now as the ancient fort of Wandiwash itself.

VII

The Bride Waits

(1)

C. Subramania Sastri was a Sub-inspector in the Salt and Abkari Department of the Government of Madras. In those spacious days the Salt and Abkari Departments went together like sisters on a festive occasion. The humiliating distinction of Provincial and Imperial was not known. The Salt department is a creation of the British Raj, which flavours the food of the citizen for a modest cash payment per day to the Government, and the Abkari department for a richer reward blesses his life with the celestial juice, as good as *Soma,* which the Tamils have brewed from time immemorial from the palm tree which stands in scattered plenty on the arid plains of South India as the solitary friend of man. This ancient comradeship between Salt and Abkari was broken by diarchy.

But Subramania Sastri sweated under the meagre shade of the palmyra long before Montagu came to India and added to the gaiety of our tribes with the election festival.

After a penal term of five years in the malarial districts of Cuddapah and Kurnool, Subramaniam was then being smiled on by fortune in the fertile Salavedu range of the Arni Circle. And Salavedu was a coveted range for the perennial 'extras' it yielded on a generous scale. Indeed the Sub-inspector of Salavedu was a little Rockfeller to the starving local republic.

Salavedu is an immense plain on the arid level tract from Acharapakam to Wandiwash, and truly has the parental air of great battle-fields. Wherever the soil is a trifle fertile fed by some jungle stream, the palmyra grows in splendid clusters darkening the horizon. Palmyra is the true-born of the sandy plains of South India and the darling of the Abkari department. It is a source of revenue to the mighty Government of Madras and the slaving Abkari Sub-inspector. It yields to the tapping hand of the government three rupees a tree, and to the patting hand of the Sub-inspector one anna, with an one-fourth share therein to the legion of six peons who worry the soul of *gramanies,* like a troop of wild ants in the bosom of a loaf of brown bread.

C. Subramania Sastri's entry into the Salt department was one of the tricks of Providence.

He came of a very distinguished family of Sanskrit pandits who had won renown by original excursions into Vedantic lore, in the shape of commentaries, and also enriched their lives by many *yagams*. Dialectics was in his blood like juice in the grape or sugar in the cane and Subramaniam might have made his mark as a great pandit or lawyer.

But the Time-spirit of the early seventies put him to English education. He was a student of the Madras Christian College and one of the early batch who studied Shakespeare under the Rev. William Miller. He imbibed the spirit of Shakespearian tragedy so well at college that he used to recite "To be or not be" with dry and solemn majesty, his eyes mirroring the soul's misery in the Salt department, whenever he failed to balance his own budget or to adjust some intricate arithmetic of an arrack shop, dreading all the while the black mark that would impede his promotion, pending so long, from rupees thirty to forty *per mensem*.

Subramaniam was a brilliant boy at college but had a serious attack of illness while preparing for the F.A., and he failed miserably in algebra which plays so vital a part in the realities of every day life. His convalescence, hastened by the nearness of the examination,

quickened his insight into the psychology of Shakespearian character but worked havoc on the exact science of algebra and arithmetic.

Subramaniam had always felt that the inner call of his career and of his own inherited qualities was the call to the Bar. But after failure in F.A., "B.A., B.L." seemed impossible, for he had married early and God had already blessed him with two children, the eldest born a daughter. His inheritance was slender and his all-powerful elder brother had refused him any further supplies of money hard-earned from agriculture. Therefore, Subramaniam had to enter life, leaving the sweet pleasures of further Shakespearian study and the dreams of a fine career at the Bar—he had a stentorian voice, and he thought that it was the ripest qualification for a successful advocate.

Subramaniam's fellow tenant was a clerk in the excise department at Chepauk. He introduced him to his chief who, attracted by the comely, graceful and lance-like figure, and clear-shining Brahmin face of Subramaniam, appointed him to a clerk's place. After three years of drudgery at the desk, and city life which his wife hated, he escaped one day to the wilds of the interior as a *sub-pro-tem* Sub-

inspector on the regimental scale of thirty rupees a month. Thanks to the one anna which the benevolence of the palmyra yielded, in spite of the malevolence of man, Subramaniam and Visalakshi, his wife, led a happy though not rich life till they came to Salavedu range, except of course for occasional storms in the domestic teacup which only made the flavour of life the richer.

(2)

'Ah, dear, you'll never learn to trim the sails to the passing wind, risk the worm on hand to catch the big fish in the sea. If only you had promptly sent the two tins of ghee to the camp-clerk to the A.C. (the Assistant Commissioner), why, there would have been no transfer at all to arid Cuddapah and this waste of five years—what a loss! We should have saved by now really five thousand rupees, ready cash for Pattu's marriage—two tins of gree, and what a magic change in our life!'

Subramaniam bore bravely under this indictment, and slowly answered grinding his palms with a fine air of discontent.

'Yes, you are right, Visalee. Two tins of ghee would have wrought a miracle five years

ago . . . and ghee, you know, is a holy gift to another according to our sastras. Only in this case it would have gone to soak and flavour a dainty dish of *pilao*.'

'What is the use of polished irony or bitter words when life's rough ways have got to be trodden? You have to stoop a little even if you want to pick up a flower from the earth. You should learn these little arts of life, if only for the sake of our dear Pattu.'

'Stoop till I'm trodden over, and my back is broken, and I'm humbled to the dust by fellows of yesterday who roam about as camp-clerks? No, not even for dear Pattu's sake. Where's the urgency about Pattu's marriage. She can wait three years and more; a husband for her, God-anointed, will surely come like the ant that finds its way to the drop of honey or bees that come of their own accord to the lotus bud. Visalee, we have made many beautiful things in life odious by the mere touch of our vile human hands. . . .'

'You are as usual out on your philosophic nothing—Pattu is completing twelve this *Ani* . . . . but that we are in this desert, the voice of social pressure and odium would have reached us long time ago. We should have married our Pattu even last year while at

Cuddapah. She surely takes after me and it is perilous to keep her unmarried for a month longer; risk the happiness of our darling's whole life by your laziness and lack of thrift.'

'That is just what you propose doing now by your hastiness and extravagance,' Subramaniam shouted in a husky voice.

Subramaniam felt revolt surging in his blood which was charged with the grained orthodoxy of fourteen generations. In some measure this instinctive revolt had its partial fulfilment in the choice of his vocation—the daily sour odour of toddy dilating the refined brahmin nostrils of one who was ordained by the sastras to inhale daily the smoke of ghee burnt with the sacred *arasam* twigs.

Under the powerful spell of English education and of the cheap reprints of the R. P. A., Subramaniam's mind had already opened up new windows of thought. He had secretly cherished the thought of not making Pattu's marriage a hasty eleventh-hour mess. Pattu would get her God-appointed husband in the fulness of time. The ripe plum in the tree—does it coo for the bird to come and peck at it? Let Pattu win her lord as in the old spacious days of Vedic India. But he felt that he must adopt a different line of action and argument to

convince his wife, and began in a soft conciliatory tone, 'Dear, you know how we stand; we can't manage the money to marry Pattu decently this year or even the next.'

'What about the village lands in the grip of your elder brother? It does not yield us even a bag of rice, a *seer* of tamarind per year. Why keep it only to pamper your respectable *anna;* sell it or mortgage it—'

'Sell it or mortgage it to whom? *Anna* is all in all in our village and nearabouts. To raise a loan! That is impossible.'

'What about the palmyra season? You were telling me only the other day that this Salavedu range was a veritable silver mine, two thousand rupees extra per pear; you promised even an *abhishekam* to our Lord of the Seven Hills if no extra inspection of A.C. or D.C. came off during the mining season, and if you were kept on this place for three more years.'

'But dear, nobody would lend us now on such uncertain credit.'

'But somehow we must celebrate the marriage this year. If you shed your laziness and go round our district with a tenth of the alterness you show in patrolling these palmyra wastes, you will certainly be able to secure for

darling Pattu a decent boy in the B.A., whom we may pay now a thousand rupees and for the balance undertake his education for the B.L.'

'Dear, now you are certainly planning very ably this instalment system; you have something of your father's constructive skill.'

Her father was a well-known tout and *vakil gumastha* recognised to be the ablest hand at writing a plaint or an affidavit for weak causes.

This compliment of Subramaniam's mollified Visalee a little. She stood more at ease, her left arm akimbo. And Subramaniam after a decent pause given to an eager, admiring gaze, reconnoitered a little and ventured to begin, 'It's no doubt a good idea, yours, dear. But the palmyra season begins only in March and finishes by the end of July and the collections all come in in driblets only towards the end of July or early in August, and you know the marriage season ends before it.'

'Well, then,' Visalee began a fresh plan; 'let us send round our district ahead of us our Dorasu.'

'*Our* Dorasu! you mean your brother Dorasu! What is he fit for, I wonder; I'm surprised that a sensible woman like you . . .'

'He may not be good at cramming books and passing examinations but he is fit for col-

lecting good horoscopes, and all say that he has a special gift for it.'

'But he is such a spendthrift, dear; how can one trust him with silver? It will surely go either to coffee clubs or dancing girls. He will bill me first-class travelling allowance, waste his time and our money, and post us a few false horoscopes. We had enough of him early in our lives at Madras. I'll not have him on any account, not even for your asking.'

'No wonder you talk like this. If it lay with you, you won't have me even or our own dear Pattu, but spend your days pleasantly with these drunken fellows, your peons, in palmyra forests, under the shade of toddy-shops. Our Dorasu must act for us. Or tell me at once who will do well this responsible task; else I myself must go home and do the task as best a woman can.'

'I'll think of it all and tell you next week.'

Subramaniam, a reverent student of *Hamlet* who scored the highest marks in Shakespeare, could never be surprised into a decisive action.

'Think of it! That means you are not going to think at all. We are already at the beginning of March and tomorrow you are going out

on a long camp with the first batch of a hundred tapping applications—instead of horoscopes.'

Visalakshi was in an unusually perturbed state and showed such a decided fighting mood that it was clear she would carry her point.

C. Subramania Sastri reflected for a while pencilling his finger and tapping it on his lips. With charm in his voice and sadness in his face he spoke, 'Visalee, today you are in a very unreasoning mood; you speak as if I have no responsibility for Pattu's marriage. Pattu is as much my daughter as yours. Money is not the only point now, there is yet another peril. The moment I apply for leave for my daughter's marriage—even supposing I'm so lucky as to get it sanctioned by the A.C.—I shall be surely transferred to a barren range; then you are off for ever from Salavedu and its silver mines. I hear already that the S. I. of Thular is intriguing for this range, ready with tins of ghee and a nice Bangalore *saree*. We shall on our return get only some station at the foot of the Javadi Hills—full of mosquitoes and malaria.'

Visalakshi was flaming red in the face. 'There's no end to your objections and arguments. I've known them so long. You are not the man to act. You can cast accounts and slave at the desk even when our home is on fire.

I'll wire for Dorasu. You may stay at home drinking cups of coffee and casting toddy accounts.'

'Why, dear, you are becoming quite unreasonable about Pattu. Where is the need for hurry? Let her grow a little more into a perfect girl full of health and strength, and a mind that has grown to know itself and the glory of marriage.'

Visalakshi wasted no more words in reply to this confession of faith of a social reformer. She had long been standing in the 'rezhi' with a cup of coffee in her hand, as if she would part with it only after extracting a promise from her husband that he would make honest attempts to celebrate Pattu's marriage that same year. Now she lost her temper thoroughly. She planted with a thump the *lota* on the pial and pushed it angrily towards her husband as if it were a toy motorcar or a perambulator. *Lotas,* not blessed with wheels, go ill with angry wives—or husbands? This one fell on its face in a mute act of worshipful protest. The coffee flowed out in a clear black rill by the side of the S. I., and fell in a little cascade from the pial to the floor. And the lota span a little, looked woebegone like a badly hit spectator in a cricket match.

Pattu was sitting in the open courtyard

with an illustrated book, seeming intent on it but really interested in this conversation. Subramaniam now raised his eyes and gazed on her with proud joy, if only for the perfect reproduction of the facial outline and colour of the skin that was all his own.

The flowing rill of coffee and the grinding protest of the *lota* decided the issue once for all. Indeed Visalakshi was never so rough or agitated all her life, and something unknown and mysterious to his rank Masculine must, he supposed, be the reason for this ire of the Eternal Feminine, and the urgency of Pattu's marriage the same year. He must gracefully yield. Such were the quick reflections with which Subramaniam watched the winding progress of the thin line of coffee which cascaded to the ground.

(3)

C. Subramaniam had not the full benefit of the palmyra season of the famous Salavedu range. That he had applied for leave for his daughter's marriage got wind—those six blood hounds, the salt sentinels, what are they for if not to ferret out domestic secrets which have so intimate a bearing on their official fortunes? The toddy-shop renters, apprised of their good

luck—for such, indeed, would be the changing of S. I.s in the middle of the palmyra season,—withheld their *mamools* to Subramaniam with the finest and most gracious of assurances of payment with the next batch of tapping applications. Still, thanks to the resourcefulness and the driving power of need, Subramaniam had succeeded in collecting over five hundred rupees of exquisite silver and copper, in all stages of emaciated and over-thumbed currency whose relatively final haven of rest in this restless world is the toddy-shop.

Subramaniam tried another day to argue again with Visalakshi, pleading that five hundred rupees would not cover even the cost of exploring for a son-in-law in the maze of villages in the Tanjore district, and that it was not yet too late to cancel his leave and save Salavedu. But what does a roving S. I., with no headquarters according to rules, know of the pulsing anxiety and the melancholy hours of a Hindu mother anxious for the marriage of her daughter before social odium crashes into her ears like thunder, even if whispered in secret? Visalakshi finally clinched the matter by promising all her jewellery for a pledge, to be of course redeemed the next palmyra season. That was earnestness indeed, and no husband,

thoughtful or otherwise, can afford to ignore such an offer of outstanding merit, if only not to be outdone in magnanimity.

So Subramaniam left Salavedu even with something like gaiety in his heart on his matrimonial researches for his darling Pattu. Sometime ago his brother-in-law, for a remittance of fifty rupees, had secured four horoscopes, two being dilapidated old men out in the marriage market the third time, with unknown assets and known liabilities. With this precious load in his pocket diary, which was itself a clever chronicle of many imaginary inspections of shops and *topes,* Subramaniam with Visalakshi and Pattu arrived one cloudy morning at their village of Alangadu on the banks of the Cauvery.

Visalakshi had not been to Alangadu for over twelve years. Her vital problem, of course, was her sister-in-law who was as masterful as *anna* himself. She was quite a sterile country affair who burnt with jealousy at the sight of Visalakshi's jewellery, her accomplished daughter and promising little boy. It was a joint family in which the elder, supported by an aged mother who believed in befriending the man on the spot, gave *nil* return of mesne profits year after year with perfect audacity to his younger brother.

For the sake of darling Pattu whose marriage no bridegroom would agree to celebrate in the wilds of Salavedu, she was prepared to put up with her sister-in-law's ways quietly for a month. But on the very day of her arrival she had hints from her enough to alarm her, "Supposing she declares for sheer malice in secret whispers to the gossiping widows of Alangadu that our grown-up and well-built Pattu has already come of age, red ruin will track our way if such a vile and false rumour were set afloat by her."

So she spurred her husband to assert his importance as S. I. of Salavedu, with an extra-income of two thousand a year, a man not to be trifled with. Of course Subramaniam did his best to indicate his adolescence in the august presence of his elder brother. Meanwhile Visalakshi prayed to her family god at Swamimalai that the critical month of *Ani* may pass smoothly and fruitfully, with a son-in-law to welcome home for Deepavali on a grand scale at Salavedu. How many requests may one include in a single prayer in return for the promise of one cocoanut? But the elephant-god Ganesha, still a bachelor, to whom all these prayers are addressed, is no match for these agile members of the fair sex.

(4)

It was indeed a critical month for C. Subramania Sastri. He plunged heroically into the work on hand. After all he was by vocation a man of action: only nobody can do two things at a time well—dispose of tapping applications as well as horoscopes. But he had been practically an exile from his own district for over fifteen years, and did not know the nuances and modes of approach laid down by the laws of its decadent but refined life. This refinement involves a complex code of diplomacy rivalled only by the tangled politics of Central Europe today. He knew ill the conventions and intricacies of the marriage market. Therefore, he had to co-opt very reluctantly the eminently diplomatic services of his brother-in-law Dorasu, saturated in the cleverness and conventions of Tanjore. Dorasu took him in one whirlwind tour from station to station, exhausting the latest developments in the theatre, and in musicians, including of course some pretty dancing girls just budding into fame.

The daytime was used laboriously for the collection and scrutiny of horoscopes, and no two astrologers said the same thing. How

could they in such a sublime subject and with so many stars speaking such a jargon! And no stars care to tell their mystic tale of charm to the poor man-worm crawling on his belly. Really it appeared to Subramaniam that Pattu's husband had not yet been born in the Tamil land. And no boy of twenty would care to think of a girl unless his inheritance was doubled by that alliance—a rupee fetching a rupee, often a bad rupee fetching a good one.

(5)

C. Subramania Sastri's five hundred rupees dwindled in these travels of search and research to rupees fifty, just enough to cover his retreat to Salavedu on the expiry of his leave. Three weeks of *Ani* had passed and Subramaniam had gained enough experience to know that one full palmyra season and its gains had to be sacrificed if at all his Pattu was to be married. Odious it looked to his rational and cultured outlook on life—he was an *apastambi*—that marriage, the most sacred and beautiful institution of man should have become such a damned affair in the Tamil land, and to a Government servant such an impossibility.

Subramaniam returned home just at break

of dawn on the 25th of *Ani*. And Pattu was drawing the *kolam* in front of the house in lines of exquisite grace and symmetry, matched only by her own beauty. She greeted her father with a tender and anxious smile; her eyes put the question as to her destiny which her tongue dared not. She stood lovely, gazing at her father, like a pomegranate in its ripening hour. Subramaniam's heart sank within him as if changed to lead at this sight of gold.

His elder brother came out of the house and greeted him with a merry twinkle in his sly and far-seeing eyes. He often explained his own infertility by saying that in this *kaliyuga* it was not worth while bringing forth children into this cruel world. He placed a long official envelope in Subramaniam's hands and said: 'Suppu, don't be angry with me or charge me with indifference. I've got ready all the hundred things needed for a marriage. Here are fifty casuarina poles and three thousand *keettu* for the marriage *pandal*. I've got husked thirty *kalams* of paddy in a day. The cooks, the piper, everything is ready. Have you fixed up the match with the Budalur boy? I think he would be the best for our Pattu, though indeed somewhat above our status. Is the wedding to be on the 31st of *Ani*?'

The elder brother, a veteran in the ways of life and the woes of others, used the utmost narrative skill in his speech, for he had already read the story of the marriage from the drooping face and the moist eyes of Suppu. And he had also had the official letter read out to him and translated in secret.

The office memo from the Arni Circle read as follows:—

Subramaniam, VI grade, S. I. of Salavedu Range has been transferred to Moolakkadu Range, Polur Circle. To join immediately on expiry of leave.

Yes, Moolakkadu, as its very name so deftly suggests, is at the foot of the Javadi Hills, full of deadly malaria and mosquitoes. The very mention of its name is enough to send a thrill of pain into any S. I., however chronically sad and listless be his share of life in the Salt, Abkari and Excise Department of the Government of Madras.

VIII

A Fractured Arm

Krishnaswami had once high hopes of a brilliant career in life either as an I. C. S. or as a successful leader of the Madras Bar who gathered his rupees in shoals, in sunshine and storm. There were five Krishnaswamis in the S. S. L. C. class but S. T. was easily the best. And he was the top boy from Form I to VI in the High School at Trichinopoly but suffered a strange eclipse of academic fortune in his college career.

They say wiving goes by destiny. But in Kittu's case, surely, destiny went by wiving. It proved a frost to the bud. Ever since he strode in bridal procession, his saffroned hand clasped in another delicate rosy hand, he suffered a strange paralysis. His interest in studies slackened. His juvenile outlook lost its vigour and abundance. His vitality became scattered. Did this lassitude arise from a romantic revolt and longing that surges the juvenile bosom with tumultuous joy at the prospect of a distant but sure fulfilment? No; for, Kittu felt no attrac-

tion for this inscrutable business of marriage, a confused human affair of costly muddling. He viewed it with a palpitating heart as a tiger would a torchlight in the deep glades of the forest. Kittu was anti-feminine by birth, probably the sub-conscious memory of many lives in the past injured by women, now, shaded deeper by the vivid touch of heredity and the misanthropic influence of his proud grandmother.

Kittu failed in the Intermediate Examination partly due to the decay that had already set in in his metabolism, physical and mental because of his marriage and partly because Trichinopoly happened to be one of the "slaughtered" centres of the year. The sensitive lad who tasted failure for the first time sold his text-books and empty bottles that once contained Dr. Rao's tonics to brace him up for the midnight studies, scraped together the train fare to Paramati, his own sylvan village on the banks of the Akanda Cauvery.

Kittu decided to have no more dealings with man or woman, teacher or pupil, boy or girl, but live a life utterly one with Nature. He indeed lived such a life but one exception he made in favour of his aged but virile and active grandmother whose striking intellectual pre-

sence attracted like magnet. Who would not, who knew the amazing talents of Seshi, the terror of the village and the born tamer of daughters-in-law? Kittu's wife, Kamalam, fair and pure as a lotus-bud, joined Kittu more as a fellow subject, to the greater glory of Seshi's imperial rule, doing as a kitchen-wench the drudgery of a home which had its own traditions of living in style.

Immediately after his marriage Kittu lost his parents within one month of each other and this aggravated Kamalam's troubles. Ever since, Seshi had looked upon Kamalam as a bird of ill-omen, and Kittu by temperament favoured the view that marriage was a clumsy contrivance of man for the reproduction of his own silly species: nay, all animal life had bungled this vital affair compared with the sovereign simplicity of the vegetable kingdom in this matter. Naturally Seshi sympathised with Kittu who inherited from her in a large measure this misanthropic, but as you may say scientific view of life.

(2)

When Kittu had thus been spending more than two years of his sterile life in his own beautiful and fertile village, and Kamalam

drudged as a kitchen-slave lashed by the tongue of her mother-in-law's mother-in-law a national event cast its shadow, or sunshine, as you please, on Kittu's destiny even in secluded Paramati. The Government of India, under the stress of Congress agitation, was becoming more and more alive to the needs of mass education. They stimulated by a well-worded circular the sleeping provincial governments which in turn whipped up the Taluq Boards who had been spending lavishly their money on mending their village roads which could never be mended so long as contractors for earthwork were drawn from the expert class of brothers and cousins, brothers-in-law and cousins-in-law of Presidents of Taluq Boards and members thereof. From mending roads they were now asked to mend boys, a task which they took up with equal promptitude.

The Taluq Board within whose jurisdiction Kittu lived finally selected three dozen villages for opening new primary schools in and spending the allotment of money that came to them suddenly like floods in the Cauvery. Paramati happened to be one of them.

Kittu's married life was unblessed and Kamalam continued to pray and work, and work and pray. Like most people who have

not succeeded in reproducing their selves Kittu felt no tenderness or love for the young, but felt a very great attraction for the career of a teacher of the young. And in those archaic days birth-control had not yet become a live or fashionable topic to engross the attention of the over-prolific and the sterile.

The fruitless are generally of two classes, the loving and the misanthropic. To the first, the touch and sight of the young, the tender young, is a soothing balm to the bruised heart that longs in vain for the satisfaction of the primal instinct. The second look upon the young with cannibal eyes and long for the opportunity to bury their nails in the warm young flesh even as a jutka driver looks upon the newest colt as the sphere for his merciless whip. Kittu belonged to the second class. Why deride poor Kittu? He is not to blame. Nature rejoices in exceeding variety, and society nourishes better the tares and the weeds.

Kittu was appointed a primary school teacher at Paramati on twelve rupees a month. The prospective clang of silver pieces in his purse humanised him for a while, and he indeed liked the job for a few months, and then carried it on as a matter of stern duty with increasing severity towards the hapless young, day by day,

for over three years. Latterly he became more and more irregular even in attendance. But his cane, the symbol of his despotic power and his chronic dislike for teaching, lay on the table, long and severe, all the twenty-four hours of the day.

Kittu was a little brute to the young tender and sensitive lads who trembled like aspen leaves at the mere sight of him or sound of his tread. Their hearts sank in twitching pain. Did their parents know? Yes, they did, but were callous because of the age-long tradition. All were busy with their own work, and fathers and mothers alike were happy that the mischievous imps were well impounded for the day and domestic peace was insured.

(3)

"Mother," so Kittu called his grandmother, "I am dead tired of this wretched slaving work day by day saying the same silly little things to little boys who could or would never learn; it's like pouring water on stone, it'll never wet; or to use a biblical saying (he had emerged from the Mission School at Trichinopoly with a good knowledge of Scripture) : cast the seed on rocky soil, it'll never sprout."

"Kittu," energetically replied Seshi, alarm-

ed at the prospect of losing the twelve silver pieces a month, "what is the use of grumbling. Take things, as they are, Kittu, and life is hard work for all of us. Look at me. Even at seventy-five I've to work hard, getting up at five, while Kamalam leaves her bed at seven, like a queen. Again, why complain of poor little boys meant for play? Look at Kamalam, your own wife. She's as old as that rain-washed mud-wall in our backyard and as wise as that. I am telling her every day to do this and to do that, and she will never learn even the routine. She is a teacher's wife—I am not surprised your little boys are no better."

"Yes, yes, mother, I understand you. The teacher is stupid, worthless, he does not know his job, can't teach." The brute in Kittu was stirred, and it required very little stirring, by the effective insinuating way of his grandmother. Kittu had a silver tumbler in his hand, a marriage present from Kamalam, from which he was slowly drinking buttermilk.

He flung it in a rage at Kamalam who just then happened to be drawing water from the well in the courtyard. In that helpless condition the silver cup struck her in the softest part of her bosom, spilling the buttermilk into streaming drops all along its flighty way. Then

it fell into the well gurgling water and sank to the bottom mire. Kittu followed his straight bowling with words of abuse of which he had well enriched his store since he had become a teacher.

Seshi made her own little contribution to the drama. In petulant ire she suggested that Kamalam herself should leap into the well and salvage the silver cup. Kamalam, who had borne with patience the ill-treatment of years, caught at the hint in a sudden access of suicidal rage and leapt into the well.

Kittu screamed in horror at the unexpected turn and even Seshi was taken aback by the prompt obedience of her daughter-in-law. The whole village was soon upon the scene and it included the troop of boys from Kittu's own school who were not a whit less eager to see their teacher's wife drowned in the well, though they would have liked most heartily to find Kittu himself at the bottom.

(4)

At about the same time, though it fell within school hours, another scene was enacted in this village drama in the dilapidated house in which the school was located. The boys had met in open revolt. For, that day, Kittu

had overdone the usual exercise of his cane over the boys. For some time he had settled into the habit of using his cane immediately on arrival as a disciplinary and preventive punishment, a measure to ensure order even during his mid-day dozing hours. The whole of the previous week the boys had conspired to put an end to this tyranny. They resolved to break cocoanuts and burn camphor to the village god Ganesha praying that some dire calamity might happen to their teacher, that his merciless caning right hand might be broken in some street accident. They carried out the resolve, broke cocoanuts and burnt camphor, but still their prayers remained unheard.

"Comrades, what is the use of praying to god Ganesha who is as helpless as little boys who sometimes stone him in play?" cried one who was more practical and realistic than the others. "Let us pull together and act. Way-lay Kittu when he goes out in the evenings, stone him from bush and tree till he carries his caning right hand in a sling for ever."

Applause greeted this speech.

"No, no. Let us be brave boys. Why should we pursue our teacher in the dark? Let us pelt him with paper balls and balloons charged with ink, or drive nails and pins into his seat,

or let off crakers when he snores on the bench," suggested another who objected to changing the venue for their operations from the school room to the open road.

"If he dare to cane us for our paper balls, let us pluck the cane from his hand," suggested another, affecting keen foresight.

"Comrades, hear me," cried the tallest and the most forward boy in the school; "these things are easily said but not so easily done. There is one clear way. Let us all some day strike work, lock the door against our teacher quietly when he is snoring on the bench. Why some day? Why not even now, when he is away?"

This suggestion was approved with a hilarious roar of applause, and in fact one boy had already produced a small lock from his pocket. But by common consent Kittu's own lock was preferred. So the simmering revolt of the young duly boiled over into an executive act of precious courage and decision.

Hardly had the boys locked the door and crowded on the verandah when the news reached them that their teacher's wife had jumped into the well. So they trooped along to see the sight and only wished on the way that it had been he and not she.

As the well was broad and shallow, and Kamalam was lean, lithe, and agile, she shot down like an arrow even in the dangerous descent of twenty feet. She escaped with a few bruises on the head and the feet. The will to live guides us secretly even in the most explosive and suicidal hour.

At about the same time, by some providential chance, the President of the Taluq Board arrived on a casual visit of inspection both of his dilapidated roads and schools.

And Kittu was unmasked.

(5)

The schoolmaster understood before sunset that after this demoralising incident he could no more remain in his village with a shred of self-respect. He planned an escape to Madras to drown his rural shame in urban vastness and ugliness where Kittu, the tyrant, would not be known or recognised. With surprising zeal and industry he tried for several jobs in the metropolis. Eventually he found that only two careers were open to a Brahmin, that of a cook or of a chauffeur, for both of which, of course, he required a preliminary training. No whilom teacher ever thinks of becoming a cook. So Kittu tried his prentice hand at motor driving,

adding terribly to the perils of pedestrian traffic in Madras. He was sure that his hand which had wielded the cane so effectively would be equally good at the steering wheel.

Kittu in the first month of his apprenticeship "back-fired" one day and nearly broke his right hand; as it was, it was badly sprained at the wrist. In the second month of his training he showed much greater promise. He was allowed on stray trials out. Encouraged by the proficiency and control he was gaining in his new art so quickly, he landed his beautiful Austin Sedan upside down one day, crashing at racing speed against an innocent tamarind tree on the wayside, the tree whose buoyant little branches he had so often and so intimately used against the tender palm and flesh of his boys. He smashed the Sedan, smashed for ever the ulna and radius of his own right hand. He had a nasty bleeding cut on the head and contracted on the third day high fever and wavered between life and death for a day in the Madras General Hospital.

But Kittu had a line in the newspapers about the accident and a photograph of the smash. He read it with some joy even in high fever. Kittu had the soul of the publicist and the politician and had for all his misanthropy,

his own share of the love of glory, a human failing that lives in the very red corpuscles of the blood.

(6)

"Kamala, how shall I ever fully express my remorse, work out my repentance and wash the hate of years with acts of love?" Kittu pleaded in a voice of entreaty, a voice to which youth, love, and sincerity alike had returned as if by magic.

"Why should you, dear? You are always my lord." Kamalam spoke with ease and refinement in the subdued accents of a true Hindu wife.

It was the third week after the accident. It was a clean bed in the General Hospital and Kittu lay therein with his fractured arm heavily padded with bandage and borne in a sling. Kamalam was by his bedside nursing him with unceasing toil and devotion. From the day Kittu broke his arm he was a changed man. The motor smash had smashed his past. Three weeks of nursing with loving care had conquered in him all hate of his wife and her sex.

"Kamala, I have been very hard on you these years, indeed cruel. I was a little brute. I never knew you were so full of love for me

even then. It was my grandmother who put me on the wrong track from the very beginning. But two generations divide you and my grandmother. Now I see the gulf clearly in the urban light of Madras life." Kittu's voice almost entreated his wife for her forgiveness.

"It's not your fault, dear; it's our joint *karma* that the early years of our wedded life should have been so conflicting and barren. My father, an astrologer, mentioned it to me at the time of our wedding, but had hopes of the latter half. We have worked out the first. Let us bury the past and work and live for the future. We are still young enough to begin our lives again in the prettiest way and God be thanked you have been given back to me so wondrously safe;" Kamalam replied with a smile such as had never shone in her face before.

"Now that my grandmother too has passed away, we can—" Kittu ventured diffidently on a difficult theme.

"Alas, dear, that she should have passed away when neither of us could be not by her death-bed!" Kamalam spoke with moving sincerity. "She prayed for nothing else but a handful of fire at your hands all these years in her ripe old age."

"God had decreed that she did not deserve it."

"Why are you so harsh, dear? Rather say God had decreed we should not have the good fortune."

"Then let it be so, Kamala. I see now that your good nature is infinite. Tell me, what shall we make of our future?"

"Why, go back to our village and work up the school once again on truer lines, on lines of love and freedom. I'll assist you in leisure hours. Let us admit girls as well, and train them up into true mothers and sisters."

"An excellent idea, Kamala!"

"The old school in that dilapidated house remains locked as it was locked by the mischievous boys on that eventful day. The President has closed the school for the present for want of a suitable teacher in the village. Let us go back and re-open it—not in the same century-old house which seems a stuffy prison for the boys—but let us hold our classes under the deep shade of the banyan tree in front of the village temple on the eternal banks of the Cauvery."

"Yes, yes, Kamala. Let us drink in with the water-laden wind the new song of freedom that stirs India." Kittu, touched by the Eternal Feminine, became poetic.

"But dear, make one promise, will you?"

Kittu gravely nodded assent and Kamalam

continued: "Never, never touch the cane or use a harsh word to the boys, dear."

"Never, never, I swear," Kittu almost rose from his reclining posture in a vivid gesture of sincerity. "Need you, Kamala, tell me now with my fractured arm yet in the sling?"

(7)

A year had passed by. The full moon was shining in all her glory. All the boys and girls of Paramati had met there on the banks of the Cauvery in the evening hour to celebrate a picnic of joy. For on that day, early in the morning when the Sun was shining in full native splendour in Leo, Kamalam had given birth to a son. There was the tender ecstacy of paternity in Kittu's eyes; a softness suffused his faltering voice; and he looked with adoring love on the little group of children that had gathered there for picnic on the fringe of the foaming freshes of the Akhanda Cauvery, a mile broad and majestic, in her fullest hour of flood.

IX

Illumination

(1)

It was No. 7, a pretty, compactly built, but very old house in one of the winding lanes of Mylapore. This lane had a sanctity and distinction of its own, and the leisurely hand of time had blessed it in many ways. In the first place it was longer than the ordinary run of lanes which in our Indian cities are proverbially long. Secondly it was blessed with the auspicious local variant of the name of God Ganesha. Presiding at the head of the lane, owning for himself a cosy stone temple, the *Pillayar* specially blessed commercial enterprise and surveyed in general the affairs of the men and women of Mylapore with a kindliness and complacence that shone even on his elephantine face, well-anointed, and smeared with sandal paste. The miseries and ambitions of modern life increased only his share of cocoanuts and camphor and the somnolent perfume of burnt incense.

And not only that. The head of the lane lay within the sacred square of the temple and

broadened out into the spacious South Mada Street, so sacred to God Kapaleswara and so beneficent to coffee clubs, small dealers, pilgrims and vagrants. While at the other end the winding lane stroked its tail, like a serpent in fright, into the slums of Mandavali. And most modern of all was the good luck that had befallen this lane as the nursery of eminent lawyers ever since Mylapore began to shine with the flush of prosperity and the show of opulence that came with the angled wealth of litigous districts all over the Presidency from the *Mahanadi* to the *Tambraparni.*

If that was the history of the lane, the history of No. 7 was even richer. It had the reputation of lodging at different intervals of time the restless mind and frail body of at least three Advocates-General in their younger years of sweat and struggle, and at least one High Court Judge who had passed away but had left behind a complete daily record of his career and case-law for the guidance of the younger generation of lawyers.

The tenant who occupied the house at the time when our story begins was both in quality and in ambition not a whit inferior to his predecessors. He in due time hoped to cast his anchor in the peaceful depths of the Luz after toiling

for the allotted period as a 'devil' bartering his manhood for eminence in case-law.

Sundaram had a brilliant college career behind him, like all my heroes. He was a first class Mathematics Honours man who deliberately chose the law as the only fit sphere of action for his clear mind and clearer ambition—else the law of gravitation might have fallen to his axe long before Einstein shot out his thunder bolt. Sundaram rejected as jejune many offers of a settled salary as a lecturer in a college or a higher grade clerk in the Secretariat. A virile mind like his was meant to teach men rather than boys.

No. 7 was a house held in trust by a young and charming lady whom Sundaram won over by his fine presence and persuasive bargaining. She could reward Sundaram only with a long lease of seven years on a moderate rent. He was apprenticed to one of the leading lawyers of Mylapore and had been 'devilling' in his office now for seven years sacrificing every comfort of home life in its most succulent hour. Still the tradition of No. 7 remained to be fulfilled in Sundaram's case. Still he waited for the chance tide in the affairs of men, which sooner or later No. 7 should send his way.

The seven years of his professional career had been marked by hard work, diligence and a supple readiness to adjust himself to all the needs of a complex and precarious profession. In spite of the steady pursuit of the well known methods of success happily knit together into a tradition in his leader's office, Sundaram found himself much worse than he had been at the start seven years before. Nothing gave him comfort except the calm and shining faith of his wife, Sundari, in a destiny that shapes wisely the future of all. For, hers was a religious nature fed upon our epics and the puranas, temperamentally reconciled to the conflicts and inequalities inherent in life. She was fully saturated in the *vasanas* of the Hindu view of life.

But Sundaram's was essentially an intellectual nature, dry, clear, logical and exploring, though elevated and refined by an artistic temperament that found peace of mind not in action for its own sake but in the splendid enjoyment of the fruits of action. So he went on working hard, but without satisfaction since there were no material rewards. His mind was vexed and riddled with ultimate questionings for which he could find no answer. The whole system seem-

ed to him wrong, which did not gave the prizes of the ring to the strong.

Sundari heard all his laments with a beatific calm and occasionally in the hour of his deepest distress, she used to sing to him the finest devotional songs or chant hymns in Samskrit in a voice of the purest cadence and the most suggestive rhythm. And Sundaram wondered in his lounge why these snatches of song composed him while the most intricate flights of his rational mind never solved the riddle of life, never gave him peace.

(2)

The crescent moon shone with a faint smile on a clear blue sky and the reverie of night was already in the lane in which Sundaram lived though in the adjoining main thoroughfare the hooting car rolled in frenzy on its return home mad with the power of petrol. Sundaram was lounging in an easy chair with the latest Appeal Cases turned down and kept open on his bare chest. The rhythmic beat of his heart was pulsing up and down the slender sheets that carried the highest law of the land. He was intent gazing on the electric bulb and the shining, star-like filament within. The light attracted the moth. The moth attracted the lizard. The

fierce glimmer of carnivora shone in the eyes of the lizard even under the blinding electric light. Sundaram's eyes caught this exploiting glimmer; he was fascinated. This twinkling light in the eyes of the lizard that preyed upon the poor moth seemed to illumine for him a mysterious track of life. He slowly sunk into a reverie.

Tall, fair, well-proportioned and with chisselled features, in any posture,—walking, standing, sitting, writing, or reclining, 'devilling' or arguing—Sundaram always attracted. Being born under the influence of Taurus, he had the temperament of the bull for absorbed and unfatigued work. And he had also that rarer thing, the touch of the artist which he carried with such grace and finish into every little thing he did. His work was perfect in line and shape, from paring his finger nail to preparing a first appeal, all neat and orderly, suggesting a clear, incisive, artistic mind. Work was his supreme joy, provided it yielded glamorous silver. Otherwise it never gave him peace of mind. His work, however good and perfect, never by itself left a trace of sweetness on his tongue.

Why? Sundaram often wondered how Sundari, so much his inferior, blazed like a child

with contentment and joy, especially after every fresh visit to the temple. He had very many great gifts, gifts of the mind. He could soothe the conflicts of life both at home and abroad, by one bright, incisive or conciliatory word but everytime he laid it by the magic wand of his mind the ghost reappeared. Why? He could not answer. His restless mind fevered with ambition and work vexed all the more his 'ego.' What is Truth? The more he worked the less happy he became, more problems came up, and the endless toil of his professional devilling to that another may roll luxuriously through life tangled his own into an ugly knot. Why; he asked himself again and again. He had enough patience to wait for the fruits of labour. But how could he with the probing, curious mind which judged everything at every step, say to himself, "I shall not seek at all the fruits of action." Before he could frame the question his mind gave the answer, "Then, only somebody else will snatch away the fruits of action even as your leader is now doing." There was something wrong somewhere in this wretched scheme of life, some arrest in the evolution of man who is now neither a beast nor an angel. And again, how could Sundaram, with five children on his hands, the latest but a month

old, act without an eye to the fruits of action and keep the pot boiling under the stress of modern life?

All the while, Sundari sat a little apart in the *Koodam* leaning on a wooden pillar that shone like polished ebony; recently Sundaram had given a dash of paint to the old timber of the trust house when he installed electric lights at his own cost. Sundari sat absorbed in maternal love, suckling her little babe which broke into cries of anguish whenever it dropped touch with mother's milk. Sundari's beauty was slowly recovering and regaining charm after the throes of child-birth, and convalescence invested her beautiful body with the sinuous grace and charm of the crescent moon that now rode peacefully over the court-yard of No. 7.

(3)

Sundaram saw the beatific calm and shine in Sundari's eyes. Where did she get it from, he had always wondered. Was it from the immobile temple gods and goddesses whom she frequented at the matin hour.

"Put the baby into the cradle, Sundari, and move up for a talk—a serious talk, I tell you, a crisis has really come over our affairs. These

seven years at the bar seem a terrible waste, all for another's joy—come up, dear."

"Go on, dear, the baby won't bear witness against you,—poor little thing, it has gone to sleep." A mother loves to carry in her bosom the infant weight of her own darling as long as she may.

"Yes, the little thing has gone to sleep,—not knowing what inroads it has made into our family funds!"

"Family funds! a fine name for the money that is all my own—that is how lawyers always reckon other people's money as their own."

"Why, Sundari, you always talk like this—everything in the house is yours—because my father once took a bridegroom price of Rs. 3,000 from you—when I could have got a thousand more elsewhere,—and spent it the very next day in marriage gaieties. You trace that money down to every stitch in my coat and shirt. A fine specimen of feminine logic and perseverance."

"Why not? if only you had funded it or invested it in my name in a bank—and not allowed your sisters to run through it—it would have trebled by now, and the whole world would be waiting upon us—and the three thousand

borrowed to pay you has broken up my father's home."

Sundari finished in a calm and subdued voice in which there was not a trace of irritation, glancing affectionately at her mother at a distance who, on the pretext of helping her in her confinement, now almost an annual function, had become a permanent member of the household.

Sundari kissed the baby exclaiming, "This little thing is our fifth born and sure to bring you royal luck."

"Yes Sundari, I remember some such saying," Sundaram gathered up the lovely freight in his own hands. "Is there not a proverb in our Tamil land that says 'The daughter that is the fifth born rules the world.' "

Sundaram's mind sought comfort in ancient Tamil proverbs.

Sundari made no answer to his eager query, but smiling peacefully put the child into the wicker cradle and gave it a swing. It rocked to and fro diagonally, instead of moving straight from wall to wall. Sundari stopped the awkward lurch, saying, "you are such a busy lawyer that you have no time even to read-just the ropes of the cradle?"

"Is it the father's duty or the mother's?"

"Ask your own judges."

Sundaram found that Sundari was not in the usual mood of calm advice and deep sympathy—child-birth had probably made her peevish and hysterical—which gave him comfort in troubled hours so often, and so he began to philosophise. "Sundari, if only your father were alive,"—here he looked at his mother-in-law, who was sitting at some distance as usual listening to the conversation—"I should be far better off. He was the best known law agent in the Chettinad and would have brought me down heaps of cases, won for me the hearts of the leaders of the bar, their affectionate esteem—kindly whispers and gracious pinch of the ear. But, alas!"

But Sundari was silent, her eyes on the new born babe which was so much like her. And Sundaram in a gently chiding voice broke the silence again after a few minutes. "Though you can't add up, Sundari, five and six correctly, sometimes you gave advice that is first rate; you seem to think not with the mind, but with something else, perhaps what the confounded philosophers call intuition—some fine name to cover up man's ignorance of many things in this world."

Sundari turned a little towards Sundaram,

seeming not much impressed by the compliment, but said nothing.

"Do you know, Sundari, how much this last confinement of yours cost me in doctor's bills and pained hours of anxiety."

Sundari was silent and indifferent.

"Rupees three hundred, and that too close upon the five hundred I had to find for the electric installation. I have touched bottom."

"And that is nothing strange or unusual with you"—Sundari replied without any acid in her voice.

Sundaram looked up at the electric bulb and the walls that were now clustered with lizards that swept down upon the moths for their prey. Sundari followed him with her quiet eyes and gently remarked, "You prophesied that clients would come to you after this illumination, as quickly and easily as these moths to these lights; where are they?"

"Where are they, Sundari, it is all your luck. I have worked as hard as anybody, but where are the fruits? The system robs me of my reward. The Gita says, don't put your mind on the fruits of action, but my mind says "How can I desist?" None can explain this riddle, this mystery of life. The more you read of it in the books, the more tangled you become like the

swimmer in the lotus pond, who out to gather buds is caught amidst the creepers."

Sundari recited a Samskrit sloka in an enchanting tone and said in the revealing voice of faith. "You can never know the truths of life with the help of the mind, as the ancients say, but only with the eye of faith, for which, as my mother says, you will have to do your Sandhya prayers regularly and go to the temple surrendering your self in the worship. Peace comes not from probings, nor from protests, nor from preaching, but from surrender and work done with detachment and in a spirit of dedication. Do but once one deed for which you expect no reward and the rest is easy. A new light will dawn and guide your way. The monsoon bursts at the appointed hour over hill and dale and cares not to know if a bunded course is there ready made by which the flood may easily reach the sea. Pray to Kapali and Karpagambal and work with no thought of the morrow but the duty that is the day's *dharma*. They will bless you."

These random words were uttered in inspired accents. Sundaram sank into a reverie. He had a revelation as he gazed on his own wife's utter innocence, purity and faith in a guiding, ruling consciousness that is far above the reach

of the mind. A musical sound as of tinkling bells ran up his spinal chord. A strange glow of light and happiness flashed through his being like a streak of lightning in a cloud-spread sky.

Sundaram switched off the light and passed into a reverie. And Sundari tenderly hugged the suckling child till sleep overcame both.

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