A MEASURE OF CULTURE

(A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES)

1. A MEASURE OF CULTURE

Walter Smith was a gifted young anthropologist. His doctoral thesis on a hitherto unknown tribe in New Guinea had been highly commended by his professors and well received in professional circles. In particular, the new concept he had evolved – a composite measure of culture (CMC as it was known) – which enabled the quantification of the level of development of primitive people was hailed as a major breakthrough in anthropological research. He had combined in a single measure, the level of economic operations, the type of relationships, the stage of artistic attainments in terms of music and dance, the awareness of the super-natural as well as knowledge of the external world. Each of these factors had been given a particular weightage and through a mathematical formula, the CMC factor was arrived at. While there was some dispute and discussion among his peers as to the relative importance of the individual factors, everyone agreed that it was an original if unorthodox approach. It had become the fashion in certain departments of universities to talk about the reliability and validity of the CMC factor. Some undergraduates started measuring the CMC factor of their professors and their spouses, all of which helped the popularity of its inventor. Walter's own professor in particular was very pleased about it all, but he realized that if this was not going to be just a flash in the academic pan, Walter had to follow it up by two or three quick studies in different cultures to test the hypothesis that he had advocated. If its universality could be established before other people took advantage of it, then, the reputation of his department would be on firm foundations. So, he got Walter a two year fellowship to apply this measure in totally different cultures. On the whole, Walter had every reason to be pleased with him and was looking forward to living in a mud hut and getting steeped in another primitive culture.

There was however, one difficulty. At the age of twenty eight, a successful man's thoughts tend to stray towards love and marriage and Walter was no exception. He had got himself engaged to a very pretty and sophisticated girl and was eager to get married as soon as possible. Ann was everything a man could wish for, attractive, intellectual, interested in all the right things and would have made a wonderful campus wife in any high-class university. But from the point of view of an anthropologist, she had a major drawback. She was essentially a city girl; the primitive life had no attraction for her. When Walter described to her life in New Guinea – in great detail and even greater enthusiasm – she was not impressed. In fact, she was very downright in her comments. "If you expect me to go into the wide open spaces every morning for my ablutions and bare my bottom to the curious gaze of the local tribesmen, you are very much mistaken," she announced.

"But Ann! He started.

“There is no ‘But Ann’ about it,” she cried. “If you want to study the mating habits of the natives along the Mediterranean coast of Southern Gaul, I have no objection to going with you, but anything else, No!” And that was that.

But Walter was nothing if not persistent. Ann’s remark about exposing her bottom had made its impression on him. He searched through anthropological literature to discover a place and a tribe where such a contingency would not arise. But at the same time, the tribe had to be sufficiently interesting from a professional point of view and enable him to verify his measure of culture. They had to be within a stone’s throw of modern sanitation. His search led him to India.

There were two groups of people in the village of Biligiri in the Kamalapur district located in Central India. The groups were identical in every respect and yet, they did not socialize with each other and had remained separate and distinct for generations. They would not even drink water from each other’s houses. “But there must be some difference,” Walter told himself. Perhaps, the application of the new measure of culture would indicate the differences between them. The advantage was that the village was within twenty kilometers from the town of Kamalapur. Ann could live there without the indignity of exposing her bottom to public gaze. He discussed the matter with his professor who also approved the idea. Letters were written to the principal of the Kamalapur College of Arts and Science who promised help and all arrangements were tentatively concluded before e broached the subject with Ann.

But knowing her antipathy towards his chosen profession, he approached it in a somewhat roundabout manner. He suggested it would be wonderful to see the Taj Mahal during their honeymoon and to live on a house boat in Kashmir, to all of which Ann readily agreed, provided they could afford it. “Of course money would be a problem,” he conceded. “But not if I could get a fellowship to go and work in India for a year or two. The travel grant would be adequate for the two of us. I could discuss it with my professor.”

The next time Walter mentioned the subject, he had more details for her. He waxed eloquently on the only European hotel of Kamalapur, about air-conditioning and all the mod-cons and the continental cuisine. He even produced a pamphlet which showed a blurred photograph of a modern building set amidst lush tropical vegetation. Ann would live there. He would have to live in Biligiri, but could come into Kamalapur frequently. It would be a golden opportunity for Ann to practice her painting about which she had always been keen, but for which she had had so little time in the busy life of London. Ann was extremely reluctant, but finally she agreed. They were married quietly in a registry office with just a few friends and their respective parents. The next day, with Ann’s paints and canvasses and Walter’s notebooks and tape recorder, they departed for India. After two glorious weeks of sight-seeing, they landed in the Meghdoot Hotel in Kamalapur where Ann was duly installed in a double room. She found that her husband had been somewhat over-optimistic about the comforts of Meghdoot. The air-conditioning worked intermittently because of energy

shortage. The water was not always hot for the same reason, and 'Continental' referred to Asia rather than Europe in their cuisine. But Walter was enthusiastic.

"Even its name has an air of romance about it," he claimed. "Meghdoot means cloud-messenger in Sanskrit and is the title of one of the poems of Kalidasa, the great classical poet."

"Let us hope the cloud-messenger stops with the roof and doesn't come in," was Ann's skeptical answer.

After the protocol of visiting the local authorities and the department of Anthropology in the Kamalapur College, Walter visited the village of Biligiri rented himself a room in the house of the village headman, engaged the local school teacher as his interpreter as well as tutor so that in course of time, he would be able to converse with the villagers directly. He also bought himself a moped so that he could commute between Kamalapur and Biligiri without having to depend on the local bus which was rather unpredictable.

From his experience in New Guinea, Walter knew that he should first establish rapport with the people of the village before he could start asking questions. They should be made to accept him as one of themselves, not think of him as an alien to their society and culture. With this object in view and because of his natural interest and curiosity, Walter participated in all their functions – hatch, match and despatch as he called them – birth, weddings and funerals. He took refreshments in their houses, played with the children, was polite to the old men and kept his distance from the women-folk who giggled and hid their faces behind the ends of their saris every time they passed him in the street. He could not dress in a dhoti and a turban like the village people. He was not sure if the dhoti would stay up even with a belt. But he wore shorts and a sun hat as the nearest equivalents and did not wear a shirt except when he went into Kamalapur. He often walked into the fields where the men were working and gave them a helping hand. Gradually, people got used to him and took him for granted. In the privacy of his room, he faithfully recorded the details of the ceremonies and customs on every occasion, checked and cross-checked them and was able after some time to identify who were the big Chodas and who were the little Chodas, though the basic difference still eluded him. The only difference he could detect was when he went to any ceremonies. At the big Choda families they decorated his forehead with horizontal marks while the little Chodas gave him vertical marks.

About once a week, he went into Kamalapur on his moped and spent a couple of nights with Ann. The first thing he did there was to have a good bath. In the evening, they went to the only picture house that screened English or American movies and spent the day telling each other what they had been doing during the week. Ann seemed to have got fixed up pretty well too. Though she was a little bored in the beginning, she had now joined the local YWCA and was enthusiastically taking part in all their activities. The local ladies

welcomed her and very soon she was running painting classes, lecturing on life in England and attending tea parties in the Kamalapur branch of the Red Cross. Kamalapur town was starved of intellectual stimulation and the new arrival was soon roped in as a speaker by the Rotary and the Lions clubs, by the college and high schools, as a saviour. Leisure was something that Ann was not used to, even her holidays being fitted into a tight schedule. But now, she was enjoying it for the first time. In the hot afternoons, she lay on her bed and dozed and the air-conditioning did not fail her too often. After two days in Kamalapur, Walter returned to Biligiri with some provisions such as bread and butter and tinned fruit, to supplement the meagre diet of rice and vegetables that the headman's wife provided him.

The people of Biligiri were naturally curious about his life and took an interest in all his doings, in particular, his visits to Kamalapur. To most of them, the city was a den of vice and for a young man to keep going there meant that he was steadily going to the dogs. Therefore, they enquired about it and Walter had to admit – somewhat reluctantly – that he had a wife staying in the Meghdoot. The elders of the village were scandalised at this. If it was bad for a young man to pay weekly visits to the city, it was a hundred times worse for a young woman to stay on her own in a strange hotel with all the temptations around her and with no husband to protect her. "A wife's place is by her husband's side," they said. "You should bring her here. It is not good for the two of you to be separated so soon after marriage."

It was obviously difficult for Walter to explain to the local people why his wife could not stay in the village. But now, whenever he asked questions about the customs of the two groups in the village, they asked him questions in return. "How can you leave your wife in the city with all its lurid allurements?" they asked. "Was it usual for wife and husband to be separated in your own country? Perhaps it was a religious requirement?" When he gave evasive answers to all these questions, they stumbled on the idea. "Perhaps, she doesn't like our way of life, is that it?" they asked.

Walter was in a bit of a fix. If this situation continued, there was every danger of his investigation being ruined. On the other hand, if he were to explain Ann's needs of privacy, again the villagers might be offended. Finally, he decided that honesty was the best policy and told the villagers that his wife was not used to roughing it out as he was, that she liked a private bath room, some furniture and the urban comforts to which she had become accustomed. The elders who listened to him were most helpful. They nodded their heads seriously and sympathetically and set about rectifying the deficiencies in the village to the best of their ability. Two cane chairs, a wooden table and a bedstead were procured; an additional room was made available in the headman's house as well as a private lean-to at the back. But more important than all these, two commodes were brought from Kamalapur and installed in the lean to. "Thunder box", the villagers called them, after the manner of British soldiers who had been stationed near Biligiri during the Second World War. A little kerosene stove was also installed in one of the rooms so that Ann could do her own cooking if she felt like it. And Ann was invited to inspect the result.

So Walter had to explain it all to her, how kind, considerate and undertaking the villagers had been and how it would ruin his entire professional career, if she were to reject the hospitality so generously offered by them.

“But we came here on the strict understanding that I was to stay in a hotel,” Ann protested.

“I know,” Walter agreed miserably. “But wouldn’t you at least come and inspect it and spend a month. You can always come away afterwards on some excuse.”

“I don’t mind the food so much, but what about the bathroom arrangements?”

Walter brightened; he explained everything and concluded, “The commodes will be cleaned twice a day. And hot water will be available every morning in the private yard which is fully enclosed on all the four sides.”

He was eager and she really liked him so much that after some discussion, she agreed to spend a month in Biligiri. Her reception in the village was warm and affectionate. She was received as a new bridge of the village, with flowers and rose water, with burning scented sticks and camphor. The oldest woman of the village ceremoniously placed a spot on her forehead as a welcoming sign, there was good-humoured raillery, singing and dancing, and even Ann was very impressed and said she would not have missed the experience for anything.

When they were duly installed in their two rooms and the village folk had departed, Walter ventured showing her round the quarters. “It is really quite comfortable when you get used to it. This is our first real home.”

“Let us hope it won’t be the last,” Ann commented sceptically.

Like a loving and dutiful husband, Walter got up in the morning, made a cup of tea with the aid of the kerosene stove. While Ann sipped it luxuriously in her bed, he heated the bath water in the yard. Ann usually got up about 7.30 a.m. and had her bath standing on the stone floor in the yard and pouring water over herself with the aid of a large metal beaker. It took her a couple of days to get used to this method, but she found she liked it. To stand in the morning sun in all her glorious nudity and let the warm water flow over her was a completely new sensation and she revelled in it.

As it happened, it was a new sensation to a lot of other people as well. Their house was on the main highway from Kamalapur to Nagpur and there was a lot of lorry traffic in the mornings. The road was much higher than the village and from the cabin of the lorry drivers; it was possible to have good view of Ann playing the water nymph. Within a few days, it was usual for Lorries to slow down and even stop, and then proceed slowly and

rather reluctantly. The village youths, on their way to work noticed this phenomenon and determined to know what it was all about, climbed the nearest tamarind trees to have a look. They were most impressed by what they saw and for them also, it became a regular pastime. Ann revelled in the nudity of her body and the morning sun, totally oblivious of what was going on around her.

Such a thing cannot be kept a secret in a village for any length of time. Soon it became general knowledge. While the younger generation was climbing tamarind trees in the mornings, the older generation – who could not climb trees anyway – was sagely discussing how to put a stop to it, in the evenings. They did not want a scandal and they did not want the new couple to be embarrassed or humiliated in any way. But at the same time, it had to be stopped. After considerable discussion among the village elders – both the great and little Chodas – it was decided to take recourse to an anonymous letter to the lady in order to put a stop to the situation. The services of the school teacher were requisitioned and the following letter was drafted.

"Dear Madam,

Respectable ladies in our society do not remove their garments while having a bath. Modesty as well as the morals of our village demands that you should wear some clothes when you have a bath in the mornings."

The letter was delivered to Ann in the morning soon after she returned from her bath. As soon as she read it she cried, "My God! The whole village has been peeping at me! This is the end." Without bothering with her breakfast, she started packing up her things. Walter was bewildered and she wouldn't even talk to him. All his entreaties were of no avail. She picked up her suit case and caught the next bus to Kamalapur which fortunately came very soon.

After a little while Walter discovered the note that had been the cause of all the trouble. He knew it was the end. He too packed his bags and followed her, all the way to London. And the measure of culture – so painstakingly developed – remained unverified.

2. A GRIEVANCE PROCEDURE

Harichandra worked in Kamalapur Engineering works as a skilled mechanic. He was by all accounts an 'awkward character'. Even his best friends would agree he was a little eccentric. But even his worst enemies admitted that he was absolutely fair and honest in his dealings with others. Perhaps it was this combination of integrity and awkwardness that made him popular among his co-workers and made him their representative in the local union. He stood by them and fought for them disregarding his own interests. Even the union leaders treated him with respect and consideration.

On the 5th of the month, Hari – as he was affectionately called by everyone – queued up with his colleagues and collected his wage packet. Coming out from the cashier's window, he opened the packet, counted the notes, checked the slip attached to the packet and then compared it with a little note book he kept in his pocket. "Hm, the usual runaround!" he muttered to himself and turned to the cashier's window. But there was still a long queue and Hari did not want to wait. "I will deal with it in the morning", he said to himself and went home.

He went to the cashier's office the next morning and demanded to see the gentleman. One of the assistants came to him. "Can you tell me what it is about?" he asked.

"My wages are short by 25 rupees," Hari complained. He showed his envelope as well as the slip – actually a computer printout – on which the wage calculations were indicated.

The assistant examined them. "It says here 754 rupees and 50 paise after all deductions. If there was less money in the wage packet, you should have come to us immediately."

"The money was alright," explained Hari. "It is your calculation of production bonus that is wrong." And Hari produced his pocket book in which he had made his own record of his daily production.

The assistant took his note book and went inside. After a few minutes, he returned and said, "I have examined the records; there is no mistake," and he handed back to Hari his pocket book.

"Are you implying that I am not honest?" asked Hari a little vehemently.

"I am not implying anything," the assistant shouted back. "All I am saying is that there is no error on our part. As you know, all production data and wage calculations have been computerized recently and the computer does not make a mistake."

"Is your computer God?"

"To err is human, but a computer does not err," said the assistant with pride in his voice.

"Nor is it human!"

"Who are you?" the assistant shouted. "Are you Harichandra that you do not tell a lie?"

"Yes, I am. Please look at my name." As the assistant checked the name and started at him in surprise, Hari walked away. Knowing the rules of the company, he went on to the next step in the grievance procedure, that is, to the personnel officer of the company. Hari knew it was no use, but the procedure had to be gone through before taking further steps.

The personnel officer knew Hari well and tried to placate him. "O.K., Hari, I'll see what I can do; but you know what these office chaps are like. I will investigate it myself. You see me after a couple of days." He hoped that after a couple of days, tempers would cool down and a difference of 25 rupees might not look so important.

When Hari went to him after two days, his answer was the same as that of the assistant, though couched in more diplomatic language. The personnel officer expressed the hope that the matter would be dropped now that a full investigation had been made.

But Hari was not one to give up, particularly after he was told that his meticulous record keeping was wrong. It was no longer a mere matter of 25 rupees. It was a matter of principle; of ethics; of Hari's integrity against the computer's infallability. So, Hari took the 3rd and final step which was to complain to the union. Generally the union would have played it down, but not when Hari was concerned. Within a few days, the manager of the works got the following letter from the secretary of the Kamalapur Engineering Workers' Union.

'Dear Sir,

We have been given to understand that there has been an unauthorized deduction of Rs.25 from Mr. Harichandran's (Ticket No.875) wages last month. When he went to complain about it to the cashier, he was not only given no satisfaction, but insulted by one of your assistants. Everyone knows Mr.Harichandran to be an honest worker whose bona fides are above board. Treating him in this summary fashion is a reflection of your total disregard for maintaining good relationship in your factory. This amounts to victimizing an honest worker because he is actively involved in union affairs.

We therefore demand the payment of Rs.25 to Mr. Harichandran and an apology from the assistant who had insulted and humiliated him. A reply should be given within fifteen days of the receipt of this letter in order to enable us to consider further steps in the matter.

Yours truly,

Secretary.

Further correspondence went on, lawyers were consulted on both sides, threats were issued blaming each other for any consequences, meetings were held outside the factory

gates and speeches delivered which helped to rouse the passions of the workers against the management. A small grievance had been promoted to the status of a big dispute. The computer became the target of attack as a soul destroying machine that had no consideration for the feelings of the workers. In the next letter received by the company, an additional demand was made for eliminating the computer and going back to the old system of wage payment which was 'fool-proof'. Conciliation by the government labour officer and the labour commissioner did not produce any results. Finally, the management received the following ultimatum.

"Dear Sirs,

Unless our demands contained in the letters dated the 10th and the 21st of last month are satisfactorily met by the 30th of this month, we hereby give notice that the workers of your factory will be on strike on any date from the first of next month. We also wish to warn you that you will be solely responsible for the consequences that might arise as a result.

Yours truly, etc."

The minister for labour happened to be campaign in Kamalapur and interfered in the matter. He discussed at length, the issued involved both with the trade union leaders as well as with the representatives of management and after three days of effort, a formula acceptable to both parties was evolved. It was to the effect that neither party accepted any blame for whatever had happened, nor did it place the blame on the other party. But as a gesture of goodwill, the management would pay a sum of Rs.25 to Harichandran and the union would withdraw its strike notice.

In accordance with this settlement, the Board of Directors passed the following resolution.

'Without accepting any responsibility for what had happened, and without creating a precedent, the Board of Directors are pleased to sanction to Sri Harichandran Ticket No.875, the sum of Rs.25 purely as a measure of goodwill.'

But Harichandran would not go to the cashier's office to receive his 25 rupees. So, the assistant went into the department and asked Hari to take the money and sign the receipt.

"Keep your miserable 25 rupees!" shouted Hari. "I would rather keep my grievance!"

3.VICTORIA SKINNER

Like many girls of her generation, she was christened 'Victoria', after the good queen and Empress of India. Her father, Albert Skinner was an engine driver in the South Indian Railway. The family was supposed to be vaguely related to the famous skinner of the East India Company days, but for various reasons, the relationship was rarely mentioned. They lived in the Railway Colony – the no man's land that existed between the sprawling bungalows of the European officers with huge banyan trees in the garden on the one side, and the congested town full of Indians on the other.

As a young Anglo-Indian girl in the early years of this century, Victoria – her parents never used the shortened form 'Vicky', saying it was common – grew up and absorbed the values and attitudes of her community. English was her mother tongue and England was 'Home'. She learnt to treat the British officers in the Railway with respect and the Indians – 'Natives' or even 'Blacks' as they were called – with condescension, if not contempt. The fact that Victoria's father was himself rather dusky did not matter. There was great affection for the King Emperor, respect for the Union Jack and pride and loyalty for the Empire. There was also a mild but hidden resentment at the Englishmen and English women who treated them as no better than servants, but who were after all their kith and kin.

As a child, and later as a young woman, Victoria would look longingly at the Club – exclusively British – see the men and women going in, in all their finery, hear the music of the band on Gala nights and the sound of fun and laughter. But she knew that she could never enter its premises as a member, or even as a guest. The Anglo-Indians had their own Railway Institute, which was a somewhat drab imitation of the Club. There too, on festival nights such as Christmas or Easter, people dressed up in their evening clothes, and patent leather shoes, plastered their hair down and went to the institute with their wives, mothers and sisters. There was also fun and laughter and music. Perhaps, the dresses were a little out of date since fashions took a long time to travel from London to the Railway Colony; the music was less sophisticated and the drinks, a little raw. The matrons sat on chairs along the wall, keeping an eye on their daughters on the dance floor, making remarks about the weather and about each others' dresses and how much everything cost these days. Sometimes, a group of British soldiers – to whom also the Club was not open – strayed in on dance nights and set the matrons' hearts throbbing a little faster in the hope that one of them might fall for her daughter and marry her. But more often than not, the soldiers got drunk, started a fight and the military police had to be summoned. They rounded them up and took them to the barracks. There was some talk about how the soldiers did not have 'Class' and then it was forgotten until the next time.

It was a narrow, restricted life, like that of frogs in a pond, but jobs for the men folk were assured in the railways or in the Posts and Telegraphs Department. Not much

education was necessary for most of these jobs and no one thought of finishing High School, much less of going to college. The women learnt to cook and sew and exchange recipes of those special Anglo-Indian dishes, which like themselves, were a mixture of England and India. In their spare time, they knitted and did needle work of various sorts in which they excelled. Occasionally, they helped the English women, though they would not demean themselves by working for an Indian. Yes, they were happy and contented; they had a very definite place in the scheme of things and it wasn't a bad place on the whole.

Marriage was the logical conclusion of such a life for a young woman and almost everyone looked forward to it. But Victoria had no prospects of marriage as she was not particularly good-looking and was considered rather dull and stupid. Eligible, young Anglo-Indians avoided her and she was not attracted by them. Her mother had died and she had to leave school early in order to keep house for her father, so that she could just read and write. But her pastry was considered the lightest in the colony and her 'Fougahs', the best. She was pleasant and friendly and rather simple and people spoke to her nicely, praised her cooking and exchanged knowing looks. But Victoria was content in her role as her father's housekeeper.

In course of time, Albert Skinner retired with a pension and led a quiet and sheltered life in the Colony. In the evenings, he used to sit on his narrow front verandah, behind the trellis work, among the aspidistras, the potted plants, the faded photographs and the nick-knacks collected over a period of three generations in the Colony, sip his drink and chat with anyone who happened to be passing by. He would talk about the good old days, about the trains he had driven, about 45 up and 24 down and how things were deteriorating and how the modern generation was not fit to hold a candle to their fathers and grandfathers.

Those things were changing, there was no doubt. The Railway Colony was no longer the private preserve of the Anglo-Indian community. Indians – even Brahmins who were vegetarians and teatotallers – were entering the Railways. Some of them were living in the Colony and one had to be polite to them – particularly if their rank demanded it. Many retired Anglo-Indians were selling their houses and moving into other parts. The solidarity, the homogeneity and the feeling of belonging was being eroded.

Two events took place in the year 1947 which made a tremendous difference in the life of Victoria Skinner. One was that her father died. Before his death, Albert Skinner had told his daughter, "Put your trust in British Justice, Victoria; it will never let you down. And be careful of the Indians." Victoria had taken the advice to heart. The second event was that India became independent. From then on, Victoria – past middle age – was totally unequal to the task of living.

Her father's savings kept her going for some time. She did odd jobs for the few Europeans who were still left – jobs such as baking a cake for a birthday party, embroidering children's dresses and later, even ironing their clothes. There was a society known as 'The

Friend in Need' started by some European ladies to help unfortunate Anglo-Indians and the society found jobs for Victoria. Other Anglo-Indians who were still in the Colony and who were better off also befriended her.

Independence was a rude shock to the Anglo-Indian community. Suddenly, they found themselves like children whose parents were divorced. They had to choose between England and India. And the choice was not always easy or simple. Many packed their bags, sold their houses, transferred their bank accounts and went 'Home' that is, to England, a strange land of cold and mist and rain where there were no servants. In those days, the immigration doors were wide open and there were no 'quotas' or virginity tests to stop them. A few returned, unable to withstand the cold as well as the loneliness. Others tried Australia, New Zealand and even Canada. The rest – not so fortunate or adventurous – made the best of a bad job, adjusted them to the new situation, joined the Anglo-Indian Association and attempted to preserve their language, culture and way of life, in the ocean of India.

But Victoria belonged to neither of these categories. She could not emigrate; she would not know how. Her roots were too deep in the Railway Colony. Nor could she adjust herself to the changed situation. She could not believe that India was now independent, that there was no British Sovereign to look after her welfare, no Union Jack to protect her. She still believed in 'British Justice' as her father had told her to, and in the supremacy of the Empire. If people told her a different story, she did not believe them – not even the British people. On the other hand, she knew that there was something wrong; that things were not the same as before. And she could not understand it. So, people let her live in the life of imagination and make – believe, humoured her out of pity and helped her when she would let them.

Serious trouble started when India issued new coinage and the portrait of the King Emperor was replaced by the Ashoka Pillar on all coins and notes. As far as Victoria was concerned, the new currency was not legal tender. She would not accept them. " I have given you honest labour Madam," she told an English lady for whom she had embroidered a table cloth. "And I expect to be paid in good, clean money."

"But this is the new currency, Victoria," the lady pleaded. "It is perfectly legal."

"How can it be legal when it had no picture of the King Emperor?" Victoria refused to accept the money.

In the end, the lady went to the bank, collected as many notes with the pictures of the King Emperor as possible, and gave them to Victoria. Afterwards, it became a habit with all the European and Anglo-Indian families to save notes and coins of the previous period for her. But the Post Office Savings Bank was not as understanding or accommodating, with the result that Victoria never operated her account after some time.

Gradually, the symbols of the Empire were disappearing one by one, but Victoria never recognised the new symbols. The Union Jack had been hauled down on the 15th of August 1947 and replaced by the Tri-colour on all Government offices. So, she concluded that the offices had been transferred to an 'unknown' destination and she was unable to find them, even to get her ration card for sugar and had to do without it. The Crown and the letters GR had been removed from the post boxes, so she never posted any letters, saying that there was no longer any postal service. Once, she received a letter from the Railways – about a long-forgotten amount of money that was due to her father – but she threw it away because it did not have 'On His Majesty's Service' printed on it.

But people were good to her. When all the coins and the notes with the King Emperor's head had disappeared, they gave her things instead, flour, sugar, fat, meat and vegetables, dresses and so on, things she accepted gratefully. There was a flourishing trade in what was known in the locality as 'Victoria Exchange' and she did well out of it.

In keeping with the prevailing trend in the country, some of the younger Anglo-Indian girls started wearing saris. But when she came across them, Victoria took them to task. "Going native, are you? Have you no shame?" she chided. The girls merely laughed and went their way and Victoria complained to their parents, both about their dresses and about their manners.

When the last British family in the area had left the country, the Friend in Need Society was run by some Indian ladies. The first time Victoria came across them, she was polite but firm. "I have never worked for native ladies Madam, and I don't want to start now." And that was that.

"But the Europeans have all gone. How will you live Victoria, if you don't work?"

"Don't worry Madam, they will come back."

By then, Victoria was getting feeble in mind as well as in body. But she had also become a local institution, wayward, eccentric, obstinate, but still loved and tolerated by all. And she would not accept charity under any circumstances. So, work was passed on to her through other Anglo-Indian families and she managed to survive and hold on to her unrealistic beliefs.

When it was announced that Queen Elizabeth was to visit India in the year 1961, most people were happy, but to Victoria , it was the second coming of the British, the second battle of Plassey when the Indians were going to be reconquered and British rule re-established. She went round telling people, "You wait and see; Her Majesty is coming in person to set things right. The Union Jack will fly again."

When she heard that the Queen was to visit Madras, she was determined to go and see her. For the first time in some years, she went to the Friend in Need. “I went to go to Madras to see Her Majesty,” she told them. “Can you help me?” If she took their help now, it did not matter. After all, the British will be here soon and everything will be forgotten.

The good ladies collected some money and bought Victoria a return ticket to Madras. They also arranged for an Anglo-Indian family to take care of her while there, for she was now very weak and really not capable of looking after herself in a strange city.

And so, on a glorious morning, Victoria stood on the footpath in San Thome, along with her new friends and waited for the Queen. Whichever side she looked, there was a sea of faces, cheerful, laughing, waving little Union Jacks. The noise of the breakers from the Bay of Bengal was drowned in the noise and the confusion of the crowd, but it was good humoured. Someone handed her a Union Jack and she looked at it with affection as she waved it slowly. There were tears in her eyes.

Slowly, the procession went past. At first, the outriders came on their motor-cycles, resplendent in their khaki and gold uniforms; then the pilot car. And then, she came, the Queen, young and beautiful as a fairy tale princess, wearing a pink raw-silk dress with hat and gloves to match; she stood in the open car, smiling and waving. As she passed Victoria – almost near enough to touch it seemed, for the road was very narrow at that point – she looked straight into her eyes and waved her hand. “Your Majesty!” shouted Victoria, but her feeble voice was drowned in that of the large crowd which roared:

‘Queen Elizabeth Zindabad!”
(Long Live Queen Elizabeth)

Victoria’s heart was full at that moment.

The journey back to the Railway Colony was uneventful, except that when someone opened the door of her compartment, it was found that Victoria had died peacefully in her sleep. Perhaps, the journey and the excitement of seeing the queen was too much for her.

Many nice things were said about her in the Railway Colony after she died. At the same time people also said that she was a bit touched, or ‘mental’. But it would be a mistake for us to imagine that Victoria Skinner had led a futile or meaningless life. Throughout her seventy years, she had stuck to her principles and beliefs and never compromised them. And in the end, she died a happy woman secure in the knowledge that Queen Elizabeth the second had reconquered India.

4.PARIS IN SPRING

What is usual and normal in one country is often bizarre in another. This was brought home to me when I was in Paris many years ago.

The year was nineteen thirty nine. War clouds were gathering over Europe. But Paris in spring was lovely, with clean fresh air, the trees in the boulewards sprouting new shoots and flowers and the streets crowded with shoppers and tourists. But there were hardly any Indians among them. As a young student from England on holiday, I was somewhat lonely at not seeing a brown face. Indians did not travel much in those days. Certainly, to see an Indian lady in a sari in Paris was a rare occurrence. So, when I saw a young Indian couple walking in my direction, I was happy. I stopped and spoke to them.

They were Mr. and Mrs. Shah and were travelling from London to Marseille to catch a P & O boat to India. This would cut their journey by almost a week and they would avoid the storms in the Bay of Biscay. In those days, the boat train from London arrived in Paris in the late afternoon and left for Marseille at five a.m. in the morning which gave the passengers a night in Paris. This was considered more interesting than a night on the train.

“Where are you staying?” I asked them.

“We are not staying anywhere,” Mr. Shah replied. “No one goes to bed in Paris before 4 a.m. anyway and we can sleep on the train all day tomorrow. So, we thought we will do the sights of Paris. If you join us, we shall be very happy.”

Though I was younger than Mr. Shah and obviously less experienced, I was nevertheless a little anxious on one point. Indian ladies – certainly in those days – were somewhat conservative and knowing something of the ‘sights’ of Paris at night, I wondered how far Mrs. Shah would enjoy it. When I expressed my doubts, Mr. Shah was quite emphatic on that point. “My wife is very modern and broad minded,” he assured me. Mrs. Shah of course did not say anything.

So, we joined forces for the evening. After a further discussion over a cup of coffee, we decided to go the Follie Bergere theatre as a starting point. Fortunately, tickets were available and we got very good seats. From the moment the curtain went up, Mr. Shah’s eyes were glued to the stage, oblivious of all else. But I could see Mrs. Shah’s discomfiture as near-nude ladies pranced across the stage to the strains of modern music. The sophistication and the artistry were totally lost on her as she averted her eyes from the stage, but did not know where to look. I felt we had made a mistake in taking her there.

Sure enough, in the interval, she walked out of the theatre. “If you gentlemen like to see nude women parading before a crowd, that is your privilege,” she cried. “But I want no more of it.” Then she turned to her husband. “When you talked about the sights of Paris, I thought you meant the Notre Dame or the Louvre or Napoleon’s tomb, not things like that.”

“But Meena, they are all closed at night!” her husband pleaded. “And Follie Bergere is not just crude sex; it is Art!”

“If that is the kind of art you prefer, I want no more of it, Meena shouted. “But I don’t want you men to stop enjoying yourselves. All I want is some dinner and a bed to sleep. You can go out on your own; you will have more fun, I am sure.”

It is always embarrassing for a young bachelor to listen to an argument between a wife and a husband, particularly when you have just met them. But they carried on as if I was not present.

“But you said you would like to see the sights of Paris!” the husband persisted.

“When you talked about the ‘ultimate in art’, I didn’t know you meant the last word in indecency,” retorted the wife.

I felt it was time for me to say something, if only goodbye. But to desert them now seemed like leaving a sinking ship. “Let us go and have dinner and talk about what to do,” I suggested. “I know an Indian restaurant in Rue Volney where they serve some very good vegetarian food.”

“Fancy coming to Paris to eat Indian food!” Mr. Shah grumbled. But his wife brightened immediately.

“Let us go there; I am famished!” she said enthusiastically.

While we ate our dinner, we discussed the next programme. Indian ladies, docile and following their husbands’ wishes most of the time, can be quite adamant when once they make up their minds about something. Meena has decided that Paris was a den of vice and that she wanted to go to bed and nothing that her husband said would change her mind. But a bed was not so easy to find at that time of night and the two or three hotels where we tried were all full. Finally, I suggested a solution.

“I have a large room with two beds in it and Meena can sleep in the spare bed. I am sure the hotel wouldn’t mind if I agree to pay for two people. Then, we men can see the ‘sights’ of Paris, come back at four a.m. Then you two can catch the train and I can go to bed.”

“The perfect solution!” Mr. Shah said enthusiastically. Perhaps, he was secretly pleased that he could get rid of his wife for the night and enjoys himself without any inhibitions or restraints. “You are a marvel!” he patted me on the back.

“Now you men can enjoy yourselves to your hearts’ content,” said Meena somewhat wistfully. “And I can have my sleep.”

I was staying in a small, medium priced hotel, where the office was closed at night and the night porter did not speak any English. I went in with Meena while Mr. Shah waited in

the taxi. I explained to the porter what I proposed to do, but he didn't seem particularly interested and just waved his hands as he gave me the key.

"Vie Messiur! Vie Messiur!" he said.

So, I took her up, showed her the room and the bath room, suggested she locked the door from the inside and came down. The porter seemed somewhat surprised to see me. He waved his arms and talked volubly and shrugged his shoulders as I waked out. But his manner was friendly and I did not worry.

Shah and I were more or less free to do what we wanted. He knew his Paris well and talked nostalgically about his previous visits. But the lady sleeping quietly in my bed room still seemed to exercise a subtle influence over us and his enthusiasm for the night life had become somewhat academic. He kept saying, "I do wish Meena had come with us." There was only one thing to do under those circumstances and that was to get drunk. We went to a night club and discovered it was one of the few places where it was cheaper to take a woman than to go alone. We made friends with some young ladies who made us drink bad champagne, made a date with us for afterwards and who, predictably, did not turn up. As the night wore on and the morning hours came and the bars and night clubs began to close, we realized that our night had not been the gay and hilarious one we had anticipated. So, we wended our way back to the hotel, tired and rather quiet, making occasional remarks about the next day. "You would still be here to enjoy yourself, but I would be gone, perhaps never to return," mused Mr. Shah as we exchanged addresses and promised to meet in India, I felt sorry for him.

At my hotel, Shah waited outside in the taxi as before while I went up to bring Meena down. She was washed and dressed and ready and her questions were a little embarrassing.

"Did you enjoy yourselves?" she asked.

"Well, sort of," I said. "Actually, we have had a bit too much to drink."

"Did you have any women?" It was surprising how blunt and cruel some of these quiet women could be. She could not ask her husband that question perhaps, but she could ask me, a total stranger whom she was not likely to meet again.

"No," I confessed. "No, nothing like that."

"Oh I don't mind. Only, you should be careful; you might go and catch something."

Her directness and matter-of-factness made me more forthcoming. "As a matter of fact, we did make a date with two girls in a nigh-club, but they failed to turn up." I said.

"Perhaps, those girls had more sense than you men."

Suddenly she smiled sweetly and patted my cheek. I didn't know what came over me; perhaps it was the alcohol I had had. I put my arms round her and kissed her cheek. "You

make me feel as if I was your mother," she said as she disengaged herself. "You are a sweet boy, but don't get into bad habits in this wicked city. She touched my cheek again.

There was nothing more to say. "Oh, well, it is time for the train," she said and we went down the stairs.

"We must hurry," said Shah who was now impatient to be off. "Or we will miss the train," And with a cursory goodbye, they left me. I watched the tail lights of their taxi disappear and went into the hotel.

The night porter was there again and he held forth at some length in his voluble French and waved his arms. I didn't know what he was talking about. So, I said in English, "Look, nothing wrong has happened. I shall explain it all to the manager in the morning."

At the mention of the word 'manager' which was the only word he seemed to understand, he burst out laughing. "Ah! Manager! Manager!" he repeated amidst his laughter. I didn't see what was funny about it, but could not be bothered to carry on an incomprehensible conversation, so I went to bed.

I got up late the next morning and after breakfast, went to see the manager, explained what had happened and offered to pay for the extra bed for one night. "But your night porter seemed to think there was something wrong, though he did not object to it," I said. "Unfortunately, I was not able to explain things to him because of the language problem."

"What my night porter was trying to tell you was," the manager explained with a smile. "That he had been a night porter in this hotel for thirty five years and in all his varied experience, this was the first time that a gentleman brought a young and pretty lady to the hotel at ten o' clock at night, left her in his bed room and went out for the rest of the night. It was a most unusual occurrence."

"But when I said I would explain it to the manager, he seemed to find it very funny."

"He thought you said that you had left her there for the manager's benefit."

5.TWO WEDDING RINGS

Hill stations in India are notorious for their snobbery as well as their Victorian ideas of morality and respectability. The British memsahib's set the standards when they were ruling the roost in the nineteenth century and these standards have been upheld faithfully by successive generations of hill station dwellers until recent times. At the same time, they enjoy a good bit of gossip, particularly if it is salacious and if it is about someone they know. Here is a case in point.

It is perhaps ironical that my wife should be British; because of the intensity of the summer heat on the plains of India, she likes to spend a few months in the hills during the hottest part of the year. When we first arrived in India, we paid a visit to a hill station nearby for the day. We inspected the only European style hotel in the town, looked at the bed rooms, asked about running hot water, etc, to see if it would be suitable for a long stay. The manager was loud and eloquent about its comforts and claimed it was the best hotel 'this side of the Taj'.

After our tour of inspection was over, we had lunch in the dining room, to sample the food. While we were doing all this, there was an Englishman – obviously a padre – also having lunch there. He had evidently been watching us and after finishing his lunch, joined us for coffee.

"I hope you don't mind if I join you," he said as he took the vacant chair without invitation. "My name is reverend Johnson." We introduced ourselves.

His visit to us was evidently professional, for he started off by asking my wife, "And to which branch of Christianity do you subscribe to, if I may ask?"

Talking about religion to my wife is like a red rag to a bull, so I listened to the conversation with a mixture amusement and apprehension.

"Frankly, I don't like to discuss religion with religious people," she replied.

"Oh, come on young lady!" said Rev. Johnson. "We are in the twentieth century not in the middle ages. We are all broad minded here in this hill station. Tolerance after all is one of the Christian virtues. Even if you were to tell me you are an R.C. or a seventh day Adventist, I would not blame you."

"But I do not belong to any branch of religion" said my wife.

The parson's professional instincts were now thoroughly roused. He took it up as a challenge to his competence and powers of persuasion.

"But surely, you must have been a Christian when you were born," then he corrected himself. "At least when you were baptized! You have obviously just come from England."

“Oh, yes, I was baptized and confirmed in the Church of England, but I don’t follow any religion now.”

“And what if anything do you believe in, if I may presume to enquire?” he asked with persistence.

“You may not presume, but I will tell you,” replied my wife trying not to lose her temper. “I am an atheist.”

According to the “Brish’ values of the time in India, she was obviously letting the side down by professing such blasphemy, but Rev. Johnson had plenty of Christianity charity and forgiveness left in him. He also had a dogged determination.

“You mean you don’t believe in anything?”

“I do believe,” My wife replied. “I believe organized religion is bunk.”

This was too much even for the patience and forbearance of Rev. Johnson. In desperation, he turned to me.

“Could you not convert her at least to Hinduism? Put the fear of God into her. It is better than being an unbeliever.

“I have,” I replied quietly.

It took some time for this to sink in, until the padre realized the enormity of my crime.

One would have thought that this would have been the end of our conversation and the parson would have gone in search of more congenial company. But no. He changed the subject of our conversation abruptly to mundane matters, as to what I was doing and so on, and we talked about nothing in particular for some time. Conversation was somewhat like walking barefoot in a field of thorns. Having upset him over religion, we did not want to upset him any further and we carried on in order to fulfil the social niceties of hill station manners.

It was getting on for two o’ clock and the waiters were hovering round to clear the table. I went to pay the bill. My wife told me what happened afterwards.

As soon as I left, the padre became silent. He kept glancing down at my wife’s hand, particularly the left hand. Suddenly, he exclaimed, “I do hope you two are married!”

My wife was so taken aback at the suddenness of the question that she blushed and did not know how to answer. Then, the reason for the parson’s question dawned on her. He had been looking particularly at the third finger of her left hand and there was no wedding ring there. Considering we had been looking at bed rooms in the hotel and were addressed as Mr. and Mrs. it excited his professional curiosity. Perhaps, he felt that his calling demanded that he should marry two unbelievers and make them man and wife in the eyes of God, rather than let them live in sin. May be, it was an indication of his generosity and charity in saving two lost souls who would otherwise be consigned to ever-lasting perdition.

When I returned from paying the bill, there was a somewhat hostile silence. Irony got the better of her anger and my wife decided to let the parson remain in his ignorance. Not knowing what had happened, I said a perfunctory goodbye to the man of God and we departed.

When we got married in England, I bought my wife a platinum wedding ring which was the fashion at that time. But when she came to India, she acquired quite a bit of gold jewellery and having a highly developed artistic sense, she didn't want to mix gold and platinum. So, she did what most Indian ladies were doing; she put the ring on a gold chain and wore it round her neck and it was not visible to the parson's inquisitive eyes. But she still 'wore' a wedding ring.

After we had left the hotel, my wife explained what had happened during my absence. Rev. Johnson thought we were living in sin. If he had thought so, perhaps many other did too though they might not have been as forthright as he was. My wife concluded. "So, you see you have to buy me a gold wedding ring! I don't want any more misunderstandings."

That is how I happen to be perhaps the only person in the world who had bought two wedding rings for the same wife! I wonder if it will get me into the Guinness Book of Records.

6.AN ATTEMPTED SUICIDE

As a boy, I was not very good at my studies. In the village school which I attended about fifty years ago, there were no modern methods of evaluation, no psychological tests, no methods of motivation and no measurement of I.Q. in children. But the teacher said it was just that I did not do my lessons. I was more interested in catching frogs from the pond next to the school, bringing them into the class room and letting them loose. I liked to wander round in the fields and throw stones at the slow moving buffaloes that annoyed me with their ponderous movements. To watch the farmers as they returned from a hard day's work in the fields and to chat with them was a very pleasant evening pastime. The womenfolk of the village were fond of me and encouraged me in my escapades. I played marbles and tops with my companions and often led them into mischief. I was popular; everyone liked me. It was just that I did not study.

The teacher did his best to correct me. But he did not cane me or beat me - at least not very often or very hard. He had to be careful because I was the son of the biggest landowner in the village and the teacher was dependent on him for so many things. My father was known for his bad temper; the teacher was perhaps afraid that he might be taken to task if I were to complain to my father. Once, when I put a live frog in his desk, he did complain to my mother, not only about the frog but also about my indifference to studies.

But I was my mother's favourite as well as the youngest son. In her eyes, I could do no wrong. "A live frog in your desk?" she laughed. "That was clever of him, wasn't it? But he is doing things like that all that time. Why, only last week, we found a live frog in our water pot! Clever, intelligent children are always upto some mischief or other. You should not take any notice of things like that!"

"But Amma! He doesn't do his lessons at all," the teacher remonstrated. "Even in the class room, his mind is wandering. He has not mastered the multiplication table yet, which he should have done last year."

"Well, my son doesn't have to become a clerk in an office and spend all his time doing additions and subtractions," replied my mother somewhat proudly. "God has provided us ample resources for what we need."

The teacher returned in silence, ready to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune rather than go to my father.

It was therefore not surprising that at the age of twelve, I failed in an important examination that would have gained me entry into a high school in the city. I was mortified, not so much at my failure, but more because of what my father would say or do. But whatever he did, I knew I would suffer mentally as well as physically. After considerable deliberation and heart-searching I thought of a way of outwitting him. I went into a dark

room in our house that afternoon with a piece of rope, tied it round the beam, made a noose at the other end and placed it round my neck – tight but not too tight. I stood on a small stool and waited for some one – preferably my mother – to come into the room. The idea was that I would jump off the stool the moment someone entered so that that person would 'rescue' me from committing suicide. After about half an hour of waiting, my mother herself walked in and she caught me just as I was jumping off the stool. Of course, the noose did not become any tighter and I did not hurt myself in any way.

"Oh, my child! Why are you doing such terrible thing?" cried my mother as she hugged me and examined my neck for bruises. "What have you lacked in this house? What terrible sorrow has driven to take such a step?"

There were tears in my eyes as I shouted, "Let me go! I don't want to live any more. I am so ashamed!"

"But why? Why?" asked my mother in desperation as she removed the rope round my neck and threw it away.

After considerable coaxing and persuasion, I confessed. "I have brought disgrace on myself and all the family by failing in my examination. What is the use of living after such humiliation? How can I face my friends?"

"Is that all?" said my mother with evident relief. "Fancy wanting to commit suicide for such a trivial thing! Your teacher probably didn't teach you properly. I will tell you what; you need not go to school in future; you need not study. We have enough wealth to lead a decent life without you having a study and get a job. Don't worry my darling. But you must promise never to do such a terrible thing again."

"But how can I live after I have brought such a terrible dishonor to the family? How can I face Father?"

Meanwhile, my father had come into the room. I did not realize that he had been listening outside for some time. "Alright, get up," he shouted at me. To my mother, he said, "Leave this to me and go into the kitchen."

My mother obediently went away, wiping her eyes with the end of her sari. But she was standing behind the doorway watching the proceedings.

My father examined the rope carefully and took his time over. He watched me curiously for some time and then, he seemed to make up his mind.

"You wanted to kill yourself because you failed in your examination, did you?" he demanded.

"Yes."

"Don't you think it would have been much simpler if you had worked a little harder and passed the examination?"

I was silent.

“Anyhow, to want to die because you have failed in your duty is a noble sentiment. I also commend you for your determination to uphold the honour of our family and to take your life rather than face humiliation.”

His words were encouraging and I was taken in by them. “Yes father,” I said wiping my eyes.

“Personally, I think it is a very good idea,” he said as he handed me the rope. “Here, go ahead. But this time, make sure the rope is really tight.”

He walked away. I sat there and wept, not knowing what to do I could hear the whispered pleadings of my mother and my father’s indifferent assurance, “Don’t worry; he won’t do anything to himself.”

After fifteen minutes, he came in. “I see you don’t have the courage of your convictions. But the next time you fail in your examination, I shall hang you myself personally and I shall make sure the noose is really tight, do you understand?”

“Yes father.”

“Now get out of here and don’t let me catch you in any more mischief to gain sympathy.”

Then, my father sent for the teacher. “What do you teach these boys in your school?” he shouted. “Reading, writing and malingering I suppose?”

“I don’t understand sir,” said the teacher non committaly. “Raju unfortunately…….”

“Haven’t you got a cane Man?” he interrupted rudely. “More learning has been taught through the behind than through the brain.” Then he explained what I had done and proceeded. “See that he passes next time. Otherwise, I will hand you a rope too.”

I had no option but to go to school and the teacher became more strict and demanding. For a long time I suffered from a sense of injustice, but I was not sure whether it was against my father. But I did place a live scorpion in the teacher’s desk. I was only disappointed it did not bite him.

7.SLIGHTLY TEMPERAMENTAL

This is the story of a wrist watch. It is not modern, ugly and assertive like these digital mostrosities that perform five different functions at the same time with relentless electronic logic. It is gold-plated, with bold Roman lettering on a simple white dial and a gold chain to match. My grandfather presented it to me in the late thirties for passing my S.S.L.C. examination with very high marks. I was very fond of it because it represented an age of prosperity, dignity and leisure and brought back memories of my youthful success. Somehow, I always thought of the watch as a lady. I had the same affection towards it that one has towards an old love whose looks still retained traces of her former glory. It was a relationship that had stood the test of time, both literally and figuratively.

One morning – it was a few days after the emergency was declared in June 1975 – my watch suddenly stopped working without any reason whatsoever. I opened the case and had a look inside, but to my untrained and ignorant eyes, the defect was too mysterious to be detected. I thought I had probably over wound it by mistake and kept shaking it with the hope that it might start working. But no amount of persuasion would do; it refused to budge a second. I decided it needed expert attention and took it to a watch repairer.

The young man who received me at the shop glanced at me and the watch alternately for a few seconds and then disappeared through the door at the back after asking me to wait a moment. I waited patiently while the patient was being examined and the illness diagnosed. At last the verdict was given. It needed oiling and cleaning, a few parts had to be replaced – which I was assured were difficult to get. It would naturally cost me quite a lot of money, far more than what my grandfather had paid for it originally.

“If you want my advice,” the young man offered it to me gratuitously. “I wouldn’t waste my money on it; it has had it. May be, it was a good watch thirty or forty years ago, but it is sure to go wrong again and you will be back here inside of six months. Now, here is a nice little piece of high technology which will last you a life time and cost you only a little more than getting this thing repaired. I think you should go in for a replacement.” He produced one of those electronic gadgets and began to explain its complicated working.

“Would you exchange your grandmother for a younger person just because she is getting a bit deaf?” I asked him.

He looked at me with a considerable degree of suspicion and shrugged his shoulders. “If that is how you feel about it,” he said. “Shall I make out a repair order for the watch?”

“Yes,” I said grimly.

When I collected the watch about two weeks later, it seemed none the worse for the repairs it had undergone. In fact, it had had a face lift. The dial was much cleaner, the gold

case brighter and it did work for a few weeks. This time, instead of stopping suddenly, it did so in stages. It kept stopping every few hours for some days before it went off altogether.

I did not have it repaired again. It was not worth spending another fortune and letting the assistant in the shop have the smug satisfaction of telling me, "I told you so." Further, as the trouble started with the emergency, I decided that probably my watch was against it and was registering its silent protest by refusing to 'cooperate'. This statement was made with such seriousness to some of my friends that they were bewildered at first and laughed later. Anyhow, it was true that it had refused to record the passage of time after the declaration of the emergency. I did not like things happening without a reason and this was the only possible explanation I could think of. So, I put the watch in a sort of cold storage and did not bother any more about it. And from a comfortable corner in one of my table drawers, the watch with a conscience watched the progress of the emergency, the release of opposition leaders, the elections and the formation of the Janata Government.

I forgot all about my watch during this period, but when I came across it in my desk one day, I took it out and shook it with very little hope of anything happening. But when I raised it to my ear, there was a faint tick. Yes, it was working now. The reason suddenly flashed into my mind. My watch was a true democrat and struck work during the emergency. Now that it was over and a properly constituted democratic Government was in existence, it had decided to contribute its share to the national effort, whatever that might be.

It started ticking again for a few days and stopped again. I took it to a half-a-dozen repairers and they all told me with surprising unanimity that they could not repair it since 'spare parts were not available'. And the watch went back to its cozy corner in my writing table.

But that is not the end of the story. Quite by accident, I discovered a way of making my watch work. It was at the time of the political crisis when Morarji Desai had to resign and Charan Singh became the Prime Minister. I do not want to carry the political analogy any further as it might not be very complimentary to the erstwhile Janata party and its leaders. You see, my watch works only when the dial is facing downwards and its backside is exposed. May be some clever scientist will be able to explain this eccentric behavior of my watch in terms of the law of gravitation and possibly suggest a remedy. But in the meanwhile, when I want to know the time, I turn its face upwards, have a peep and replace it quickly lest it should decide to stop as a further protest against another political somersault.

Now-a-days, instead of being on my wrist, it adorns my writing table, exposing to everyone, not its beautiful dial, but its dull, tarnished back that has lost its original brightness. I console myself philosophically by saying to myself that the behavior of my watch is perhaps a true reflection of the times we live in. My watch is neither a believer in democracy nor in dictatorship. Like most beautiful things – particularly ladies – it is slightly temperamental.

8.THE MISSING EAR RING

The banquet in honour of the foreign dignitary was to begin at 8 p.m. Lady Helen, the Governor's wife was putting finishing touches to her make-up.

"I am ready dear," His Excellency the Governor announced from his dressing room.

"I will join you in a minute John," Her Excellency announced as she screwed on one of her ear rings. But she could not locate the other ear ring. She hastily went through the jewel box in which it normally should have been, searched the floor in case it had dropped on the carpet, but no, the ear ring was nowhere to be found.

"Damm!" she shouted and then called her husband.

"Yes dear?" the Governor peeped his head inside the door. "Aren't you ready yet? His Highness will be here in another ten minutes."

"I have lost one of my ear rings," she cried.

"Put something else on and come," pleaded the Governor. "We can look for it later. If you are not there when the old nincompoop arrives, you will create another diplomatic incident."

"But it is my most favourite ear ring," she wailed. "The one you gave me when little Timmy was born." But the Governor had already left.

She knew her husband was right. Within six months of their arrival in the colony, she had acquired a reputation for putting her foot in things. The left wing press had made the most of it. She hurriedly removed the diamond ear ring, put on some pearls and followed her husband.

As she made absent-minded conversation with His Highness during the banquet, her mind was on the missing ear ring. Where could it have gone? Perhaps, it was under the bed; or may be, it had got under the dressing table. She had a sentimental attachment to it, not because it was particularly valuable, but because of the occasion it was given to her. She remembered all the important occasions it was given to her. She remembered all the important occasions when she had worn them. Losing anything however trivial – was bad enough, but to lose a favourite ear ring! "I hope to goodness I find it," she told herself as she passed some hot pickles to His Highness who was on a bland diet.

After the banquet was over and the Royal guest had departed with expressions of mutual goodwill – in spite of the pickles – there was pandemonium in the Governor's mansion. At first, the Governor and his lady – with the help of one of the A.D.C. s – searched the bed room without any result. When it became evident that it was missing – probably

stolen – the police were sent for, after midnight. Considering it was the Governor's house, they came promptly with powder bags for dusting for finger prints, inspected the garden and the grounds for foot prints, and questioned all the servants and ever Her Excellency as to when she had last seen the ear ring. Then they departed, promising to catch the thief and recover the jewel 'soon'.

The A.D.C. kept telephoning the superintendent of police every day and even the inspector-general. They made encouraging noises, but nothing happened. Patience was not one of Her Excellency's virtues and she gave vent to her feelings without bothering about who was listening. "Whoever would want to take one ear ring?" she exclaimed to those who commiserated with her. "When they could so easily have taken both. It is sheer stupidity, matched only by the inefficiency of our police force!"

"You can't expect them to work with the same speed as New Scotland Yard," the Governor remarked.

"You bet they don't!" she responded. And then she produced her classic remark that was to become a by-word in the colony for many years. "Perhaps, a policeman's wife is wearing it now."

The remarks of Her Excellency were repeated with embellishments wherever people met – at parties, in clubs and other social gatherings. The loss of the ear ring came to be referred to as 'Herring', short for 'Her Excellency's Ear Ring'. 'Herring' stories – real as well as fictional – became the topic of conversation everywhere in the capital. His Excellency's efforts to tone them down proved futile. Naturally, the newspapers got hold of the incident as well as the stories that were circulating and they were repeated in the press with enthusiasm. For the first time, the press was on the side of Her Excellency and one newspaper wrote an editorial on the subject which ended with the words, "If this is the fate of the Governor's Lady, one can easily imagine the plight of the common people when they have to seek the aid of the police!"

"I wish you would be a little more circumspect in your remarks in public," His Excellency remonstrated with her.

The police were making frantic enquiries, following many leads that led nowhere, questioning all the suspected characters in the city, but without results. At last there was a new clue. The superintendent came to see Her Excellency. "Can I borrow the pair to the missing ear ring Your Excellency?" he asked.

"Why?" Lady Helen wanted to know.

"We think we are on the right track, not only of this piece of jewellery, but a whole lot of other thefts in this area. If we should unearth the hoard, we want to compare it to see if one of the ear rings forms a pair to this."

"You might as well have it I suppose; I can't wear a single ear ring," she handed it to the superintendent.

About two weeks later, the police officer came to the Governor's mansion, all smiles. "There you are Your Excellency, he said handing her the pair of ear rings. "I do beg you to have greater faith in the efficiency of our police force in the future."

Lady Helen's eyes sparkled as brightly as the diamonds as she received and inspected them. "Thank you superintendent," she said with reluctant admiration. "I am ever so grateful. And you have even had them polished. There was no need for you to do that."

"Well Madam, the stolen ear ring was buried in the sand and was looking somewhat dull. So, I thought, better to have them both polished so that they looked alike. I hope you don't mind," he said somewhat bashfully.

"Thank you very much. Let me know who was actually responsible for tracing it and I shall see that he is suitably rewarded."

"There is no need to do that Your Excellency. It was all in the course of duty. By the way, would you like to see the thief? He has confessed and is waiting outside."

They went out into the garden. A man in dirty clothes was standing in the drive, his head bowed and a constable with a rifle towering over him.

"Ay, you!" the superintendent shouted at the thief. "Fail at Madam's feet and ask her pardon."

The man did as he was told. "Excuse me Lady," he cried.

"Ask him why he took only one ear ring instead of taking the pair. If he had done so, you might not have been able to catch him." Lady Helen told the police officer.

When it was translated, the man gave a sickly grin and looked at the superintendent. Then he said, "I was going to have it melted down. But I had no time."

"He will get at least two years Madam," the officer said. "Needless to say, this won't be his first conviction. He is a professional of long standing."

With renewed expressions of grateful thanks on Lady Helen's part, the superintendent departed with his prisoner, a smile of satisfaction on his face over a job well done. And Lady Helen praised the efficiency of the police to all her friends.

****

A couple of months later, when Lady Helen's bed room was being spring-cleaned, the missing ear ring was found in the small space between the mattresses and the carved wooden penalling of her old fashioned bed. Immediately, the superintendent was sent for and asked to explain how he had found the missing ear ring and caught the thief while all the time, it was in the bed.

"If your Excellency's ear ring is missing and the police are unable to trace it, what will you and the public think of our efficiency, Madam?" he asked.

9. A. R. P.

Most people are aware that the recent I.N.F. treaty signed between the United States and the U.S.S.R. is the first major step towards avoiding a nuclear war and preservation of world peace. But very few people know about the A.R.P. treaty signed some months later between the two countries regarding nuclear safety for the civil population. It was given a very low-key treatment by the media, possibly because neither government wanted to publicize the events that led up to the signing of the treaty. Most people do not even know what the letters A.R.P. stand for. But I happened to visit the small town of Kam La in the eastern Himalayas, and met one of the chief actors in the story responsible for it and he gave me all the details. This was how it happened.

****

The elderly Englishman was sitting at the bar of the Kam La Club, sipping 'chota' peg – alone as usual. The young American walked in. He wore rimless glasses, long sleeved shirt and trousers which was the dress prescribed for members and their guests who wished to use the bar.

"Good evening sir," he addressed the Englishman in a friendly and jovial manner. My name is George G.Homer (Junior). But please call me George."

The Englishman got up from the bar stool. He was tall and slim, very erect and carried himself well for his age. "I am Colonel. Charles Lockwood, Indian Army; retired of course. I happen to be the secretary, president, and the only member of the Kam La Club. People of the locality call me Col.Charlie. I hope you are comfortable in our modest hostelry."

"Well, under the circumstances……." George G.Homer trailed off.

"Of course, it is not like your Hilton," replied the Colonel. "We did put in modern sanitation some years ago. But you will find that the drinking water is boiled and the food is wholesome. None of your fancy Pizzas, doughnuts and burghers here."

"I suppose so; but we always carry some tinned stuff when we travel in India. We find it safer."

"Perhaps you are wise," said the colonel without much conviction in his voice."

"What are you drinking sir," the American asked. "May I offer you some scotch?"

"My dear sir, I do not like to accept a hospitality that I am unable to return. What with a colonel's pension and the policy of the present government, scotch is but a nostalgic memory to many of us in India."

"What is a bit of hooch between friends and allies colonel? In any case, it costs next to nothing in the diplomatic service. And look at the trouble you have taken to accommodate

us here." He signalled to the turbaned barman who produced two glasses. The American added generous measures of scotch from a bottle he carried, and splashes of soda.

"Well, if you put it like that, how can I refuse? Replied the colonel as he accepted the glass offered to him. He became distinctly friendly after that.

Mrs. George G.Homer, a petite brunette with an attractive face came in and introduced herself to the colonel. "Call me Margaret," she told him. "I am young enough to be your daughter. Kam La is such a charming place. I believe on clear days, you can identify many of the well known peaks in the eastern Himalaya from the club tower. It must be wonderful to live here. And what a nice club you have! It has such old world charm!"

It was just the kind of gambit that the colonel needed. He told them about the old days in his youth, in the thirties, when he was a young subaltern, when scotch was twelve rupees a bottle and English officers behaved like demi –gods. He related to them about his marriage, about his wife's passing away during the Second World War, about the gay times in the Kam La Club, about dances, picnics and scandals. It was obvious he had reached the period of his anecdotage.

Margaret encouraged him by appropriate questions at the right places. But she also tactfully changed the subject by enquiring about the people of the area, their customs, superstitions, etc. The colonel, without being aware of it, went into a peroration about the locals, about the monograph he had written about them some years ago and which was published by an obscure week from Calcutta. Meanwhile George kept refilling his glass whenever it was empty.

Finally, the colonel got up. "Oh well, I must be going," he said. "Mutta will be waiting for me."

"Mutta?"Queried Margaret.

"My bearer; he is nearly as old as I am, but he is also very fit for his age. He was my Batman in the army and when I retired, he did not want to serve anyone else. Let me see, he has been with me for over forty years." If I don't get back before nine o' clock, I will be in trouble."

The colonel picked up his stout walking stick and his torch, "see you tomorrow," and stalked out.

That night lying under mosquito nets, George said to Margaret, "You had the old boy eating out of your hand."

"He is a dear really," the wife replied. "And so innocent. Did you see, his shirt cuffs were frayed? I am really sorry for him. May be, tomorrow, we can get him to talk about the local tribes and the Swami. He can give us information, if anyone can."

****

During the next two days, they went on picnics and pony rides and took the colonel with them. He was very knowledgeable about the local people, their customs and traditions and was happy to tell them about it all. Having very few people to talk to, he soon became very attached to them, particularly to Margaret who boosted his ego by showing sympathy, understanding and admiration. And in the evenings, they met at the bar as usual.

"Here's to your good health sir," said George as he raised his glass.

"That picnic this morning was wonderful Charlie," commented Margaret. "We could never have found that delightful village without your help. Thank you very much for taking us there."

"You see colonel, I am interested in tracing the cultural links between Nepal, Tibet and the hill dwellers in India," said George.

"It is strange that you should be interested in the problem," replied the Colonel. "I myself wrote a monograph on the subject some years ago. I will see if I can find a copy for you."

"Tell us more about it Charlie," Margaret encouraged him. "George and I are so interested in the topic."

"Well, most of these people call themselves Buddhists, but their religion is a mixture not only of Buddhism and Hinduism, but paganism as well, for they still worship the gods of the pre-Hindu era. But the main constituent of their faith is magic and superstition. They are able as a result to perform so many feats which are super-human and which cannot be explained by western methods of logic and deduction. They believe that life after death is lived not in heaven or hell, but in the upper reaches of the Himalayas. And they claim to converse with the departed spirits. They have magical medicines that are a cure for most ailments including cancer. The devil of it is that some at least of their claims have been verified and found to be true. But they will not reveal the secrets of such medicines. Many of them are administered – not orally – but through the pores of the skin. 'It is like giving them a thousand injections,' as one medicine man explained to me."

"Can you introduce us to some of these people sir?" enquired George. "I would like to make a study of their social and cultural environment."

"I can help you in that direction," said the colonel. "People in these areas trust me as a friend and if you can get anything at all from them, I can manage it."

"Thank you for your help sir," replied George. "There are rumours that these people have some kind of protection against radiation and heat. That is how they are able to survive against the brightness and the ultra-violet radiation from the eternal shows of the mountains. Is there any truth in all this?"

The colonel looked at him somewhat quizzically. "I say, you don't belong to the C.I.A. or anything like that, do you."

George looked hurt, “I am surprised at you colonel.” he exclaimed.

“How do you spend your time here Charlie?” Margaret smiled and changed the subject. “Do you read a lot of books? I suppose you go for long walks into the mountains you evidently love so much. We would be fascinated to hear about it.”

“Please don’t misunderstand me,” explained the colonel. He felt that the mention of C.I.A. had introduced a great constraint between them. “When I first heard about this protection from heat and radiation, I naturally refused to believe it. But my bearer Mutta who has a lot of friends among the local people and is married to a local girl was full of it. He said that if I did not believe it, he would bring me a sample of the powder to demonstrate.”

“It is a powder, is it?” asked George. “I wondered.”

“Yes, he brought just half a teaspoonful. He rubbed the powder against the tip of his little finger and it kept disappearing evidently into the skin. That meant that the grains of the powder were smaller than the pores in the skin. They must have been of atomic proportions. Then he lit a candle and held the flame so that it would burn his finger tip. When he removed the flame after about ten minutes, the finger was just as it was before. No pain; no burn marks; nothing.”

“Of course candle flame is not particularly hot,” commented George.

“I thought of that. So, I asked him to place his finger tip in contact with a red hot poker. But it didn’t bother him. Later, I tried it myself, with the same result.”

They were silent for a few moments. “Of course, heat is only one form of radiation,” said George. “But tell me sir, how long does the effect last? Is it for any specific period or is it for life?”

“Certainly for six months, perhaps longer. Here, just hold your lighter to my finger.”

When George held the flame of his cigarette lighter to the Colonel’s finger tip, there was no pain and no burn marks.

“There you are,” cried the colonel in triumph. “My finger was treated six months ago.”

When once he had started on his story, the colonel seemed unable to stop. “Being a military man, I immediately thought of its potentiality in modern warfare. So, I shot off a letter to the defence ministry in New Delhi giving an account of my investigation and asking them to send a team to contact the Swami who was supposed to have developed the secret.”

“Your deduction was brilliant colonel,” George complimented him. “What happened afterwards?”

“Nothing; absolutely nothing, even after three reminders. So, there the matter rests as far as I am concerned. But last month, I heard that a team of Russians had visited Kam La – presumably to meet the Swami.”

“Did they stay in the Club?” this was George.

“No, they stayed in the local travellers’ bungalow I believe. I was glad they didn’t come here.”

“So, you do not know if they got a sample of the powder colonel.”

“I’m afraid not; even Mutta did not get to hear about it. For all we know, they might have been here on holiday like you, thought I very much doubt it.” And the colonel smiled.

Again they fell silent. George made a quick decision. “I want to put my cards on the table sir,” he said earnestly. “This powder is not an offensive weapon; it is purely defensive, for the protection of the civilian population. If there is any truth in the claims made for it, it may still be the means of saving Humanity from a nuclear holocaust. Therefore, the best scientific brains in the world – it does not matter if they are Indian, American or even Russian – should study it, develop it, mass produce it and distribute it so that Mankind may be saved from the nightmare that is hanging over everyone’s head. In fact, it may make a nuclear war meaningless. Therefore, instead of treating it as tribal magic or superstition, should we not get hold of it?”

“Quite a speech,” smiled Charlie.

“You see Charlie,” it was Margaret’s turn. “I don’t mind telling you that we had heard about the Russian visit. We had also heard that the visit was not particularly successful. So, we thought we would come over, particularly as we knew you were here. Now, we leave it to you. From a woman’s point of view, this is perhaps the most encouraging scientific development in the post-war world. If the claims are true, I would like to nominate that Swamiji for the Nobel Peace Prize.”

The colonel was moved and flattered by the trust and confidence imposed in him by the young couple.

“These hill people are rather peculiar,” he said. “They love to play practical jokes on foreigners and then laugh at us. This Rakesh Swami I understand is very temperamental and has his own strict sense of ethics and values. But I will see what I can do to arrange a meeting. Afterwards, it is all up to you and him.”

****

And that was how on a fine, sunny morning, the four of them were negotiating the tracks on the slopes above Kam La. Mutta, the colonel’s bearer led the way followed by George with a heavy ruck sack which contained some scientific equipment as well as sandwiches and coffee. The colonel and Margaret followed, the colonel giving a commentary on the flora and fauna of the area. The morning was cool and bracing, the air was clear and pure and a gentle breeze caressed them as they walked. On the higher slopes, there was thin mist which hid the peaks. A solemn stillness, a sense of mystery and enchantment hung in the air as they climbed higher and higher.

“I feel almost mesmerized by these wonderful mountains Charlie,” said Margaret as she stopped to survey the view. “No wonder you like living here. I would too, if I didn’t have a husband and family.”

“Yes, there is an attraction, a charm that is beyond description,” replied the colonel as he helped Margaret to get up a particularly steep step. “It holds you and keeps you; difficult to get away from its magnetism.”

But on the whole, the climbing was sufficiently strenuous to permit much conversation and they walked in silence for the most part. After a walk of about four hours, they reached a plateau from where they could see the plains of India for a hundred miles. Above them towered the tall peaks of the Himalayas, covered in eternal snow. They sat under the shade of a tree, thankful for a rest.

“Please have your sandwiches and coffee; I will be back shortly,” said Mutta and disappeared. Margaret took out the sandwiches and distributed them to the menfolk and poured the coffee into mugs which they drank with relish.

By the time they had finished their meal, Mutta was back. He was smiling from ear to ear. “You are lucky Sahib,” he said. “The Mahayogi is in his cave and will see you.”

“Have some sandwiches and coffee Mutta,” Margaret offered.

“Thank you Madam. I shall have them when you have Darshan of the Mahayogi. Let us go.”

He took them along a narrow path circumventing a small hillock. As they turned, the plains of India were completely hidden and they were in a different world of gigantic rocks, rugged peaks and snow. Soon, they were in front of a cave.

“The Yogi is inside,” whispered Mutta. “Please go in and have Darshan.” He seemed completely obvious of the purpose of the visit.

They left their shoes outside and walked in. Margaret shivered a little and the colonel held her hand to give her support and strength. They had arranged among themselves that only George should speak and the colonel would intervene only if it was absolutely necessary.

The entrance to the cave was rather dark, but the cave itself seemed to be well lit and ventilated from some hidden source. They could see the Swamiji sitting on a tiger skin in the Padma aasana pose. The three of them walked in, bowed their heads and raised their folded hands in respectful greeting.

“Pray, be seated,” said the Swami in perfect English.

As they looked round, the Swami continued, “I am sorry there are no trappings of modern civilization such as chairs in my abode. But the floor is quite clean and hygienic.”

They sat down, feeling somewhat uncomfortable.

“And what is the purpose of your visit?”

“We have come to seek your blessing Swamiji,” replied George.

“You have come a long way to seek a simple and perhaps useless piece of benediction,” the Swamiji smiled.

“Your blessings are most valuable, we have heard sir.”

“Only the restless wander in search of such things; those at peace with themselves – like me and Colonel Lockwood – stay in one place.”

The colonel was startled. He knew he had heard the voice somewhere but could not quite locate it.

“Don’t look startled colonel. We have known each other a long time ago, though you knew me by a different name.” Then, the Swamiji turned to George. “Let us not beat about the bush with polite and meaningless hypocracies Mr. Homer. You have come here to investigate the rumour about some powder that makes people immune to radiation. You have some equipment in your ruck sack which is capable of producing different types of radiation in order to see whether the claims are correct. Is that not so?”

“Amazing!” exclaimed George. “How did you know about the equipment?”

“My mind is rather like one of your radio receivers. Whatever thoughts are in your consciousness, I can read them. Some of us are blessed – or cursed – with such capabilities. I say ‘cursed’ because; occasionally it can be a curse, as when a murderer comes to you for help. “Now, have I proved my bonafides to your satisfaction?”

“Yes, of course Your Holiness.”

“Very well then; here’s some powder. Just a pinch; enough to cover about three square inches of your skin in any part of your body. You can conduct any experiments you like on the portion treated with the powder.”

George hesitated.

“Come on! You are a scientist though you are called a cultural officer. There is no better proof for deductive knowledge than experimentation, is there?” The Swamiji seemed to know everything.

George accepted the powder and the three of them came out. It was rubbed into the skin on George’s wrist and with the help of the portable equipment; the skin was subjected not only to intense heat but to the entire range of the electro-magnetic wave spectrum. At the end of ten minutes, he shouted, “My God, it can withstand any kind of radiation. It works!” Even the hairs on his wrist were not singed.

They went back into the cave.

“Are you satisfied Mr. Homer?” enquired the Swamiji.

“Yes sir, I do not know the principles of science on which this invention is based, but it does work and I am satisfied. I would like to congratulate you on this great invention. And I request, in the name of Mankind that it may be made available in order to protect human civilization from an atomic war.”

“It is my hope that this little invention of mine need never be used on a mass scale as you seem to envisage. It should be used only in laboratories and atomic power plants where the chances of accidental exposure are very great. But tell me, if I reveal the secret to you, will you share it with the Russians?”

“Sir, this invention is not an offensive weapon. It is purely for purpose of defence of the civilian population against the dangers of a nuclear war. And since we have solemnly declared on more than one occasion that we will not be the first to start an atomic war, the question of sharing it with the Russians does not arise.”

“Just as I thought,” smiled the Swamiji. “You know of course that the representatives of the Soviet Government have been to see me. I put the same questions to them and got almost identical replies. Since they have also declared that they will not be the first to start a nuclear war, it is obvious that neither of you need the powder.”

“Why not give it to them both?” Colonel Lockwood intervened.

“No,” said the Swamiji. “They will immediately start research on how to nullify its effects.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” agreed the colonel.

“Therefore, I suggest that each one should have fifty percent of the information on how to manufacture it. If they have enough sense to come to an agreement and share the information, then they will both have it. If not, neither will.”

“But sir……..” George began.

“There is no ‘but’ about it Mr. Homer,” the Swamiji was emphatic. “The Russians already have fifty percent of the information. Therefore, it is only fair that you should have the other fifty percent. This folder gives the formulae, the process, etc. All it needs for complete manufacture is the other half which is with the Russians. Don’t lose this or attempt to steal the other.”

George looked at the folder. It was neatly typed on an electronic typewriter on extremely good paper and well prepared, exactly like a report one was likely to get from an expensive consultant in the United States. It was marked A.R.P.

“What do the letters A.R.P. stands for?” he asked.

“During the Second World War – you were perhaps too young then – we had Air Raid Precautions in every city and town in Europe. But I have called this, using the same initials – since it is for the same purpose – Anti Radiation Powder.”

“Thank you sir,” they all bowed deeply and left.

****

And that was how the A.R.P. treaty came to be signed.

10.SINS OF THE FATHERS

I lived alone in Bangalore in a small but very comfortable flat. I had my own car. My husband Mohan was away on an assignment in one of the African countries. I couldn't go with him because he would be working in the jungles most of the time. To be parted from my husband after only three years of marriage was a great blow, but it was only for two years and this was a great opportunity for Mohan in his professional advancement. He would be planning and executing a whole new transport system including bridges, roads and railways. It was the chance of a lifetime to implement his ideas and there was every hope of international recognition when his work was successfully completed. Everyone – including my parents – said, "What is two years when you have your whole life before you?" So, I let him go, reluctantly.

But I was bored; bored and fed up. I suppose I could have taken a job, but I was not trained for anything. My sister Nirmal was the brainy one in the family. I did some social work, may be ten hours a week, went and saw my parents-in-law occasionally, went to the ladies club and played caroms or badminton. I had been very fond of those games at college, but it was not the same now. I wrote to Mohan as often as possible and demanded frequent letters from him. Poor man! He was so enthusiastic about his work, worked so hard and was so tired in the evenings that it was difficult for him to write long letters. But I knew he loved to read mine.

At the end of one year, I became a little restless. I wished I had had a child. It would be something to love and to comfort and care for. It would have provided companionship and would have reminded me of Mohan. But we didn't happen to have one. Neither of us thought much about it at that time, but now, I wished it had been different. Anyhow, one year was gone and in another ten months, Mohan should be back. I was already looking forward to it and began to make plans for the future.

It was about that time that my sister Nirmal came to see me. She was an assistant professor in a girls' college in Madras, a real career girl. She was interested in literature and philosophy, keen on attending conferences and seminars and presenting papers, involved in helping her students with their problems and in all the usual academic gossip. She had no intention of getting married and settling down to the dull routine of domestic life. "I don't want to cook for a man and mend his socks for the rest of my life," she used to say. She was full of life and laughter and energy, a great advocate of women's liberation and stood no nonsense from any man. Her male colleagues were a little scared of her.

I was therefore greatly shocked when she walked in with her suit cases, looking utterly miserable and as soon as I shut the door on the taxi man, she broke down completely and started sobbing.

"What is the matter Nirmal?" I asked anxiously, but she was unable to speak.

I put my arms round her and tried to soothe her. After a few minutes she calmed down and almost whispered, “Sheila, I am pregnant.”

I was stunned. “How did it happen?”

“How does it usually happen?” she retorted. “By going to bed with a man of course!”

“But who is he? Do you love him? Can’t you marry him?”

“No!” she was vehement. “It does not matter who he is. He has done his part. Now, I must do mine.”

I hesitated a little before asking the next question. “Couldn’t you……..get rid of it?”

“No, it is too late for anything like that. I have to have the baby.”

What surprised me was that Nirmal seemed to have been affected by it so badly. With her views and attitudes, I would have thought she would have taken it in her stride. But I suppose the higher you go, the bigger the fall.

There was not much to say. I made a cup of tea and it calmed us both a little. While I felt truly sorry for Nirmal, I must confess I was a little jealous of her. Here I was, married for three years and wondering why I hadn’t conceived and my unmarried sister goes and gets herself pregnant on some silly misadventure.

After a second cup of tea, we discussed the problem in a calm and sensible manner.

“But who is the man, my dear?” I asked. “Couldn’t we put some moral pressure on him to do the right thing? Surely, he must have parents, friends, people who would advise him?”

“It is better you do not know who he is,” said Normal. “You see Sheila; he has done it deliberately to ruin me. He did not come to me out of love or even lust. His only object was to make me pregnant and then to laugh at me. The strange thing is that I should have fallen for him as badly as I did. Even now, after all that he had done to me……. I find it difficult to forget him. When I realized I was pregnant and suggested I get rid of it, he said so. He was fond of children; he would marry me and if I wanted to pursue my career, he would look after the baby with the help of Ayah. He was so nice, loving and tender and affectionate, but when the three months were past, he refused to have anything to do with me. So, I had no other alternative but to resign from the college and come away to you.

“But in heaven’s name, why?” I cried. “How can any man be co callous? What had he against you?”

“I don’t know; but from the hints he drooped during our last meeting, it had something to do with father.”

Our father had retired as a judge some years ago. He was known a firm but fair judge, but of course, during his long career, he must have sent quite a few people to the gallows. I

could not imagine anyone having a grudge against him as a person, but someone could have thought he was being unjustly punished. He must be a very vindictive person indeed if he was to harbor a grudge for so long and I said so.

"He is a man with a warped and twisted mind", Nirmal said. "Sometimes, even when we were friendly, he would talk of a suicide pact. Afterwards, he told me that that was because I did not conceive soon enough. But he really didn't want me to die. He wanted me to live and suffer."

"Give me his name and address," I pleaded. "Let me see what I can do."

"No Sheila. Don't you see, if he has a grudge against father, then he would want to harm you in some way also. Not in the same way as he has used me, because you are married and sensible, but in some other way. I am glad I didn't give him your name or address. That is why I have come here without telling anyone and hope he won't be able to find out where we are."

Over the next few days, I did my best to find out something about that man but Nirmal was adamant and I did not really know anything about him until afterwards.

****

The problem of Nirmal's hospitalization had to be faced. She should also see a doctor periodically to make sure everything was alright. I knew very little about these things. We discussed it many times without coming to any conclusion. Nirmal did not want to have the baby in her own name. She felt the child would be handicapped.

Finally, I made a suggestion. "Nirmal, I agree that as a single woman, it would be difficult and embarrassing for you to have a baby under your own name. So, why don't you go into a hospital where we are not known and admit yourself in my name? You can be Sheila Mohan Rao for the 'duration'. We are alike to look at and no one would know any difference. I will be 'Nirmal' and look after you."

"Will you do that much for me?" she asked eagerly. "Will you really do it? Oh, how nice you are! What a wonderful sister I have!" She hugged me and kissed me and shed tears of happiness.

Looking back on it now, I wonder why I made that suggestion. It just came out of the blue. Was it really to help my sister or was it a subconscious desire to have a baby at least by proxy? I don't know. I did not of course realize the consequences of what I was doing. I was just relieved for Nirmal.

We selected a small private maternity hospital outside the city. The doctor, Dr. Suguna Ramachandran had a good name as a gynecologist. I took Nirmal to her for the first time about two weeks after she came to me and introduced her as Mrs. Sheila Mohan Rao, my sister. From then on we were playing a part. I told the doctor that my brother-in-law was away and I was looking after her. The doctor was not unduly bothered about it. She gave a

thorough examination, explained that things were normal and advised fortnightly visits till the confinement.

But I knew Nirmal was not normal.

"You know," Nirmal said to me one day. "If it wasn't for the baby, I would gladly commit suicide. But I have already begun to love that child, conceived out of a love-hate relationship – love on my part and hatred on his. Only, I did not know it then."

She was no longer my sister Nirmal, full of fun, full of confidence and optimism, taking things in her stride, advising others over their problems, tackling awkward parents and people from the education department with tact and wisdom. Was she the one who told me I was a fool to get married? Was she the one who hoped to lead a life full of intellect and solitary splendor? It was obvious she was deeply hurt, wounded, not physically but somewhere deep inside, wounded in such a manner that her spirit was debased and humiliated. After all, it was not such a tragedy for a single woman to have a baby these days, particularly if she had no financial problems. Our father had settled quite a lot of money on us, so that we both had a private income. But she seemed to be shattered beyond repair……. I could not understand it.

She would be quiet for hours and suddenly, she would start sobbing. "You don't know what I have been through, the agony and the torment!" And she would cry like a child.

"Tell me."

"No, it is enough that I suffer. Why should I drag you into my misery? Why should you be involved?"

"Because I am your sister and I love you."

"It is exactly for that reason that you should not be involved."

She would gaze for hours through the window. "I wonder if he knows where I am." She would talk to herself. "If he came here, I would kill him! There is no other alternative."

It was perhaps a good thing our parents were far away. After my father's retirement from the service, they decided they did not like city life, retired to our ancestral village, modernized the old house and cultivated the few acres of land inherited from my grandfather. I wrote to them to say that Nirmal was staying with me for some months as she had a research project going in one of the colleges here. My mother replied that it was a good thing for me as I must find time hanging heavily on my hands. My father rarely wrote.

Apart from the mental agony, Nirmal was also physically not feeling well and that worried me. The morning sickness seemed to go on and on and she was completely exhausted. The doctor prescribed some tonics, asked Nirmal to eat plenty of fruit and that was all.

What with looking after Nirmal and worrying about her, I had no time to think of my own problems. I wrote to Mohan regularly of course, but we decided – Nirmal and I – that Mohan should not be told anything about Nirmal. It would only make him worry and there was nothing he could do from four thousand miles away. So, I told him the same story I had told my parents, about a research project.

2

From the time Nirmal was admitted into the hospital, things began to go wrong. Physically, she was weak; but mentally, she seemed totally unfit for what she had to go through. Lately, a new worry had been added to her other mental and psychological problems. It was that her erstwhile lover could claim the baby as his and might take it away from her. I assured her that that would not be possible because the baby would be officially and legally mine. That soothed her for a while and then she began to worry if I would want to keep the baby. Again I assured her that I would not do it since I wanted to have my own babies with my husband. But she was still not fully convinced.

The doctor was a bit puzzled because of something that Nirmal might have said to one of the nurses, or may be in her sleep.

“Is everything alright between Mrs. Rao and her husband?” the doctor asked me.

“Of course! Why do you ask?”

“Because of something she said and because she seems so miserable about it all,” said the doctor. “Having the first baby is a time of great happiness for most mothers”.

But physically, she found nothing wrong except that Nirmal was very weak. Needless to say, I was very concerned about everything. The birth was extremely difficult. The labour pains were prolonged and agonizing. Nirmal lost a lot of blood, but she delivered a beautiful baby girl weighing three kilos. We named her Geetha and she was registered as the daughter of Mrs. Sheila and Mr. Mohan Rao.

Nirmal’s recovery was very slow. But what were more worrying were her mental state; her attitude towards me and the baby.

As soon as she was able to talk, the first thing she said to me was, “Are you going to keep the baby?”

“You know we have discussed all this and made arrangements as you wished,” I replied. “She is going into the Social Service Society’s orphanage until such time as you are in a position to look after her yourself. I don’t come into the picture at all. Meanwhile, we will both go and see her every week!

“But she is being registered in your name; will be legally your daughter. What rights have i?”

“Look Nirmal, we have gone over all this many times before. Do you really think I will rob you of your child?” I asked with tears in my eyes.

“I don’t know what has come over me,” she cried. “I suspect everyone; don’t trust anyone. Not even you who have done so much for me.” And she started crying.

It was very awkward in the hospital. Though Nirmal had a private ward, the nurses kept popping in and out, the resident doctor dropped in unexpectedly and I did not know what Nirmal would do or say. But fortunately, they didn’t seem to suspect anything and Nirmal was usually quiet when anyone was around.

On another occasion she moaned, “I hate that baby! Oh, how I hate her! She looks just like him!”

“Babies change considerably as they grow up,” I answered.

“But I know; I can feel it here in my heart. Every time I look at her, it is his face that I see. How can I bear it forever and ever?”

“Calm down dear. In a month, her face would have changed completely.”

“Take her away from me! I might do something to her if you leave her alone with me,” she said amidst her tears.

A nurse came in during one of these outbursts. Though Nirmal calmed down as soon as she saw the nurse, she had obviously heard something and she must have spoken to the doctor. So, that evening, Dr. Suguna spoke to me.

“I think your sister is mentally disturbed,” she said. “In her condition, it is not abnormal. But I would advise you to be careful for the next month or two. I would also advise that she should see a psychiatrist as soon as she is fit to do so.”

“And when will that be doctor?”

“I could keep her here for another week. Then, she should be fit to go home. It is then that you should be careful.”

“Of course.”

“It is not really my field, but I have a feeling that she is harbouring a great and secret sorrow in her heart. That is what is causing all the trouble. So, take her to a psychiatrist as soon as you can”, the doctor concluded.

After what Dr. Suguna had said and after what Nirmal herself had told me, I was glad that we were leaving the baby in an orphanage. It would be one responsibility less. Apart from my own grief at my sister’s plight, I was confused and bewildered as to what was going to happen. I had so little experience in these things and there was no one whom I could consult.

****

A week later, I took Nirmal home. As had been arranged before, we drove to the orphanage. They were expecting us. It had been arranged that we would pay for the upkeep of the baby and be free to take it away when it was convenient for us. Again, I had chosen it with a view to privacy. We signed the necessary papers, handed over Geetha and returned to my flat. I had made sure that either Nirmal or I could claim the baby whenever we wanted.

If keeping the baby was a great emotional strain on Nirmal, leaving it in the orphanage was even more so. She was constantly talking about her. “Will they look after Geetha properly in the orphanage? Will they have all the vaccinations and inoculations done at the proper time? Will they hand her over when the time comes?” and so on.

I took Nirmal to a psychiatrist, but it was not a success. After three sittings, he told me that Nirmal would not discuss any of her problems with him. “You see Miss Nirmal,” he said. (Yes, the fiction of my being Nirmal and my sister being Mrs. Sheila Mohan Rao had to be maintained even with the psychiatriat.) “It is essential for me to know everything regarding the circumstances of her pregnancy, of her husband leaving her and her relationship with him I am to be of any use. But your sister will not discuss any of these things with me. There is a complete block. Perhaps, if she were to come to me after a few months, I may be able to help her.”

I could quite visualize Nirmal’s problems with the psychiatrist. Now was she to pretend to be a married woman and still tell the truth. So, the attempt had to be given up.

About a week after Nirmal came home from the hospital, I had an unusual letter from my mother. “There was a letter addressed to your father last month from an insurance agent. There was evidently a claim from Nirmal about some minor loss of jewellery and they can’t pay it because she is no longer in her previous address. They wanted to know her present address and your father sent him your address. I hope it is alright,” it said.

I knew Nirmal had no insurance of any kind except life insurance. Could it be that man trying to find out her present whereabouts? I was sure it was. It made me frightened. It meant that he now knew my address also. But I did not want to discuss it with Nirmal in her present state and kept it to myself. But I wrote to my mother asking her to forward the original letter from the insurance agent to me.

One day, Nirmal asked med all of a sudden, “Have you told Mohan about my problem?”

“No, why?”

“Don’t you think you should?”

“I don’t want him to worry unnecessarily. After all, there is not much he can do about it, is there?”

Another time, she asked me, “Sheila, will you look after Geetha if anything should happen to me? Adopt her, make her yours.”

“Of course dear. But don’t worry, nothing will happen to you.”

“But you don’t have to adopt her really, do you? She has been registered as your child, is it not?”

“She is your baby and you know it! Why do you torment yourself with such morbid ideas?”

“Sheila, listen to me. I know I have been talking rubbish, hurting you and tormenting myself. Now, my mind is clear. So, let me tell you this. You have suffered as much for that baby as I have in having her. You have as much right to be her mother, in fact more, because you will give her a father as well. So, I want you to have Geetha. You might have one or two of your own when Mohan returns. But I still want you to keep my child. Do you understand? I want Geetha to be your daughter. Forget everything I have said in the past or I may say in the future when my mind is disturbed. I want you to promise me that.”

“Of course dear.”

She hugged me then. “You have not only been a wonderful sister, but you have been more than a father and mother. You have not reproached me once for what I did.” And tears flowed from her eyes like a torrent. From then on she started referring to Geetha as ‘our child’.

After that day, she seemed to improve. She was mentally clear and logical, more coherent in her speech, helped me with the housework and went for walks in the evenings. She often switched on the T.V. and took an interest in the outside world. I was afraid for her because I knew that man had got my address and would be looking out for her, but I dared not say it. Nor could I stop her from going out, because it seemed to refresh and revitalize her. But I was greatly relieved that she was happier and also because my husband had written to say that his work was nearing completion and he hoped to return in a couple of months. Then, I could dump whatever problems I had in his lap and relax.

It was therefore such a shock when one evening Nirmal did not return from her walk at the usual time. As I was beginning to get worried, there was a telephone call to say that she was involved in an accident and had been admitted to the Kasthuri Bai Memorial hospital.

“Is she badly hurt?” I asked.

“Please come quickly!” And the line went dead.

I rushed out to the hospital. She was in the operation theatre. The sister in charge of the ward told me it was serious, but would not say anything more. I waited and accepted a cup of tea that she very kindly brought me. At last, at two A.M. I was allowed to see her.

She was swathed in bandages. She hardly opened her eyes. Only the pressure of her hand on mine indicated life, love, trust and understanding.

“Nirmal! Nirmal! I sobbed.

Her eyes opened for a few seconds. Her lips parted. “It was Him!” she whispered. And the pressure on my hand ceased.

3

I wrote to my parents as well as to Mohan that Nirmal had died in a tragic road accident. I advised my parents not to come to the funeral. It would have been too much for them.

I was not left to myself for long to suffer the agony of my sister’s passing. A great doubt assailed my mind. To whom did Nirmal refer when she whispered, ‘It was Him’? It could only be her erstwhile lover. Who else could it be? During the eight months she had stayed with me, no other man was mentioned. It had to be Him! It was also evident that he had been in touch with her and she had not thought fit to confide in me. Probably, she wanted to protect me from him as she had done all along. If so, he was also responsible for her death in some way. That was probably what she meant when she whispered ‘It was Him!’ It explained a number of things that Nirmal had said to me and which at that time seemed to make no sense. Particularly the last conversation we had when she spoke so clearly and wanted me to have Geetha as my daughter must have been after some decision she had come to. What was that decision? Was it suicide, as the police report seemed to indicate? Or was it murder?

The police report said that Nirmal had swayed as if she was in a coma as she was crossing the road and fell across the path of the car. The inspector assured me that the driver of the car was coming slowly, tried to brake and was in no way responsible. From what the inspector said, there was not likely to be a case against the driver, which was most unusual. Knowing about her health and mental state, it was perhaps not surprising that the police came to the conclusion they did, particularly when there were witnesses to say that she fell in front of the car. But how did they know about her health and mental state unless someone had told them? And who was that someone? A passenger in the car? A bystander who was conveniently located on the footpath near the scene of the accident? Again, I came back to ‘Him’.

But one question that the inspector asked made everything very clear to me. “Tell me Mrs. Rao, why was your sister carrying a rather large knife in her hand bad?” And he showed me a murderous looking thing. I had never seen it before. She must have kept it hidden from me.

“She was afraid of being attacked inspector,” I told him.

Then I knew my sister was murdered. She was going to meet her lover on an assignment, and if she got a chance, she was going to kill him. If so, suicide would have been the last thing on her mind. He obviously knew which may she was going and where she would cross the road and had forestalled her!

Now that my sister was murdered, I knew I would be the next victim. I contemplated it with fear and apprehension. And yet, I welcomed it in a way. It was a challenge. I was like a moth buzzing round a flame, but sooner or later, my wings would be singed. Would I suffer the same fate as my sister? What a terrible, terrible mess I was in! If only Mohan would come home before anything happened!

I realized that in the grief of my sister's death, I had not bothered to get the number of the car that hit her or the name of the owner and the driver. So, I telephoned the inspector. He was very kind; he gave me the number but said that the name of the owner was not recorded since it was the driver who was driving the car at the time of the accident. It was a Madras number.

****

The expected was not long in coming. About ten days after Nirmal's death, I got a letter by post. It was type-written and there was no signature.

'My dear Sheila,

I hope you don't mind if I address you by your first name. I feel I know you so well.

Your husband has been away in Africa for the past one year and eight months. And yet, you have been admitted into a nursing home about three months ago and according to records, gave birth to a baby girl. Was it another case of Immaculate Conception? I wonder.

Photostat copies of your admission into the hospital and the birth certificate of your child with the name of the parents are enclosed along with this letter in case you think I am bluffing.

I am sure your husband would be interested in seeing this evidence of your loyalty and devotion to him during his absence. However, before I sent it to him, I would like to discuss it with you if you will meet me in the north-eastern corner of Lal Bagh, near the big banyan tree on Saturday at 4.30 P.M. No code word or identification is necessary. I will recognise you if you are there. If not, the documents will go by courier service to Africa.

A Friend!

The letter struck terror into my heart. I did not know there were such callous and vindictive people in the world. What would Mohan think when he got that information? Would be believe it? Would he hate me? How much would he suffer? What proof had I to show that the child was not mine? I had covered Nirmal's tracks so cleverly that I was completely exposed. For twenty four hours, I cried my heart out without knowing what to do. Then I suddenly came to a resolution. I realized I had lost my sister and was about to lose my husband if I let the initiative slip from my hands. There was nothing more left for

me to lose anyway. So, I decided to fight. Desperation gave me a sort of fool hardy courage. But at the same time, I realized that courage was not enough. I was dealing with an extremely clever, probably rich, influential and desperate crook, as desperate as I was in his own way. Yes, courage and determination had to be combined with a certain degree of cunning.

I made my plans very carefully. I surveyed any advantages that I had, there was very little. There was just the odd chance that he could be an ordinary black-mailer who had somehow got hold of the information quite accidentally. But I discarded the idea. I was convinced he had been Nirmal's lover, tormentor and probably killer. Now he was gunning for me. But what information did I have? Only a car number which might have been borrowed for the occasion and the letter he had written to my father which seemed to have been typed on the same typewriter as the one I had received. After Saturday afternoon, I would have a face to go with it.

I desperately needed help; someone in whom I could confide and who would help me and at the same time keep my confidence. It was then that I thought of the Universal Detectives Incorporated. I remembered Mohan mentioning them as being extremely reliable. Though they were very helpful – particularly after I mentioned Mohan's name – I did not want to tell them too much at one time and kept my plans to myself. As a first step, I wanted one of their men to take some pictures of the man whom I was going to meet, by himself, as well as talking to me. It had to be done from a distance so that he would not suspect anything. Fortunately, they had an expert photographer who could use a camera with a tele-photo lens. I also arranged that after I left him. Someone should follow him and get his address.

As I walked to the prearranged spot in the park, a tall good-looking man, dressed smartly in a pair of trousers and a bush shirt walked over to me.

"Good evening Sheila; I am glad you decided to meet me."

"Tell me, what do you really want?" I asked him.

"Let us first get to know each other, shall we?" his voice had the quality of light music. No wonder Nirmal fell for him in a big way. "Come and sit on this bench and we can talk."

I followed him and sat on the bench. From that position, the photographer could get good shots. He was behind the banyan tree.

"I hope you have come alone," he said when we had settled down.

"This is not the kind of occasion when either of us would like to have witnesses," I remarked.

"I have nothing to hide," he said. "But I think you are wise." He smiled and took my hand in his.

I pulled my hand away from him. “I am not here for a social or romantic chit-chat,” I said, severely. “I am here to discuss a particular matter and what your conditions are for not passing on the information to my husband.”

“I want you in return,” he smiled. “You are very attractive, if I may say so. I have always been fond of you; loved you from a distance, as one might say.”

Now I was sure he was Nirmal’s destroyer. No true black-mailer ever wants love – or a woman’s body – in exchange for vital information.

“But what assurance do I have that if I agree to your proposition, the information will not be passed on to my husband?”

“You have to trust me. You have no other alternative.”

“Has it ever occurred to you that my husband may already have all the relevant information? And when I say all, I mean all.”

“If that were true, you would not have come here.” He sounded so confident.

“I may have my own reasons for wanting to meet you. You don’t seem to realize that.”

He looked at me quizzically. “You mean you have told your husband that during his absence in a foreign country, you have had a baby by another man?”

“I think you know exactly what I mean.”

“By the way, where have you hidden your baby? I know it is not in your flat. I wouldn’t mind adopting it myself since I have no children.”

“You have found out so much about me. How is it that you don’t know where the baby is?”

“Don’t worry; I will find it sooner or later.”

“And then adopt it I suppose?”

He was thoughtful for a while. And then he said, “I might just do that. After all, the baby is mine.”

So, he was out in the open. I was waiting for that.

“The baby may be yours, but it has been registered as the daughter of Mrs. Sheila and Mr. Mohan Rao. You yourself have a copy of the birth certificate, remember?”

“You know Sheila; I thought you will be more sensible than that. Now you leave me no alternative but to send the information to your husband.”

Inside, I was shaking with fear and indignation, but I had to have it out with him, bluff him. Under no circumstances did I want to expose my weakness.

“Yes, send it!” I nearly shouted. “You destroyed my sister, tormented her and sent her to her death, probably killed her yourself! Now you are trying to do the same with me. Why? What have we done to you that you are doing this to us?”

“Ask your father.”

“No! I am not going to ask my father or anyone else. Even if had done something wrong, should the sins of the fathers be paid for by the children? Would you like your child to pay for your sins?”

That shook him. He became agitated.

“Don’t worry! Your child will not pay for your sins! But you will! I shall see to that!” I cried.

“O.K. Let me have my child and you will hear no more about anything.” He was almost conciliatory. “I promise to disappear from your life. After all, the child is going to be a permanent embarrassment to you.”

“Never! I made a promise to Nirmal and I am going to keep it. The child is legally and morally mines.”

“Even if your husband were to divorce you?”

“You do not know my husband.”

“If that is your last word, then I will have to make other plans.” He stood up.

“You won’t be able to knock me down on the road, if that is what you are thinking of,” I taunted him.

His face turned red. But he controlled himself. “I do not give up easily you know,” he remarked.

“And I do not give up at all.”

On that note we parted.

****

I had to act fast. Any day, he might discover Geetha’s whereabouts. So, I requested the Universal Detectives Inc. to guard the child. His car number was the same as the one involved in the accident. His name was Kesavan and he was a native of Madras, but was now staying in a hotel here.

The next day, I went to the college in Madras where Nirmal had been working, introduced myself and asked if anyone had seen the man in the photograph along with Nirmal. Two of Nirmal’s colleagues identified him as the gentlemen who often came to call

on her. From what Nirmal had told them, they thought they were going to get married. I also found out he was a married man, therefore, he could not have taken Nirmal to his house. Nor would they have gone to a hotel in Madras where he was well known and might easily have been recognised. So, they must have met in other places. I got a list of conferences and seminars that Nirmal had attended during her last year in the college before she resigned and came to me. It was then a simple matter for the detective agency to find out in which hotels she had stayed in those towns. Sure enough, in six hotels in Bangalore, Bombay and other cities, Nirmal and Kesavan had stayed in the same hotels on the same dates. And they had stayed in adjoining rooms with an inter connecting door. Fortunately, they had registered in their own names.

Going through Nirmal's things, I was able to get two letters in his handwriting, loving, threatening, and compelling her to meet him. The second letter written only a few days before Nirmal's death had asked her to meet him in the north-eastern corner of Lal Bagh, near the banyan tree at four thirty P.M. on the day she met with her accident. I shivered as I looked at all this evidence. He had been extremely careless.

The private detectives interviewed Kesavan's driver. When they started asking questions, he broke down and confessed that he was not driving the car on that fateful day, but had been persuaded by his employer to confess to the accident on the assurance that there would be no prosecution. They took a sworn statement from him.

Now, I was ready to go to the police. But I realized it was no use going to the local inspector who had investigated the accident. I fixed an appointment with the superintendent of police and went to him with all the facts.

I gave him the authenticated hotel reservations of Kesavan and Nirmal on six different occasions, the statements of Nirmal's colleagues about Kesavan's visits to the college to meet Nirmal, the letters he had written to me and to my father and to Nirmal fixing an assignment for four thirty P.M. on the fateful day, and the statement of the driver. "And if you check on the witness who claimed to have seen the accident, you will find he is connected with Kesavan in some way," I concluded.

The superintendent heard me patiently. "I must congratulate you on the thoroughness of your investigation Mrs.Rao," he said. "You have left out only one thing. Why was your sister carrying a knife?"

"For self protection," I replied. "She had every reason to fear that man and her fears have proved to be true. In fact, it was that knife that convinced me that she was going to meet him and that she was murdered."

I heard later that Kesavan had been arrested for the willful murder of Miss K.R.Nirmala, formerly assistant professor in Mangalam College, Madras.

****

After the hard work and excitement of the previous ten days, a kind of lethargy overtook me. As the day of Mohan's return drew near, so my concern and anxiety increased. Would he suspect me in any way? How was I to convince him? And then, I wondered, what kind of a husband was he if he believed anonymous letters? After all I had been through, if he were to accuse me of infidelity, I decided to leave him. I had Geetha for love and comfort. No one could take her away from me now.

At the same time, I wanted absolute proof that I could throw in Mohan's face before I left him. There was only one way to do it. So, I went to Dr. Suguna who had looked after Nirmal during her confinement and asked her to examine me. I told her a tall story about my fiancee wanting to make sure that I was normal and could have children before marrying me. What she told me proved to be another great shock of my life.

"Miss Nirmal," she said. (I was still Nirmal to her) "I am sorry to tell you that it is extremely unlikely that you will ever have any children. There is a mal-formation in the womb,,,," I did not hear anything more.

I met Mohan at the airport after a long wait. He was cheerful and laughing as usual, but just squeezed my arm in affection. We were not used to exhibiting our emotions in public.

"By the way, how is our baby? Why didn't you bring her with you?"

I started at him in amazement. "You have been having a lot of fun and games during my absence, haven't you?" And he put his arm round my shoulder. I could not resist giving him hug.

"How do you know all this?" I demanded.

"Here, read this," He took a letter from his pocket and gave it to me. It was from Nirmal. She had written to him a few days before her death, telling him the whole story and telling how her tormentor might try to blackmail me. What a wonderful sister she was!

"Well, it is nice to have a baby without having to work for it," he laughed. "When I left you, we were two. And now, we are three. It is great."

11.BIG POWER RIVALRY IN CODESIA

Big power rivalry is a well known phenomenon in the post-war world. But it took a somewhat curious turn in Codesia and resulted in the recall and possible disgrace of an ambassador. This was how it happened.

Com.Dimitrov had been a career diplomat carrying out the instructions of his superiors, never expressing a view if he could help it and generally earning a good name for stability and reliability among the top people at the foreign office in his country. As a result, he had been promoted recently and appointed as ambassador to Codesia. It was an important assignment and he was naturally eager to make a success of it. Codesia was at the cross roads of big power ambitions. As a small, influential, non-aligned nation which opened its doors wide to all, there was great rivalry between the biggest of the capitalist and socialist powers to get the Codesian government to appreciate their respective virtues.

Having faithfully obeyed the orders of others for twenty years, Com.Dimitrov felt that the time had now come to exercise his own powers of discretion and diplomacy. He felt that success in his new assignment depended not only on aid programmes, cultural exchanges and supporting each other on the floor of the United Nations, but also in making the common people of Codesia feel that his country was more humane and helpful than capitalist countries – in a purely non-political way of course.

In attempting to put these ideas into practice, he was perhaps more lucky than most ambassadors, because his wife was a qualified doctor. He knew that Codesia – like most developing nations – was woefully short of doctors, medicines and medical facilities. The few doctors who qualified within the country tried to escape to the wealthy capitalist countries in order to make a good living. Therefore, if his wife could set up a clinic and treat people freely, it would be good propaganda for socialist medicine and a march over the capitalist countries. From the point of view of publicity, it would have been best if the clinic had been opened in the capital itself. But the government of Codesia had just embarked on a massive programme of rural development and was requesting doctors to go to the villages and the ambassador did not want it to appear that he or his government disapproved of that policy even in an indirect manner.

So, his staff was asked to scout round and select a village. After some exploration, they came upon the village of Sirumudi. It was only fifty miles from the capital, there was a good motorable road and it as in one of the areas selected by the Codesian government for development. Apart from all these things, the people of Sirumudi seemed a highly intelligent lot, understood the implications of capitalism and socialism and promised all cooperation. MadameDimitrov visited the place and approved it.

There were various formalities before the clinic could start to function. Permission had to be obtained from his Home government. The top brass at the foreign ministry did not see what contribution a small clinic was going to make in the Global strategy of outwitting

capitalism and consolidating socialist gains; but ultimately, permission was given somewhat reluctantly. Then the foreign ministry of Codesia had to be approached. They referred the matter to their Health ministry as well as to their intelligence wing. After making sure that no security risk was involved, permission was given for the clinic to function, provided no political propaganda was mixed with the medicines.

And so the clinic came into being. Two rooms had been engaged, the outer one for examining the patients and the other for storing medicines, bandages, etc. Simple wooden furniture was sent from the capital and the shelves filled with various bottles. On the first day when MadameDimitrov visited the clinic. She was horrified to discover the pictures of Codesian gods, in various war-like poses which had replaced her carefully selected posters about diphtheria and chickenpox. The village priest started burning some insense as soon as she arrived. It suffocated the people inside and made them caught – 'to drive away the evil spirit of capitalism'; it was explained to the doctor. When the religious ceremonies were over the village head man welcomed Dr.Dimitrov, spoke at some length on the goodwill between their two countries and how this clinic would act as a strong link in their chain of friendship.

MadameDimitrov visited the clinic two days in the week, examined the women and children and distributed pills and capsules. The women were rather shy at first, but with the help of one of the local assistants, the doctor put them at their case, laughed and joked with them and after some time, even some men came asking for medicines, though they were reluctant to be examined by the buxom woman doctor. MadameDimitrov worked hard, ate her sandwiches at lunch time, drank her thermos of coffee and returned to the embassy in the evening, tired but with a feeling of virtuous satisfaction. There was even a news item in the local paper about the good work and the ambassador wrote home to his ministry about his modest success in making friends with the common people.

Of course, such a thing could not go on without it causing some comment in the capital – particularly in the diplomatic world. It was a topic of good-humoured comment among the various ambassadors, and their wives. One ambassador claimed that he had asked his government to sanction a family planning clinic which was even more essential than the healing of suffering. Another ambassador's wife wanted to start cooking classes in order to teach the women of Codesia, all her national dishes. While Com.Dimitrov sent the newspaper cutting about the clinic to his minister, one of his junior clerks – who had been detailed for the purpose by his home government – forwarded the remarks going round the diplomatic world.

But in the rival embassy, the matter was taken more seriously. Mr. Homer Black called a staff meeting and a plan of action to counter the effects of the clinic was worked out.

So, one day – when it was an off day for the clinic – Mrs. Homer Black arrived in Sirumudi in a huge Cadillac that was the size of two village houses. She had a couple of pretty Codesian girls with her in their national costumes who distributed flowers and sandalwood paste and beetle nuts and leaves to all the village women and sweets to the

children. The Codesian girls explained that the great and powerful country across the Black waters was celebrating its National Day and this year, as a special treat and a mark of affection, it had been decided to give the village of Sirumudi an important place in their festivities. The ambassador's wife had come in person to invite them. Mrs. Homer Black who had an irrepressible sense of the obvious, explained in mime and dance, what sort of entertainment was to be provided.

The village women were delighted at the prospect, but there was one difficulty in accepting the invitation. It was that the Capital was fifty miles away and there was no public transport. It was then explained to them that buses – free of cost – would be provided and they were to come in their most colourful costumes, with their menfolk and their musical instruments so that they could perform their traditional dances on the embassy lawns. This was even better than the village people had hoped and the invitation was graciously accepted.

On the morning of the party, fie large buses arrived in Sirumudi and everyone in the village – except the very old and the infirm and babies – piled into them and were taken to the embassy. The ambassador and Mrs. Homer Black received them in person, greeted them in their local dialect – which they had learnt specially for the occasion - which was acknowledged by the men with dignity, and the women with shy giggles. They hid their faces behind somewhat inadequate veils which they kept drawing aside all the time. Mrs. Homer Black laughed and joked, did a little jig to indicate dancing and led them all to the long tables which were loaded with all kinds of local as well as imported delicacies.

There were cakes and pastries and meat rolls and sandwiches of various kinds, luscious fruits, sweets and ice cream and local delicacies such as chilly puffs and hot balls. Orange juice as well as tea and coffee were served by uniformed servants. There was a band in attendance which played background music. The people of Sirumudi enjoyed themselves as they had never done before and mingled with the elite of the capital as equals. (The elite however felt that this was carrying democracy to ridiculous extremes). They admired the lawns as well as the public rooms where they tried the soft, velvety chairs, lolled on the sofas and admiringly inspected the curtains as well as the excellent bath room arrangements which were quite novel to them and whose working arrangements were demonstrated by no less a person than Mrs. Homer Black herself. While no alcohol was served out of deference to the policy of the local government, knowing the propensities of the Codesians, an enterprising aide had laid on a private bar in one of the back rooms. The men of Sirumudi – quick on the up take in such matters – clandestinely visited the bar in ones and twos. Each time they returned, there was a brighter gleam in their eyes and a greater respect for their hosts. Fortunately, the liquor was suitably pre-diluted so as to avoid any embarrassing or untoward incident.

As the sun went down and the shadow lengthened and finally disappeared, thousands of coloured lights appeared among the trees and bushes in the vast gardens. The delicate outlines of the embassy buildings were also floodlit, giving an appearance of a dreamland to the rustic people of Sirumudi who had never seen anything like it. Chairs had been placed in

semi-circular rows and a floodlit platform was erected in the middle for the entertainment. There were one or two items from the host country, followed by polite applause, and then, the people of Sirumudi took over.

The musicians sat in a corner of the platform and the prettiest belles of the village – in their colourful costumes – did languorous dances to lilting tunes. But they soon ceased to be languorous; thanks to the private ministrations of the aide, the music became more melodious, the rhythm more emphatic and insistant. In keeping with the music, the dancers soon lost their inhibitions as skirts swirled and veils were discarded. There was a gay abandon as Mrs. Homer Black joined the dancers, clapping her hands to the rhythm and urging the audience to join in the fun.

The embassy P.R.O. had done his job well. The press had been briefed beforehand, a film company invited to film the proceedings. As the dances succeeded one another, flash bulbs exploded and movie and television cameras whirled from appropriate angles. Soon, they would be screened not only in Codesia and the host country, but released through an International syndicate that would bring name and fame to Sirumudi.

The last dance was performed by the men, with drawn swords. It was jokingly known locally as the 'Harakiri' dance because of its wild abandon, and thanks to the alcohol they had imbibed, they nearly succeeded in justifying that title. But the whole thing was stopped just in time by the P.R.O. who turned off the loud speakers and brought the dance to a safe if abrupt end and to thundering applause from the audience.

Mr. Homer Black spoke a few words at the end. He thanked the good people of Sirumudi and hoped that he had been instrumental in bringing their skill and artistry – which was undoubtedly considerable – to the notice of the wider world. He hoped they would go far but in which direction, he did not fortunately specify. But it was generally understood they might even go as far as his own country – all of which was translated for the benefit o the people of Sirumudi.

So, after tearful and affectionate goodbyes – made even more affectionate by the final packets of sweets that were handed round – the men and women of Sirumudi were bundled into the buses to go home exhausted, but exhilarated. The next day there was a big splash in all the local newspapers with suitable photographs and even one or two editorials about the democratic traditions of a great country – all of which was duly noted by Com.Dimitrov as well as the junior clerk in his embassy.

The next day, when Dr.Dimitrov opened her clinic as usual, there were hardly any patients. She thought that after the festivities of the previous day, there would at least be a demand for indigestion pills and it would give her an opportunity of demonstrating how socialist medicine can overcome capitalist indigestion. But after some time, a group of women came to her. They didn't want any medicine, they said. But couldn't she throw a party on her embassy grounds and let them come and dance there?

“But I have been looking after your health!” the doctor exclaimed. “Surely, that is more important than eating rich food and getting stomach upsets!”

“Illnesses come often,” said the wise women of Sirumudi. “But they go away often also. And no one can stop death when it is fated. But a party doesn’t come our way very often and we enjoy it. Homer has told us that he is even going to take us to perform in his country. We will all fly in an aeroplane and become very rich.”

“But that is ridiculous!” exclaimed the doctor. She was going to say, ‘Who wants to see your dances?’ but stopped just in time.

“Doctor, you have been telling us about the superiority of socialist medicine and we have believed you. Then surely, socialist pastry and cakes and sweets should also be superior to the capitalist variety. So, we want to try them.”

One of the younger women who had had a little education tried a different approach. “You see doctor, we are a non-aligned country. We have neither capitalism nor socialism. We have a mixed-up economy. We want to ease international tension by our efforts. Having exhibited our talents in one embassy, we feel it would not be fair if we do not give a performance in the rival one.”

“But I can’t give a party!” cried the doctor. “I have no authority.”

“Mrs. Homer had authority; she invited us.”

Finally, the village ladies left in a dissatisfied mood and the doctor returned to the capital and reported everything to her husband. He knew it was the end.

He sent for the junior clerk. “Kindly send a message to comrade Foreign Minister that I would like to come for consultations.”

“But Comrade Ambassador, I have just received a message from our foreign office recalling you from your onerous duties! I was about to bring the message to you when I was called!”

That was the last anyone heard about Ambassador Dimitrov in the diplomatic world.

And the village of Sirumudi, after a brief moment of glory, relapse into its age long drabness and lethargy.

12.MODERNISING GUNDAVIA

Gundavia was a small and neglected country until quite recently. It was once a part of the mighty British Empire and was shown in world maps in red as 'British Gundavia'. Any senior official of the colonial office who had committed grave errors of judgement was sent to Gundavia as governor for expatiation of his sins. And as the poor man got ready for his departure his sympathetic colleagues usually asked him, 'How many rolls are you taking?' meaning toilet paper, since that precious commodity was not available in that country. The quantity he took indicated how long he expected to stay there before resigning. After its independence in 1968, the word 'British' was dropped and its colour in maps became a pale green. But it was too poor to establish other symbols of independence such as a national air line. It was not even presented in many of the capitals of the world and usually, as a member of Commonwealth, the third secretary in the British mission conducted its affairs. No foreign power wanted bases there and no one was interested in investing money in the region. Consequently, it enjoyed a period of peace and tranquility that was unknown in most parts of the world.

But a small announcement in the Gundavian Times changed all that and created a flutter that reverberated in all the capitals of the industrial world. The small, insignificant kingdom became the centre of attraction for all the big powers. The only scientist in Gundavia, Dr.Dubai, a geologist from Cambridge, discovered both Uranium as well as oil on the lower slopes of the Gundavian mountains. This news item was picked up by one of the London dailies and head-lined 'Gunda Strikes it Rich!' All hell broke loose in the corridors of the Commonwealth office while officials frantically searched their files for any information on Gundavia. The matter became even more urgent when there was a call from the Prime Minister's secretariat for a detailed report. It was then realized that someone had slipped up and His Majesty Surabe, king of Gundavia had never been invited to the last Commonwealth heads of State meeting. Heads began to roll. Retirement without a knighthood was the only punishment available for those responsible, now that they could not be sent to Gundavia as governors. A letter of apology was soon dispatched along with a suggestion that a trade delegation may be received in Gundavia to strengthen the traditional bonds between the two countries. One of the purposes of the delegation was to verify the press reports regarding the discovery of oil and Uranium. The delegation was received somewhat coldly by the Gundavian authorities, because of the insult to their king and country. But the king himself was unaware of the fact that a Commonwealth heads of state conference had taken place without his knowledge or presence, the officials being too frightened to inform him of that fact. His Majesty had a summary way of disposing of messengers who brought him unpleasant news. But, in the course of discussions, the British delegation was able to convince the officials of their goodwill and hint that a special invitation from the British Prime Minister to his Majesty would be issued as soon as it was known that it would be accepted. They were also able to collect samples of rock and other materials which, when analysed, indicated rich deposits of Uranium.

This was the beginning of a new era of friendship, co-operation and cultural exchange between Great Britain and Gundavia. The Commonwealth office which until recently had forgotten the existence of that small country, suddenly went into action. An interest free loan of five million pounds sterling was sanctioned to a reluctant Gundavia. A troop of dancers from that ancient land was invited to tour the United Kingdom and give performances. Gundavia became very popular in radio and TV quiz programmes. Information about its population, natural resources, royal family, music and dance and sculpture were all avidly gathered both by quiz masters as well as competitors. The fact that the king of Gundavia had three wives was politely ignored until a popular comedian brought the matter up in one of his gags as the Gundavian Trinity. Help was also extended for agricultural development, for exploration of natural resources and for strengthening the English department in Gundavian University. That small country soon became the largest recipient of aid under the Colombo plan. The culmination of all this was an invitation to His Majesty king Surabe to pay an official visit to Great Britain.

King Surabe – true to the tradition of his ancestors – had never left the borders of his country, unless it was for purposes of war and conquest. But as a progressive ruler, he was aware that his country was backward. If it had to enter the technological era along with other great nations, it could not do it with one geologist and a few unqualified assistants. It could only be done with external help and guidance. And which other country could provide it but Britain which had ruled his land for a hundred years and was fully aware of its complex problems? After all, his great, great, grandfather had also broken the rule about going abroad and had been presented to Queen Victoria! So, he accepted the invitation. A whole floor in one of the super de-luxe hotels in London was reserved for him, his three wives and his ministers and aides.

While his sides and ministers were busy having discussions with the officials of the Commonwealth office regarding the needs of Gundavia in various economic and industrial fields, about health education and medical services, the king was busy doing a little sight-seeing along with his three wives. They were photographed everywhere. There were good humoured articles in the press about the royal family which, fortunately, His Majesty did not understand. But what fascinated him most of all was the toilet paper in the various bathrooms. The management of the hotel, with great forethought, had provided different coloured paper with Gundavian coat-of-arms, in the different rooms. His queens came to him proudly with fluttering bite of soft, silky, scented paper in their delicate hands. Put together, the king was surprised to discover that they made up the national colours of his kingdom. He was enthralled at such ingenuity and sent his compliments to the management. Their smoothness as well as firmness in handling was a great joy to his Majesty. In his own realm, leaves of a particular tree were used for this purpose; they were supposed to have magical, medicinal properties, but the king was aware that many of his subjects suffered from certain ailments in that part of their anatomy. The king himself had never got beyond the Gundavian Times for this purpose. Its editorials were said to be excellent and written in chaste English, but the quality of the paper left much to be desired. The king was so fascinated by the paper in his own bath room that he went in very often just have the

/pleasure of touch and feel, so much so that his personal physician was somewhat anxious and wondered whether His Majesty had developed a London Belly!

The next day, while his three queens went to one of the large departmental stores to do their daily shopping, the king spent his time in another department. He examined different types of rolls, packets, fittings, smelt the delicate scent that wafted from some of the more expensive items. The method of inter-leafing in flat packets so that a second paper was ready for use as soon as the first one was pulled out intrigued him and he spent quite some time opening the packets to see how it was done. He inspected everything with the thoroughness of an electronic engineer studying a new type of micro-processor. Orders were placed on the spot for all the bath rooms in the palace, to be equipped suitably. He had noticed that in his hotel, different suites were named 'Regency Suite', 'Tudor Suite' and so on. He decided that when he got the bath rooms modernized, they would be named after the maker of toilet equipment in order to distinguish them.

The next morning, His Majesty called for a metting of his ministers and harangued them on the urgent need for the modernization of their native land and on the virtues of toilet paper. It would become a symbol, nay, a torch bearer of Modern Gundavia. Under his instructions, the subject was discussed at the next meeting with the officials of the Commonwealth office. They were somewhat taken aback, but agreed that cleanliness was next to Godliness and the project should be given high priority. Before departure for their native land, an agreement was signed for the establishment of a factory for the manufacture of toilet paper and accessories. An innocent looking sub-clause specified that the factory would be paid for by exports of Uranium and oil.

When His Majesty's special flight from London landed at the Gundavian capital and the door opened, His Majesty stood smiling on the steps, hoping to receive the greetings of his people for concluding a successful and economically rewarding visit for modernizing his beloved mother land. But instead, the aircraft was surrounded by soldiers who had originally come to provide a guard of honour. The king, his three wives and all ministers were taken prisoners and moved to a maximum security prison where they languished. At the same moment, other units of the army took over the secretariat, the palace and the broadcasting station arrested those who were loyal to the king and put them in the same goal as the king himself. Since there was now equality in Gundavia, they did not want to treat Common Era any different from the king himself. The Gundavian revolution was complete, bloodless, and even non-violent.

That evening, Gundavian radio broadcast the following statement:

> "Citizens of Gundaland!
>
> The bloody and autocratic reign of Surabe has come to end! Dictatorship is over. Traitor Surabe is behind bars, for all the crimes he committed. All agreements, treaties, etc, entered into by traitor Surabe are hereby abrogated. He tried to give away the wealth of Gundaland for his imperialist masters and therefore has suffered the fate of all traitors!

> Henceforth, our nation will be known to the world as the Sovereign, Independent, Democratic, Republic of Gundaland, the ancient name of our beloved country. To refer to it as Gundavia amounts to treason. In order to round up the followers of the traitor Surabe, martial law has been imposed. The freedom of all citizens is hereby guaranteed. Free elections will be held as soon as possible. Meanwhile, all citizens should stay indoors. Harbouring of traitors is a serious crime and those who do so will receive capital punishment…"

Yes, with the coming of the revolution, Gundavia – sorry, Gundaland – has entered the modern age. But the modernization of its bathrooms has been indefinitely postponed.

Vol.II

13. GATES OF HEAVEN

It was dark everywhere and there was an eerie silence. A faint glimmer of stars was not only above him, but below him also. It was as if he was in the centre of the Universe. There was no horizon. Normally, he found it difficult to walk, to carry his huge bulk around, particularly after a heavy meal. But now, he felt almost weightless, as if he had shed his ninety five kilos and was free of it. It was like being an astronaut who had got beyond the gravitational pull of Earth.

Sivaramakrishna Sasthri, head priest of the Mahalakshmi temple in Kamalapur, felt completely bewildered and confused for the first time in his life. He did not know where he was or how he had got there. It was all most peculiar. Only that afternoon, he had been to attend the funeral feast in honour of Mr. Manikkam, a leading merchant of the town. Perhaps he ate a bit too much, but then, Manikkam was a great patron who had obliged him in many ways and enjoying his funeral feast was the last service he could perform for him. As he got home, he felt a violent pain in his stomach and lay down on the mat. His wife went into the kitchen to prepare some stomach mixture. The pain became terrible and he cried out, but his wife did not seem to hear him. She was probably gossiping next door about his weakness for feasts. But now, there was no pain at all. But why was it so dark on a sunny afternoon?

Gradually his eyes got used to the darkness and he could see a distant figure moving about. He walked towards it.

“Is that you Swami?” someone shouted at him. “Just before I died, I gave you many gifts, Godhan, boodhan, swarnadhan, and so on. But you had no luck to enjoy them all and have followed me so soon.”

“Who is that?” Sasthri enquired. He rubbed his eyes unbelievingly. But somehow, it did not seem to improve his vision. “Merchant Manikkam, isn’t it? It means I must also be dead I suppose. It is your funeral feast that did it, with all the adulterated stuff you used to pass on to your customers.”

“Don’t worry Swami,” Manikkam consoled him. “How many times have you told me that eternity in Heaven was any day preferable to the ocean of domestic misery on Earth? I have merely accelerated your wish a little perhaps.”

“You are right,” agreed Sasthri. “I must be dead. Even when I pinch myself hard, I feel no pain. But where are we? Is this Heaven, or…….the other place? I don’t understand.

“I don’t care where it is,” confessed Manikkam. “So long as my wife isn’t here, it is like Heaven to me. But you are a clever man Swami. You told me about all kinds of punishments

for my sins in Hell and took so much money off me for one ceremony or another. But here, there is nothing like what you said. You see that man sitting over there?"

"Where?"

"There, near that platform."

"Oh yes, I can see him now," said Sasthri.

"Well, let us go and ask him. He seems to be in charge here. Come on."

They walked towards a distant light. As they came near, they could see a brightly lit platform with two large doors at the back that led into the beyond. Some steps led up to the platform. Near the steps sat a gentleman in a dhoti, a closed coat and turban, sitting on a chair. In front of him was a table and on it was an instrument that looked like the penal of a modern computer. There were two chairs in front of him.

As Merchant Manikkam walked forward, the gentleman called to him. "What is your name please?"

"Please tell us who you are first," Countered the merchant. "One of the principles I have always followed in life is, never to do business with any one without knowing his antecedents."

"Who do you think I look like?" the gentleman countered.

Manikkam thought for a moment. "You could have been an elementary school teacher when I went to school some sixty years ago, or a collector's office clerk perhaps. But now-a-days, even they have long side burns and bell-bottom trousers sweeping the office floor. So, you must be a left-over from a previous age. Are you also waiting for service like we are?"

The gentleman looked a bit crest fallen. But he perked up. "I am in charge here. I keep the accounts." He said rather proudly.

"Ah! You must be Chitra Guptan!" Sasthri cried. "My humble greetings My Lord!" He touched the gentleman's feet.

"But where are your account books?" asked Manikkam. "You should have a day book, a ledger; and duplicates for income tax and sales tax purposes."

"I used to," agreed the gentleman. "Though not for income tax or sales tax, for we are not called upon to pay any of those. But now, this machine does everything. When the population of the Earth broke the five billion barriers, it was decided by the higher authorities that our accounts should be computerized. It is a bit confusing at first, but it has more than five billion memories……"

"Does it use fortron or some other language?" Manikkam enquired.

"I have really no idea. Some Japanese technicians have installed it and they assure me it is fool-proof. All I have to do is to press these buttons and information about any individual is at my finger tips."

"What is the use of paying for an expensive computer like this and still keeping you employed? Your higher authorities sound like the Government." Manikkam argued.

"That too was considered," Chitra Guptan smiled. "But there are so many protestors and dissidents coming here now-a-days. So, I have been retained to do a public relations job."

Manikkam examined the computer and thought for a moment. "O.K. you seem genuine enough," he admitted. "My name is Manikkam. I am…… or rather was, the owner of a chain of shops selling general merchandise until I was 'transferred' here. I can assure you that I am known throughout the town of Kamalapur for my honesty and integrity. Even when I did any adulteration, only pure ingredients were used, as this Swami here will testify. Now tell me Mr…… I didn't get your name."

"My name is Chitra Guptan."

"Oh, that is who you are!" cried Manikkam. "Of course I have heard about you. In fact, I have taken you as a model for all accounting purposes. I have also been told…….you are open to persuasion, if you know what I mean. If so, I am the right man for you. Manikkam has never let anyone down, in this world or the next. But tell me, where are we? Is this Heaven or Hell?"

At this stage, as a humble representative of divine authority on the Earth, Sasthri felt that he ought to make his presence felt. He came forward. "Sir, I am Sivaramakrishna Sasthri, head priest of the Mahalakshmi Temple in Kamalapur. I am well versed in all the Vedas, Agamas and Puranas and entitled to conduct all ceremonies according to our ancient traditions. In fact, every year I conducted a great yaga for the rain God for a bountiful monsoon."

"That is why we have had a drought for so many years!" mumbled Manikkam.

But Sasthri ignored him and continued. "Sir, if you are here to receive us, it must be Kailas, the abode of Shiva, or the milky sea, the abode of Vishnu, or perhaps the abode of Indra and the Devas….."

But Chitra Guptan interrupted him. "Look," he admonished. "I have no time for answering all your questions. What with so many wars, revolutions, earthquakes and terrorist activities going on, it is difficult even for a computer to keep pace. Just climb those steps and go through those doors and everything will be clear to you."

"Sir, how can you brush us aside like that?" Manikkam questioned Chitra Guptan. "Obviously, you have not been trained in public relations. Again, it reminds me of our Government. As I understand it, P.R. consists in telling something to your clients, even if it

means absolutely nothing." He turned to the priest. "Swami, all those homams and yagas you made me perform and the money you got from me seems to have got me nowhere. The only consolation is, you are in the same boat with me. At least, if I have prayed to this gentleman, it might have been more use."

But Sasthri ignored Manikkam and spoke to Chitra Guptan. "My lord, you must pardon me for all my sins, committed knowingly or unknowingly. You must forget them all and arrange for me to enter Heaven." He went and touched his feet with reverence.

There was pain in Chitra Guptan's face as he replied. "I no longer keep the accounts, as you can see. The computer does it all now. There is no question of using my….. discretion or anything like that now. And a computer never tells a lie. Ask your friend," he pointed towards Manikkam, "He knows."

"Yes, "Manikkam confirmed it. "When the sales tax people raided my office, they pressed a button on the computer and all was revealed!"

"Therefore, please go up those steps and through those doors and they will take you wherever you wish to go," said Chitra Guptan.

Just then, Doraiswamy entered the scene. He was a bit wild looking with unkempt hair and a bushy moustache and a crumpled shirt and dhoti. "Are you in charge here?" he demanded from Chitra Guptan.

"Yes, what is your name please?"

"Good heavens! This will be the death of me!" cried Doraiswamy.

"Exactly! Now you know why you are here," replied Chitra Guptan.

"Am I really dead?"

"That is how your present status will be described on Earth," replied the divine accountant.

"How is it then that I am still alive and am able to converse with you," demanded the new-comer. "There is obviously some deception. Look here, I don't know who you are, but I do know there is nothing after death. Nothing! I have proved beyond any shadow of doubt, through scientific, objective methods that there is no Heaven and no Hell. You yourself should know that there is no such thing as a God."

"There may be a lot of truth in what you say," admitted Chitra Guptan. "But who are we two against a whole lot of believers? Besides, I have to earn my living."

"People like you have been earning their 'living' for many generations on the credulity of the masses!" shouted Doraiswamy. Then he suddenly rubbed his eyes, as if he had just seen a very brilliant light focused on them. "No! It cannot be true; it just cannot be true! I must be dreaming. How can I come to a Heaven that I have denied all my life with my heart and soul?"

“Perhaps, you were destined for the other place,” ventured Manikkam.

“Don’t be silly!” Doraiswamy replied. “If I go anywhere at all, it will only be to Heaven. But this is surely some trickery of the orthodoxy. I will not believe it!”

“Why don’t you go up those steps and you will know the truth, Chitra Guptan suggested.

“I will not go up or down any steps at your bidding!”

“Staying on level ground is difficult enough these days,” commented Manikkam.

But Doraiswamy was adamant. “Everyone knows there is no such place as Heaven,” he told Chitra Guptan. “I demand you answer all my questions!”

“I have no time for it now,” the accountant replied. “And even if I explain, you will not understand.”

“Then I will not go,” the atheist insisted. “I want to know the ‘Ultimate Truth’.”

“Alright, please wait,” said the accountant with resignation. And Doraiswamy went and occupied one of the chairs, indicating he was prepared for a long wait if necessary.

The discussion seemed to have unnerved poor Sasthri. “I knew it I guessed it! This must be Hell!” he wailed. “Otherwise, how can unbelievers come here?”

A middle aged woman with faded charms, but plenty of make-up on her face walked in. From her mannerisms, one could see that she was probably a prostitute.

“What is your name Amma?” the accountant asked her.

“My name is Neelambal,” she replied. “But everyone knew me as Neela. My profession was…… pleasing men in their moments of need. But I never cheated or pretended to be what I was not; always gave value for money. My men went away happy and came again often. I made no distinction on the basis of status, caste, or religion; totally secular. But some men called me names just the same. Is this place Heaven?”

“If you go up those steps, you will find out,” said Chitra Gupta.

“What beauty!” Neela spread her hands and looked up. Her experience as a bit part actress came in very useful now. “What divinity, brightness and ecstacy! This was what I had always dreamed! I did not imagine for a moment that I would attain the lotus feet of the Lord so easily!”

Doraiswamy turned to Neela. “Don’t believe all this trickery and hypocracy of the orthodox!” he cried. “They are all lies! Lies!” Then, he turned to the accountant. “Look here, if all your religious texts are true, how can this woman come to Heaven? She who had sold her body to every man who had money to pay, how can she enter the place reserved for great souls and benefactors of Mankind?”

The divine accountant, who had avoided answering questions so far decided to answer this one. “She had told you already,” he pointed out. “She gave value for money, without adulteration and without black-marketing, which is more than can be said of some people. (He looked pointedly at Manikkam and Sasthri and they turned away) But why should we follow the distinctions and prejudices of the Earth you have left behind? Neela has seen and experienced Hell even when she was on Earth. Now, she can go up those steps.”

“But I am afraid to go alone. If someone would accompany me….” Neela waited as she looked round desperately, but no one looked in her direction.

“Alright; please wait,” said Chitra Guptan. “If someone you know comes along, you can go with him.”

“Many people know me intimately,” Neela said. “But they wouldn’t like to recognise me in public, not even in Heaven.” She looked pointedly at Manikkam and Sasthri, but they turned away in embarrassment.

A young man who looked like a dissipated youth, with a silk shirt and trousers and natty sandals walked in whistling a tune from the latest movie. “Is this where one buys tickets to get into Heaven?” he enquired somewhat jauntily.

“Don’t be misled by appearances,” Doraiswamy advised him. “The whole thing is deceit, deception and degradation of the freedom of Man. Don’t fall into the trap.”

“Please don’t interfere sir,” Sunderam chided him. “It is difficult enough for me to enter Heaven without your obstruction. This gentleman looks as if he is in charge.” He turned to Chitra Guptan. “Sir, is this the way to Heaven?”

“Please go up those steps and through the doors.”

“Really! It is as easy as that?” Sunderam wondered.

“Yes,” the accountant replied.

“I mean, I never dreamt I would get into Heaven.”

Chitra Guptan smiled. “Ninety three point four two percent of the people think like you do. The computer has said so.”

“Mind you, I cannot say that my behavior on Earth has been particularly exemplary,” Sunderam confessed. “I lost all the money my father left me on drink and women. And I have been living on my wits ever since. Somehow, I managed to be happy so long as I lived and I have never thought ill of anyone else. Isn’t that the most important thing?”

“Right, you can go now,” Chitra Guptan told him.

“I say,” Sunderam enquired. “I hope you won’t lose your job or anything like that because of sending me to Heaven. If so, Please tell me. I don’t mind going to the…… the other place. Perhaps, some of my friends will be there.”

“You will find your friends in both places,” said Chitra Guptan.

Sunderam went towards the steps. “Stop! Stop!” Doraiswamy cried. “Somebody is trying to fool us all. Let us find out what it is before we commit ourselves.”

“Let go of me sir!” Sunderam turned and shouted at him. “I have heard of picketing the foreign cloth shops and toddy shops before independence in the old days and even Government offices now-a-days. But whoever heard of picketing at the Gates of Heaven?” He turned round and noticed Neela.”Is that Neela? How nice to meet you here! When did you come? O.K. I will stay with you for a while and see what happens.”

A young girl of twenty, beautiful but with unkempt hair and wet clothes walked in slowly and hesitantly as if she was afraid to come there.

‘”What is your name please?” Chitra Guptan asked the usual question.

“I am Sarala. You may be surprised to see me here. You see, I have come on a sudden impulse, without telling anyone.”

“Why did you do that? What was the hurry?”Sunderam enquired.

“When the deepest of your heart’s desires is not fulfilled, what is the use of living? I loved one man dearly. But Society saw to it that our love did not succeed; that it was doomed. When I could not bear the pain in my heart and when there was no peace for my soul, I went to bathe in the river and let myself be carried away.”

“Poor girl!” said Sunderam. If there had been one girl who was willing to give up her life for my sake, I would have been a better man.” He said wistfully.

“Please go up those steps and through those doors,” said Chitra Guptan.

“Before I go, you must answer one or two questions that are important to me,” said Sarala. “Will he follow me soon?”

“We cannot give information about such things.”

“Will he come to wherever I am going?” Sarala insisted.

“I cannot tell you that either.”

“What he means is, he doesn’t know,” said Doraiswamy.

Sunderam too took the part of Sarala. “I say, that is rather tough,” he said. “Is there no pity in Heaven?”

But Sarala went on putting her questions. “Why do you make us suffer so much when we are on Earth?” she enquired.

“Good Question!” applauded Doraiswamy. “Come on man, answer the poor girl!”

Even the accountant’s heart seemed to soften. “Did you suffer a lot” he asked with some interest.

“Yes, I had enough suffering for my twenty short years. But it is over. Therefore, I am not asking for myself; I am asking on behalf of everyone else. Why are there wars, famines, conflicts, tragedies and hatred on Earth? Why should Mankind be made to suffer? And what to be the end of all this?”

“Look here Mister,” cried Doraiswamy. “You are here before us as the so-called God’s representative. And this girl stands before you as a personification of suffering Humanity. She has raised some very pertinent questions. Either you should give satisfactory answers or admit that all this is a whole lot of hocus-pocus.”

At last, Chitra Guptan was goaded into a long speech. “What can I say to you?” he cried. “How can I satisfy you? Even after death, you have not given up your human weaknesses, your prejudices and your bonds and desires; Heaven, Heel, sin, sacrifice, idealism, pity, lust, avarice and a hundred other things. They have all been created out of your own ingenuity and now, you want me to be responsible for them. You want me to say if they true or false. How can I? How can I explain to you the basis of the Universe and the Ultimate Truth when you are still bound down to Earth? How can mere human knowledge grasp eternal wisdom?”

“There you are!” Doraiswamy interfered. “You admit they are all lies then.”

Chitra Guptan was roused. “Truth and falsehood, illusion and reality, do you know the real meaning of those words? Who am I? Am I really here? Or, am I also a mere fiction in your fertile imagination?”

“I do not want to know about the Universe or the Eternal Truth,” pleaded Sarala. “All I am asking is, is there no way out for suffering Humanity?”

Chitra Guptan tried to explain. “Don’t you see, only if you are able to grasp the External Truth, you will know the cause of your suffering as well as its cure? You have all done what little you can in that direction. It is for others to carry on now.”

“It means, you are yourself a lie,” argued Doraiswamy. “An illusion in our minds.”

“I am nothing more or less than the conscience that evaluates your life,” the accountant said. “I am not outside you. Ultimately you and I are one.”

“Does it mean that this is the end?” asked Sarala. “Is there no eternal life for us when we pass through those gates?”

“Let me put it this way,” Chitra Guptan explained further. “You are all sparks from a flame. You may glow, flicker and die. But the flame that gave you birth is eternal.”

“All this only proves that what I have been saying so far is right,” Doraiswamy said. “I will not go up those steps until I find out the so-called eternal truth and have had time to verify it.”

“You will not learn to swim until you jump into the water,” the accountant explained. “Now you can all go up those steps. Your time with me is over.”

Everyone began to climb the steps, slowly, hesitantly. They kept looking back, Manikkam and Sasthri first followed by Neela and Sunderam. Sunderam hesitated and signaled to Sarala who kept looking at Doraiswamy and then reluctantly followed Sunderam. Only Chitra Guptan and Doraiswamy were left behind.

“I regret to tell you that you too have reached Heaven,” Chitra Guptan informed Doraiswamy.

“How is that possible?” Doraiswamy countered. “I have not climbed those steps!”

“Climbing those steps merely represents a state of mind,” said Chitra Guptan. “Shall we say, it is purely metaphorical?”

“No! No! You can’t fool me like that! I shall not go to a Heaven that I know does not exist! So long as there is blind superstition clouding the minds of men and women, so long as there is poverty, disease, hatred and injustice, I shall go on fighting….” Doraiswamy was highly rhetorical.

“Now, you are really in Heaven.” His adversary announced.

“If so, even here, I shall raise the banner of revolt! I shall unite all Mankind for the last final onslaught on prejudice and blind faith! I shall not rest content until victory is won, for I have all Eternity in which to do it! We shall inherit Heaven as we have inherited the Earth…. What can you, a few celestial beings do against the vast majority who will follow me…….

Chitra Guptan interrupted the flow of oratory. “Mr. Doraiswamy, I should like to remind you that the Kingdom of God is not a democracy God does not have to stand for election every five years.”

……

14. KANNAKI'S ANKLET

Mr. and Mrs. Jonathan White were having their breakfast in the Madura Hotel and glancing through the tourist literature about the historic city of Madurai. One of the brochures was somewhat unusual; it was not from the Hotel lobby or from any of the tourist agencies, but had been given to them by their guide, Mohan. It related to the story of Silappadhikaram- the story of the Anklet – and it ended with the words. "What happened to Kannaki's Anklet?"

Mr. Jonathan white (Jr) was the curator of a museum in Laughing Waters (Mississippi), a wealthy agricultural town, but with great pretensions to international culture. Ever since the neighbouring city of Little Falls got a Nataraja reputed to be of the 10th Century, the cultural elite of Laughing Waters had been smarting under an inferiority complex and have been urging their own curator to do something about it. So, Mr. White was in India to see what he could find to rival the Nataraja of Little falls.

The Whites had read the pamphlet the previous night. They had been greatly fascinated by the tragic story of Kovalan and Kannaki and had been intrigued by the question. The story had all the ingredients of history, romance and antiquity. Certainly the Anklet would out-rival the Nataraja, if it could be found and authenticated.

"Mohan is not the run of the mill guide," Julia White commented over her toast and marmalade. "He is extremely knowledgeable and we are lucky to have got him. He can make us feel the historicity of this place right away."

Mr. White took an indigestion pill before he answered her. "Yes, he is a very clever fellow. But I wonder, what did happen to the Anklet? If we could locate it, it would be as important as the discovery of Venus de Milo."

"Oh, Jonathan!" his wife chided him affectionately. "Here is a beautiful and tragic story, and all you can think of is, 'what happened to the Anklet?' Does it matter?"

"But don't you see, if I could find it, I will acquire an international reputation. It is not like just buying a stolen idol, which is what that fellow in Little Falls has done. It will be a great archeological as well as a historical discovery and Laughing Waters will get its status symbol. After all, that is why the committee of the museum has paid for this trip."

Their discussion was interrupted by the arrival of Mohan. He was a pleasant looking young man with polite and friendly manners, with a very deep knowledge and love for the city of his birth. His conversation was full of wit and wisdom and the Whites were very impressed by it.

"Good Morning sir," Mohan shook hands with Mr. White and turned to Julia. "A very good morning to you Julia; I hope you slept well."He smiled at her with easy informality as he sat down in the vacant chair. The Americans were both happy - Mr. White because of the respect that had been shown to him and Julia, because she liked the attention of attractive

young men. Mohan threw in an occasional 'professor' or 'doctor' in addressing Mr. White which pleased the curator enormously.

"Would you like some coffee?" Julia asked him.

"No, thank you Julia," Mohan replied. "I have just had my breakfast. My mother makes excellent coffee, much better than what you get here at six rupees per cup. I would like to invite you both to my home sometime before you leave Madurai."

"Isn't that wonderful?" cried Julia. "I sure would like to try your mother's coffee."

"So, what are your plans this morning?" Mohan became the professional guide. "We could go to the thousand pillar hall, visit the hill temple of Alagar. Or, if you feel up to it, we could motor down to Periar Game Sanctuary and see the elephants bison, etc."

"I think we will take things easy this morning, "Julia announced. "Wander round the Palace, take some photographs, and perhaps do a bit of shopping."

"You are the boss," said Mohan with a smile.

"I was intrigued by that pamphlet of yours," Mr. White returned to the topic of his interest. "About the Anklet. How is it that it is not mentioned in any of the official brochures?"

"As a matter of fact, it is" Mohan replied. He picked up one of the more voluminous folders and turned the pages. "Ah, here it is!" and read the appropriate passage.

"Oh yes," Mr. White replied, satisfied now that he was sure of the authenticity of the story. "But tell me, what did happen to the Anklet?"

Mohan was enthusiastic about the question. "To me, a native and a lover of this great city, the high drama that Kannaki enacted in the palace of the Pandya king is the most important and significant event in its long history. I don't know how she strikes you professor, but to me, she is not just a poor woman seeking justice for the death of her husband; or a divine goddess enforcing vengeance on an unjust ruler. To me, she is a social reformer rousing the people to fight tyranny and injustice; she is the personification of the chastity and courage of Indian womanhood……."

"My! My!" Aren't we eloquent?" Julia laughed.

"Sorry Julia," Mohan said somewhat crest- fallen. "I am afraid I get carried away every time Kannaki's name is mentioned."

"Tell me, is this mere mythology or is there any historical evidence for the authenticity of the story?"

"It is as historical as, say, St. Thomas, one of the apostles who came to India in the first century A.D.," Mohan knew that the Whites were very religious and any allusion Christianity

was sure to receive their sympathy. And he gave a whole lot of references – one or two of which were familiar to Mr. White – and the couple were duly impressed.

"You know, in our country, there will be half –a-dozen universities offering fellowships and doctorates for doing research on Kannaki's Anklet. And there will be treasure hunters trying to locate it."

"Yes, I can quite understand it," Mohan said almost to himself. "You are a go-ahead nation; you do everything in a big way. But in India too, we have been at it in a quiet way, not with any fanfare or trumpets, but almost secretly."

Mr. White picked up his ears. Perhaps, there was material here for an article for his museum journal perhaps, there was something more. "Can you tell me about it?" he asked.

"Are you really interested Mr. White? Not just as a tourist, but as a historian and an archeologist?"

"Yes, as I told you, I am the curator of a well-known museum in Mississippi. I am interested – I may say more than just interested – in history and objects of historical interest and value. My interest is – shall we say – professional."

Julia was watching her husband; she knew the symptoms. When he was on the trail of something big, he went after it with cunning and a single-minded determination. The desire to own Kannaki's Anklet- if it existed – was on him now; to feel the sparkle of gold and precious stones, to hear it jingle with the rubies inside it, to feel its contours, but above all, to feel the historic presence of a great relic-the emotional compulsion was on him now. Julia knew that nothing she could say or do would deter him from the path he had chosen.

"I see," Mohan said slowly. "If you are so keen, then I suggest that we carry on this conversation in the privacy of your room rather than in public."

****

Mr. White called for his bill initialled it and the three of them went up to their suite on the second floor, while the men seated themselves in the sitting room, Julia disappeared into the bedroom to do odd jobs.

"You see, Mr. White," Mohan began. "In your country, if you have knowledge that could be economically exploited or which will bring you a reputation, there are various means of protection such as patenting, trade marks and copyright acts. But these things in India are of recent origin. The traditional method has always been to keep such knowledge a secret and whisper it to your son when you are on your death bed. So, even ordinary knowledge has acquired a mystery and is often associated with magic or the supernatural. What we have to do is to remove such cobwebs and get to the core of knowledge."

"Yes, but tell me about the Anklet," Mr. White was impatient.

“It is essential for you to understand the background of that knowledge and that it is not always based on logic and reason as in your country, but on subjective factors.”

“I can appreciate that,” Mr. White realized that he had to let Mohan tell his story in his own way.

“Alright, I will start from the beginning,” Mohan continued. “You know from the story of the Anklet that as soon as Kannaki broke open her Anklet and red rubies were spilt on the floor of the hall, the king realized his terrible mistake and committed suicide.”

“Yes, I know that much.”

“Well, that is where our story really begins. Some of it is guesswork of course but there is enough evidence for what I am going to tell you. When she saw the king die and the queen follow suit, Kannaki threw away the Anklet and walked out to lead the revolution that was breaking out in the city. She had no more use for the ornament. There was utter confusion in the palace itself with everyone running helter-skelter and trying to hide, for fear of repraisals. But the guard who had let Kannaki into the palace in the first place saw the Anklet lying on the floor, picked it up and ran after our heroine and handed it to her.

“Keep it, she said, and after a moment, she turned to him. ‘Keep it as a token of loyal service. Many generations later, your descendents will benefit from it,’ and walked away.”

“Have you proof of all this?” Mr. White wanted to know.

“Let me complete the story Mr. White,” Mohan answered patiently.”The guard knew it was too valuable to be kept in his poor home in those troubled times. There was only one way to preserve a treasure in those days and that was to bury it underground. That was exactly what my ancestor did.”

“Your ancestor! My God!” Mr. White exclaimed.

“Yes, you might well say ‘My God!’ for unfortunately, the story does not end there. The Anklet was like a lucky charm; no one dared unearth it, but the family prospered. My ancestors became leading officials, poets at the court of the Pandyan king, and well- known and prosperous in many ways. But generation after generation, they preserved the secret of the Anklet, made sure that it was safe, but never removed it from its hiding place until the 16th century.”

“What happened?” Mr. White’s curiosity was at fever pitch.

“You see, my ancestor at that time had no sons- at least not legitimate ones. And he was not sure whether he should reveal such a secret as the Anklet had now become, to his illegitimate son, and whether he was worthy of such a trust. So, on his death bed, he called his son and said, ‘I have a great knowledge to be entrusted to you, my son. It is concerned with the great heroine Kannaki whom we have always worshipped as our family deity. A treasure belonging to her has been in our possession and we have been guarding it. I am now going to entrust it in your Keeping!”

“I shall try to be worthy of it father, “he replied.

“I hope so,” the old man sighed. “If you are worthy of it, you will solve the puzzle I am going to give you and know where it is. But if you cannot, pass on the puzzle to your son. May be, one of your descendants will be worthy of it.”

“So, you see Mr. White, that is how I happen to be in possession of the secret.”

“Have you solved the puzzle?” Mr. White’s eager eyes glowed with excitement. “Perhaps, I can help you to solve it.”

“Mohan smiled. “I’m afraid you couldn’t, not in a hundred years.” Then, he explained, “You see, it needs a knowledge of topography of this city in the sixteenth century as well as familiarity with local history and literature.”

“Have you solved it?”

“Yes and no,” said Mohan. “I have got the approximate location. But the exact spot to be by a process of elimination. It is like an American auction. Each time you eliminate a spot, the chances become greater.”

“Can you at least translate the puzzle for me?

“Certainly,” Mohan recited the puzzle.

“‘Between Kannaki’s eyes and Pandyan’s might;

From the Buddha’s shrine, ten paces to the right;

Stand and worship the morning sun,

Beneath your head is the treasure, my son.’”

“What the hell is all that supposed to mean?” Mr. White cried, his impatience rising.

“The solution to the puzzle depends on a correct interpretation of each of the four lines.”

“I wish you would tell me where the Anklet is buried without beating about the bush,” Mr. White cried.

“You see, Mr. White,” Mohan explained. “If I were to tell you where it is, you would have to take my word for it. Your first thought would be, ‘is it a forgery or an imitation?’ you would not be convinced of the authenticity of the article you were getting. I am therefore trying to give you the historic as well as the personal background so that you will know its value. And the people who come to see it will be impressed by the romantic story of its discovery. It is even more interesting than the finding of Tutankhamen’s treasure inn Egypt.”

Mr. White saw the genuine concern in Mohan’s eyes, his desire that he should be believed. “Alright, explain the puzzle to me,” he asked.

“Kannaki’s eyes have been compared to lotus blossoms in literature. Lotus as you know, flowers in tanks or ponds. Pandyan’s might was represented by his flag which had a fish for its symbol. And fish is plentiful in the river Vaigai. It was therefore obvious to me that the place referred to must be between the river and a pond, not too far from each other.”

“So far, your logic is clear.”

“Next, I had to locate a Buddha’s shrine. This was more difficult because Buddhism had ceased to flourish in Madurai from about the fifth century A.D though some Hindus worshipped the Buddha as one of the Hindu Gods. I went through all the available records and literary works prior to the sixteenth century in order to locate a Buddha shrine between the river and a tank. After years of frustrating and hard work, I came upon a reference to a small idol of the Buddha under a tamarind tree on the banks of the river and only about fifty meters from a Lotus pond.”

“This beats James Bond!” exclaimed Mr. White. He was now really interested and excited.

Mohan continued. “Ten paces to the right of the shrine and I faced the morning sun, that is, towards the east. And really Mr. White, at that moment, I felt truly elated. I was back in the sixteenth century, at the death bed of my ancestor and knew I had discharged my debt to him. I had justified the trust and had washed away the stigma of illegitimacy that had dogged my family for ten generations.”

There were tears in Mohan’s eyes. Julia who had been listening and who had come in to hear the last part of the story went to him, put her arms round him like a mother, ”Poor boy!” she cried, “What a struggle to establish the right to your inheritance! But it must have been a moment of fulfillment.”

Mohan wiped his eyes. “Yes, thank you Julia. It was a moment of fulfillment, but it was also the beginning of frustration. For what was a place of worship in the sixteenth century is at present a burial ground. Almost every bit of earth has been dug up in the few centuries and if anyone had come across the precious Anklet, they would not have realized its importance and value, but merely melted it down to make ornaments for their womenfolk.”

“So, we are back to square one,” said Mr. White.

“Not quite,” Mohan smiled. “You see, the shrine of the Buddha – though in ruins - has not been destroyed or desecrated. We Hindus have a great reverence for Gods, even other people’s God’s. Further, I did not at first realize the significance of the last line in the puzzle. ‘Beneath your head is the treasure my son.’ Now, when you face the morning son, your own shadow is thrown back and the shadow of your head - I realized after many months of heart-searching – is thrown back towards the west and your head covers the pedestal of the Buddha. It was then that I knew that the Anklet must be under the statue. My ancestor was a clever man and he knew that if he hid something under the statue of a God, no one dare disturb it.

“Have you…….. er…….verified your hypothesis?” Mr. White asked.

“No,” said Mohan. “To me, the knowledge was sufficient. When it came to the point, it seemed like sacrilege to disturb something that had been buried for twenty centuries.”

“Then why have you told me all this, if you are not willing to unearth it and….. benefit from it?”

“I don’t know,” Mohan spoke almost to him. “If I did unearth it, what would I do with it? It is too important a find and the government will take it away from me. The scholars will question its authenticity. There will be a contraversy and some at least will call me a fraud and an impostor. But as it is, I have the satisfaction of guarding Kannaki’s treasure just as my ancestors have done, for the past two thousand years. It will still be in the family, so to speak.” Mohan gave a rueful smile.

It was Julia who took the initiative now, as so often before. “Poor Mohan!” she went and sat by him and patted him on the shoulder. “You are suffering from a conflict of emotions. You do not know what to do; you cannot make up your mind. I can understand and sympathies with your problem. But don’t you see, you have no right – no moral right – to keep such a valuable treasure hidden from the public eye. Think of the thousands – may be millions, if it happens to find its way the United States – to whom it would give pleasure to see Kannaki’s Anklet. And your name will go down in antiquarian history as famous as Elgin who discovered the Greek marbles. And your fortune would be made. You will no longer have to work as a miserable guide showing ignorant tourists round your fascinating city, day after day.”

“You are very kind Julia, “Mohan cried. “But I am confused and frightened. I have spent many years of my life trying to solve the family puzzle and now that I have solved it, it has left me with a feeling of apprehension.”

“You don’t have to worry one damn bit,” Mr. White assured the young man. He was like a hunter stalking his prey; now that he was in for the kill, he wasn’t going to lose it. “You take me to the Buddha shrine, dig out the Anklet and I shall see you are suitably rewarded. And what is more, I will send you an invitation – with the compliments of the Museum Sub-Committee of Laughing Waters – to come to the States and tell your fascinating story about the Anklet. All expenses paid of course. There will be newspaper articles, radio and T.V interviews, publicity galore, and all the money that goes with it.”

“You mean I can get to the U.S.?” Mohan asked excitedly. “Can I settle down there and become a citizen of your great country?”

“I don’t see why not,” Mr. White assured him. “For the service that you have done for my museum and to humanity in general, I can keep you there until you get the green card.”

At last Mohan was persuaded. For a substantial sum of money – fifty percent to be paid on the spot and the balance immediately after the discovery of the Anklet – Mohan agreed to unearth it for them. For one who was so emotionally upset, he proved to be an

expert negotiator when it came to bargaining. “I hope you realize I am not doing it for the money Julia,” he kept saying as he pocketed the money. “I am doing it in the interests of humanity as Dr.White said and so that the Anklet might have an honoured and prominent home, instead of lying amidst the bones and skeletons in the burial ground.”

* **********

At ten 0’clock that night, Mohan picked them up from the hotel. He was driving himself. As Mr. White settled into the front seat beside the driver and Julia at the back, Mohan remarked, “I hope you are not nervous about visiting a burial ground at night Julia.”

“I enjoy visiting cemeteries,” she replied.

“But this won’t be like a neatly kept cemetery with flowers and funny epitaphs as in your country,” Mohan replied. “We don’t bury people very deep and hot in coffins either. You will have to pick your way through the bones.”

“I don’t suppose it is any more eerie than the inside of the pyramids,” said Julia.

“You have the balance of the money, Mr. White?”

“You bet!” the curator replied as he showed a packet containing currency notes.

They parked the car on a lonely path near the banks of the river and got out. The darkness of the night, the rustle of wind in the branches of the huge tamarind trees, the slow moving waters of the river, the scattered bones, made the atmosphere somewhat ghostlike. Mohan produced a small torch and asked Julia to hold it while he got out a pick-axe and a shovel from the boot. They walked through the tamarind grove. The skulls and the white bones shone in the faint light of the torch as they walked. Julia shivered a bit though the night was warm. “My goodness!” she exclaimed as they saw a jackal run away from a newly dug grave.

“It won’t be long now’” Mohan whispered encouragingly. “There is the lotus pond which is overgrown with weeds and here is the shrine of the Buddha.”

Julia shone the torch at the stone platform; the statue of the Buddha – meditating with eternal calm, if weather beaten over centuries – came into view.

Putting down the pick-axe and the shovel, Mohan tried to move the statue from its pedestal. But it was too heavy and Mr. White had to give him a hand before it could be shifted. The stone pedestal was equally heavy. But after about ten minutes of hard work by the men, it was also out of the way and Mohan began to dig the ground beneath the pedestal and remove the thin mortar that covered it. Mr. White helped him by removing the stone. About a foot underground, the pick-axe came upon something hard and Mohan dug round it with feverish haste while Mr. White began to shovel the earth.

“There it is!” Mohan exclaimed. “A stone Jar!” As Mohan removed it from the earth and opened it, Julia shone the torch and the Anklet came into view.

Mohan removed it with reverence, placed it in front of the now lop-sided Buddha and prostrated himself before it. But Mr. White seized it with eager and impatient hands, like a miser counting his money, and inspected it with the practiced eye of a connoisseur.

“Beautiful; Beautiful!” he exclaimed. “But it is heavy.”

“It should be,” whispered Mohan. “It is not hollow; it has rubies inside so that it can jingle as the lady walks.”

“Can we open it and see?” Mr. White wanted to know.

“I wouldn’t advise it Doctor,” said Mohan. “The last time it was opened, a king committed suicide and a kingdom fell.”

“Mr. White shook it. There was a dull sound like the hitting of stones against metal.

Mohan was crying. “I am parting with perhaps the most precious treasure in India,” he said. “A treasure that has been in the keeping of my family for nearly two thousand years.”

“My boy! When I exhibit your treasure in my museum in Laughing Waters (Mississippi), I will be the most famous man in the antiquarian world. And you will by my side. And here is my part of the bargain.” He handed Mohan a packet of currency notes which he examined in the light of the torch, and put it inside his pocket.

Julia, who had been silent and somewhat nervous, said “Let’s get out of here!”

The Anklet was placed inside the stone jar and Mr. White carried it. “Shouldn’t we replace the idol?” he asked.

“We have committed a great sacrilege,” Mohan said. “Replacing the statue will not wash away our sins. Besides, it will take too long.”

They had not gone about twenty yards when a powerful beam of light shone in their faces. “Stop, whoever you are!” an authoritative voice sounded as it came near.

They could discern two tall figures in khaki uniforms.

“Oh! My God! The police!” Mohan whispered and tried to run, but one of the figures caught hold of him easily. “Any more nonsense from you will be sorry,” said the man who

had caught hold of Mohan. In his holster was a revolver which he now brought out. Mohan stood there shivering.

"Your name please," asked the other man with the powerful torch.

"I am Jonathan White and this is my wife. We are from Laughing Waters (Mississippi). You will find my name in any Encyclopedia of Archeology. We are respectable citizens and I demand……."

"And I demand that you hand over the stone jar you are holding to my colleague here," the man shouted. "Unless of course you want to go with me to the police station and face a charge."

"What am I accused of?" Mr. White demanded with a show of confidence he did not feel.

"Of desecrating ancient and protected monuments, of stealing and trying to smuggle rare, valuable and antique objects out of the country. As a curator of a museum from Laughing Waters (Mississippi), you should know what the punishment is for such crimes."

"Who are you?" Mr. White demanded.

"We are from the intelligence wing of the Government of India. We have been detailed to be on the lookout for smugglers of rare objects. For your information, I can tell you that your hotel room was bugged and your conversation with this fellow has been recorded."

Mr. White quietly handed over the stone jar.

"Ay, you!" the policeman shouted to Mohan. "You had better hand over the packet that is bulging in your pocket before it burns a hole there." Mohan did as he was told. "You should also drop these people at the hotel and report to B-4 police station first thing tomorrow morning.

"Yes sir! Thank you sir!" Mohan almost whispered.

Then the policeman with the torch turned to the couple. "You may go now," he said. "And be thankful you have got off so lightly this time. Next time we catch you, it will be three years R.I. Now, beat it."

The couple began walking to the car and Mohan followed them. They got in silently and Mohan drove. There didn't seem any need for conversation. As they got of the car in

front of the hotel, Mohan asked them, “I presume you won’t want my services in the morning.”

“No, no thank you,” said a tired Mr. White as they walked into the lobby.

* * **********

The two ‘policemen’ went to the shrine, filled the hole made by Mohan while digging for the Anklet, replaced the pedestal and the statue in the original place.

As they dusted themselves and walked away with the stone jar containing the Anklet, one of them asked the other, “What do we do with this trinket now?”

“We wait for Mohan; he will have to make up another puzzle, find another place to hide it, and the most important, find another sucker to buy it, as the Americans say.”

15. CONVERSION OF ST.FRANCIS

We inherited St.Francis along with all the assets and liabilities of the Indo-American Engineering Works, Limited. He was the cook in the Managing Director's bungalow and it was one of the privileges of the Managing Director to have his cook paid for by the company. It meant that the cook was a company worker. Since the company is located about 20 K.M. from the nearest town, there is a large residential colony for workers as well as for Management staff. All the expatriots lived there in spacious bungalows and the Managing Director's cook was considered the senior-most among the domestic servants in the colony. When the company was taken over by Indian Management, Francis became our cook.

The name St.Francis somewhat intrigued me. Surely no one called himself a saint unless it was conferred by the Pope himself. But the cook explained it to me. St.Francis of Assissi appeared in his mother's dream, the day before he was born and told her to name the child after him. She therefore insisted on the full name being conferred on the child saying that he would be as good a Christian as his patron saint. Hence the name.

Of course, most of the servants called him just Francis except when they wanted to be sarcastic. Then they emphasized the word 'Saint'. Francis of course bore it with true Christian forbearance. There was nothing else he could do.

I don't know how good a Christian he was, but he was a true descendent of the British Imperial system. Of the various people who have served the British Raj in India faithfully, the servants are the one group who has been unhonoured and unsung except rarely in certificates by their employers. They were often sentimental and highly complimentary but occasionally cruelly sarcastic. 'John is an excellent cook provided you imbibe sufficient alcohol for lunch and dinner and are oblivious to what you eat. He is also entitled to order of integrity third class'. The recipients of these notes could not understand them and preserved them proudly. But St.Francis of course had extremely good certificates from all his previous employers which he exhibited to me very proudly on the first day of my arrival.

The passing of the Raj dealt a cruel blow to such servants. During the Raj they had a status of their own as the servants of the rulers. To polish cutlery and glass until they shone beautifully, to lay the table with nice decorations of flowers and coloured rice, to fold napkins in various complicated patterns, to bake a cake with no more facilities than an open fire and an old tin with a lid when the master went camping; these were all matters of pride and joy for them. To serve dinner to people who behaved like demi-Gods, who dressed for dinner at the slightest provocation and to put on their own uniforms – often with a crest and turbans was a proud ritual as well as a way of living.

St.Francis was used to these traditions and revelled in them. After that, anything else was a come down. From his point of view, the new generation of brown Sahibs had no sense of dignity and decorum. To serve buffet dinners to people who turned up in all sorts of costumes, in fancy bush shirts and chappels, even in dhotis; to serve Indian and European

food all mixed together instead of relegating curry to Sunday lunch; to drink all kinds of peculiar brews instead of the normal 'Chotta Peg'; to serve fish and meat on the same plate; these were sacrileges that Francis found difficult to accept. He did not realize that his skills were both of a bygone age, like those of the coach builder after the motor car was invented.

That Francis felt that working for us was a come down for him was not a secret. While he was scrupulously polite, both to me and to my wife and did his work efficiently, he did not hide his feelings from the other servants. He used to boast about the parties they had in the olden days, the exploits of his erstwhile masters, their capacity for drink and the pranks they played during Christmas festivities, and so on. Often, when we had Indian food we did not use cutlery but brass or silver plates instead and ate with our fingers. On such occasions Francis avoided serving or if he had to, did so reluctantly.

"He thinks he is superior to us" my wife used to say.

"He is still under the glamour of the British Imperial life but he will soon get over it", I replied.

****

However, one incident brought matters to a head. One of the ministers of the local government wished to stay in our guest house because the local circuit house was under renovation. Since he was going to be our guest, I thought it polite to invite him for dinner in our bungalow and he very kindly accepted. He was the minister, who a couple of years ago was refused admittance to a club in Madras which still followed the old British tradition, because he was in a dhoti. Since then, he had forbidden the use of cutlery and crockery at any function he attended as his form of protest. 'So we decided that we will go all the way and have banana leaves for eating instead of silver plates.

It was then that Francis came to see me. "I understand that Mr.Sivakumar, the minister is coming for dinner on Friday sir," he enquired.

"Yes, why Francis?" I asked him.

"And that the guests are to be served dinner on banana leaves sir".

"Yes, do you object, St.Francis", I asked him.

"It is not for me to object sir"

"Then what is it?"

The poor man hesitated. He swallowed twice and began "Sir, when I first came to this company, I was engaged as an English cook. I was to cook English food and serve in the best English manner", He hesitated and went on, "Forgive me sir, I know circumstances have changed. You have been good to me and I have tried to adjust myself. But Sir, to ask me to serve on banana leaves……. Well sir, I don't know what to say".

"You mean you don't want to serve when people eat off banana leaves".

Poor man! I felt sorry for him. He was a prisoner of his own choosing. An outright refusal might mean losing his job. He was nearly ready to spend tears. But he remained silent.

"It is alright Francis if you not want to serve when people eat off banana leaves. After all, you are an English cook engaged to cook and serve English people. So you need serve on the day of the Minister's visit".

There was a smile on his face. "Thank you sir, you are most generous".

As he was about to depart. I called him back. "Francis, why do you think that one's fingers are less clean than indifferently cutlery which is used by many people?"

"It is not a matter of hygiene sir."

"What is it then?

He hesitated for a few seconds, trying to choose the right words. "It is a way of life sir".

I was amazed at his perception. "Yes, it is a way of life that is dead and gone. Just remember that".

My wife thought I was too soft and if I let him get away with things like this, it would be difficult to control the other servants. "You should have sacked him," she said.

"Yes, and court the unpopularly of the workers as well as lose a good servant in the bargain. As it is, the workers will all criticize him for his prejudice against Indian ways. But don't forget he is a very good servant when we have European guests as we often do."

"But what about his silly notions?"

"One of these days he will wake up."

There the matter rested for the moment.

****

I knew Francis attended St.Antony's church which is the only church where the sermons were in English for the benefit of the few Europeans still in the area. There were a few even in our factory on short-term contracts, or doing certain specialized jobs. The priest there was an Indian, Father Vincent, a verpious and dedicated man. I have heard Francis mention him with reverence; I had also met him a few times when he came to see me in my office. He was running an orphanage and when the children grew up, he was interested in finding them jobs in the local factories. I was impressed by his manner.

Fortunately for his reputation, there was one story about Father Vincent that very few people knew. Some years ago he was invited to the local English club for Christmas dinner. The reason for the invitation was that they wanted someone to say grace before commencing the ceremonial feast. During the evening, many member of the club, seeing

that Fr.Vincent was somewhat lonely, came and spoke to him and offered him a drink. Not knowing the difference between the various types of alcohol and not anxious to exhibit his ignorance, the Rev. Father replied, “Whatever you are having, I will have”.

Not knowing that he should sip his drinks slowly, he gulped them down. The result was that by the time the dinner was started, he had a succession of whiskies, brandies and gins and was not in complete possession of all his faculties.

During dinner he was placed between the president of the club and his wife. But instead of saying grace, he started to deliver a sermon. After a couple of minutes the President’s wife, who was herself in a pretty jolly mood on the festive occasion, gave a strong tug at his Cossack whereupon the Rev.Father fell into his chair and went to sleep. He was gently removed to a more comfortable couch in order to avoid any more serious accidents and later, one of his parishners took him home.

Father Vincent felt thoroughly humiliated and ashamed by the incident, in the same way as the minister had done when he was refused admission. He never entered the portals of the club again. He was also very wary of any European food or drink after that.

****

It was the custom in our factory to have periodic lectures on religion, social reform and such subjects, once a month. They were very popular particularly among the women. That month, the talk was on the evils of the dowry system by a Hindu savant, and I thought it would be a nice change to invite Fr. Vincent to preside over the function. He of course readily agreed, since the dowry system existed among the Christians also.

It was also the custom for me to invite the Chief Guests and a few senior officers to have dinner with us afterwards. On this occasion it would have to be a completely vegetarian Indian dinner since the lecturer would only eat off a banana leaf. I did not think Fr. Vincent would mind. He did not. In fact, he said he would eat off a banana leaf every day, only they were so expensive.

A few days before the dinner, I could St.Francis and informed him about the lecture and Fr.Vincent coming to dinner.

“I am very happy sir; the Rev.Father is a very holy man. It will be my pleasure to serve him”.

“That will not be possible Francis” I replied. His face dropped. “You see, the dinner is completely vegetarian and it is going to be served on banana leaves. Since you have already expressed that you are not willing to serve under such circumstances, I am making other arrangements”.

“Sir, Fr.Vincent is my priest and he knows I work here. He would expect me to serve him.”

“That may be Francis, but we must stick to our bargain, must we not? Further, your knowledge of how to serve on a leaf is perhaps not adequate, particularly when a Hindu divine is present. If you like, you can take the day off to save embarrassment for yourself”.

Francis stood silent for a minute, about to say something but changed his mind and departed.

The next day, he did not turn up for work, a most unusual thing for him. I was told that he had gone to pray in his church. What pangs of agony or qualms of conscience he went through, it is not known. It might be, he consulted Fr.Vincent or came to a decision on his own. But the next morning he came to work as usual and asked to see me.

“I am a sinner sir,” he cried. “And you have found the right way to punish me and teach me a lesion. I forgot that the first duty of a good servant is to obey orders. I also forgot that it is not how you eat that matters but how you treat other people. When I was impertinent, you were generous. Sir, pleases, please, be generous once again, forgive me and let me serve Fr.Vincent. I shall serve on banana leaves for the rest of my life if necessary”.

“But what about the method of serving? There is as much convention in the Indian as there is in the European way you know”.

“Madam has promised to teach me sir and when I wish to learn something I am a good pupil”.

Francis was a truly happy man that evening of the dinner as he attended on his priest with tender loving care and attention as the two divines discussed a point of dogma with their mouths full.

That was how St. Francis was converted to the Indian way of life.

16. THE AVENGER

You murdered me; killed me in cold blood. You did not commit the crime because of hatred, revenge, jealousy or even money. You destroyed me because of 'love'; a strange way of expressing one's passion or affection; for I am sure you loved me once and had some affection for me.

And now, I, a lonely, forlorn and frustrated spirit, wander through an eternity of space and time for ever and ever, restless, with no one to hear my woes, restless without tranquility or comfort. For how long am I to bear this burden, this tragedy and guilt? For I too am guilty in a way though I have paid the price. For how long, oh! God? How long?

Before I met you, I was happy, pure and innocent. Did I say pure? Yes, not one evil thought passed through my mind; I had hatred for no one; I loved the whole world. I was fond of my studies, played Table Tennis for my university, was popular in the college and had a lot of girl friends with whom I used to laugh and giggle over trivialities. I loved my parents and the way they spoiled me, being an only girl child. I enjoyed the freedom they had given me. I treated them more as intimate friends. There was no generation gap between us. I liked modern jazz and had a lot of cassettes. My only weakness, if weakness it can be called, was Tooti-Frooti Ice Cream.

I curse the day I met you. When the bus for Mambalam moved on and left me behind because it was full, you stopped in front of me, lowered the window of the car and shouted, "You seem to be going Mambalam way, miss. I am going in the same way. I can easily drop you at your bus stop".

Though your face was pleasant and gentlemanly, I hesitated. I knew all the perils of young girls accepting lifts from strangers.

"By the time the next bus comes, you will be drenched to the skin" you said.

I looked at the sky. Dark clouds were hovering, ready to burst. Already one or two big drops began to fall. I made up my mind quickly and got into the car. I placed my books between you and me as a sort of barrier, not to be crossed. But really was no need.

You spoke to me nicely; asked me what subjects I studied.

"English literature "I said.

"I am fond of literature miss! In fact, I am by way of being an amateur poet. Not that I have published much but I keep trying.

You asked after my family, made references to the dangers of pretty girls like myself accepting lifts from strangers and asked me to be more careful next time. Everything was open and above board. You asked for my bus stop and dropped me there.

“Just as well I don’t drop you in front of your house. If your parents happen to see they may be worried” you commented.

I told you my parents were broad minded and thanked you for your kindness. You smiled and said, “This is a small world. We might meet again.” And you drove off. I thought you were a nice young man but soon forgot all about it.

The next time it was at the beach. We met ‘accidentally’ just as I said goodbye to my friends and walked over to catch the bus. I did not realize that the meeting was ‘contrived’. But this time we chatted for a little while before my journey home. That was when we exchanged our names. You were a little more familiar with a touch of playfulness and full of compliments. I thought you were rather nice, good looking and obviously had a lot of money.

And so it continued; meetings at the beach, ice cream in restaurants, even a picture that we both wanted to see. Once you told me I had a pretty face and a nice figure but you liked my mind even better. I was immensely pleased. No man had paid me any compliments. But you never touched me, never referred to love. We discussed books, music, religion almost everything under the sun with the eagerness and enthusiasm of youth. You shared your thoughts and ideals, your aspirations and hopes and often sighed and ended up by saying, “Oh! What is the use of it all?”

“Why? What is the matter? With you youth and your ideals you can achieve anything”, I told you.

“A lonely man has only ideals to sustain him. A man with a loving friend has happiness to inspire him,” you commented.

I was silent.

All the time you must have known I was falling deeply, desperately in love with you. But my love was pure, ethical, almost divine in its concept. It did not need physical contact. Certainly I never thought of sex. Though occasionally I used to wonder wistfully if you would not at least hold my hand occasionally, just to show what we meant for each other.

I had to explain to my parents my frequent absences and late comings. I would must rather have told them the truth, taken you home and introduced you to them so that they too might share in my joy. But no. You invented non-existent girl friends. Real girl friends were too dangerous, you advised me. My mother might bring them up some time and find I was not there. And then everything would come out in the open. It never occurred to me to ask why our love should be kept as secret. After all, love that is pure and unique must have its way. So I had to tell lies and felt guilty as hell. You were slowly, inevitably leading me through the murky corridors of deception and deceipt from which there was no return.

One day you gave me a few sheets of paper. “These are for you”, you said. They consisted of 5 love poems a bit old fashioned in rhyme and technique but expressing the clear, limpid spirit of love. I was enchanted; After all they were for me. Someone had taken the trouble to compose them because he thought I was worth it. How could I think of style

or grammar? I thought of the great heroines of literature who had received poems from their lovers. I too was such a heroine! I nearly put my arms around you and kissed you. But modesty stood in the way.

"They are wonderful" I said. "No one had ever written poetry for me before".

"They do not express my feelings eloquently," you confessed. "My powers of creation are not adequate to my love".

For the first time you put your arms around me and I did not resist. And so it went on day after day, week after week, each day bringing me nearer to my total undoing. At last, we found ourselves in a cheap hotel bed room, just off Mount Road.

Even then, you were the perfect gentleman; you explained that you could not take me to one of the Five Star hotels for fear of being recognised. Love is really a matter of the mind and the spirit, you said and the environment really did not matter. But it is of the flesh too, since God had blessed us with our bodies and they demand their own way of fulfillment. I averted my eyes and was counting the cigarette burns on the carpet. I was already psychologically prepared and wanted to get it over. It would be my final sacrifice at the alter of love, for I did not expect to enjoy it.

But you were a skilful lover, guided me patiently through all the intricacies and gave me a lot of pleasure with very little pain even on the first day. This was a great surprise to me.

It was soon after this that I discovered that the poems you had 'written' for me were plagiarized. I was browsing through a copy of Byron's poems when one of his lesser known verses caught my eye. Except for a change of one or two words here and there – 'You' for 'Thee' and so on – it was word for word, one of the poems you had given me as your own. After that it was not difficult to locate the others.

My world of dreams had collapsed around me. I was full of anger and tears and thought seriously of suicide, but the desire to taunt you and to humiliate was more than the desire for death. So, I waited for our next meeting. But it turned out to be quite different to what I expected.

"Give me five minutes and I shall explain it to you" you begged after I had shouted at you. "Here is a wonderful girl with whom I am madly in love. She has a fine mind and is fond of poetry. How am I to convince her of my love? Poetry will perhaps do it, but I am a bad verifier. So I thought, what is the harm in a little subterfuge if it will impress her and convince her of my true love? Don't you see, if I did anything as mean as this, it shows the hopelessness of my love rather than any deception."

To anyone else, you would have been a selfish and unscrupulous fellow who would stoop to anything in order to get what you wanted. Perhaps, it would have been best if at that point of time; I had kicked you out of my life and tried to forget you as best I could. But unfortunately my mind worked in a different direction. After all, had I not told lies to my

parents in order to protect my love? So why should you not cheat a little, in order to show yourself in a better light? Copying poems that were nearly 200 years old and claiming them as your own was not serious crime. It was not as if you had published them. So, I not only forgave you but felt sorry for your predicament. If anything our love became more intense afterwards. Yes, love is truly blind.

So, our love moved towards its inevitable conclusion when I told you that I was pregnant. I was not ashamed or sorry. I was proud and happy. With the idealism of youth, I was prepared to shout it from the house tops and on street corners. After all, was not pregnancy the ultimate fulfillment of love? I was prepared to face the world, but you evidently were not prepared to confront your wife. That was when I learnt you were a married man and it was a great shock to me. Could love be divine or pure with a married man? Was it not tainted? My dreams were shattered. But I realized I had made my bed and had to lie on it. I was desperate. We were too closely joined as Siamese Twins to be able to separate. Inspite of everything I still was not prepared to give you up. I must have been mad.

You wanted me to get rid of the baby. But I was not prepared for it. Under no circumstances would I do it. I had already begun to love it. If the worst came to the worst, my parents would not let me down. They had enough money to look after me and the baby and I could easily get a job. When you found that I was determined to have the baby you started talking about suicide. You said you still had some ideals left and did not want to leave me in the lurch. The only way out was for you to kill yourself, first to prove your love and second as a warning to others.

I was really frightened at this for I still trusted you. I pleaded with you not to do anything foolish, that I could mange any help from you, that I merely wanted to see you and for you to get acquainted with the child. You seemed even more upset over this. We argued forwards and backwards without coming to any conclusion.

Once you shouted at me, “If you are afraid to die, that is O.K. But why do you prevent me from committing suicide?”

My pride was deeply wounded, “I am not afraid to die!” I shouted back. “It is just waste of a life and in my case two lives, for now I have the responsibility for a child.

“Then, let us both die,” you pleaded. “It is the only way I can defy the world. Let us have a suicide pact”.

You pleaded, you begged, you besieged, and you used every cheap trick in the seducers’ encyclopedia to persuade me, to convince me. Even then, I trusted you. My only worry was about my parents; their agony and suffering and their loneliness in old age. At last I agreed. Immediately we became more loving and more tender towards each other. You did not waste any time. The date and the time was fixed. The place was chosen, the same shabby hotel bed room where we had gone for the first time. “Where our love began, there it shall end”, you said almost cheerfully.

On that fateful day you insisted I had my favorite ice cream. How considerate, I thought to myself. But I found it difficult to swallow. In the hotel room we embraced and kissed each other. We composed our love note. We had a little argument but finally you agreed to my draft.

"There is no room for our love in this world. Perhaps there will be greater tolerance in the next."

We both signed it. Everything was simple, businesslike, matter of fact. There were no tears, no emotional scenes. You had made me take some tranquilizers. "It will make it easier," You assured me.

Now you pulled out a bottle from your hip pocket and poured out some liquid into two tumblers. I remembered wishing the glasses were cleaner. Then you handed one to me. It was then that my nerves gave way. I hugged you and sobbed.

"I don't want to die! I don't want my baby to die!" I could not control my tears.

"Come my dear" where is your courage? Where are your brave words?" you patted and soothed me.

"A few minutes more and we shall both be in another world and we will be happy ever after." But I saw that your eyes too were misty. I wonder, was it because you were sorry for me?

Slowly I took the glass from your hands. "Shall I go first", you asked.

"No! No! You give me courage", I cried. "If you go first I shall never have the guts to drink this". I gulped the foul liquid. You took a sip out of your tumbler made a wry face and came to me. "Please lie down on the bed where you will be more comfortable". You made me lie down and adjusted the pillows. "Leave me some room and I shall join you presently" and went to take your glass which was on the far table. But by then I was suffering pangs of agony and a burning sensation in my throat. I wanted a glass of water more than anything else.

I heard a big thud and saw you sprawled on the floor. "My god, he has not even time to come and join me" I remember thinking. I called out your name "Ranjan!" But you could not heard it. Within seconds I was dead.

And then I knew the truth.

After a few minutes you got up and felt my pulse. But you were careful not to touch anything else. You raised an alarm and asked the hotel manager to call the police and an ambulance and also to telephone your father. You did not tell him that I was dead, merely said that I had taken an over dose of poison and needed to be rushed to hospital.

Everything went smoothly, like clock work. Your father was there to take charge of everything. You told the police the truth that it was a suicide pact. I was to take the poison

first but as you went to pick up your glass and come back to bed the worn-out carpet slipped on the cement floor and you went sprawling on the ground and the glass of poison was smashed. There was a cut on your forehead when you hit the corner of the table to prove your story. You were full of shame and sorrow for having let me down. The police believed your story.

So, I am dead. My baby is dead. And you are alive.

There was a moment soon after my death when I thought that you were probably a coward who honestly wanted to commit suicide but funked it at the last moment. But soon I knew better. The methodical manner you went about, feeling my pulse and raising the alarm. But more than anything else, that conversation between you and your father that night when he said that once I refused to get rid of the baby, I had to die since the unborn child might one day lay claim to your father's millions.

I learnt another thing too; that my father was Chief Accountant and Adviser to yours and resigned his job because he would not participate in your father's under had dealings. He never forgave my father for his 'desertion' and that was how the whole thing started as revenge. So your father is just as quality as you are.

Now, what am I to do? How am I to avenge your crime? I have no voice to accuse you in public, no hands to hold a gun or a dragger. My parents are too shattered by my death and the publicity it involved, though they too are sure it was murder.

And yet I am not without resources. I can haunt the minds of people, disturb their sleep, influence their sub-conscious and make them do what I want in the end. I can fully exploit the powers of mind over matter. I have already made sure your wife has left you. She was hesitating inspite of the sympathy of her friends who were kindly only to be cruel. But I have made her see my plight; made her know me almost as well as I know myself, merely by making her think about me. I appealed to herself respect, honour and pride. You will now never have a child to inherit your father's immense wealth.

And I shall haunt your mind as no spirit has ever haunted a human being. You will never be able to forget me in your waking hours or in your sleep. You will falter in your golf strokes. Your business decisions will go wrong. Your friends will wonder if you really slipped and fell on that fateful day. They will look at you with suspicion and you will avoid their company more and more till you become a lonely soul. Your dreams will become nightmares of the scene you enacted so expertly in that dingy hotel bed room. You will not be able to live with yourself. Your conscience shall become the sharp instrument of my revenge and then it will be the turn of your father. Yes, until I am avenged, shall never rest or relax or find peace and tranquility in the hereafter……

****

A Press Report

'It is reported that Mr. Ranjan of 14, Mossley Road, a well known social figure in the city circles, was found dead in a hotel bed room off Mount Road, in the early hours of this morning. It will be remembered that he was the lucky partner of a suicide pact when he slipped and fell and his glass of poison was smashed. It is strange that he should have chosen the same room for his obviously second and more successful attempt. The Management of the hotel says that the room was not rented to him and he must have got in with a duplicate key. Since all the doors and windows were locked from the inside, no foul play is suspected, but there was no suicide note either.

The police are investigating'.

17. 'TILL DEATH DO US UNITE'

The Kamalapur Labour Union- 'KLU' as it was popularly known – was celebrating its silver jubilee. The jubilee committee wished to commemorate the occasion by installing a statue of its founder late 'Stalin' Ramaswamy, at one of the busy cross roads in the industrial area of Kamalapur. The founder had been referred to as 'Stalin' first by his opponents in the trade union movement because of the ruthless efficiency with which he liquidated all opposition within his union. But later, it was adopted by his followers as an honorific title and he was universally known as 'Stalin' by friends and foes alike. The KLU felt that the silver jubilee was an appropriate occasion to immortalize the father of their union and achieve some publicity at the same time. They therefore applied to the Kamalapur municipality for permission to install the statue.

But the Kamalapur Industrial workers' Union (KIWU) a more militant rival to KLU could not stand idly by and allow their rival to get away with such a blatant and undeserved bit of propaganda. They could not permit their members to gaze on the aggressive countenance of 'Stalin' on their way to work every morning. Their own founder, late comrade Purushotham, was the first to be expelled from the committed of KLU as soon as Stalin became the president, as a result of which KIWU was born. As Purushotham walked out of the meeting in protest against the autocratic behavior of Stalin, the president shouted after him, "We shall not meet again except as enemies, until we die."

"We shall not meet again even after death," Purushotham shouted back, "For we will be going to two different places."

At the first public meeting of KLU after KIWU was born, Stalin remarked, "I know we are called KLU; I can only describe our opponents as 'clueless'".

After such expressions of mutual regard and affection on both sides, Purushotham worked hard, encouraged defections from KLU which was not very difficult, and cultivated the ruling party in the State Legislature so the within a few years, he was able to threaten the supremacy of KLU in many factories. Each union claimed a larger membership than the other and the total membership of the two organisations was more than all the workers in Kamalapur. Their rivalry and competition grew along with their membership until at one point in a conciliation meeting before the Labour commissioner, Stalin shouted, pointing his finger at Purushotham, "If that man is working, then I am going on Strike!"

In course of time, the two rivals passed away, but the tradition established and cherished by them continued to flourish and rivalry pursued in every factory and at every meeting in Kamalapur. Therefore, it was only natural that when KLU announced their plans for installing a statue of their leader, KIWU should do the same. Their committee also passed a resolution proposing to install a statue of Com. Purushotham at the same cross roads. But instead of going to the Municipality for sanction, they forwarded their request

directly to the State Government. In course of time, both statues were sanctioned, the coordination between the two authorities being somewhat lax.

By a strange coincidence, the same auspicious time was fixed for the ground breaking ceremony by both the unions. On a fine, cool morning before the night mist had cleared; two processions converged on to the same narrow cross roads and faced each other with their respective flags, slogans and loud speakers. When the leaders of KLU, as true law abiding citizens complained to the police that their unmannerly rivals had no business to be there, the leaders of KIWU produced the order of the State Government and contended that since the State Government was the higher authority; their permission took precedence over the municipality's permission. The police refused to interfere except to say that should be no breach of peace. A bizarre touch was added when two priests – one from each side – were pushed into the narrow space between the processions and microphones placed before them so that their recitation of Mantras could be heard by the respective multitudes. They recited them more or less in unison so that instead of two individual performances, it became somewhat of a duet which would certainly not have pleased originators of all this trouble. They offered flowers, poured water into the small pits that had been dug and did the usual puja with all the paraphernalia. The leaders on both sides, while announcing their determination to fight unto death in order to maintain their right to install a statue of their dear departed leader, nevertheless asked their followers to remain calm and peaceful.

The KLU – whose revolutionary fervour had evaporated to some extent after the demise of Stalin and who now prided themselves on following peaceful and democratic methods – thereupon filed a petition in the district court praying for an injunction to restrain their rivals from interfering with their legitimate right to install a statue of their leader. The KIWU – who did not mind going to the court when it suited them – filed a copy of the state Government's order contended that their order took precedence over the order of the municipality since the latter was subject to the control of the State Government. The judge refused to interfere, remarking that there were two legitimate and conflicting orders and it was for the State Government to resolve the issue.

Then the fun started. Having exhausted all 'legal' remedies, the two unions, in order to assert their inalienable, democratic rights to install a statue of their leader in the hallowed spot that had been chosen, but even more to prevent their rival from doing so, decided on direct action. While KLU picketed the offices of the State Government for giving permission to their rival, the KIMU picketed the offices of the municipality for the same reason. The former contended that their order was legal because it was earlier; the latter asserted that their order was issued by a democratically elected government while that of KLU was issued by the municipality which had had no elected council for the past ten years. When picketing did not produce the desired results, there were processions, bandhs, hartals and relay hunger strikes.

Meanwhile KIWU – as the younger and the more enterprising of the two unions – decide to take the law into their own hands. On a dark night, they took six masons to the

hallowed spot, dug a pit and built a platform on which the late Com. Purushotham's statue was to be installed. By the time it was day light and members of the KLU realized what was happening the platform was nearly one metre above ground level, at which point the police prevented them from going any further. The KLU who were certainly not far behind in such matters, brought a statue of Stalin – which they had got ready against such emergencies – in a lorry the very next night to be installed on the platform which had been constructed by KIWU the previous night. But their attempt was foiled by alert KIWU members who were guarding the platform night and day. Rather than take it back, the statue was left prostrate next to the platform. Fearing a breach of the peace, the police banned all meetings and processions and put a fence round the platform and the statue and posted a guard so that there would be no further encroachments. It was no longer possible for buses to ply along that route, what with the platform, the statue and the fence and had to be redirected along a different route. The long suffering public of Kamalapur was forced to find new and longer routes to get to work.

The situation was now sought to be resolved at the political level. The State Assembly was in session. One of the things that happened was an adjournment motion by the leader of the opposition 'to consider the serious situation in Kamalapur following the action of KIWU to install a statue of their erstwhile leader illegally while there was a legitimate order of the municipality granting permission to KLU to erect a statue of the famous Stalin'. The minister for labour issued a statement saying that the situation was delicate, that negotiations were proceeding and it would not be in the public interest to discuss the matter any further. The speaker disallowed the motion and the opposition members walked out in protest.

At long last, when everybody's energies as well as patience was exhausted, thanks to the efforts of a 'citizens' committee', the two unions were brought to the negotiating table with the district collector as chairman. There were endless discussions as to their respective location, the direction they were to face and so on. The traffic department insisted that there should not be more than one metre between the statues as otherwise they would cause a traffic problem. Finally an agreement was arrived at.

And now, Stalin Ramaswamy and Comrade Purushotham stand in the middle of the road within one metre from each other like duplicate traffic wardens, Stalin raising his mailed fist at his erstwhile enemy while Comrade Purushotham raised a warning finger of the dire consequences to follow if he misbehaves. Refusing to see each other in life, they now face the prospect of gazing at each other's countenance for ever and ever in unspoken, but eloquent silence.

And the buses have been permanently diverted.

18. THE ASTROLOGER

Dr. Narayanan was listening to the radio, waiting for the nine o'clock news. His wife Lakshmi was pottering in the kitchen. The servants had gone home and the children were in bed. Everything was quiet and peaceful.

Suddenly, there was a crash. "What was that?" exclaimed Lakshmi as she came out of the kitchen.

"Sounds as if a coconut had fallen from one of the trees and on the tiles," Dr.Narayanan said.

"But we harvested all the coconuts only a few days ago!" replied Lakshmi. "And there is no wind this evening."

There was another crash on the roof and they could hear the object – whatever it was- rolling down on the tiles and falling on the ground with a dull thud.

"Let us find out," Narayanan rose, picked up a torch, opened the front door and went out.

"Please be careful," his wife called out after him. She had had a bad dream the previous night and was getting nervous. But still, she walked to the front door and peeped out. Her husband was flashing the torch in various directions in the darkness.

Just then, there was a shower of stones – about five or six – in quick succession and some of them rolled down and fell in the garden. "Come in! Please come in!" Lakshmi called out in panic.

There was a gentle rustling of the wind in the leaves of the coconut tress made a noise. The wind stopped as suddenly as it had started and again there was silence.

Dr.Narayanan came in with a couple of stones in his hand. "These are what caused it," he exhibited them to his wife as if they were trophies from a contest.

"Where could they have come from?"

"It is obvious someone had projected them on to our roof, for stones, by themselves, have no power of mobility," the doctor was a rationalist and he believed in logical explanations.

"But who would want to throw stones at us?" Lakshmi was bewildered as well as frightened.

“May be the boys next door,” said the doctor. The house on their left was occupied by a group of students who were noisy and played music at all hours of the night and the doctor had on occasions spoken to them about it, with very little effect. “Those boys are up to anything.”

“But the college is closed and the house is empty!”

“Then it must be the people behind us, your friend Mrs.Ramani.”

“I wouldn’t put it past her!” said Lakshmi. “As you know, their servant has been pinching coconuts from our garden.”

The Ramani’s and the Narayanan’s had never got on well. Mr.Ramani owned a big shop in town selling all sorts of things and had made a lot of money. The two houses backed on to each other with a fence separating the two kitchen gardens. There have been frequent complaints and counter-complaints based mainly on the evidence of the servants.

“We will deal with it in the morning,” said Dr.Narayanan as another stone fell on the roof.

They waited for some more time and no further stones came. Then, they went on bed. Needless to say, Lakshmi found it very difficult to go off to sleep that night.

The next morning, the doctor inspected the damage. Some ten tiles had been broken, one glass pane had come loose and he could collect about six stones in the garden, before going to his surgery, he telephoned his friend the superintendent of police about the previous night’s incidents.

An inspector called round later in the morning, examined the damage, looked at the stones that had been collected, walked round the house and finally, questioned Lakshmi about it.

“Tell me Mrs. Narayanan, do you suspect anyone?” he asked. “Has anybody a grudge against you or your husband?”

“I can’t think of anyone, confessed Lakshmi. “Unless it is the people behind us. Their servants have been taking away our coconuts and I have complained to Mrs.Ramani about it. May be it is one of their servants. I can’t think of anyone else.”

“Don’t worry Madam,” the inspector was encouraging. “I shall frighten the servants a bit and I am sure it will not happen again.”

With that assurance, he went round and questioned the servants, enquired if any suspicious looking characters were seen in the neighbourhood the previous evening and if anyone else had heard any noise the previous night. He drew a blank of course. But when he went to Mrs. Ramani, she was very aggressive.

“They are always complaining about our servants,” she exclaimed. “Just because he is a doctor, they think they are superior to us. After all, my husband is only a merchant. But I

can tell you, my husband can afford to employ half-dozen doctors like him. Nor do we depend on their coconuts for our chutney!"

"But did you hear anything, any noises last night?" the inspector persisted.

"We heard one or two thuds at about nine o'clock," she confessed. But we didn't think anything of it. Frankly, I think it must be one of his disgruntled patients."

The inspector could not find out anything. He decided it was a stray drunk passing by and went off to make his report.

That evening, Lakshmi finished chores in the kitchen early and joined her husband. "Don't worry, nothing will happen," her husband assured her. "Whoever it was would have been warned by the visit of the inspector." But all the same, he did not turn the radio on as usual for the nine o'clock news, but kept looking at his watch.

Promptly, at five minutes to nine p.m the first stone fell. The doctor, who had his torch ready, went out though Lakshmi pleaded with him to stay indoors. "You might be hit," she cried.

"Don't worry; I shall catch the blighters this time!"

He went to the back of the house, towards Ramani's and shouted, "Come on, you coward, whoever you are! Come out into the open instead of throwing stones from behind the trees!"

The response was another stone which rolled down the roof and landed at his feet. Lakshmi stood on the back doorstep wringing her hands and imploring her husband to come inside.

Hearing the commotion at the back, Mr.Ramani came out too and flashed his torch across the fence. The two beams crossed and the neighbours recognised each other.

"Please don't shout! You are disturbing the entire neighbourhood," the merchant cried.

"Then stop throwing stones on my roof!" the doctor shouted back.

Just then, a shower of stones landed in quick succession and they all rolled down and fell near the doctor.

"There you are!" the doctor shouted.

"Doctor, do you mind if I come over and discuss this matter?" Ramani made a conciliatory move.

"There is nothing to discuss!" the doctor shouted back in anger. "Stop this nonsense or I will see you go to goal!" And he walked back into the house.

When the same thing happened the next two nights, the Narayanans were convinced that their neighbour was responsible. The stones generally started falling at nine p.m and stopped by about nine thirty. No one was hurt and the damage was of a minor nature. Lakshmi was getting extremely nervous and jittery and talked about leaving the neighbourhood and of sending the children away. She could not sleep at nights and listened to her husband snoring comfortably with anxiety and fear.

The doctor considered the whole thing as a bad joke, had the tiles repaired and made a written complaint to the police. A picket was posted at his request and two policemen patrolled the house as well as the neighbourhood. But the kept falling though there was no one anywhere within a 'stone's throw' of the doctor's house, according to the policemen.

Such an unusual occurrence could not go in the town without other people coming to know about it. The servants' gossipped in the bazaar, Mr.Ramani gave highly coloured version to all his customers in the shop, neighbours told their friends and soon, it was the talk of the town. In the morning, people congregated in front of the doctor's house and watched him inspect the damage and collect the stones. People of course had their own explanations for the occurrence. There was the haunted house theory, the neighbourly quarrels theory and the disgruntled patient's theory. Some even said that the doctor was doing it himself in order to get some publicity. Some good Samaritans, disgusted with the injustice of it all, got together and broke the window panes in Mr. Ramani's house. The feud – which had so far been vocal – was now activated into a court case. The local newspaper published an article with a photograph of the doctor's house and ended with the question, "Are the stones an act of god or the devil?"

But when a national newspaper got hold of the story, the Narayanans acquired a somewhat doubtful reputation. The opposition in the legislature – not to be outdone by the press-moved an adjournment motion in the assembly 'to consider the failure of the Government and the callous negligence of the police department to provide safety and security to a harressed family.' The result of all this was that Lakshmi became a nervous wreck. She was afraid to go out, ashamed to meet her friends, and unable to sleep at night. Her husband prescribed a tonic and some tranquilizers, but they were not of much help.

After the adjournment motion in the assembly, the police really got to work. A platoon was stationed in the vicinity for patrolling at night. Powerful search lights were rigged up from various corners to see where the stones were coming from; even a photographer with a powerful camera was drafted to photograph the stones. But while people could see the stones falling on the roof with the aid of search lights, the photographic plates were blank. For the first time, the word 'super – natural' was used in connection with these incidents.

It was at this point that the police asked for the services of Professor Kannan of the local university. He had a minor reputation as an investigator of the occult. He spent a few nights in the doctor's house, prepared a plan of the roof, and marked the tiles that were

broken on different nights with a red pencil as well as the points on the ground where the stones had fallen to determine the direction of the flight of the stones. He weighed the stones, calculated the possible velocity in order to find out the distance from which must have been projected, and so on. Before giving his official report to the police, he discussed his conclusions with Dr. Narayanan.

"The first thing is to realize that the stones are not coming from any particular direction, but from everywhere," he said. "Secondly, some of the stones at any rate are quite heavy and could not have been projected by human hands – not without some form of motive power. Yet, none of them have pierced the roof though one would have expected it from their weight and speed. And no one has been hurt though you have been wandering round the garden while they were falling. Taking all these factors into account, I can only come to one conclusion."

"And what is that?" Narayanan enquired.

"That it is the work of a sorcerer, intended to annoy and harress you, but not to harm you seriously. He has been using poltergeists for the purpose."

"You don't believe in all that rubbish, do you?" asked the astounded doctor.

"The mistake that we scientists make is in believing that logic and reason can explain all phenomenons. The Newtonian universe, even Einstenean universe, is bounded by the laws of physical science. But perhaps there are other universes of which we are not yet aware and whose laws of operation we do not know. We are only just beginning to perceive them though we do not understand them as yet."

"I don't believe it? The doctor persisted.

"But what other explanation can there be?"

"The fact that something is beyond our understanding does not necessarily mean that an illogical or superstitious explanation is the right answer," the doctor insisted.

"I am not asking you to accept anything," said the professor. "I am merely suggesting that you should get a sorcerer to perform certain ceremonies to neutralize the effect. I am also thinking of your wife who is likely to have a nervous breakdown if this thing continues. And if the stones stop falling, then we have gone another step towards finding an explanation."

"Rubbish!" Narayanan shouted.

"I suggest Dr. Narayanan, that one of the necessary virtues of a scientist is humility," said the professor before he departed.

While Dr.Narayanan was an aggressive rationalist, Lakshmi had always believed in the super-natural. She had worshipped her family deities, visited the temples regularly and observed fasts on religious days. All her childhood memories in her mother's home about

hunted houses, ghosts and possessed women came back to her now. But she was nevertheless bewildered. She could not imagine whom they could have offended that such a calamity should befall them. Also, she did not know to whom she should turn for advice. Many of her friends were away and some at least gave her a wide berth after the mysterious events and the publicity of the past few weeks. She had long since ceased to believe that the Ramanis had anything to do with it. So, in her anxiety, fear and distress, she turned to Mrs. Ramani in whom she discovered a kindred soul with sympathy and understanding.

It started with a smile across the back fence when she saw her on the other side of the garden accidentally. There they chatted, shy, timid and reserved at first. But soon, there was all the new-found enthusiasm when animosity turns to friendship. After a few days, Lakshmi confided her fears to her new friend and what the university professor had told them.

"The men with all their power and wisdom have failed to solve your problem," said Mrs. Ramani. "Let us see if we women can't put a stop to these stones." Then, she lowered her voice though no one was listening to them. "There is a sorcerer I know who can help you. He is really an astrologer, casts your horoscope, and fixes auspicious days for weddings and so on. But he has extra- ordinary powers. If we consult him, he will know what to do. I will take you to him; but don't tell your husband."

So, one afternoon when the doctor was on his rounds and Mr.Ramani was busy in his shop, the two ladies made a clandestine trip to a dusty, narrow and crowded part of the town where the astrologer lived. They were received by a small boy and asked to sit on a none too clean mat, a few feet away from the astrologer. He stared at Lakshmi with his piercing eyes for a few seconds. Lakshmi averted her glance and looked at the floor.

"At last, you have come!" said the astrologer. Lakshmi did not feel that the statement required an answer.

"The power of the police and the wisdom of science have failed to help you. So you have come to seek my help."

"Yes," Lakshmi almost whispered.

"The stones are falling on your house, because your husband has no belief. He is arrogant in his ignorance. Let him believe, let him learn to respect people and the stones will stop."

"We are willing to perform any ceremonies that are necessary, and meet the expenditure," Lakshmi ventured.

"Expenditure!" the astrologer almost shouted. "All you care about is money! Do you think a few paltry rupees are going to satisfy me? I tell you the stones will go on until your husband acknowledges the power of the super- natural!"

“Do you mean you have caused the stones to fall on our house?” asked the astonished Lakshmi.

“Who else? Your husband ridiculed me in public, called me a charlatan. So, I just wanted to demonstrate my powers.”

“Could you not stop them for my sake? For the sake of my children?” pleased Lakshmi.

“No! Your husband must come to me. He pooh-poohed my powers. Now, he must acknowledge them in public.”

Lakshmi was a great believer in the occult and the supernatural, but she was also a loyal wife. “Then, we shall go to someone else,” she said.

On their way back, Mrs. Ramani commented, “I think your husband should visit him.”

“But you know what my husband is!”

And they were both silent.

When Lakshmi broached the subject of the astrologer, Dr.Narayanan’s reactions predictable. He thoroughly cross – examined her about her visit and came to the conclusion that the astrologer was responsible and should be sent to goal. He made another complaint to the police, this time accusing the astrologer as the culprit. But when the police questioned him, the sorcerer spoke in riddles.

“The doctor brought it on himself,” he said. “I am merely an agency for bringing home to him, the effects of his arrogance and unbelief.”

“But did you throw the stones?”

“No, I did not throw them myself; but I caused them to fall on his house.”

“How did you do it?”

“How do you fire a bullet from a gun?”

“Will you stop the stones from falling in the future?”

“Yes, provided the doctor recognizes my powers.”

After that statement, the police had no other option but to prosecute him, ‘for harressing Dr.Narayanan and his family by causing stones to fall on his house by some unknown means’. But the inspector explained to the astrologer that he was merely carrying out his duties ad was convinced of the powers of the astrologer.

In course of time, the case came up for hearing, before judge Menon, a young and progressive judge who gave a lot of freedom to the defence, Because of the publicity that

had preceded the case, the court was crowded with newspaper correspondents as well as the public.

When the prosecution had presented their case, the defence lawyer stood up and addressed the judge. “Your honour,” he pleaded. “The prosecution case rests solely on the statements of the defendant. There has been nothing underhand or perfidious in the behavior of my client. Dr. Narayanan had called him a charlatan and an adventurer who made money on the credibility of the masses – a statement highly damaging to my client’s reputation. Now – a-days, it has become the fashion for the so-called scientists to decry phenomena which are beyond their comprehension. Instead of admitting the limitations of their own deductive knowledge, they merely abuse those who have advanced beyond the confines of modern science. But in spite of such abuse my client did not go to court. He merely wanted to prove to Dr. Narayanan that there were still many things in this world which are beyond his knowledge or understanding. And the only way of proving anything like that was through an experiment that could not be disproved. While the doctor might have been inconvenienced to a certain extent, no one has been hurt and there is no serious damage done to property. You might say it was just a super-scientific experiment. Now that the ‘experiment’ has been proved successful, my client has decided to stop the falling of stones as from tonight. I submit it is unfair to be prosecuted just because a man wanted to prove that he wasn’t a charlatan.”

“Tell me Mr. Iyer,” asked the judge. “Do you yourself believe in this ‘super- scientific’ phenomena as you call it?”

“Your honour, my belief or disbelief, has nothing to do with it. I am here to defend a person who I consider has been wrongly accused. It is for the police to prove that the stones were in fact projected by a human hand.”

“Can he demonstrate his power here?” the judge persisted. “Can he make the stones fall on the court house for example?”

Mr.Iyer had a private consultation with his client and after some whispering, the astrologer produced two envelopes from his pocket which the lawyer handed over to the judge. They were marked ‘one’ and ‘two’.

“Your honour, my client says that he does not want to disturb the security and dignity of this court by making stones fall on it. But in order that you may be convinced of his powers, he has handed over to you; two envelopes marked one and two. He suggests that you might open them at the appropriate time.”

Just then, an express telegram was brought to the judge. He opened it quickly – since he was expecting it and was happy to learn that his wife had given birth to a baby boy. He was all smiles.

The astrologer whispered to his lawyer and Mr.Iyer in turn spoke to the judge. “Your honour, you may now kindly open the envelope marked number ‘one’.

The judge was amazed to read, “You have a son now. He was born at five a.m. this morning, under the star Scorpio.”

“How did this man get the news even ahead of the telegram?” the judge wondered aloud. “This is most uncanny. Or, was it an inspired guess?”

The public prosecutor stood up. “Sir, may I be permitted to see the contents of the telegram since it seems to have become a part of the case now?” he asked.

The judge passed on the telegram as well as the envelope to the public prosecutor. As soon as he had read them, he made a submission to the court. “Your honour, while I may offer you my congratulations in my private capacity, I must at the same time protest that irrelevant and immaterial factors are being introduced into this case which is a simple one of harressing a respectable citizen and his family and causing them mental anguish. Mrs. Narayanan is a nervous wreck; her husband has been forced to take time off from his practice to attend to the care of his family……”

But the judge cut him short. “The astrologer says that his intention was merely to demonstrate his powers to the doctor who had accused him of being a charlatan,” he said. “He has certainly demonstrated them to the satisfaction of this court.

“By the envelope marked number one,” said Mr.Iyer.

“Exactly!” echoed the judge.

“Your honour!” pleaded the public prosecutor. “I consider the powers of the astrologer or the contents of the envelope to be quite irrelevant to the matter at issue before this court.”

“Mr. Prosecutor,” the judge interrupted again. “Don’t you realize that we are in the presence of a super- human power which we should try to understand…?”

With those words, the judge collapsed in his seat. His body slumped and people crowded round him trying to find out what had happened. The authoritative voice of Dr. Narayanan took over. “He has fainted. Make room for the doctor; let him have some air!” With those words he pushed the people away, went to the judge and examined him. Lawyers, the police and the visitors stood around in groups and whispered to each other. After a couple of minutes, the doctor stood up and exclaimed, “My God! He’s dead!’

There was pandemonium in the court room. Everyone turned to the astrologer who was still in the witness box. “You may now open the second envelope,” he announced.

19 .HEADGEAR HABITS OF THE SIRUMUDI INDIANS

Professor Adam cornflower is an eminent sociologist from one of the mid-western universities of the United States. He had come to Sirumudi to seek my help in executing his research project. His university concentrates only on gigantic, global, projects, he told me. "You see, we go in for quantity, without of course neglecting quality," he said. "HGH for example will produce a hundred reports and a hundred doctorates. Will be executed in a hundred different societies and the name of the University of Little Falls will be known in the corridors of knowledge in every country in the world."

"What is HGH?" I asked him.

"Head Gear Habits," he explained patiently. "Our president Douglass Crammer is known for efficiency and economy of expression. Where we can use initials, we do not use full names; it saves so much time and effort. He has calculated that the University saves fifteen thousand dollars in printing and stationary and five percent of the time of the staff by following this policy. I myself am known as A.C. throughout the campus."

"And I suppose your president is known as D.C.?" I queried.

He did not seem to understand the irony behind my question, but went on explain the project in some detail. He was obviously eager to elicit my cooperation. "I have seen your study of the Todas who I don't suppose number more than a few thousand in a very small and insignificant area. But when you cooperate and collaborate with us, you will be participating in a global project with international repercussions, something gigantic. We have selected one hundred centres throughout the world and Sirumudi and your college has the privilege of being one of the hundred. Naturally, there will be hundred group leaders in charge of the project each of whom will have hundred assistants. Each assistant will interview one hundred subjects so that we will have a sample size on one million! All the information collected will be fed to our Jumbo computer in Little Falls and analysed centrewise, on the basis of religion, social habits, education, climate, sex, and economic status."

"All this must cost a lot of money," I ventured, thinking of my own very modest budget for research.

"Oh, money is no problem," he waved aside my remark. "The Summit Trust of Little Falls Country has donated a sum of fives million dollars for this project, the condition being that the project must be completed within one year and the reports published within six months afterwards."

"That is rather a tight schedule, isn't it?"

“You haven’t heard the end of it K.S.,” It almost slipped out and he seemed a little shy about it. “I hope you don’t mind if I call you K.S. It makes things so much easier and puts everything on a first name basis.”

“Please go ahead.”

“I am glad; I find some universities – outside the U.S of course – are a bit particular that the heads of their departments should be addressed as ‘Mister’, ‘Doctor’ or even ‘Sir’. It makes things so much more difficult all round.”

I nodded in sympathy and understanding and he continued.

“You see, there will be one hundred reports, one for each centre with some local colour of course, and a general report – GP we call it – which is my responsibility. It will summarize and highlight the global conclusions and considerations and will be very useful for organisations like the United Nation as socio-psychological dimension in their discussions. We are confident that the findings of this report will earn our University consultancy status with the U.N. I will personally be responsible for the execution and completion of the project and will go round the world three times, once to set up the project, once to supervise data collection and finally to discuss and finalize the reports.

I was impressed by all this hectic activity and said as much.

“I am glad you like our approach. At the end of the project, there will be one hundred doctorates awarded by the University of Little Falls and I am glad to say you will be one of them,” he smiled benevolently.

I thanked him; I did not realize that it was so easy to become a ‘doctor’.

“Ours is a new and revolutionary approach to social research K.S.,” he confided. “We don’t fiddle around with aborigines in West New Guinea or the lost tribe of Indians in the Andes with a shoe-string budget. We don’t send young graduates with quinine tablets and birth control pills into unknown regions. Ours is planned, mass production, sociological research; conveyor belt investigation if you would like to call it that. Just imagine! In the course of eighteen months, we will have published one hundred and one reports and created one hundred doctorates! In another five years, we would have beaten Haward and Princeton hollow! I hope to streamline the whole programme and cut the time down to one year. In the course of the next ten years, I hope to produce one thousand doctorates in my department alone! It is truly a knowledge explosion of the twentieth century!”

“You have lined up other projects for execution?”

“You bet! The footwear people are coming in next year to sponsor a similar study. It is what you might call ‘from head to foot’. If only they had made up their minds earlier, I would have had two projects going simultaneously. It would have cut costs and increased research productivity by almost one hundred percent! May be I will do that next year if I can

get a sponsorship from underwear manufactures. But that is still in the 'lap of the gods' as you might say."

"How did you happen to choose Sirumudi College?" I could not help being curious.

"We have an extensive information storage and retrieval system. So, your work is not unknown to us. I can tell you that it is not bad……. of the type, what we call a micro project. But we also found that Sirumudi meant a little hill summit. Mudi, I understand, can also mean a tuft of hair, a crown and so on, in your lingo. I felt there ought to be some psychic relationship between that name and our project. You see, our background exploration is thorough, very thorough. For the kind of work we do, it has to be; don't you agree?"

I agreed that it has to be thorough. "Well, if you agree, here are the guidelines for group leaders – that is, yourself. This bundle contains instructions for your hundred assistants. And here is the sample questionnaire to be administered to the subjects. In order to make it easy for the interviewers as well as those being interviewed, the questions are designed in such a way that the answers can be in one or two words, 'Yes' or 'No'. There are ten thousand of them and the bundle will arrive shortly. Really, you don't have to do a thing. Everything has been taken care of." A.C. smiled, "O.K?"

But I still had one last question. "Why have you chosen HGH for your research in preference to so many others?" I asked.

"My dear sir! I am surprised that a sociological of your eminence should ask that question!" exclaimed A.C. But nevertheless he seemed pleased with it, for t enabled him to explain his philosophy in some depth.

"Headgear has played a notable role in the progress of Mankind," he said somewhat pompously. "It has been worn from time immemorial for climatic, social, religious, ceremonial, or merely decorative reasons. These reasons have changed from time to time and have often influenced the history of many nations. Just because it is an article of daily wear. I don't see why sociologists should ignore it."

"Really?" I said in wonder. But A.C. waxed eloquent on the subject for the next few minutes.

"Take for example, the crown; it is a symbol of Royalty, of temporal power to which everyone pays homage – except in republican countries like yours and mine of course," he laughed, but quickly went back to his thesis. "A tiara is a symbol of nobility. The mitre of a bishop is an indication of his religion as well as status. A fez proclaims a man's faith as Islam. A solar topi is a sign of colonial power; a turban, a mark of dignity. Your own Gandhi cap proclaims a political commitment as well as a philosophy of life. It must evoke nostalgic memories of a glorious past in the mind of many older people. But I am told it is considered a symbol of hypocracy by many young people today. If a man enters a church, he has to remove his hat; on the other hand, a woman cannot enter without one. The peak cap of a cricketer or a golfer is a sign of interest, affiliation to a particular mode of life and sport. A

helmet – whether in battle or on a motorbike gives one a feeling of security? From the featners worn in darkest Africa to the chic hats of the Paris salons, the headgear is a symbol of tradition, or fashion, of social status, religious faith, economic or political supremacy. The balaclavas of the Russians, the fur hats of the Eskimoes, or the turbans of the camel drivers in the Sahara, they mean something, they say something, both to the man who wears it as well as to the man who sees it worn. That is what we are trying to find out, the meaning behind the symbols the reality behind the facade. The motivation for a particular form of headgear springs from our subconscious, from the needs and desires of our primitive past. It explains our inner needs and hidden frustrations, determines the patterns of behaviour of individuals and groups……."

The professor would have gone on, but I interrupted him." I am fascinated A.C!" I tried to stem the flow of rhetoric.

My interruption merely provided A.C. with an opportunity to take a deep breath.

"Therefore, by studying the headgear habits of men and women in different cultures, different geographical regions, different educational and social levels and under different economic conditions it will be possible to predict they are likely to behave in a given situation, even perhaps how they will vote in the next election. When my study is complete, it will be a corrective and a cross check with the results of the various opinion polls which have not been particularly accurate in their recent predictions……."

I was truly converted. But I still had one lingering doubt. "Tell me A.C." I asked. "For one who seems to be so dedicated to his project, how is it you don't wear a hat?"

He seemed a bit confused. "That is hitting below the belt K.S.," he mumbled.

"A hat is worn on the head, not below the belt," I pointed out.

A.C. was perplexed and thought for a few moments. Then he seemed to have come to a decision. "But I do wear one!" he exclaimed.

"What? A hat? I didn't see you come in which one!"

"Well," he said and raised his right hand to his head and lifted his thick curly mop of hair, exposing a completely bald and shining cranium. He was obviously wearing a wig.

"I presume we do not include that in our study A.C." I asked laughingly.

"Thank you K.S." he said with relief.

I earnestly set about planning the study of the Head Gear Habits of Sirumudi Indians, in fond expectation of a doctorate.

20. TWO STONES

For the first twelve years of my life, I lived in a small village. I had no toys, no exhibitions or museums to visit, no children's books to read. I used to play after school hours with other boys. We had tamarind seeds and mango seeds (during the mango season) and an old tennis ball as play things. There was a three wheeled wooden cart made by the village carpenter. I used to drag it around with a piece of string when I was about three, but by the time I was six, I had discarded it. Catching frogs or butterflies were frowned upon by my elders. On moon – lit evenings, I used to sit with my grandmother on the back verandah of our house while she told me stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, but now my grandmother was dead and there were no more stories.

One result of all this was that I became somewhat of an introvert, talking to myself more than to the others. I also took a great deal of interest in my environment. Not only birds and animals, but even inanimate objects began to attract me. I used to wonder about the large tamarind trees near the burning ghat that were reputed to have been planted by Tipu Sultan so that there would be shade his army marched from Palghat to Dindigul. There was the inclined stone pillar that supported the choultry roof and I used to wonder when it would collapse every time I passed the choultry. It is perhaps ironical that it is still standing after more than sixty years of uncertain existence. There was a degree of mystery and fascination in everything and I used to make up stories about them all.

But the stone in front of our house on which my grandfather used to sit in the mornings and in the evenings was very much a hard reality. It was a huge stone, sufficiently large for anyone not to attempt to move it. It was in many ways, the sheet anchor round which my thoughts revolved and my grandfather was the presiding deity. I could not imagine life without that stone being in front of our house. Perhaps, in my subconscious mind, it represented something permanent. Something that would not, and could not be destroyed.

When I was due to leave the village at the age of twelve and go to a high school in town, I cried secretly and silently about all the things I had to leave behind. The tamarind trees which were getting old and whose roots were already exposed because of soil erosion might fall down and be washed away during the next monsoon; the choultry pillar might collapse any day even without the aid of the monsoon. My favourite corner in the school will now be occupied by someone else who would not be able to appreciate the full benefits of that sacred spot. The little tin trunk which I loved and in which I had stored all my precious possessions had been replaced by a leather suit case as being more suitable for the city and the tin trunk had been relegated to the attic in the village house. I was sure that my mother would give it away to someone rather than allow it to gather dust year after year.

But there was one consolation amidst all this ruin of my past. I did not matter where I went or what I did, the stone in front of our house would still be there as a reminder of everything I loved and cherished in my childhood. Other things might change; even people might die; but the stone would not be affected. It was not a biological organism; it was not

born as a result of copulation and conception, except in a very vague sense of its formation in the bowels of Mother Earth many eons ago. It would not grow, decay and die. It did not need any nourishment for its sustenance nor did it contribute sustenance to its environment. It had no birth and consequently, no death. It was eternal. Storms and floods could not ravage it and fire could not destroy it. Did I think of all these things at the tender age of twelve? I did not have any knowledge of the sciences in those days, but some such thoughts occurred to me as result of my limited experience of the outside world. Even as I grew older and left the village permanently, that stone became a symbol of eternity and a mythical repository of all my early sentiments connected with the village. For, even after many years' absence, when I went back to the village, I was glad to see the stone was still there.

I was naturally interested in how that stone happened to come there. While my own elders were not interested enough to talk to me about it, it was my grandfather's bullock cart driver Kuppan who told me about its antecedents. It had come there even before he was born, in fact, before the temple in front of our house was built and consecrated. Evidently, two huge stones were quarried and brought there more than a hundred years before I was born; no one knew the exact date. The two stones had lain side by side as a single rock – perhaps like Siamese twins – for a million years before the rock was blastered and the two stones brought to our village. An idol was to be chiseled out of one of them, to be installed in the new temple that was being constructed. The sculptor had chosen one of them which ultimately became the central deity in the new temple. And the other unfortunate stone, un- chiseled unhonoured and unsung, lay in front of our house like a discarded mistress. It was too heavy to be carted away by the usual means and no one wanted to make the special effort for moving it. It was therefore pushed to one side of the street so that it would not cause any obstruction to passing bullock carts.

In later years, it became a seat for my grandfather. The other villagers would sit on the front verandah of our house while they discussed the affairs of the village, the price of bullocks and the prospects of the monsoon. By tradition and convention, on one other than my grandfather dared to sit on that stone. It was perhaps a measure of his authority as well as the respect the other showed him. It had acquired the same status symbol in the village as a reserved parking lot for the chairman's Rolls Royce in a large company in the United States. I did not know whether his father had also sat there, but the stone was worn smooth on the top with constant contact over many years with my grandfather's behind, just as it's more sacred and successful rival had also worn smooth with constant oblations of oil by succeeding generations of priests.

So, there it was; one stone became a god, showering blessings on all those who came to worship at its feet; the other , its 'Siamese twin' for a million years, a seat for the village elder; one serving a divine purpose, the other a social one. When I learnt of all this as a small boy from Kuppan and heard my grandfather pontificating from his perch, I was fascinated, but did not know what to make of it all. Though I too worshipped the stone idol in the temple like a true devotee, I felt no love for the divine icon. It was the rugged, unshapely stone outside that commanded my affection. When no one was about, I used to

lean on the stone and feel the smoothness of its top surface with something skin to love, as if I was stroking a pet dog. Our relationship was truly intimate.

Fifty years of life in the city has made me worldly wise and somewhat of a cynic I suppose. My loves and affections have been softened by time, my enthusiasms tempered by disappointments and frustrations. I have learnt to take the rough with the smooth and have become philosophical rather than fight against the inevitable. Therefore, it was no surprise to me when I went to the village a few years ago and the stone was not there. Even stones had become very more expensive in the last few decades and an enterprising neighbour had broken it up and used the pieces to build a compound wall for his house.

"It was a strong stone I tell you," he commented when I enquired about it, "Extremely hard to break up. It took two masons with huge hammers three days to reduce it to small, usable pieces." And then he added as an afterthought, "Seeing that your grandfather used to sit on it for years, I suppose I should have asked you first. But I didn't think you would mind."

My only thought was, how callous can people be?

So, one stone continued to receive the homage of its devotees while its sister merged into a compound wall with mortar and cement, still serving a social purpose even in its disintegrated form. It had lost its individuality after nearly two centuries of independent existence.

But that is not the end of the story. Constant oblations of oil - often adulterated with acids - had eroded the strength and stability of the divine statue as surely as the mason's hammer had performed that service to its erstwhile companion. It was replaced last year by a newly made idol from the local arts and crafts society. It is not known what happened to the old idol. It was ceremoniously removed from its platform in the sanctum of the temple, taken in procession and immersed in the 'Ganga', which meant in this case, the local irrigation tank. But when the tank went dry in this year's drought, plenty of mud pots that people had thrown away came into view, but no idol. I know, because I searched for it. Did it disintegrate? I thought not. Was it removed by some enterprising individual and sold as a rare find? Had it found its way into a museum or a private collection? Or, had it been sold to an unsuspecting American tourist as something belonging to one hundred B.C? No one knew, and obviously, no one cared for the welfare of an object of veneration for nearly two hundred years.

To my way of thinking, both stones have gone the same way. The beautiful, serene form of the idol and the hard seat of a village elder, are both dead, one through stone cancer and the other through vivisection. In fact, the seat of the village elder is still there in a different form, still serving a social purpose. But the divine idol has gone forever. But the strange aspect is, the village people have forgotten the existence of both stones and the part they played in their lives over so many generations and which were so much a part of their daily life.

But somehow, I cannot forget the two stones, their long hibernation together in a quarry, their different life styles, or their final disappearance into eternity.

21. A FUNERAL HAS BEEN ARRANGED

The body was laid out on a thin mattress in the centre of the hall. The legs were pointing to the north, as was the Hindu custom. A brass oil lamp with five wicks had been lit and placed at the head of the mattress. The hands were placed across the chest and the face had a repose that belied the struggle he had undergone in the last hours of his life. A religious mark, bright and shining like a newly polished urn, added dignity to the face.

Lakshmi could not take it all in. She was still in a daze and the tragedy had not yet penetrated into the depths of her consciousness. The illness, the operation, the slow recovery and the sudden collapse – everything came in such quick succession that she had no time to adjust herself to the fast changing circumstances. She had been very busy, attending to the needs of her now dead husband for almost twenty four hours a day for the last three weeks. She was keyed up, tense and would take time to unwind; and then, the grief would hit her. She was now standing behind a door, her chin resting on her hands, watching the puzzle and confusion of the body being brought in and the ritual of being laid out.

Now, it was all over. Her husband's body lay there, peaceful and serene. One of the ladies – who take it upon themselves to 'officiate' on such occasions – came and took her by the hand. "Come and pay your respects to the departed," the old lady led Lakshmi forward. She went obediently, knelt at the feet of her dead husband and touched the ground with her forehead as a sign of obeisance. As she rose, a sob escaped her, almost unaware, but there were no tears in her eyes. Others followed her, her sons, daughters- in- law, daughter and her husband, and then, all the other relations. They all came, one by one; the men prostrated themselves before the lifeless body while the ladies knelt and bent their foreheads towards the mother earth, as custom and tradition demanded. There were tears in the eyes of her daughter who came to her and started weeping. The sons were dry-eyed, though grim-faced.

The daughter had come to her to offer and receive love, consolation and sympathy, but Lakshmi found she had no words in which to express what she felt. She merely hugged her. The old lady came again. "Come and sit here," she said and led Lakshmi to the head of the mattress and made her sit by her husband's head. It was the place for a wife, almost a place of honour at the funeral of her husband.

The drummers had arrived and they were beating their instruments to a monotonous rhythm never varied. It was a way of announcing to the entire village about the funeral and at the same time driving away the evil spirits that might be lurking in the neighbourhood.

There were always some people in every village who took it upon themselves, the responsibility of organizing a funeral. They knew what had to be done, who should be sent for, what arrangements to be made. The members of the family were usually too upset on

such an occasion and in any case, they had to meet all those who came to condole with them. These gentlemen were therefore busy, sending messages, writing lists of names of people to be informed, sending for the carpenter to construct the funeral car and arranging to purchase various things required for the funeral such as flowers, new clothes, limes, etc.

People started arriving and the crowd increased. The women sat in the inner hall, solemn and silent, with occasional whispers. The daughter and the daughters-in-law sobbed, wiped their eyes with the ends of their saris, spoke occasionally to the more important of the lady visitors. But Lakshmi sat-like a wooden statue - not moving, her face grim and her hair unkempt, staring into the far distance.

She knew how other wives behaved at the funeral of their husbands. It was the only occasion when traditional Hindu women could exhibit their emotions in public. They beat their breasts or stroked the face of the dead husband – an action they would have considered inappropriate in public during his lifetime. They sobbed and whimpered, bemoaned their fate at having outlived their lord and master, called him endearing names and praised his wonderful qualities. Some of them even learnt funeral dirges whose words could be altered to suit the occasion and sang them. Other women wept with them, not so much because of their grief for the departed, but because of their own unspoken tragedies. Each had her own tears to shed; her own private grief to cry over and a funeral was a public occasion to get rid of their deep-felt inhibitions and get relief.

But Lakshmi had never been articulate. Try as she would, she could not express her feelings in those conventional ways. She was shy and retiring by nature and her extreme sensitivity prevented her from expressing her grief in a public in a demonstration. She knew that she was expected to shout and wail and call on all the Gods to be witness to her grief. But the lump in her throat would not melt; the construction in her heart made it difficult even to breathe. The tears seemed to have solidified somewhere behind her eyes, and prevented her from seeing what was happening around her. Women fussed over her, friends and relations came and sat near her in the hope that she would shed tears and condole with them and then, made way for others. But she seemed oblivious of what was happening.

Why was she not crying? Was it indifference? Was she hard hearted? Surely, she must cry and wail at least for form's sake! Didn't she get on with her husband before he died? She looked after him with such devotion when he was in the hospital! Why didn't she cry now, and evoke sympathy from all and sundry? How can you console a woman who was dry-eyed on the day of her husband's death? How can we cry if she doesn't? Had she no consideration for her guests? So, some women whispered to each other at the fringes of the crowd.

In the front hall, the men came and went. Some hessian cloth had been stretched between bamboo poles in the front yard to protect people from the rigours of the mid-day sun. Wooden chairs and benches from the local school had been borrowed for the occasion and placed in the shade for visitors to sit. Servants from the neighbouring houses were

distributing coffee in brass tumblers to the guests, for no cooking was permitted in the house where there was a corpse. It was the responsibility of the neighbours to feed the members of the bereaved family in turn until the third day ceremonies were over. It was also their responsibility to feed the guests who might be coming for the funeral.

Two logs of fire had been lit and they were burning slowly in the front yard - fire with which the funeral pyre will be lit later in the day.

The sun rose higher and higher and it became hot and stuffy inside the house as well as in the yard. The women wiped their faces with the ends of their saris. The men moved to cooler places, to neighbouring houses where they were provided with snacks and coffee. The carpenter was making the funeral car out of bamboo slats and coconut matting. Tender banana trees, flowers and coconuts had arrived for the decoration of the car and people were shouting orders to various men to hurry up with whatever they were doing. And the monotonous, insistent, rhythm of the drums went on and on….

“Come with me,” the old lady who had taken it upon herself to look after Lakshmi said to her and Lakshmi followed her obediently. “Go into the backyard and relieve yourself; I shall stand guard,” and Lakshmi did as she was told. When she came back, a hot tumbler of coffee was waiting. “Here, drink this,” commanded the old lady. “You can’t go on for the whole day without anything in your stomach.”

Lakshmi mechanically took a sip. “I can’t swallow” she exclaimed.

“I know how you feel, but drink it.” Lakshmi did so with difficulty and found she felt the better for it.

As they were returning into the house, her senior daughter-in-law came to her. “Amma! Can I have the store room keys please? The men want something for… the car.” The last words nearly choked her.

Lakshmi removed the keys from her hip where they had rested for more than twenty years and handed them over. Then, the full force of the simple act struck her. She knew she would not see those keys again. Now that her husband was dead, her oldest son was the head of the household and his wife would naturally run it. She would merely be an appendage, a widow, a bringer of bad luck, a woman whom people avoided on every auspicious occasion. The keys represented authority, status and power. As the full force of giving up the keys struck her, she realized with dramatic suddenness what had happened to her. She was now a widow. She had never realized it till that moment and tears began to flow.

“You have to take a back seat from now on,” the old lady consoled her. “As I have had to do for the last fifteen years. That chit of a girl, your daughter-in-law, will run everything from now on.”

Lakshmi did not reply. But as she came in and took her place near the head of her husband’s mortal remains, she too wailed and sobbed. Her daughter came to her with

anguish and sympathy, near relations who had sat in embarrassed silence offered her their condolences, but the flood of tears would not stop.

As wife, mother, and mistress of the house, she had had responsibility, authority and the respect of others. People had looked up to her, waited for her decisions, accepted her comments and obeyed her orders. But now?

She wondered for a minute whether the tears for the dead husband or for herself. But tears were always for the living; the grief was for those who were left behind, only the ceremonies were for the dead so that they might be reasonably comfortable in afterlife. Her married life of thirty years, monogamous but also monotonous, passed through her mind in a flash. Her arrival as a young and innocent bride, looking up to her husband as lord and master, holding on to the ideals of a chaste Hindu wife until they were wrecked against the rock of reality. Her achievements and tragedies, the quarrels and the reconciliations, the slow fusing together of two contrite and independent souls into a single unit with a one will and one interest, passed through her mind's eyes. Yes, the tears and the sobbing were for a life that was lost, that was precious in spite of all the disillusionment. In spite of all its imperfections, it had been worthwhile.

One of her sons came to her. "Amma, the cremation has been arranged at……." he described the place. "Is that alright?" Lakshmi merely nodded. This was probably the last decision on which she would be consulted.

Suddenly, at that moment, she realized that she had loved her husband and he had loved her in his own fashion. Yes, in spite of the frequent infidelities, in spite of his anger and tantrums, there had been tender moments of loving and sharing things together and the realization brought a more violent bout of weeping. People thought it was because of seeing her son and wanting to share her grief with him. The old lady came and held her and spoke soothing words which only increased her grief. She was now shaking like a leaf at the thoughts of her husband.

Conches blew, the family story teller was reciting the glories of the departed, men were hurrying hither and thither, even her daughter-in-law were busy attending to various chores that had to be done. Only her daughter sat by her side, held her hand and cried with her. And the monotonous beat of the drums went on and on….

Some men came into the hall. One of them came to her and whispered," It is time for the funeral; everything is ready." She merely nodded.

Six men lifted the body and carried it out. The name of god was on their lips. "Govinda! Goovinda!" They shouted the name of the favourite deity.

To benches had been put together in the yard for the body to be washed. The mortal remains could not be cremated with all the uncleanness of the hospital and the pollution in must have suffered. The crowd of men parted to make way for the body and then closed round it again. The old lady who had been looking after her came to Lakshmi. This time she knew what to do. Then men parted to make way for her. Helped by the old lady, she walked

round the body on the benches, made her obeisance, dipped her finger in a pot of ghee and rubbed it on the forehead of her husband. It was then that she noticed the scar on his cheek, made by the horn of a rather wild bullock he was trying to train many years ago. She remembered him coming home from the farm with blood on his clothes, her bathing the wound in warm water and putting an ointment on it. It set her off, weeping and shaking with grief, thinking of that long forgotten incident. The men looked on in sympathy and silence as the old lady guided her back to the hall where the other women had congregated.

After the near relations had offered their homage, the body was bathed, dressed in new clothes, a coconut was broken, and camphor lit on a brass tray and the puja was performed. The body was moved into the decorated car and the procession started to the shouts of 'Govinda! Goooovinda!"

At the burning ghat, a crude platform of firewood and cow dung cakes had been erected, the body placed on it and the relations were asked to offer their last respects by walking round the body, sprinkling holy water and placing some rice. It would be their last chance to see the mortal remains of their loved one. Beginning with the eldest son, the men came first and at last it was Lakshmi's turn. She walked round with unsteady feet, again helped by the old lady, placed the rice on the head, dipped her hand into the mud pot and sprinkled the holy water. As she knelt and touched the ground with her forehead, she looked at the face of her husband for the last time; her control gave way. She stumbled and fell in the dust and bemoaned her fate. Her daughter who was close at hand gently lifted her and took her away. Sitting under the shade of a tamarind tree, she shed tears of longing and bitterness and waited with the other women for the obsequies to be over.

The preparations for the cremation went on. Firewood was stacked all round the body, some kerosene was sprinkled to make sure that the wood will burn properly and the whole thing was covered with mud, leaving holes for igniting and for air to get in. The mourners stood about and waited.

Lakshmi thought of the future. Tomorrow they would come again and her son would pick up the bones and ashes place them into a new mud pot full of milk and take it to the river to be immersed. The bones would in time find their way to the ocean – the mingling of the individual spirit with the universal. She thought of the great heroines of the past, the chaste and famous Hindu wives, who had immolated themselves on the funeral pyre of their husbands. But this was not a heroic age and Lakshmi was not a heroic woman. She would continue to live and suffer like other, ordinary widows, may be in time, and even learn to enjoy it. But she still wished she could die.

On the third day, she would be dressed up as a new bride, with all her jewels, for the last time. And then, the gold bordered sari and the jewels would be removed, the glass bangles shattered and the string that her husband had tied round her neck on her wedding day would be broken. She would be given a rough, white sari to wear and sit in a dark room with a little oil lamp to keep her company. And she would go on, not living, but merely existing……

Everything was ready; the men went round shouting orders. Her eldest son walked round the mound three times - assisted by his brother-in-law - and inserted the burning stick of firewood into the mound at the feet of the corpse. There was suspense for a minute, a doubt as to whether the firewood was sufficiently dry, whether the kerosene was adequate. But they need not have worried. The wood caught fire and smoke was rising. As the mortal remains of her dear one went up in flames, Lakshmi wondered, 'Whose funeral was it? Her husband's or her's?'

22. AN 'UNFAIR' PRACTICE

The committee on unfair labour practices was due to meet in the premises of the Green Chimney Mills Ltd., that afternoon. The chairman of the committee, Mr. Veerappa was a retired judge who was not keeping good health. Walking round factories tired him and made his legs ache. So, in the afternoons, he rested in the travellers' bungalow under a fan while his peon, a loyal servant of many years standing gently pressed his feet. No one alluded to this weakness of his. It was the best kept secret, because everyone knew about it. Therefore , after going round the Green Chimney Mills and having enjoyed a good lunch hosted by the managing director, he rested for a couple of hours and the committee met at 4 p.m in the office of the company.

The other two members of the committee, Mr. Thiruvengadam representing the workers and Mr. Prasad representing the employers were already there when the chairman arrived. The case referred to what the representative of the workers described as 'a blatant and odious case of exploitation of an innocent worker by an unscrupulous management. The enquiry was public and since the managing director was personally involved in the case, it had created a lot of interest; curiosity and excitement among the workers and a large number were present. The managing director, Mr. Gajapathy Raj himself sat in a corner of the room looking somewhat anxious and apprehensive. There was suppressed excitement and whispering among the audience.

After a preliminary discussion between the members of the committee regarding the procedure to be followed, the aggrieved worker was called to give evidence. After giving his name- it was Karuppuswamy – and the department where he worked, he was examined by the member representing the workers, Mr. Thiruvengadam. It went something like this.

"Are you a permanent worker of this mill?"

"Yes Sir."

"When is your weekly holiday?"

"Saturday sir."

"And what do you do on Saturdays?"

"Has this anything to do with his employment Mr. Thiruvengadam?" the chairman enquired.

"Yes sir; it will be revealed in my subsequent questions," Mr. Thiruvengadam proceeded.

"And what do you do on Saturdays?"

The worker fidgeted and seemed uncomfortable, particularly as the managing director was there.

“You can answer without any fear; this committee is here to protect you,” Mr. Thiruvengadam encouraged him.

“I go to managing director’s house and give him a massage and oil bath.”

“And you have been doing this as a regular routine?”

“Oh yes sir. For five years.”

“There you are Mr.Chairman! Mr.Thiruvengadam spread his hands in a gesture of helpless despair. “Here is a serious case of an obnoxious, unfair labour practice. An industrial worker employed in a public limited company is being used for the private pleasure of the managing director on the only holiday the poor man has’. And this has been happening not once or twice, but regularly and for a long time. Are we living in a democracy where personal freedom is considered sacred, or are we living in the age of the grand Mogul?”

“You are right Mr. Thiruvengadam,” exclaimed the chairman in virtuous indignation. “It is certainly a clear case of unfair labour practice. It is to stamp out such things that this committee has been appointed,” he looked round the audience with satisfaction. “I hope you Mr. Prasad will agree with us on this point. We should unanimously condemn such practices wherever they may exist.”

But Mr. Prasad was in no mood to agree with the other two members. “Mr. Chairman, don’t I have the right to cross-examine this witness?”

“What will cross-examination reveal?” asked Mr. Veerappa somewhat impatiently. “The facts are there. If you want to rebut the evidence of this witness, you will have to put the managing director on the stand.”

“Nevertheless, I would like to bring out all the facts in connection with this case.”

“Alright, go ahead,” said the chairman with poor grace.

“Mr. Karuppuswamy, how long have you been in this mill?” Mr. Prasad asked him.

“About five years sir.”

“And what were you doing before that?”

“I used to give massages and oil baths to people sir.”

“I see,” he paused. “In fact, that was your ancestral profession?”

“Yes sir.”

“And were you in the habit of giving oil bath and massage to Mr. Gajapathy Raj before you joined the mill?”

“Oh yes sir; for many years.”

“And was your father in the habit of giving oil baths to Mr. Gajapathy Raj’s father before you?”

“Yes sir; for the last three generations we have been working for that family sir,” said the man proudly.

“When you joined the mill, did you ask for the job or was it offered to you?”

“I asked for it.”

“Did you ask once, or twice, or many times?”

Karuppuswamy looked down. “Many times sir,” he mumbled.

“In fact, you pestered him.”

The witness nodded his head.

“And did you also assure him that even if you joined the mill, your services as a masseur would always be available to him?”

“Yes sir. After all, it is my ancestral profession.”

“Are you in anyway inconvenienced as a result?”

“No sir.”

“And you get paid for it separately?”

“Yes sir, the master is very generous.”

“And do you also give oil baths to other people in your spare time and receive remuneration?”

Karuppuswamy fidgeted, looked sheepish, but had to admit that he did.

“Do you know that it is against the conditions of your employment to engage yourself in other jobs while you are employed full time in the mill? Do you know that you could be dismissed for it?”

Poor Karuppuswamy was thoroughly miserable. “I didn’t know sir,” he cried. “If I had known all this, I would never have come here in the first place!”

“Did you come here voluntarily or did someone persuade you against your will?”

“I was persuaded against my will.”

“Did you know that you were brought here merely to make your managing director look ridiculous?”

“I didn’t know that sir; if I had known, I would never have consented to give evidence.”

Mr. Prasad could have stopped at that point, but some devil seemed to have got into him and he proceeded in a slightly different direction.

“Mr. Karuppuswamy, do you know that even peons employed by the Government sometimes have to perform private duties for their officers?”

“What has that to do with the present situation?” the chairman queried. “He does not know anything about it.”

“Sir, I want to establish the fact that unfair labour practices are not confined to private industry only,” Mr. Prasad replied. “I wish to show that many of these so called ‘unfair labour practices’ are the result of our social traditions and not necessarily harmful even if they seem to be against the spirit of modern times.”

And before the chairman could say anything further, he got his next question in. “And do you know peons sometimes have to press even the feet of their officers when they are tired in the afternoons?”

There was pin-drop silence in the hall as the full import of? Mr.Prasad’s question sank in. “I have finished my cross-examination Mr. Chairman,” he concluded.

The chairman turned slowly and somewhat ponderously to the labour member Mr.Thiruvengadam. He was obviously under some strain. “You should not bring such frivolous cases before this committee Mr.Thiruvengadam,” he announced. “A service that is voluntarily and willingly performed by a worker and for which he has been generously rewarded does not come within the preview of this committee. As Mr.Prasad has pointed out in his cross-examination, it is not so much an unfair labour practice as a man doing two jobs and earning money for which the management has every right to take action. I therefore declare that there is no substance in the charge of unfair labour practice in this case.”

And what was how Mr. Gajapathy Raj’s reputation as a fair and just employer was saved.

Mr. Prasad felt that the chairman might have a grudge against him for dragging in his own personal weakness to public notice. So he went to the travellers’ bungalow to apologize to Mr. Veerappa. But the judge not only brushed aside the apology but was magnanimous enough to compliment him. “You know Mr. Prasad that was a brilliant piece of cross-examination; the best I have come across in my career as a judge for many years. Your talents are wasted in the industry; you should have been a criminal lawyer.”

“It is nice of you to say Mr. Veerappa,” Mr. Prasad thanked him.”But my cross-examination was not based purely on intuition,” he hesitated and then revealed the truth. “You see, Karuppuswamy gives an oil bath and massage for my father every week.”

23. A TEMPORARY REVOLUTION

Some 65 years ago I received my education in the Board Elementary School in the village of Sirumudi. Our headmaster, Mr. Veerasamy had been there for many years and to us, school boys, he seemed to be eternal. He knew everyone in the village knew their idiosyncrasies and made allowances for them. He taught us the three 'R's, used the cane when required, but otherwise he was interested in keeping things going and avoiding trouble. It was therefore a surprise to us when he was suddenly transferred. I was about nine at that time.

Our new headmaster Mr.Krishnaswamy was a younger man, full of ideas and enthusiasm about how a school ought to be run. He was appalled at the way things had been going on and did not hide his opinions. He believed in 'modern methods of education', in an integrated development of the mind and the body, in parents' participation in school activities and in pupils acquiring a general knowledge about the external world. But the village people would have none of it. They were sceptical, and said he was a brash young man who would ruin the school and its age-long traditions and drive the boys away from it instead of attracting them.

The new headmaster kept us - the upper class boys - after school hours and talked to us as if we were grown-ups. He said he was amazed that there was no provision in the school curriculum for our physical development, such as sports and games or even drill. So he started drill classes for the whole school. The two other teachers in the school did not know anything about drill; nor were they interested. Consequently, he had to conduct those classes himself. But he was undaunted. Half an hour before the school was due to break up, all the pupils of all the classes were marched into the open yard in front and made to stand in two rows facing each other according to height. Mr. Krishnaswamy explained briefly hat we had to do and then proceeded to demonstrate it. We followed him and lifted our arms upwards, sideways and downwards in unison. Then we were asked to touch our toes alternately, that is, the right toes with the left fingers and vice versa. On this too, we obliged. When he felt that we had learnt it he said, 'Right, now we will do it properly.' He then started calling out the numbers from one to ten in ascending order and then in descending order as he performed the various movements. Used as we were to repeating everything in the class room; we too started shouting the numbers as we swung our arms. But he told us it wasn't necessary, which we found rather strange.

The drill class seemed a meaningless waste of time to us and to the villagers who saw us performing these exercises as they were returning from their farms. They did not hesitate to tell the headmaster that it was downright foolish. 'My son has a more useful way of getting his sweat out when I put him to work on the farm. I send him to school so that he can learn to read and write and do sums and that is what the teacher is supposed to teach them, not these silly acrobatics,' they said. 'Everything he does is upside down. Look at the way he calls the numbers, from one to ten and then from ten to one. Why can't he call from

one to twenty and be done with it? Next, he will be teaching them to read from right to left!' But in his superior wisdom, the headmaster persisted in his efforts to help our physical development. The farmers grumbled but did not go further. When the inspector came, he complimented the headmaster and spoke to the villagers about the importance of discipline, physical and mental coordination, etc., none of which they understood. But the opposition to drill died down and we continued to swing our arms and legs for half an hour every day.

Next, the headmaster introduced games. A few of the boys had been proud possessors of small rubber balls before, and we kicked them about sometimes. But Mr.Krishnaswamy levied a fee of two rupees each from the upper class boys. With the money collected, a football was purchased from Coimbatore with a pump to inflate it and a kit for mending punctures. The open space in front of the school yard was cleared and the field marked out. We had no goal posts and stones about a foot in height were planted in their place. We also learnt the rules of the game.

There were of course certain handicaps in playing the game properly. We did not have twenty-two players to make up the two sides, so we had to play with six or seven a side. The size of the playing field had to be adjusted to the availability of land, which was not quite rectangular. Along one side of the ground was a thorny hedge and whenever the ball hit the hedge, we faced the risk of a puncture. Often, when we should have been playing, much time was spent in mending punctures made by the thorns in the hedge. And finally, a bullock-cart track passed right in the middle of the ground and whenever a cart passed, the game had to come to a stop. Under such handicaps, even the persistence of a Robert Bruce might have weakened, but our headmaster persevered for months until the football was beyond repair with too many punctures, and the unsympathetic farmers refused to part with more money for another ball.

Mr. Krishnaswamy was also able to get a group of young men together and persuade them that the recreational facilities in the village were non-existent and it was their duty to create such facilities and to participate in them. He talked enthusiastically about eliminating the backwardness of the villages and bringing them into the mainstream of civilization through games and sports. He emphasized the need to modernize and to move with the times and do the things that people in the towns were doing, so that we would not be called uncivilized by any casual visitor. The younger farmers with a little money and leisure soon became interested in these ideas. If they could all be modernized for the cost of badminton equipment, then they certainly did not want to remain backward. Soon, some money was collected, Mr. Krishnaswamy went to Coimbatore to buy the equipment, a badminton court was laid out in front of the village choultry and young men returned from their farms earlier than usual in order to hit a yellow woollen ball back and forth-much to the chagrin of their elders. The older people grumbled and said that when young men gave up useful farm work in order to indulge in useless pastimes, it was obvious that Kali Yuga - the age of evil-was advancing fast towards is own destruction. But like all things that are grafted on to an alien environment and culture without adequate preparation, badminton too was somewhat short-lived. The young men felt that they were not making adequate progress since the headmaster always won; they quarrelled over rules, over decisions; the attendance dropped

and finally it stopped altogether. The headmaster said that they had not learnt the spirit of the game, which was to lose gracefully. I too could not understand it since the whole objective of playing was to win. Though badminton had stopped, the net became useful for the local untouchables in trapping birds.

But the reformist zeal of our headmaster could not be dampened by such minor setbacks. He said he was determined to make our village the most progressive in the whole district, however much it cost him (or us!). He next started private tuition in English for such of the boys as cared to learn it by paying five rupees per month. Very few people in the village knew English in those days. Apart from the headmaster, the only other person who could boast of knowledge of the language was the village Karnam who maintained the village accounts. Contact with the ruling power was only through minor officials in the district headquarters, and no one felt the need or the desire to learn the language of the rulers. The villagers always referred to it as 'crooked letters'. My brother was the only person who knew a little English, as he had been to a high school in Coimbatore for some years. Now, the headmaster spoke to the leading farmers in the village about the importance of English, about higher education for their children in a high school or even college, about their sons becoming lawyers or doctors, or perhaps even collectors, and how they should not be content merely with being farmers forever. (The district collector was the highest dignitary the villagers could think of in those days. Anyone higher was too far removed from them and beyond their comprehension.)

Certainly, the arguments about becoming lawyers appealed to most of the parents. They had to go to courts because of litigation over land or occasional feuds when they beat each other up and the police hauled them all before a magistrate. On such occasions, they had had to engage lawyers, pay them exorbitant fees and watch them argue before judges in a language they did not understand. A villager did not like to be subjected to the discipline of officialdom and he did not think much of the collector in spite of the powers he wielded. But the profession of law gave a kind of freedom that the farmer cherished. Therefore, apart from professional dependence, there was a mutual sympathy between lawyers and agriculturists and the average farmer could quite visualize the possibility of his son becoming a lawyer with some satisfaction.

So the English classes were started in the evenings in one of the empty houses in our compound. Books and notebooks had to be purchased and again Mr.Krishnaswamy had to collect money and go to Coimbatore to buy the necessary things. I think the book was called King's Primer with a picture of George the Fifth on the front cover. These were about ten boys to start with, including myself, a number which dwindled to five before the end of the first month. One of the difficulties we experienced was with regard to pronunciation. The sounds 'B', 'G' and 'F' were not known in Tamil and for some of the boys this was a great obstacle to start with. We struggled over 'A Big Fig' for days before mastering it. But when it came to making a sentence and learning grammar, our teacher's own knowledge was somewhat rusty and we spent months merely learning words without being able to use them.

Another effort of our headmaster in bringing our village upto date was in the intellectual field. Along with starting English classes, he felt there ought to be a library in the village so that knowledge acquired in the school could be strengthened and enlarged. By now the village people were getting used to his enthusiasm and feeling that perhaps there was something in what the man said. He managed to collect a few hundred rupees from among the affluent farmers for the establishment of a library. The village carpenter made a large shelf according to Mr. Krishnaswamy's specifications. Another journey was made to town to buy books and the library was housed in the school. While a majority of the books were concerned with religion and philosophy, there were also quite a few novels. Most of the people had neither the time nor the inclination to read books, though they all agreed that the library was a good thing. Only a few religious-minded ladies like my aunt and a few of the older students made use of the new facility. But it was soon discovered that while people borrowed books, they rarely bothered to return them. Often a servant was sent to borrow the books and, while on his way back, someone else took the books from him to save them a journey. They also borrowed from each other freely, so that ultimately the books could not be traced. And people got annoyed when asked to return the titles they had borrowed! 'After all, I paid twenty-five rupees to start the library and you come and ask me about a miserable book costing five rupees! Anyone would think I had stolen it!' was the indignant answer. Consequently, like most good things, the library gradually melted away until there were no more books to borrow. The bookshelf was quietly shifted to the headmaster's house and that was the last we heard about it.

Mr.Krishnaswamy also taught us history. He told us about Gowthama, the Buddha and Mahaveera, about Asoka and Akbar and about Vikramathithya in the form of stories. He had many other plans for the village such as a Social Service League, a teacher-parents association a Women's institute to teach them tailoring, knitting, etc. But these were still in the realm of imagination. To us, the students, he spoke of higher education, of high schools and colleges in the cities with long corridors and intellectual giants as teachers and a whole new world of civilization and culture we never dreamed of. To me personally, he opened the door into a larger world and my curiosity was aroused as a result. After that, there could be no going back.

Another of Mr.Krishnaswamy's activities was the organization of a teachers' conference in the village. The Palladam Taluk Teachers Association had existed for many years but in a more or less dormant state. Our headmaster resurrected it and the first meeting was held in our school. The only things I remember about it is that we had the afternoon off from school and the arrival of a photographer with his black box to record the occasion for posterity.

The group photograph of the teachers with myself sitting at the feet of our headmaster- like a true sishya still hangs in our house in the village. It was rumoured later that the authorities frowned upon the formation of such associations. Our headmaster was told not to indulge in such activity in the future. It was one thing to get the farmer's sons to contribute money to play football or badminton, but quite different when it came to

organizing teachers who might start talking sedition! Anyhow, that was the beginning as well as the end of the teacher's association for a long time.

Unfortunately, the civilizing mission of the headmaster was brought to an abrupt halt when he was suddenly transferred - some said under a cloud. It was discovered that he had collected far more money than he spent on his various reforming activities. He had also left a lot of unpaid debts. Many of the farmers nodded their heads in self-righteous indignation and said they had always known that he was no good. Without the presence of an active and progressive force, the various activities which were already languishing came to a stop and the village lapsed back into its old lethargy and contentment.

****