

THE COURSE OF TRUE LOVES

It was dusk. The inner court yard of the temple which was intended for the more important and higher caste people was still empty, but the outer space was already getting crowded. The priests, their protruding stomachs hanging over their dhoties and their brown bodies glistening with perspiration were busy, running here and there, shouting orders to the garland makers, giving instructions with regard to decorations, asking for lanterns to be lit and calling on the lower caste people to keep away from them lest they should be polluted. The smell of burning incense and camphor mingled with the stale smell of oil and the fresh aroma of flowers and banana leaves.

The decorations at the temple were almost complete. It had been newly white washed and the compound wall had been painted in stripes of white and red. Coconut leaves had been woven into mats and bound round pillars to cover them. At the entrance, banana trees had been tied in the form of a welcoming arch, with the green fruit still hanging from them. Mango leaves had been strung together and hung across every door way. 'Garuda vahana' the flying transport of Vishnu the creator, had been brought out of its storage and was being cleaned up and decorated, ready for the procession at night. The divine kite would be used later in the night to carry the bronze image of Lord Ranganatha, the presiding deity at the temple along the main streets of the town. It was the birth day celebration of Sri Krishna – an important occasion in a vaishnavite temple.

Outside the temple, the small vendors along the dusty street were doing a brisk trade by the light of smokey oil lamps. One could buy coconuts and bananas, betel leaves and scented sticks and camphor for worship. But one could also buy little mirrors and combs, coloured ribbons for girls' hair, white sticks and red tablets for painting religious marks on the forehead and flowers and sandalwood paste. There were also little baskets for girls and rattles for boys – all made out of dried coconut leaves. There was bustle and confusion as people bargained and argued and children cried with tiredness and hunger. Beggars crying for alms and sadhus intoning their hymns mingled with the noise of conches and gongs in the distance. The dust and noise of the street mingled with the smells and sounds of the temple to create the peculiar atmosphere of a Hindu religious festival.

Though Palayam was only a small town, one of the eating places had started serving a new drink called coffee. It had been introduced by the British rulers and there were many stories about it. Some argued that since it was of European origin, it must necessarily be unclean: others said it might be alcoholic. In any case, very few tried it, since a tumblerful cost as much as half an anna, while butter milk was served free in many places and coconut water – including the tender coconut – was only a paise. Only the most daring or the wealthy could afford it.

There was animated conversation about this and about various other things among the men who were slowly gathering in the temple courtyard. They talked about a new thing called a railway which had just extended to the town from Madras recently. They called it a monster of iron since it was so huge only a monster could pull it. Queen Victoria had been proclaimed 'Empress of India' a few weeks ago and it was said that benign lady was going to usher in the golden age of peace and prosperity. In order to celebrate the great occasion, horse races and bullock cart races had been held in every town and a few Indians had been allowed to ride along with the Europeans for the first time in living memory. Most of them had been watching the races that afternoon and there was animated discussion about the finer points of various races. With these momentous changes taking place in their environment even the price of crops and the state of the monsoon seemed unimportant. 'The

old days are gone for ever' they said. 'Things will never be the same again'. But the topic of immediate interest at the temple was the new dancer who was going to dance at the temple before the start of the procession. No one had seen her dance before: it was her first performance. After a rigorous course of training for ten years, she was going to be dedicated to the temple and she would spend her life dancing at the temple, providing pleasure as well as a sense of Godliness to the devotees who came to worship. She was supposed to be extraordinarily beautiful, talented and only sixteen years of age. There was eager anticipation as the court yard began to fill with men. As time went on, they began to ask each other. 'When is she coming?' 'How long are we to wait?' But they were used to waiting; time did not mean very much when once the crops were in and the sowing season had not started. They had very little to do and they chatted about their times and events contentedly.

First, the musicians came and sat down in a corner of the inner court yard. As they began to tune their instruments, there was a general thrust forward and a craning of necks to see what was happening. The priests shouted at people to stay where they were. A side door opened and a young girl in the costume of a Bharatanatyam dancer walked in, with downcast eyes. She was escorted by her mother. The noise in the crowd increased as people at the back started shouting to the people in the front to sit down so that they could get a better glimpse of the dancer. She walked to the sanctum of the temple and waited with folded hands while a priest inside started the puja. Mantras were recited, the bell was rung, the camphor was lit and offered to the deity. The priest came out with the plate with the burning camphor still blazing and offered it to the girl. She knelt in obeisance; her forehead bowed low towards the ground. When she rose, she touched the burning camphor with her fingers and then raised them in prayer. She took some ashes from the plate and applied it to her forehead. Next, she walked over to her guru, the dance teacher who had trained her since she was a child. To him also, it was a day of fulfillment. She bowed low and touched his feet and was blessed by him. It was a momentous occasion for her; it was a sublimation of her desires, the fulfillment of her dreams. May be she would be a great dancer coveted in the courts of kings and thousands would flock to see her. Or she would remain a temple dancer making a precarious living and then thrown on the scrapheap of humanity after a time. Yes, that day would largely decide the issue.

As she took her position in the centre of the forecourt of the temple and as the musicians began their first song, a silence fell over the crowd. The first dance began. It was an invocation to Ganapathi, the elephant God, who had to be propitiated first if the occasion was to be success. People watched her with curious, critical eyes, watched her face and figure and noted her expression and her movements.

As the preliminary dance ended, a young man walked into the inner court yard and sat in the front row. He was tall, with dark, piercing eyes and distinguished looking. His thick, long hair was neatly tied into a bun at the back of his head, according to the fashion of the time; his mustache was neatly trimmed. The red, gold laced upper cloth he wore did nothing to hide the firm muscles in his body and his brown skin shone in the mellow light of the oil lamps. There was a rustle among the crowd to see who he was and then, he was recognized as the young man who had won the main event in the horse races held by the British rulers that afternoon. He had received a big silver cup from the European collector who had complimented him as an example of what was best in the native population.

“He is Ramaswamy Udayar of Achipatti Village” someone whispered. “Even the white people admire the way he rode”.

“Nevertheless, he should have more respect for the elders”, another commented. “He should not push past everyone and sit at the front”.

Meanwhile, the second dance had started. The rustle in the audience died down and they watched the dancer intently as she went through the various motions of joy, sorrow, jealousy, anger, ecstasy and love. Her face glowed in the soft light of the oil lamps; her hands coiled and uncoiled with the supple movements of a cobra, but her feet had the precision and timing of the soldier on parade. Her beautiful figure was poetry in motion and her face was a kaleidoscope of expression as she acted out one story after another from the rich repertoire of Hindu mythology. It was not only the technical perfection of her art, but the inner excitement, her love of God and her love of dancing, the combination of religion and emotion that flowed through every movement that made her dancing what it was.

“She is truly great; a dancer like this is seen only once in a century”.

“Let us hope she doesn’t become the concubine of some zamindar and neglect her dancing”.

“Whether a Zamindar gets her or not the priests will earn a fortune if she is clever”.

“With her face and figure and her dancing, she will earn a fortune if she is clever”.

“What is her name?” Ramaswamy Udayar asked someone sitting next to him.

“Her name is Meenakshi; she is the daughter of Muthulakshmi who used to be a dancer at this temple a few years ago”.

The dancing went on and on. The mother stayed in the background and made a note of all the important people who were present. There was no way in which a professional dancer could make money through her art. There were no public performances where people paid to watch the dancing. The few occasions when she might be called upon to dance at a wedding were not enough to enable her to make a decent living. Further, a dancer was married to God, dedicated to the temple and often at the mercy of the temple priests. The only way in which she could thrive and make a fortune was to have a powerful patron or patrons who would pay her well and look after her interests at the same time. Watching the people in the audience and watching her daughter’s dancing. Muthu smiled with satisfaction, for she knew that her daughter’s fortune was made.

Ramaswamy Udayar get up and walked out of the dancing before the end. Outside the temple he called his personal assistant and cart driver Ganapathi.

“Ganapathi, I want you to find out where this dancer lives and let me know in the morning. I am going to bed now”.

“Alright sir”.

Next morning, Udayar was driven to Meenakshi's house in his bullock cart. In addition to his upper cloth, he wore a turban that morning. It added dignity to the occasion and made him look older.

Muthu received him and invited him to be seated on the carpet which had obviously seen better days. A cushion was placed for his comfort. There was no other furniture of any sort in the room. The house had not been white washed for a long time and there was every evidence of poverty and neglect. Muthu herself stood out of politeness for her guest, leaning against one of the pillars.

"We are honoured by your visit sir", she said.

"I suppose you know who I am?" Udayar asked.

"Who does not know you?" she asked in return. "Everyone is talking about your riding in the races yesterday".

"Oh that", he waved it aside. "That is nothing. Everyone will talk about it today and forget it tomorrow. What I mean is, do you know who I am, where I come from and most important, what I am worth".

"Well sir....." she hesitated.

"If you don't know, you had better make enquiries", he said. "I am fairly well off".

"That is not surprising", she said. "I can tell from your appearance that you are a person of status".

"I want to see your daughter".

"Meena", Muthu called. Meena emerged from the back room and stood shyly behind her mother.

"Come forward and show your respect to the gentleman", Muthu instructed.

Meena joined her hands in greeting and bowed low before her honoured guest. She was dressed in a simple cotton sari and tight fitting blouse. Devoid of make-up, the gaudy costume and the tinsel jewellery of the previous night, the delicate features of her face and the outlines of her beautiful figure showed to better advantage. There was innocence as well as dignity in her expression that her obvious poverty did nothing to hide. Udayar eyed her with keen and critical appreciation, in the same way he was used to appraising a pure blooded Arab horse.

"Go and bring some refreshments", Muthu told her daughter who went inside and returned with a tray of spiced nuts and betel leaves for chewing. But they remained untouched.

"She is very young sir", Muthu went on. "Until yesterday she had not seen a man, except in the street from a distance. And when her dance teacher was here, I was always present. Her young life so far has been one of dedication to her art and to God".

To be dedicated to the temple, a dancer had to be a virgin. It was the one thing to which deva daasies attached great importance and young men in search of mistresses attached equal importance. Muthu delicately hinted at it in case Udayar was doubtful or did not know the customs.

“Look, I am not used to sophisticated conversation”, Udayar interrupted. “I will be plain. I like your daughter. She is not only attractive, but seems a nice girl. I want her to be my mistress, not for a month or two, but for ever”.

Muthu was shocked at the blunt and crude way he spoke. She herself would have approached the subject through subtle hints and oblique references after another half an hour of verbal sparring, with a lot of politeness and courtesy and a few shafts malicious wit. ‘He is not very experienced’. She told herself. ‘But he may give a lot of trouble’. It was a challenge she faced with relish. To outwit him and take some money off him in the process would be fun.

“Well sir. Meena has just started her career as a dancer”, she answered. “With her good looks and her talent, she will go far in her profession. And she had been dedicated to the temple for life”.

“I know all about this dedication business”, Udayar cut her short. “You too were dedicated when you were young I suppose. You also must have had good looks and talent when you started your career and must have had offers from wealthy patrons. You must have accepted them, or you would not have had a daughter. And yet, where has it got you? How much money have you saved in your old age? I bet you are under debt to half the tradesmen in the town. Now, you have to start peddling your daughter’s good looks in order to make a living. And if you are not careful, she will end up like you, prematurely old and no security for her later life. What I am offering is comfort and security, even respectability; and she must give up her dancing”.

Give up her dancing indeed; who did he think he was, a Maharaja? Muthu was terribly annoyed at the way he spoke; all the more so, because it was all too true. But she could not afford to send him away.

“Your offer is most kind”, she said. Her attitude alternated between flattery of her guest and an assumption of great future success for her daughter. “But she has her career to think of. I am also told that some wealthy zamindars are interested in her”.

“I am sure they are”, Udayar replied. “They might keep her for a month, perhaps two months. Then there will be another dancer in another town or in a different temple who might take their fancy and they will get rid of your daughter. And you will have to start looking for new patron. And gradually, she will end up with the temple priests. I am trying to save her from all that”.

“I have been looking forward to my daughter dancing in the courts of princes”, Muthu spoke, half to herself. “I have dreamt that she will be the greatest dancer in all India and future generations will speak of her art. It is a great sacrifice you are asking us to make”.

Muthu had not the slightest intention of letting Meena make any such sacrifice, but allowing it to be implied would be an advantage.

“Tell me, have you ever heard of a dancer who led a comfortable retired life?” Udayar asked. He had reached the point of concluding the deal. “Here is fifty rupees for any immediate expenses you may have. He counted out five ten rupee notes and handed them to her. The sight of money was tempting and Muthu could not refuse it.

“You had better make a list of people to whom you owe money”, he continued. “I will settle them all tomorrow so that you will be free of their worry. From now on, you should not borrow money on any account. If you need anything, you ask me”.

“Yes sir”, she muttered.

“I am a kshatria and I do not like to break my caste rules”, he said. “I shall not eat anything cooked by you or your daughter. I shall send a Brahmin cook who will do all my food in a separate kitchen”.

“Very well sir”.

“I shall return in the evening”, and he went out.

3

During the day, Udayar was generally off on some work or other. He was engaged in a civil dispute with his uncle on the partition of the ancestral property for which he had to consult lawyers. He had been lending money to various people and he often went round to collect interest. Horses always interested him and if he heard of a good one that was for sale, he went off to look at it. To buy bullocks for farm work, to sell his crop of tobacco or cotton, to negotiate the purchase of a farm – yes, he was always busy during the day.

In the evening, he returned to Meena’s house, had his bath, the Brahmin cook served his supper while Meena supervised in the background. At night, they made love. Meena, in spite of her inexperience, was adept in the art of pleasing men, thanks to the training and advice she had received from her mother.

Day after day, they grew fond of each other. Meena found that love was very different from what her mother had taught her to believe. Udayar was tender and affectionate in private though often blunt in public and hardly noticed her during the day. In the privacy of their room, he spoke to her about their future. “I am fond of you Meena girl”, he said. To address her as ‘Meena girl’ was his way of expressing his tenderness, of saying she was something special, because he had a special name for her. “I am fond of you, but I cannot be fond of a professional dancer. A dancer’s life is degrading and I want you to have self-respect as well as the respect of others. If you cannot achieve that, then our relationship cannot be permanent. You want to be mine for ever don’t you?”

“Yes, of course”, she answered demurely.

“Then, don’t listen to your mother. She belongs to a different tradition and a different age”.

Meena listened to him with growing interest and affection. From him, she learned about honour, loyalty and fairness – values that had not been a part of her mother’s tuition and contrary to

her mother's ideas. They made a big impression on her young tender mind. "You should be able to hold your head high under any circumstances", he told her and it seemed an attractive prospect.

Physically, they were well matched. In private she was tantalizing and provocative, with all the art and guile her profession had taught her, except that it was not pretence. Her love for him was genuine. When he went away in the morning, she looked at him longingly, but dropped her eyes in true modesty in the presence of others. And she waited impatiently till the evening for his return.

The household dues were all settled. Meena admired the way he dealt with the creditors. They all knew him and respected him. Used as she was to her mother's ways of cringing and pleading, this was a revelation to her.

"She owes you two hundred rupees, does she? How do you make that out? Oh, I see, it includes the interest also, does it? Did you give all this money in cash or in goods? Have you kept an account? Have you a promissory note? You haven't? Then how can I verify your statement? Alright, I will pay you one hundred rupees in full settlement, or would you prefer to wait? Or will take the money, will you? Good, then give me a receipt".

On the first day. Udayar's servant went to the market and brought a cart load of provisions such as rice, lentils, spices and so on, to last for a few months. Udayar himself gave some money to Muthu for daily expenses – adequate but not over generous. She grumbled about all this, but to his face. She resented this brash young man who had so unceremoniously taken over the management of her household and treated her like a glorified servant.

For the first time in Meena's young life, there was no anxiety about money, no fear of creditors and no apprehension about the future. Meena knew for the first time what security meant. How often had she seen her mother argue with a man over money and then taken him into the back room and after little while, he would go away satisfied. Meena remembered only too well the vulgar jokes of some men who came to her mother. "We can't give you any money on the strength of your good looks; we will wait for your daughter to come of age". Yes, Meena began to realize what happiness and contentment was. Udayar was a generous lover who might desert her any day, her mother kept telling her. 'They all swear eternal love until they get tired of you'. She said. But Meena did not like to think of that day. She had no thought for anything or anyone else, except the more contemplation of her love. She did not even think of her dancing.

After he had been there for about a month, Udayar spoke to Meena one morning. "Look here, Meena girl", he said. "I have to go back to my village. While I am gone, don't let your mother get you into any mischief".

"But I don't want you to go?" Meena cried. "You promised you will never leave me".

"I am not leaving you", he said. "I will never leave you unless you or your mother makes me do so. But you must realize that I have work to do. Achipatti is only twelve miles from here and I can come back if you really want me. I have to attend to my farms, collect rent from tenants and so on. As you grow older, you will understand these things".

But to Meena who had never travelled beyond the outskirts of the town, Achipatti might have been at the other end of the world.

“Mother says, when once you go, you will not come back”, she wailed. “She says all men are the same”.

“Your mother is a fool”.

“How can I be without you?” she shed tears. “What will I do all day long?”

“What do wives do when their husbands are away?” he shouted. “You will do the same”.

“But I am not your wife”, she shouted back.

“Look, Meena girl”, he spoke to her tenderly, almost like a father. “You know I cannot marry you. According to the Hindu tradition which we both accept, you are married to God and I cannot marry anyone outside my caste. But the Hindu tradition permits a man to have a mistress. However, the very fact that we cannot get married imposes a greater responsibility on both of us. You are perhaps still too young to understand, but I shall make sure that our children will not have to take to your profession and will be respectably married. So, you must trust me and be patient”.

Meena’s answer was more tears.

“You will not mix with the other dancers because they will tempt you to follow their ways”, he continued. “You cannot blame them because that is their tradition. But I want to take you away from it all. And to make sure of it, I am leaving Ganapathi behind. He will look after you, take you to the temple if you want to go there for worship and will buy any household things you may want”.

“You don’t trust me after all my promises”, she said.

“I trust you, but I don’t trust your mother”.

They bid an affectionate farewell. But his goodbye to Muthu was short and perfunctory. His small cloth bag was packed, his horse was saddled and he rode away.

4

Evening after evening, when Ganapathi was safely out of the way, Muthu talked to Meena. ‘Why don’t you comb your hair, make up your face and go to the temple? How do you expect people to remember you if after one performance, you hid yourself in your house as if you were in mourning? Don’t you want people to see you and to admire you?’

“I went to the temple this morning to worship and to offer puja; that is enough”.

“But it is in the evening that wealthy young men come to the temple to see the dancing girls”.

“I don’t want wealthy young men to see me”.

“And what if this man should leave you?” Muthu shouted. “Are you married to him? Did he take you as his lawful, wedded wife before the holy fire and before as assemblage of elders? He can walk out any time and you have no defence; no appeal. You have no right recognized by society to

retain your man. You have to fend for yourself and make the best you can of your life. You ought to get what you can out of him and then leave him if a more wealthy patron were available”.

“Don’t you see mother”, Meena pleaded. “He loves me and I love him. He will not leave me and I certainly shall not leave him”.

“How silly you are!” Muthu laughed bitterly. “Love is a luxury we in our profession cannot afford. Anyhow, what do you know of this man? May be he has a wife tucked away in his village. Even if he hasn’t, his relations will make sure that he gets married and has legitimate children who can light his funeral pyre so that his soul can go to heaven. In that case, where will you be?”

Meena started weeping. “How can you talk like that mother?” she cried. “For the first time in my life, I have known freedom from anxiety and worry. Now I know what love and security mean. And I am infinitely grateful to him for having made all this possible”.

“Yes, he is a clever man”, Muthu said slowly. “I begin to see his plan. He has given you freedom from worry, made you feel secure and complacent. But if he should leave you tomorrow, you will be exactly where you were before – perhaps worse – since you are no longer a virgin. There is not one thing that he has given that can be converted into money”.

“But I trust him!” Meena shouted in spite of her tears.

“Look Meena”, Muthu spoke slowly and deliberately in order to emphasise her words. “We are deva dassies – servants of God. Our loyalty is to our art and our devotion is to the temple. We may offer our bodies to any man, even enjoy it; but we do not mortgage our emotions to any human being. That is our tradition and that is our duty, our dharma if you like”.

“How can I be true to God or loyal to my art if I am disloyal to my lover and protector?”

Muthu came and hugged her daughter with affection. “Poor child!” she cried. “You have lost your heart to this selfish man who is only interested in his pleasures. It happens to all of us sometimes. But it is the worst thing that can happen to a deva daasi, for men are fickle where we are concerned. They will be loyal to their wives even when they hate them; they will protect them even when they don’t need protection, because society expects them to do so. But they will leave us at the slightest provocation. And we suffer not only the miseries of a lost love but also because of the missed opportunities with other men”.

“He will not leave me mother”.

“What a fool you are!” Muthu shouted in anger. Her sympathy and understanding of a few moments ago had disappeared. “Love has made you lose your senses”.

But the argument was not yet over. There was only a respite before the next stage of the battle. Meena felt helpless, because she was young and inexperienced and because she love her mother. Muthu was clever and knew all the arguments.

“Peace and contentment and happiness are not for us”, the mother argued. “Ours is a life of excitement, of ecstasy. People might tease us or humiliate us, but we find a rare fulfillment through

our art. How can you give up such a life in preference to the drab, monotonous existence which does not even guarantee security for the future?"

"Yes, I will miss my dancing", Meena agreed. "I wish there was some way by which I could go on dancing without having to put up with all that it implies. But if I have to choose between love and art, I will have no hesitation in choosing love".

"And after all I have done for you!" Muthu shouted. "For the past ten years, I have slaved and humiliated myself and had you trained so that in you I could see myself dancing, so that you will earn a fame that eluded me. And this is how you repay me".

This was perhaps the wrong approach and Muthu realized it the moment she had spoken. Meena looked at her mother, long and hard. "I know all you have done for me mother", she said. "Don't think I am ungrateful. I know only too well the mean and low men you have had to entertain, the priests in the temple you have had to please, the creditors you have had to satisfy and my heart cried out for you. I used to wonder which of these men who came to see you was my father. Though I was young, I knew all about these things; our profession makes one understand them at a very young age. But I didn't realize you did these things in order to mould me in your own image; to make me go through the same life that you did, perhaps a little better, perhaps a little worse. You see, I don't want the same things to happen to men when I am older. I want to look after you in your old age, but I want to do it without humiliating myself. I am lucky to have found a man whom I can love and respect; I am going to stick to him".

The argument went on day after day. There were tears and recriminations, appeals to love and tradition and duty, and above all, future self-interest.

"Has he bought you any jewellery?" Muthu demanded. "Any saris? Who will believe he is fond of you?"

"He has brought us peace and security", Meena countered. "Isn't that enough? He has brought us dignity and a sense of pride. The tradesmen talk to you with respect now. Young men do not wink at me sly jokes about my face and figure in an indecent way. Isn't that enough?"

"As if these things will feed you when he has gone!"

"But he will not be gone!"

Then, Muthu tried a totally new line of argument. "Do you know if he is married?" she asked. "Has he any children? Has he told you anything about his family?"

"He is not, married; if he is, he would have told me".

"But has he told you?"

"No, he has not told me in so many words", Meena shouted. "But his parents are dead and he was brought up by his uncle with whom he has quarreled. He is his own master".

"What about that uncle of his?"

“You know he has court case against him because of the dispute over the partition of ancestral property”.

On other occasion, Muthu brought up the subject of a zamindar who had come to town in search of adventure. “I believe he is very wealthy and has lots of diamonds on his fingers”, she said.

“I am not interested in any zamindar”, Meena replied coldly.

“You never know”, Muthu speculated. “This man of yours may not turn up. So, it is better to be on the look out and let people know you have not gone completely into purdah”.

“Look mother, I don’t want you to inform anyone about me”.

But all the same, Meena was getting worried and lonely. Ganapathi was like a good watch dog, affectionate and obedient, but hardly good company. Before all this happened, Meena had her dancing lessons, her music and the exciting anticipation of the first performance. But now, she found time, with nothing to do but worry or argue with her mother. Muthu’s constant arguments were beginning to have their effect. Suspicion was beginning to eat into Meena’s soul. Will he come back soon? Will he keep his promise? Perhaps her mother was right. She had a lot of experience with men. May be, men were fickle as she said, and her man was no exception. She turned to Ganapathi in her misery.

“When do you think he will come Ganapathi?”

“I don’t know Amma”, he said. “It is sowing time in the fields and until that is over; he won’t stir out of the village. He also had this dispute with his uncle and he said he was going to settle it one way or another”.

“My mother says he will soon get tired of me and leave me”.

“He is not like that”, Ganapathi assured her. “I have never known my master give his word and then go back on it”.

“But I am lonely and miserable. Mother keeps saying I should practice my dancing and not give up my profession”.

“If you break your part of the bargain and start dancing, then he will have nothing more to do with you”.

“I do wish he would come back”.

The priests from the temple had also been trying to persuade Meena to continue with her dancing. A young, attractive dancer was a great asset to any temple. She drew crowds during festival times and she created a new interest at other times.

Don’t forget you are a servant of God”, they reminded her. “You are in fact married to God as a result of your vows. It is your duty to dedicate your talents to His service. You must dance in the temple to please God as well as His devotees. You cannot break the tradition of a thousand years. To break your vow would be a sacrilege”.

There was a minor festival in the temple and Muthu and the priests between them succeeded in persuading Meena to agree to dance on that occasion. "I am not asking you to give up your man or take up with another", Muthu argued. "I am only asking you to keep your own vow to God".

So the dance teacher was sent for. Muthu and the teacher between them selected the items for dancing, keeping in view the occasion. That evening, there was music and the jingle of bells emanating from Muthu's house as Meena practiced these items. It gave her a new satisfaction as she went through the various items – the physical exertion as well as the emotional tension contributing to it.

"What is this I hear Amma?" Ganapathi asked Meena. "You are going to dance at the temple".

"It is true Ganapathi", Meena replied. "What can I do? The priests are threatening me with the wrath of God and my mother is shouting at me. It is nearly a month and he hasn't come".

Ganapathi walked the whole night and reached Achipatti village in the morning. He reported to his master what had happened.

"If she wants to go back to her dancing, let her go", Udayar muttered in anger.

"No sir", Ganapathi pleaded. "She does not want to go back. But she cannot withstand the joint efforts of the priests and her mother. She is young and afraid. How long can a young girl who is just past childhood withstand such pressures? If you go to her now, she will refuse to dance".

"But it would cause trouble with the temple authorities".

"If she stays in the town and does not dance, it would cause trouble", Ganapathi said. "But if you take her away somewhere for a few days, by the time you come back, people would have forgotten all about it".

Udayar thought for a few minutes. "I am just wondering if she is worth all that trouble", he said aloud.

"She is loyal and decent sir", Ganapathi said. "And she is very fond of you. Further, Ganapathi added a bit of practical wisdom. "You have already spent a lot of money settling her mother's debts, apart from the household expenses".

5

When Udayar arrived at Meena's house, she was having lunch. He walked straight into the kitchen. "Meena girl, wash your hands and come with me", he said. "We are going on a pilgrimage and you are going to have a ride on the new railway".

Muthu was speechless, but Meena got up from her lunch in the middle, washed her hands and went into her room to get the few things necessary for the journey.

It was then that Muthu started shouting and wailing. "How can she go away now?" she cried. "What will the priests say? How can I answer them? What will the devotees who come to the

temple expecting Meena to dance, say? It is the most humiliating thing that can happen to a dancer – not to keep an appointment at the temple”.

“But Meena is no longer a dancer”, said Udayar.

“We are deva dassies; it is our profession and it is our life”, Muthu shouted. “Who are you to come and interfere with the tradition of a thousand years?”

“Well, it is not going to be Meena’s life any longer”. Udayar shouted back. “And the sooner you get that into your head, the happier you will be. Here is hundred rupees for your expenses while we are away. Give some of it to the priests and there won’t be any trouble”.

6

They left by train the same afternoon. It was a new experience for Meena. In many ways, she was still a child with a child’s sense of wonder and a child’s curiosity. She was delighted by little things and was constantly asking questions. She had never had any toys and had rarely played with other children. Her life had been one of dedication and discipline with dancing lessons for two or three hours a day, in addition to her schooling and her mother’s instructions on the life of a deva daasi. She had never left her little town and a train journey was the most exciting thing that could have happened in her young life. At first, her enthusiasm was somewhat tempered by the anxiety she felt on her mother’s account. But in the sights and sounds of the journey, she soon forgot all about it. The noise of the engine, the bustle of people trying to get into the compartments, the clanging of bells, the green and red flags of the Anglo-Indian guard who seemed to have the power of the almighty himself, the shouting of the vendors of refreshments, all these made her open her eyes with wonder.

She chatted like a little girl, not like one running away with her lover. “Look! Look! The engine is going back! Will we have to pay extra for it?”

“Can I buy myself some sweets?”

“Who is that man with the red turban?”

“There are some sadhus getting into the train. Will they also have to buy tickets?”

“Are there separate compartments for the untouchables?”

As the routing of arrival and departure was repeated at each station, Meena put her head out of the window and watched with mounting fascination, the moving crowds of humanity that always seemed to be present at Indian railway stations irrespective of the time of day.

Udayar, as a man of the world and as one who had travelled twice before on a railway, satisfied her curiosity and she was duly impressed by his knowledge of the world.

When the excitement of the journey began to wear off, she was immersed in pangs of remorse about her mother and about her dancing at the temple. “I have left my mother to the mercy of the temple priests. I don’t know what they have done to her”.

Don't worry", Udayar soother her. "Those Brahmins will sell their souls for five rupees. If your mother had given them some money and performed some pujas, they would be more than satisfied".

"How can you talk like that about the priests of the temple?" Meena chided him.

"Because I know them", Udayar replied. "They may be priests and we may have to depend on them, but they are greedy men and more interested in making money than anyone else".

"We should have brought her away with us", Meena felt. "Then there would not have been any trouble. And when we got back, we could always have explained it by saying that it was a divine call from Sri Rangam and we had to obey it".

Udayar was disgusted at the idea and told her so.

"But she is my mother", Meena argued. "She has sacrificed everything for my sake and it is my duty to look after her. You don't know what humiliations she has had to suffer in her life. Further, I am fond of her".

Their first half was Sri Rangam, the famous vaishnavite temple town. Though Meena had never travelled before, thanks to the training in dancing that she had received, she knew all the mythology as well as history associated with the temple and was able to enlighten Udayar about many things. The presiding deity at the famous big temple was the same as at Palayam, Lord Ranganatha, Vishnu the creator in reclining form. Meena was therefore familiar with all the ceremonies and traditions of the temple. She told him of the birth of Andal, the garland maker's daughter, the girl who fell in love with Lord Ranganatha, and of her ultimate salvation. She could sing the hymns of Andal as well as the other saint poets of the vaishnavite world and her feet itched to dance and her mind was totally absorbed in devotion. "Do you know that the famous poet Kambar is supposed to have sung his Ramayana here in this thousand pillared hall, nearly eight hundred years ago?" she asked Udayar. He didn't know and didn't much care. She knew all about the various festivals that were celebrated there and their times. Udayar was overwhelmed by her knowledge. She insisted on going to all the minor shrines that surrounded the temple. Her soul was immersed in an orgy of devotion. She kept telling herself and her lover constantly, "I never thought I would worship here; to be blessed like this is truly rewarding!" which Udayar found rather disconcerting.

When Udayar was uninterested in her stories, she chided him. "You have no culture, no appreciation of art, no sense of tradition; even worship at the temple is a boring duty you perform in order to reserve for yourself a place in heaven. I may be only a deva daasi, but I love God; I love music and poetry, particularly when it is devotional poetry in praise of the Lord. Don't you realize, thousands will sing these poems, long after you and I are forgotten?"

"They are very nice to listen to", Udayar admitted. "But when I have listened to them for some time, I want to do something active".

"Your idea of something active is a new way of making money", she said.

He spread his hands wide. "It is money that makes all this possible", he shouted. "Without my earning money, where will you be?"

"I suppose we have to work and earn money", Meena admitted. Her attitude towards money was that of any artist and Udayar found difficulty in understanding it. "I hate the life of a temple dancer. But I wish there was some way of dancing, entertaining the public and pleasing myself, even earning money, and yet leading a respectable life. And I do wish you were a little more interested in the finer things of life".

"Well, I am interested in horses", he smiled. "There is nothing in God's creation that is finer than a horse".

"When I use the word 'finer', I refer to the things of the spirit, not horses", she said somewhat sarcastically and Udayar was a little disappointed.

In a few days, Udayar realized that it was one thing to attend to his affairs during the day and sleep with Meena during the night and a different thing altogether to have her on his hands for twenty four hours a day. In his own town, he was the master, able to dictate terms and demand implicit obedience. But in an atmosphere of religion and culture, he found that Meena had the upper hand; she knew so much more, could converse with priests and sadhus intelligently, could strike up friendships with other women and participate in religious discussions. Udayar was at a handicap in all this. Music and religion had a small place in his life and to spend whole days in such activity was boring in the extreme. Further, he was used to thinking of Meena as a mere dancing girl, as one who was beneath him socially and unimportant in other respects. He tended to relegate her to the background in everything. But now, in this environment and where her origins were not known, it was he who was being ignored by others and treated as an appendage of Meena. It was difficult for him to adjust himself to such a situation; nor could he participate fully in these activities. He could only spend money and demand service.

In Palayam, Meena had thought of Udayar as being next to God. He was so confident and masterful in dealing with men and affairs. But in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the big temple, where people – rich and poor – came from many parts of India, he was just one of many. His limitations and inadequacies were exposed to her and her own superiority – at least in some things – was apparent. Because of this feeling, combined with her own enthusiasm for everything around her, she tended to take him for granted.

One of the men at the choultry where they were staying remarked to Udayar one day. "That wife of yours is a highly educated woman for her age; it is not often that girls from our class are as knowledgeable as that. All they know is cooking and having children. You are a very lucky man to have found such a wife".

For some odd reason, this made Udayar angry instead of being pleased.

"Most of us find such qualities only in our mistresses", the man continued. "But the trouble with them is, they are only attracted by money".

They stayed in one of the higher class choultries that abound in temple cities. Choultries were places of residence built by philanthropic people in towns – particularly in temple towns – for

the benefit of travelers. In the days when there were no hotels, they performed a useful social function. Accommodation was usually free and simple and the living was more or less communal. Occasionally, for a very small sum, people could have a small private room. Udayar and Meena managed to get a small room for themselves for sleeping in and for keeping their few belongings. The people who saw them assumed that they were a young married couple on pilgrimage in fulfillment of a vow or because they hadn't any children. But people did look at Meena a little curiously, because her clothes did not conform to what was usually worn by upper class women when they visited temples. They usually dressed in simple but fairly expensive clothes while Meena's were cheap and gaudy, bought by her mother, as being suitable to a temple dancer of slender means. Meena was quick to notice this and told Udayar about it. She also noticed that people with money did not travel carrying bundles but had steel trunks which were carried by porters to and from the station.

So the couple went shopping and bought themselves a steel trunk to keep their clothes in, a bed roll with a couple of pillows and blankets for sleeping and a bronze 'kooja' - a round water carrier with a screw top. She also bought herself two saris, sober and suitable to a young married woman. Meena was very proud of her possessions and she kept producing the kooja at every opportunity so that other women could admire it. Though most men - even wealthy ones - went bare bodied, Meena noticed that a few of the wealthy young men wore shirts, not when they went to the temple of course, but at other times. They were useful since they had pockets in which one could keep money instead of having it tied into a knot in the corner of one's dhoti. They also kept one warm on cold evenings and it seemed to be the fashion. After a lot of persuasion, Udayar agreed to have two shirts made and even wore them on one or two occasions. But he felt more comfortable with his upper cloth during the day and the red shawl in the evenings. She also managed to persuade him to go to the barber once a week to be shaved. She was proud of his appearance with all these improvements, but Ramaswamy Udayar - not easily adjusted to the urban ways of living - considered these a waste of money.

The relationship between Udayar and Meena was based on sex. In Palayam, it had dominated their lives and they had been happy with each other. Gradually, it was maturing into a deeper affection. But coming on this pilgrimage, Meena had been overwhelmed by the things she saw and heard; her spirit had been suffused with devotion and feelings of Godliness. The wonderful sculptures she saw, the hymns she heard every morning and evening.

Meena started crying at what she considered was an unprovoked attack. "I am not asking you to buy me a diamond necklace!" she moaned. "I am not asking for gold laced saris! That zamindar who was coming to see me would have bought me gold bangles and necklaces my mother said. And you begrudge me a miserable toy!"

He slapped her then; slapped her hard. She reeled under his blow. "You and your mother!" he shouted. "You are now showing the true habits of your caste! Here is the money for the return journey. Go! I do not want to see your face again!" and he walked away.

But she followed him like a faithful puppy that had been thrashed for being naughty. Her hand instinctively went to her cheek which was turning red and smarting under the blow. She followed him with tears in her eyes, unmindful of the staring faces of the passers by.

When they reached their room in the choultry, he ignored her completely. She waited and tried to plead with him, but it was no use. "Take all your clothes and your precious steel trunk and go!" he said.

"Whatever happens, I am not going back to my mother", Meena shouted back. "So, I don't need this money. If you don't want me, I am going to die".

She waited for a few minutes. There was no response from him. She threw the money on the floor and walked out.

Suddenly, he realized what had happened, remembered her words, got up and followed her. He did not know which way she had gone, but it must be in the direction of the river. So, he made his way there.

From a distance, he saw her going down the steps of the bathing ghat and shouted after her.

"Meena! Meena! Come back!"

Either she did not hear him or did not want to hear him. He ran after her and waded into the water as she was getting into the deeper part of the stream, caught the end of her sari and dragged her out.

"If you didn't want me, why did you come after me?" she cried. "Death would have ended all my troubles!"

"Meena! Meena girl! Was all he could say.

A crowd was gathering and people began to ask what had happened.

"Come, let us go away from here", he said. And in their wet clothes, they walked back to the choultry. People who saw them thought that they must have taken a vow to walk in wet clothes to the temple every day.

The next day, they went and bought the wooden doll which had started all the trouble. "I am going to call this doll 'Kaveri' after the holy river", said Meena.

"Yes", Udayar agreed. "The next time we have a quarrel, you say, 'Kaveri' and we will make up".

This incident made Udayar realize the deep affection Meena had for him. And Meena learnt that she could not afford to take him for granted. From then on, their relationship required a deeper meaning and a more permanent bond.

They went to Rameshwaram, Madurai, Chidambaram and Tanjore before returning home after two months. Meena would have liked to have spent longer and visited more places, but Udayar was getting bored and restless.

Thoughts of return brought to Meena, the problems that were awaiting her.

"I wonder how mother is getting on", she said.

"If I know anything of her, she would have run up some more debts", Udayar said sarcastically. "Otherwise, she would be perfectly alright".

"I wish you would like my mother a little better".

"I would, if only she didn't try to persuade you to give me up at every opportunity".

"Do you realize what I am giving up in order to stay with you?" she asked. "Dancing is in my life's blood. It tears my soul into two when I have to choose between you and dancing".

"Look Meena", Udayar spoke seriously. "When we go back, you are not going to live in the same house with your mother. Ganapathi would have made arrangements for you to live in a different area of the town. Your mother can continue to live where she is now and I will pay her an allowance so that she can lead a decent life in her old age. Or if she chooses, she can live with you. But it is on the strict understanding that she does not interfere with us in any way whatsoever. Personally, I would prefer for her to stay where she is at present".

"You have made all these arrangements without consulting me?"

"Yes, it is for a man to decide these things; further, you are too young to understand the ways of your mother".

"Yes, it is for a man to decide these things for his wife", she retorted. "But I am not your wife. If you leave me tomorrow, I have no one to care for me. Under these circumstances, don't you think you should ask me first?"

"I am not in the habit of breaking my word", he thundered. "So, you need not worry about not being looked after. I decide them for you just as if you were my wife. But I don't like all this talk about missing your dancing. If you are not sufficiently fond of me, if you really do not want to give up dancing in your heart of hearts, now is the time for you to say so, once and for all".

"What love, what understanding you have shown!" she shouted back. "All I ask for is a little appreciation of my sacrifice, some understanding of the dilemma in which I am placed. But you can only talk about Udayar's never breaking their word! I wouldn't care even if you broke your word so long as you understood me. Is that too much to ask of one's lover?"

"I am sorry. I tend to treat you like a child", he confessed. "I had not visualized your growing up so fast".

"Yes, when I met you, I was still a little girl giving her first performance", she turned and looked at him. "But these months have taught me many things and I am much older".

Udayar thought for a while. "When we get back, you decide what you want to do", he yielded. "If you want to go back to your dancing, you do so; if you want to live with your mother, you may. Or you may accept my offer and take the house that Ganapathi would have fixed up by now".

"If I start dancing, will you stop seeing me?"

“I don’t know”, he mused. “After all that has happened, it will be hard for me not to see you. When Ganapathy came and told me you had agreed to dance at the temple, my first reaction was to let you and forget the whole thing. But it is not the same now. Since we started on this journey, we have been through too much together to be able to part that easily. We have become too involved”. He looked up and gazed into our eyes. “But I certainly will not see you if I had the slightest suspicion that you were thinking of other men”.

Meena smiled. “You know why I agreed to dance at the temple?” she asked. “It was not so much because of mother’s pleading or the persuasion of the priests. I wanted to see if you would come back to stop me or would ignore it”.

“Women are hard to understand”, he muttered.

“If I am to give up dancing, then I must get away from my mother’s house”, she said. “The entire atmosphere there is saturated with music and art and it is better I get out of it. Yes, I will live in the house that Ganapathy has arranged. My mother can do as she likes”.

They sat silent for a while. Then Udayar spoke.

“You know Meena”, he said. “We come from different worlds; mine is based on security, stability and respectability; yours, on the thrills and desires of the moment. The only meeting point between us has been sex. Only, in our individual case, it has become something much stronger. But the fact remains our worlds are separate. Which of our worlds is better, I don’t know. But I do know I cannot change. Is it too much to ask you to change?”

Meena realized that this type of introspection was a great effort for Udayar. He had attempted it only for her sake. In a way it was a compliment to her.

“Yes, I too want to change”, she agreed. “I do not like a dancer’s life as it is at present. But when I hear music, my heart leaps and my feet itch to keep time to the tune. My mind is filled with divine emotion and my face is dying to express it. How many times have I looked longingly at my dance costumes and my ankle bells and wondered if I would ever wear them again! I don’t like the life of degradation my mother had planned for me, but what harm can there be in dancing? It is the noblest form of art there is and it is wholly dedicated to the praise of God”!

“Dancing may be a noble form of art, but dancers have a bad reputation and I don’t want my girl to have anything to do with it”.

“I do wish there was some way out”.

They returned to Palayam railway station in the evening. Udayar went to see about the arrangements in their new house and to fix an auspicious day for Meena to move in. Meena came home in a bullock cart with her steel trunk her kooja and her bed roll, like an experienced traveler. Now that Udayar was not there to give her courage, she was anxious and worried as to what had happened about her failure to dance at the temple. Her feelings of guilt that she had left her mother to face the situation alone and unaided returned to her.

The servant girl who first saw her arrive was greatly excited. She ran into the house shouting. "Amma! Amma! Meenakshi has come!"

Muthu came out of one of the inner rooms when she heard the noise. "So you have come at last", she said to Meena. Her greeting was cold.

"Yes mother, I have just arrived", Meena said pleasantly.

"So I see".

"Look Amma! Look what Meenakshi has brought", the servant girl shouted as she brought out one by one, the steel trunk, the bed roll and the kooja. "What have you got inside the box?" she enquired. "Is it all saris? Have you bought a lot of things? Is there anything in it for me?"

"Put them inside and don't chatter!" Muthu shouted at the poor girl.

Until she went away on this trip, there had not been a single day when Meena had not seen her mother. People rarely travelled these days. Having been away for so long and to so many places, Meena had expected a warm welcome, mingled perhaps with wailings and recriminations, but not this coldness and aloofness which was so unlike Muthu. She felt perhaps that there was something seriously wrong.

"Is everything alright mother?" Meena enquired anxiously.

"You might well ask", shouted Muthu. Her control was beginning to give way. "Is everything alright?" she repeated the question. "No, everything is not alright. I have been ashamed and humiliated. We have been deva daasies and we have been attached to this temple for I don't know how many generations. We have always maintained our tradition and earned the respect of all until you went off with your fancy man and broke your promise at the temple".

"Respect, mother?"

"Yes, respect. Strange as it may seem to you, we too have our respect and our reputation and our pride; the pride of our profession, the pride of never missing an engagement at the temple to please our followers and to please God. I remember my mother dancing at the temple once when she had high fever and completing her performance before collapsing in the anti-room. She said, 'Muthu, remember our only loyalty is to our art; we have no other loyalties and no ties'. I too danced at the temple once, only two weeks after losing my baby who would have been your sister had she lived. That is our pride and that is our tradition".

Meena came to her mother and held her hand. "Please don't worry; I will make it upto the temple in some way".

Muthu pulled herself away. "How will you make it up? She asked.

"I don't know. Mr. Udayar" she always referred to him as Mr.Udayar. "He will talk to the priests and do whatever is necessary".

"Mister Udayar!" Muthu spat the words out in bitterness and anger. "Do you think a little money would satisfy God? It might satisfy the priests, but do you think he can pay adequate

compensation for a life time of your devotion to God? I wish I had the courage to send him away on that first day when he came here showing off his money. Then I would have been saved all this shame”.

Meena suddenly felt tired and miserable. Her spirit could only stand so much. She had returned in the hopes of convincing her mother about giving up dancing and going to live in the new house. But now she felt it was impossible. With Udayar not being there to sustain her, she collapsed. She ran into her room, lay on the floor and started sobbing. But Muthu followed her.

“It is no use shedding tears”, she said. “I too have shed tears until my eyes are dry. You had better know what happened after you left”.

“Tell me in the morning”.

“No, I must tell you now”, Muthu insisted. “When the priests found out you had left, they were annoyed. But when they came to know of the reason for your leaving, they were really furious. They called me all kinds of names and said it was a serious matter of discipline and they would have to report it to the trustees. I did my best to prevent them, even tried to bribe them; I would have succeeded but for one thing”.

“What was that?”

“That uncouth brute of a villager Ganapathy has been hanging around here since you left. He had told everybody that you were never going to dance again”.

“And then, what happened?” in spite of herself, Meena was interested.

“It is an affront to God and to the authority of the temple”, they said. “So, the matter has gone before the trustees. Since they appointed you as a temple dancer in the first place, they have every right to discipline you if you do anything wrong. I told them that you had had a dream in which the Lord of Sri Rangam temple, Lord Ranganatha appeared and asked you to go there and you had gone. ‘Did the Lord appear in Mr.Udayar’s dream also?’ one of the trustees asked sarcastically. Oh, the shame of it all!”

“But what did they do mother?”

“I pleaded with them to forgive you this time, but they have said they would wait to hear your explanation and then take a final decision”.

For the first time, Meena was frightened. “What could they do to us mother?”

“That depends on what your attitude is going to be”, Muthu spoke slowly and deliberately, as if measuring every word before uttering it. “They are all just as powerful and wealthy as your Mr.Udayar; even more so since they are vested with the authority of the temple. Public sentiment is also in their favour. But they are men and naturally have men’s weaknesses. If you can be a little more accommodating by promising to please them and if you agree to dance at the temple whenever required in the future, they might let the whole thing drop with an apology”.

“If I am not accommodating? Then what happens?”

“How can you think of such a thing?” Muthu shouted.

“So breaking my vow to God does not matter so long as I please the trustees. Is that it?”

“You are merely twisting my words. If only you had not gone away, such a situation would not have arisen; you would not have been at the mercy of the trustees. In any case, it is our art that is important to us. A little accommodation to have the trustees on your side is not important”.

“But if I refuse, what will they do mother? What can they do?”

“What can they do?” Muthu repeated the question before answering it. “They can excommunicate us; they can forbid us to enter the temple. They can hound us out of this town and they can see to it that no other temple employs you. We will be sunned as parayahs. Is that the kind of life you want to choose for us?”

“I don’t know. I am confused and miserable. I wish there was a simple way out of it all”.

Muthu felt she was succeeding and pressed her advantage. “If such a calamity occurs, how can we look anyone in the face afterwards. Do you want other deva daasies who haven’t half as much talent as you have, to laugh at us? And above all, do you want to incur the wrath of God? For, you are married to God”.

“I wish I were dead!” Meena sobbed as Muthu held her to her bosom and soothed her.

8

When Udayar went to the house that had been rented as Meena’s residence, Ganapathy was waiting for him.

“I think there has been some trouble at the temple sir”, he said to his master.

“What happened?”

Ganapathy was a slow talker. He told Udayar in broken sentences about the anger of the priests and Muthu’s attempts to bribe them.

“But I expected that Ganapathy”, Udayar said. “I am surprised she didn’t succeed”.

“But the trustees have come to know about your wish that Meena should not dance again”, he said. He did not realize that he had been the cause of their knowing it. “Sir, I think they are annoyed not so much about Meena not dancing, but because, you stole a march over them all. The managing trustee, Mr.Sankara Sastri is particularly angry. He wants to have his revenge by making Meena give you up”.

Udayar thought for a while rubbing his chin. “It looks as if we are going to have a fight on our hands Ganapathy”, he said.

“It looks like it sir”, agreed Ganapathy. There was eager anticipation in his eyes as he continued. “We have not gone back on a fight yet”.

“I don’t think we are going back on this one”.

So Udayar hurried to Meena's house to find out what had happened. It had gone dark and the front door was shut. When he knocked, Muthu came to the door.

When she saw who it was, all her pent up anger burst forth. "Haven't you done enough harm to us?" she shouted. "You have made us the laughing stalk of the whole town and ruined Meena's career. Why don't you leave us alone?"

"Go in woman, don't shout so that everyone in the street can hear you". Udayar pushed her aside and walked in while Muthu made futile attempts to stop him.

"Meena! Meena girl!" he called out.

Meena came out of her room with tear stained eyes. All the laughter and the gaiety that was there so recently had disappeared. But the delicacy of her features and the beauty was still there – if anything, enhanced by her grief.

"Meena girl, what have they been trying to do to you?" Udayar asked tenderly. "Whatever it is, don't you worry. I shall protect you however much it may cost".

Meena's reply was more sobs and tears. Muthu came and held her daughter protectively. "She has to appear before the trustees tomorrow morning to answer charges of indiscipline. She has to promise it will not happen again and agree to dance at the temple whenever required to do so. There is nothing you can do about it".

Udayar thought for a while. "Meena girl, look at me", he said. "Look at me and tell me. What do you want to do?"

"I don't know; I am confused and bewildered".

"I can see your mother has frightened you badly". He said. "You remember, when we were in Madurai last week, you asked me. 'If I were to go back to my dancing, will you stop seeing me?' And I said, 'I don't know'.

"Yes".

"Well, I know now". There was iron determination in his voice. "You will not be going back to your dancing or fulfilling your vow to God. You will be taking to whoring".

"How can you use such language in a respectable house?" Muthu shouted.

"Keep quiet!" hissed Udayar. Then he turned to Meena. "First you will be pleasing the trustees, then the priests and after that, whoever happens to come your way. And I am not going to permit such a state of affairs if I can help it".

"Even you can't fight the trustees", said Muthu. "They are respected and influential men".

"You will be surprised", was Udayar's answer.

The argument went on and on. Muthu wailed and shouted and called on all the gods to bear witness to her misfortune. She cursed Udayar. Udayar said she was deliberately driving her daughter into the arms of senile, old men, Meena could stand it no longer.

“Keep quiet both of you”, she shouted. Desperation seemed to have given her renewed strength. She was no longer the young girl caught between two powerful and opposing forces; she was no longer helpless. She seemed suddenly grown up. There was a ring of determination in her voice. Both Udayar and Muthu knew from past experience that Meena had come to a decision and nothing they might say would move her now. “You are arguing about my life and my future. Don’t you think that I have the ultimate right to decide what to do?”

She waited but neither of the two answered her question. She continued.

“Rightly or wrongly, I made a vow before God; I made it in all honesty and sincerity”. She turned to Udayar. “I dedicated myself to the temple not for a day or a year, but for life. And I broke that vow because of you”.

Udayar was about to speak but she silenced him.

“I am not blaming you”, there were tears in her eyes as she said this. “Whenever happiness I have had in my life has been because of you. You have taught me what it is to have self-respect, to hold one’s head high. After knowing you, I shall never have another man. But the fact remains, I broke a vow taken solemnly and seriously”.

“That is just what I have been saying”, Muthu added.

“That is not what you have been saying mother”, Meena retorted. “I can never accept the kind of life that you had planned for me”.

“What other life is there for a temple dancer?” her mother demanded.

“I don’t know mother”, Meena hesitated before she continued. “I hope that one day, dancers will be truly dancers, practicing a glorious and divine art and not exist as appendages to temples or as concubines to the trustees”.

“But what are you doing to do?” Muthu asked desperately.

“I will meet the trustees as they wish me to, apologise for going away when I should have given a performance, perform any religious sacrifices that may be necessary to absolve myself, and offer to dance again. That is the only honourable thing to do”. She turned to Udayar. “It was you who taught me about honour. So, you should not be disappointed at my wanting to uphold it”. Then she turned to her mother. “But I will not swerve by a hairs-breath from the path of virtue”.

“They won’t have you under those conditions”, Udayar said. “Even if they accept your apology, they will throw you out of the temple on some excuse or other”.

“If that happens, then I will have to give up dancing. I will be sorry but I am sure God will understand and forgive me”.

There was nothing for anyone to say or do.

“Now that I have made my decision, will you continue to see me?” Meena asked Udayar. Her eyes were pleading.

“I will, I will”, he said. “But I must think about the future”, He went out into the darkness of the night.

9

The next morning, Meena walked to the temple accompanied by her mother, to present herself before the trustees. They waited in the outer hall where the various paraphernalia of the temple were kept, because that was where the enquiry was to be held. Meena was calm and composed, but Muthu was restless, going out frequently to see if any of the trustees were arriving, asking one of the priests how long it would be and what they would decide. But the priest could not give her a satisfactory answer. “What will happen, will happen”, he said.

At last, the trustees arrived one by one. The first to come was Natesa Gounder, a fat, middle aged agriculturist with a hairy chest and an untidy turban. As he saw Meena, he said, “So you have turned up, have you?”

“Yes sir”, Meena replied politely.

“She has come to offer her apologies sir”, Muthu said in an emotion choked voice.

“Hm!” he grunted.

Lakshmana Chetty, an elderly shopkeeper was the next to arrive. He and Natesa Gounder went into one of the inner rooms to confer with each other. They were soon joined by Sankara Sastri the managing trustee who was a pleader in the local court. As the only man who knew English and who moved in official circles, he had considerable influence with the public. He was the only one among the trustees who was modern enough to wear a shirt in addition to the usual turban. The last to arrive was Krishna Konar, a comparatively young cotton merchant. They whispered among themselves for some time before coming out and taking their seats on a carpet that had been spread on the stone floor in the outer room. Betel nuts and leaves were brought for them to chew.

At last, Sankara Sastri, the managing trustee spoke. “What have you to say for yourself?” he asked as he took one of the betel leaves and spread some lime on it.

“Sir, as I promised, I have brought my daughter to you”. Muthu said in a tone of supplication.

Mr. Sastri carefully folded the green leaf and put it into his mouth before he spoke. “Your daughter has a tongue, hasn’t she?” he asked. “Let her speak for herself”.

Meena came forward from behind a pillar as Muthu prodded her. She was terribly frightened at what these men might do to her, but she knew that she had to go through with it and come out of it with self-respect if possible. She had been quietly praying to give herself courage and now she spoke.

"I committed an unpardonable sin when I didn't keep my engagement at the temple and I have already asked Lord Ranganatha's forgiveness. Now, I beg you to excuse me. I shall of course perform the necessary pujas to atone for it. I also promise that it will not happen again".

She had spoken with courtesy but without the cringing attitude of her mother. The trustees looked at each other meaningfully.

The managing trustee spoke again. "Your perfunctory apology is not sufficient", he said. "This is not a light hearted matter to be forgotten after such an apology. You have affronted the deity and insulted the temple authorities apart from breaking your sacred vow. Therefore, we have to go into the circumstances that led to this unfortunate incident so that it can be prevented in the future".

"Yes, we want to know why you did it", Natesa Gounder asked as Mr. Sastri went out into the yard to spit out the red saliva that had accumulated in his mouth from chewing.

"I have already explained sir about the dream", Muthu pleaded as Mr. Sastri came back and sat down again.

"We know what you told us", said Mr.Sastri. "We want your daughter's explanation now".

Meena was silent.

"Come on, speak!" shouted Mr.Sastri.

"I have already apologised for my behavior", Meena spoke in a whisper. "I had no excuse and I have taken all the blame on myself. Therefore, there is no need to go into the circumstances".

"That is for us to decide", said Mr.Sastri patiently. He wanted to make a show of reasonableness before getting angry. But the other trustees started shouting.

"She is not truly repentant!"

"She has not come to us in the proper mood".

"She is arrogant".

"This is an insult to us".

Meena began to get an idea of the direction in which their minds were working. They wanted to make Udayar the cause of her breaking the vow and then tell her she should give him up. When once that happened and she had no protector, she would be easy prey for any one of them. She made up her mind not to fall into that trap.

"You are all elders and very wise", she said. "I am only a young, ignorant girl. It is for you to excuse me when I come to you with bended knees".

She waited. They were obviously pleased at the flattery and their faces showed their pleasure. Suddenly Meena found new strength. 'They cannot do any real harm to me', she thought and continued.

"I have come to you with true repentance and remorse. In future, I shall fulfill the duties of a temple dancer without fail. But my personal life outside the temple is my own. I am not answerable to you gentlemen for my private life".

Afterwards, she was to wonder how she ever had the courage to utter those words. But she had said them and there could be no mistaking. She implied that she would not give up Udayar in the first place and would have nothing to do with any of them in the second place.

The trustees were struck dumb. For a miserable temple dancer to speak to the trustees of the temple in such terms was unknown. Mr.Sastri was the first to recover. "What impertinence! What arrogance!" he cried. "You shall pay for it and pay for it dearly. You will be hounded out of this town in shame and humiliation!"

Muthu cried in desperation. "Please forgive her sirs. She is silly and ignorant. Excuse her this time and I shall take her home and teach her some manners".

Suddenly all the trustees started speaking at once, but Mr.Sastri silenced them. He got up and walked towards Meena and stood over her. She stood still, afraid but without flinching. "Young woman", he cried. "You are not only repentant, but a challenge to duly constituted authority. As a temple dancer, you are married to God and subject to the authority of the temple. You have no personal life. Your life belongs to the temple. Don't you know it?"

Meena had taken a step from which she could not go back. "I have dedicated my art to God and to the temple, but my body is my own", she insisted.

Muthu stood helpless and stupefied at her daughter's words, wringing her hands and crying.

"Alright, in spite of your insolence, I give you one more chance", Mr.Sastri said wagging his finger at her and coming closer. "We consider that man Ramaswamy Udayar as being responsible for your behavior. So, your repentance cannot be accepted unless you promise to give him up".

There it was at last, out in the open. A direct question had been asked and a direct answer demanded. But Meena remained silent.

"What do you say?" demanded Mr.Sastri.

Slowly Meena spoke. She knew that the moment she had spoken, he would probably hit her. But she had to speak.

"That I cannot promise", she said.

"What! We have given you too much latitude!" and he raised his hand to strike her.

At that moment Udayar appeared from nowhere and shouted, "You touch a single hair on her head and I will beat you to a pulp!"

Mr.Sastri turned and glared at him. "Who asked you to come here?" he demanded.

"No one asked me", Udayar said. "But a temple is a public place, a place of worship for all, not a place for ill treating a young and innocent girl. I just wanted to make sure that nothing

happened to Meena, so I was waiting behind the Garuda Vahana”, and he indicated the huge flying transport of Vishnu used for processions on ceremonial occasions. “She has given you her apology as well as a promise to honour her commitments to the temple. You can either accept it or do what you like with it. But you cannot insult her or ill-treat her”.

Then he turned to Meena. “Come Meena, let us go. These gentlemen can make up their minds and inform your mother”. He moved towards the door with Meena following him close behind.

“You cannot take her away!” cried Mr. Sastri. “She belongs to the temple”.

“Yes, stop him! Stop him!” cried the other trustees.

Udayar turned round. “Who wants to stop me?” he challenged. But none of the trustees moved. So, he walked out with Meena, got into his bullock cart that Ganapathy had waiting for him and drove away to his new house.

10

Meena’s challenge to the authority of the temple and Udayar’s dramatic appearance to rescue her was the talk of the town. Opinion was equally divided regarding the rights and wrongs of the issue. The educated and the well-to-do in general felt that the trustees were wrong. Since Meena had expressed her regret in no uncertain term. Many of them were opposed to dancers being attached to temples and found in the behavior of the trustees, a further reason for the total abolition of the institution of deva daasies. On the other hand, a number of people felt that the rights of a temple dancer were insignificant when compared to the authority of the trustees and a deva daasi’s first duty was implicit obedience. At the same time, Udayar was a popular man in the small town and known for his generosity and good heartedness. But everyone was agreed that the trustees had been made to look foolish when Udayar took Meena away from them single-handed.

The trustees, in anger and humiliation, had excommunicated Meena, forbidden other deva daasies to have anything to do with her and banned her from entering the temple. In practice, all this did not mean very much since she did not consort with temple dancers in any case and she was not dependent on the stipend from the temple which had naturally been withdrawn. Only two things worried her. One was that she could not enter the temple and offer reparations for failing to dance there. The second was that her mother would have nothing to do with her.

For the first week or two, there was a lull while the trustees considered what to do. Could Udayar be prosecuted for abducting a minor girl? No doubt Muthu could be persuaded to sign a complaint, but when once a girl was officially installed as a temple dancer, the question of minority would not arise. They considered a social boycott of Udayar, but he was a popular figure and if they didn’t succeed, they would look more foolish than ever. They wondered whether they should take Meena away by force, but gave it up when they found that Ganapathy was always there and it would be impossible without a fight. So, after banning her from the temple, they were considering whether any legal steps would be possible.

Meanwhile Udayar was not idle. One who insisted that Meena should give up dancing altogether now became a champion of her rights. Meena was a temple dancer officially dedicated to

the temple and the trustees had no right to prevent her from entering the temple or even from dancing. He consulted his own lawyer on what the legal position was. The lawyer explained that while British courts did not generally like to interfere in religious matters, the recent proclamation of Queen Victoria had assured freedom of worship for all and the action of the trustees can be construed as depriving an individual of that freedom. Meena was also entitled to a stipend for life and the trustees had deprived her of her livelihood without just cause. "You have a good case against the trustees Mr.Udayar", the lawyer told him.

It was at this stage that Mr.Chettiar, Udayar's friend and adviser decided to interfere in order to settle the dispute. He was a friend of Udayar, but he was well known and respected by everyone in the town, including the trustees. So, when Udayar came to see him one day, he spoke to him.

"How is your dispute with the trustees coming along?" he asked.

"I think I am going to court", answered Udayar.

"Our religion is supposed to be pure and exclusive", said Mr.Chettiar. "And yet, we go to a British court to settle matters of religious tradition".

"But how can I help it?"

"You don't want Meena to dance, do you?"

"No".

"Then why go to court about it?"

"Because it is her right to dance at the temple. My lawyer told me....."

"Yes, I know. You will spend years as well as a few thousand rupees in order to establish that right and then you will insist that she should give up dancing. The only people to benefit will be the lawyers".

"But the trustees have insulted her. And if it wasn't for my being there, they would have hit her also".

"They say you have insulted them by taking Meena away before the enquiry was complete".

"Alright, I agree. But what is the alternative?"

"It seems to me, the question is not whether Meena should dance at the temple or not. The problem is one of prestige – your prestige versus that of the trustees".

"I suppose that is what it really amounts to", agreed Udayar.

Mr.Chettiar spoke in a similar vein to the trustees also, pointed out that Meena should not have been banned from entering the temple when once she had apologised for her one mistake and long drawn out litigation would seriously deplete the funds of the temple which were in no too good a state.

After prolonged negotiations, Mr.Chettiar was able to get both parties to agree to the following terms.

- (1) The ban imposed on Meena as well as excommunication would be revoked and she would be permitted to use the temple just like anyone else.
- (2) Meena would present a silver statue of a dancer to the temple as a substitute for her giving up dancing at a special ceremony.
- (3) Meena would also dance on that occasion as a farewell appearance.

Though Udayar had achieved almost all his demands, he grumbled at the cost of a silver statue.

“You are really exchanging with God, a silver statue for a live one, which isn’t a bad bargain”, Mr.Chettiar smiled. “Further, the size of the silver statue has not been specified in the agreement. You can make it as big or as small as you like”.

11

So Meena went back to her mother’s house to practice her dancing and to prepare for the ceremony. Muthu grumbled, “It is like preparing for a funeral. You are committing sati from an artistic point of view”. But decisions had been taken at a much higher level and she knew she was powerless to influence events.

A special costume was got ready for the occasion; in consultation with the dance teacher, appropriate dances for a farewell performance were chosen and Meena practiced every evening. Udayar was surprised at the amount of care and concentration necessary to achieve near perfection in the art. But having agreed to it, he threw himself into the arrangements enthusiastically. A silver statue – two feet in height – had been ordered from Madurai. Symbolically, the statue would replace Meena in the eyes of the Lord. She also insisted on getting a learned priest from outside who could perform the appropriate ceremonies to release her from her bondage to Lord Ranganatha.

“As you are aware, there is no divorce according to the Hindu tradition”, the priest explained. “But a separation is permissible. Since a marriage of this type is symbolical, a silver statue can represent you in the temple. But it would be better if you were to get nine small statues and present them to nine Brahmins, so that not only God, but the nine planets which control your future will also be satisfied”.

So nine small silver statues were ordered.

On the appointed day, there were large crowds at the temple. Apart from the fame of her artistic abilities, people had heard about the dispute and that she was dancing for the last time. They didn't want to miss it.

A holy fire was lit in the courtyard of the temple, the silver statues were anointed and decorated with flowers. The priests recited Mantras from the Vedas and poured ghee into the rising fire. Finally, Meena bent low to the ground and received the blessings of the chief priest, as the statue was offered to the Lord. The nine small statues were offered to nine selected Brahmins and holy water and mint was distributed to all those present.

At last the dance commenced. Meena as well as the audience were aware of the special circumstances. Meena knew she would never dance again; the audience were aware that they would never see her dance. As she danced, Meena prayed to God to forgive her if she had transgressed any of His laws. But soon, she was totally immersed in her dancing and was not even conscious of her environment. The suppleness of her body, the quick and constant changes of mood expressed by her face, the precision of her feet, were the admiration of all. Even Udayar felt a twinge of conscience that he should have been the cause of such artistry being consigned to oblivion. The last dance was a dance of parting. There were tears in Meena's eyes and grief in her heart as she danced it. She was saying goodbye; she was conscious of severing a special relationship with Lord Ranganatha. She only hoped he would not altogether reject her as a devotee. All these moods were expressed in her face as the last dance came to an end.

Meena was now her own mistress. She lived in a respectable part of the town. She had a servant girl to wait on her and a Brahmin cook. She was like any other young house wife, running a house, gossiping with her neighbours, going to the temple occasionally to worship, and with a few shopping expeditions thrown in. Her mother came to see her often and still harped on Meena's wasted youth and the opportunities these days for a young and talented dancer. But her grumbling had ceased to worry Meena and she took it with good humoured tolerance that was a sign of maturity. True, she still kept her dancing costumes and the strings of bells that went round her feet, at the bottom of her steel trunk. Occasionally, she took these out when there was no one around, looked at them longingly and wondered if she would ever use them again. But the ceremonies she had performed and the silver statue she had presented gave her some consolation though in her heart of hearts, she wondered whether a vow once taken could ever be broken.

Udayar went about his business with a new enthusiasm. Apart from attending to his agriculture, he was also beginning to lend money to other agriculturists who were not as well off as he was. They usually borrowed from him at the time of sowing and returned the loan after the harvest was gathered and sold. Other money lenders were all town people who did not understand the needs or the psychology of the agriculturists. They charged exorbitant rates of interest and went to court the moment there was any delay in payment. But being an agriculturist himself, Udayar understood the borrowers and their problems; he knew about the prospects of crops and advised his clients about the type of crops to grow when to sell and so on. He also charged a standard rate of interest at twelve per cent. He further accommodated them in various ways, gave time for repayment in case of a bad harvest and gave concessions in interest to those who happened to have had bad luck. But he was particular about one thing and that was, the return of his loan. He was not interested in taking over the farms of his debtors as compensation for his loan. His philosophy was that unless a man could prosper by taking a loan from him, he would not give him one. The result was that he picked and chose the people to whom he lent money and rarely had to go to court in order to recover it.

Consequently, he was a popular man among other agriculturists. They came in increasing numbers to Meena's house to meet him, to borrow money and to ask for advice. While Meena stayed at the back of the house when there were other men, he found that her knowledge of men and affairs was very wide – thanks to the training she had received as a deva daasi – and her judgements were sound. She often got information through her servant woman about the various people who came to the house and passed it on to Udayar. He often benefited from such information.

Occasionally, when she heard music, unconsciously, her feet would begin to keep time and her face would acquire the mood and emotion that the song expressed. Or when her mother spoke about the new dancers who had come to the temple and explained some of the finer technical points in their dances, she would look wistfully into the far distance, but would soon recover herself. Except for such rare occasions, the life of peace and domesticity gave her a sense of contentment and permanence that she had not known before.

That day, she was particularly happy, Udayar had been away but was expected in the evening. She was tying some flowers to put in her hair when Muthu arrived with tears in her eyes.

“You have ruined yourself my daughter”, she cried as she came into the house. “You wouldn’t listen to me, your poor mother! You knew better! You could trust him! Udayar’s word indeed! He has betrayed you and now we are ruined”.

“What is all this mother?” Meena enquired. “Calm yourself and tell me how I have been betrayed”.

Even in her grief, Muthu had a sense of drama. She would not come to the point. “You trusted him! You gave up your life of glory and ecstasy in return for a life of mediocrity and monotony. You sacrificed your youth and your beauty at the alter of love and what have you got in return?”

“But tell me what has happened”, Meena asked anxiously.

In reply, Muthu went to the door and shouted. “Subban! Subban!” and came back. “Let Subban tell you”, she said wiping her tears.

Subban, a middle aged man who had done odd jobs for Muthu for many years, came in looking nervous and anxious.

“Subban! Tell us what you told me just now”, Muthu demanded.

“Amma, I hope I don’t cause any trouble”, he mumbled. “Three days ago, I took a load of bananas to Sirumudi village in my bullock cart. I started talking to one of the ladies who was buying bananas at her door step. She wanted to know where I came from and when I told her, she asked me about Udayar Master. Without thinking, I told her about him and you and how he had set you up in a nice house and how he spends half his time here and the other half in his own village of Achipatti. This lady who was listening suddenly started shedding tears. ‘What is the matter Amma?’ I asked her. ‘Nothing is the matter’, she said. ‘That woman cannot be happy at the cost of another’s misery. She will surely pay for it’. ‘Are you related to the young master?’ I asked her. ‘Related?’ she said. ‘No, I am not related. I am only his wife’.

“So there you are!” Muthu shouted triumphantly in spite of her apparent grief. “He told you he wasn’t married. He told you he would support you for life. And all the time, he has a wife hidden away without your knowledge”.

“I don’t understand”, Meena said almost to herself. “I don’t understand. There must be some mistake somewhere”.

“There is no mistake my daughter”, said Muthu. “Before coming here, I went to the Chettiar who is friendly with your Mr.Udayar and he confirmed it. He was married nearly two years ago, before he came to us. No, there is no mistake”.

“I might have known you would have had it verified before coming to me”, Meena said bitterly. “You have been determined to break us up. But there’s still something I cannot understand, some link that is missing”.

“My poor, poor girl”, Muthu spoke tenderly. “I have only tried to protect your interests and your career, but I can understand how you must feel. You lost your heart to an undeserving man. I knew it would happen but I was powerless to prevent it. But it is not too late”.

“It is too late mother”.

“I will tell you what you should do”, Muthu become conspiratorial. “When he comes this evening, pretend as if nothing has happened. Ask him for some expensive piece of jewellery that you have taken a fancy to; ask him for money for household expenses. Get as much out of him as you can on some pretext or other. After two or three days, I will send a message to say that I am ill. You can come to see me, but bring all the jewellery, money and clothes with you. And then, I will see to it that he doesn’t trouble you any more”.

“I can’t do that mother. If I am to leave him, I leave him now and with the same clothes in which I came here. But he has done so much for me, risked so much. We have gone through a lot together that you don’t know about. That is why I feel perhaps, there is some explanation, some factor.....”

“No”, Muthu shouted. She was afraid that if Meena stayed on, Udayar would be able to give some excuse and persuade her not to leave. “What explanation can there be except that he has tricked you into giving up your dancing? After the way he has treated you, he deserves whatever you do to him. Yes, leave him immediately!”

“I do not want to see him again and I will come away with you”, Meena said. “But I do not want to take a single thing from here that will remind me of him”.

Muthu’s pleading and shouting were all in vain. Meena would not touch a thing. The steel trunk, the bed roll, the beloved kooja, even the doll Kaveri was left behind. She left the house wearing the same clothes in which she had come there. She had locked up everything carefully and left the key with the servant girl.

“I think you had better stay in Lakshmi’s house for some time”, Muthu said. Lakshmi was her cousin. “Otherwise, your Mr.Udayar will come and create a scene in our house”.

“Alright mother”, Meena had no strength or will power left for further arguments.

So, they went to Lakshmi’s house and Meena went straight to bed and stayed there for three days without food and without sleep, shedding silent tears, the meaning of which her mother or her aunt could not fathom. She cried and cried until her heart was dry. Only a hard core of bitterness was left in her soul.

When Udayar sent Ganapathy to Muthu’s house to find out what had happened, Muthu heaped abuses on men in general and Udayar in particular and sent him away. Then, Udayar came himself.

“Where is Meena?” he demanded.

“She is not here; she is not anywhere where you can find her. But I can tell you this much. She doesn’t want to have anything more to do with you”.

“Come on woman. Where is she?”

“I have told you, she does not want to see you”, and then Muthu added coyly. “You are not the only man in town”.

He was going to hit her then. But he found it was one thing to stand up against a group of bullying men and a totally different thing to hit a woman. The raised hand fell down.

“Why doesn’t Meena want to see me?” he asked.

“I have already told you; you are not the only man in town to look after Meena”. She knew these words of hers would hurt him most.

He went through the house to see if Meena was in any of the inner rooms. When he did not find her, he came out fuming. “You ungrateful wretches, after all I have done for your daughter!”

And he walked out.

“There is no need to take it so hard my dear”, Muthu kept saying. “Take to your dancing again, take an interest in life and in other people and you will soon forget him. The temple will be glad to have you back in spite of all the ceremonies you have performed. This sort of thing happens

to all of us some time or other. In a way, I am glad that you have got it out of your system so early in life”.

“Hasn’t he sent anyone to find out why I had left him? Meena enquired. “Hasn’t at least Ganapathy been?”

“No he hasn’t sent anyone”, Muthu lied. “It shows how much he cares for you, doesn’t it?”

After all that has happened, I thought, perhaps, he might come to see me”.

“Well, he hasn’t and it is just as well”, said Muthu. “Now you can devote yourself to your art”.

“I can’t mother”.

“Why not?”

“I can’t dance because I am pregnant”.

A bomb shell could not have created a greater sensation. Muthu was dumb founded. She stared at her daughter for a full half minute before speaking. “So, you did not want a single thing from him, a single thing to remind you of him! But you are landed with something that will be a constant reminder of him, not for a month or two, but for ever”.

“Yes, I shall never be able to forget him”.

“Oh, the shame of it! Why didn’t you tell me before?”

Muthu was now secretly regretting having sent Udayar off so unceremoniously.

“There wasn’t much time was there? Everything happened so suddenly”.

“How long have you known it?”

“Only the last two weeks or so”.

“If so, something can be done about it”.

“No mother, he might have betrayed me and I might have left him, but I am not going to lose my child!”

“Who do you think is going to look after it while you go off dancing? And do you think men will feel romantic about a woman with a baby? Where are you going to get the money for it?”

“You brought me up some how, and I shall bring my baby up in the same way. But I am not going to get rid of it, you understand?”

“Will it not remind you of the man you are trying to forget?”

“I don’t care, but I am going to have my baby even if it kills me”.

Gradually, Meena got up and attended to her daily chores. But the magic had gone out of her life. She went about things in a dispirited manner. She never went out of the house; never spoke to people. Her only contact with the outside world was her mother.

One day, Muthu herself raised the subject of Udayar. “Don’t you think he should be told about your pregnancy and made to take some responsibility?” she asked Meena. “It should be his business to provide for you as well as for the baby”.

“I don’t want him to know!” Meena shouted vehemently. “Do you hear mother? I don’t want him to know, ever! If you tell him, I am going to throw myself into a well and end my life!”

“How can I feed you and provide for the baby?” cried Muthu. “Before all this happened, there was hope of your success and I could borrow money on the strength of it. You were young and attractive and talented and people knew you could earn money. But when once people know you are pregnant, who would lend money to support a pregnant woman?”

“I don’t care what you do, but do not go to him for money”, Meena pleaded. “When once I have had the baby, I will do whatever you want and try to earn as much as possible. I am cured of love for ever”.

“If you did not love him, you would not mind taking money from him”.

“It is all over mother”, Meena said with tears in her eyes. “But I do not want him to know that he has a child”.

“As you wish”, Muthu agreed reluctantly.

Meena sat at home day after day without saying much. She thought of her past and wondered about her future. When she decided to leave Udayar so suddenly, she thought he would come to her, explain how it all happened, plead with her and she would go back to him. Her self-respect demanded that she should leave and her mother’s cunning persuasion had the desired

effect. But when he did not turn up – her mother had said that he had not – she put the worst construction on everything.

As time went on, she began to wonder. Was her mother right? Was she herself wrong to have tried to give up the tradition of her caste, give up her life to ecstasy and degradation and resort to a life of domesticity and mediocrity? Was God punishing her for her sin of not keeping her vows of dedication to the temple? Were all her prayers in so many temples, were all her special pujas in vain? She thought of the brief but blissful happiness she had enjoyed with Udayar. Was that enough for one, long, lifetime? Was she ultimately going to end up like her mother, without money and without self-respect, cringing before the tradesmen and the priests? Then she thought of Udayar. How could he be so cruel? And so deceitful? It was so much out of character. He was a blunt, straight forward sort of man, not one who would deliberately hide things in order to get what he wanted. And yet, Subban was not the lying type.

One day, when her mother was not at home, she called Subban and questioned him. What was Udayar's wife like? Was she beautiful? But Subban was confused and incoherent. "I don't know Amma, I didn't look at her properly. But she seemed very fair in colour".

"Did she live in a big house?"

"Her father was the biggest land owner in that village. Their house was the largest".

If she was fair and rich, what hope had Meena of retaining the affections of a man against such a wife? He was sure to go back to her. Perhaps, he had already gone back. Perhaps, her mother was right. Men were fickle and you would not trust them, especially if you had no legal or moral hold over them. If he was really fond of her, why had he not come to see her? That her mother might have lied about his not coming never struck Meena. Why had he not sent even a message? Perhaps he thought that she had left him for a totally different reason. May be, she had acted hurriedly, without thinking. If she could only know why he had not told her about his marriage!

She felt sick with grief. How was she going to live? Where was the money to come from? Only nine months ago, she was a young girl with worries no greater than the perfection of her dance steps. How quickly things had changed! It was fate, she told herself. It was an explanation for everything, almost a consolation. She resigned herself to her destiny. 'God will find a way', she thought. Perhaps, it was all a punishment for some sins she had committed in her former life.

Muthu had the responsibility of looking after a pregnant daughter. She had never reconciled herself to Meena giving up her dancing. When she found that Udayar was married, it was a golden

opportunity for Muthu to take her daughter away from her lover. It was a great thing she was doing, for her tradition, for her community and for God. But she had not bargained on Meena being pregnant. This introduced a totally unforeseen and unfortunate complication. She had taken the responsibility for looking after her forsaken child and now found herself unable to do so. She could no longer borrow money on the strength of her daughter's charms. What was she to do? How was she to manage? She felt perhaps she had acted in a hurry and she should not have sent away Udayar as she did.

Swallowing her pride and without informing Meena, she went to see him at Mr.Chettiar's house where he used to stay before. But he was not there. So, she left a message that he should come to her house or at least send for her. There was no reply, so she called again.

"I gave your message to Udayar, but he does not wish to see you", the servant said sympathetically.

Muthu wondered whether she ought to tell him about Meena's condition. But after Meena's insistence, she was afraid to do so. She merely said, "Please tell him it is very important and concerns him personally".

The servant was soon back. "No, he won't see you".

"Is he very angry?"

"Yes".

"What did he say?"

The servant hesitated.

"Tell me please".

"He said he has had enough of ungrateful whores".

There was nothing else for Muthu to do after those words but to depart.

The old routine started again. Borrowing money from friends and neighbours, running up debts with the tradesmen, cringing before some of her old paramours who were now either too old or had gone to other women, trying desperately to make both ends meet. Only, now it was more difficult. During the brief period of prosperity when Muthu had security, she had been rude to many people, taunted them for their behavior and now that she was in difficulties, they were in no mood to help her. But then, she was used to such a life. She was a creature of the moment, spending

money lavishly when she had it, and scrounging from others when she hadn't. She had known no other way of life.

Not so Meena. Her mother had provided her with some sort of security in her childhood and she had known what it was to be free from want and to be protected. She still attached great importance to her self-respect. And she watched her mother's futile struggles to keep the home going, helplessly. The few valuable things in the house which had been acquired during the brief prosperity of the past months went one by one. Even the small stipend from the temple to which Meena would normally have been entitled was not available because she had officially given up her rights as a temple dancer. Things were getting more and more difficult.

15

When Udayar came back from Achipatti and found that Meena had left without a word, his reaction was one of bewilderment. The servant girl could not tell him anything except that Muthu had come and they had left together.

"The old woman is up to some of her tricks again", he thought. But when Ganapathy came back and told him that Meena was not in her mother's house, that Muthu had hinted at a new and more wealthy lover, his anger knew no bounds. He himself went to find out what had happened and was none the wiser for it. His confidence was badly shaken; his honour and self-respect were seriously hurt. The combination of misery and anger sent him furiously back to the nearest prostitute he could find and in the violent act of sex, he tried to relieve himself of his feelings. But they were not to be so easily relieved. He was more miserable than ever.

"I was wrong to have trusted her so much Ganapathy", he commiserated with his trusted servant. "These women always show the true character of their caste sooner or later. I thought I had picked a gem out of the gutter, but she is no gem. She is just part of the gutter".

"There is some mystery I am unable to understand sir", Ganapathy said. "If she were going to leave you for another man, she would have taken all the clothes and things you bought her. But she has left everything of value behind. That makes it appear as if she was annoyed with you over something".

"If she was, she could have waited for me and asked me about whatever it was that had annoyed her. Why should she leave so suddenly and without warning?"

"I have been making enquiries", Ganapathy said. "I don't think there is any other person, whatever that woman might say".

“Why do you make enquiries?” Udayar shouted at him. “I am not going to see her again even if she comes to me on her bended knees”.

“No sir, that is not right”, pleaded Ganapathy. “I am older than you and I know Meena. She may be from the gutter but she is a gem just the same. When once this misunderstanding is cleared, things will be alright. If only I could talk to her! But her mother is keeping her hidden somewhere”.

“No! This is the end”, said Udayar gloomily.

And he went through all the women who were available in the town one after the other. Ganapathy’s feeble protests were of no use. He also started to drink, a thing he had never done before. He tried to drown his sorrows in an orgy of sex and drink, but he saw the picture of Meena on every woman’s face. He saw it reflected in the glass of brandy and it made him more miserable than ever. He got on his horse and rode and rode until he was dead tired. But one could not escape the consequences of one’s actions, he told himself. What had gone wrong? Where was the fault? Was it because he had made her break her sacred vows to the temple? It was surprising how both his mind as well as Meena’s, conditioned as they were to the common traditions of Hinduism, ran on parallel lines. Was it fate? Was it something he had done in his former life and he had to pay for it through misery and suffering?

Whenever a misfortune befalls anyone for which there is no explanation and for which there is no remedy, then, it is fate. It is God’s will.

He went to the temple and prayed. The priests were none too friendly towards him for having taken Meena away from the temple; they told him he had offended the Gods by what he had done. It was an affront to the divine will and no man can escape divine wrath. There was magic and mystery in superstition; it added flavour to life, made it fascinating, provided the ecstasy as well as the tragedy of living without which life would have been dull and drab. But as usual, he ignored the priests; he knew their worth. He appealed directly to God, to Lord Ranganatha whom Meena had worshipped both here and in Sri Rangam. He did not ask for happiness or ever for a return to the old life. What he sought was a logical explanation, perhaps on obliteration of the past so that he could have the easy, carefree life he used to have before Meena. But Lord Ranganatha was mute and no consolation was forthcoming from that quarter. Perhaps, he did not pray hard enough. But then, he was not a man used to meditation or prayer. He was essentially a man of action. But in this case, there was nothing he could do.

Udayar felt ashamed to meet his friends. Perhaps, they laughed at him, at his inexperience and naivety in trusting a dancing girl in the first place. They certainly treated him as if he were

recovering from a serious illness, with kindness and tolerant good humour, making allowances for moodiness and fits of temper. He could not bear what he thought was their implied criticism and even less, their sympathy. Slowly, the grief of losing her was replaced by anger and a sense of humiliation. The only way out of the situation was to go away and stay away so that he would not meet anyone who knew him or his past. It was not unknown for people to disappear completely when a great tragedy or humiliation befell them. He had heard about one of his own great uncles being imprisoned by the British in the early days of the East India Company rule on suspicion of having supported a rebellion against them. But when he was released, the shame of having been in prison was too much for him and he had completely disappeared. No one knew what had happened to him and his own grand father had had the responsibility of having to look after his brother's family. So, why should he not do the same?

He went to his friend Chettiar and asked for a thousand rupees.

"Thousand rupees is a lot of money", Mr.Chettiar said. "What do you want it for?"

"I cannot lie to you", said Udayar. "I am going away".

Mr.Chettiar knew that once Udayar made up his mind, nothing he could say would make him change it.

"Promise me one thing", he asked Udayar. "Whatever you do, don't give up life and become a sanyasi. You are too young and too full of life to give it up".

"I would probably make a very bad sanyasi anyway".

"And don't forget", Mr.Chettiar continued. "You do have a wife. When all this is over and forgotten, you will come back to her".

"I have no wife! "Udayar muttered under his breath.

"When the time comes, you will remember her", Mr.Chettiar said. "Everything will have to have a prosper time for its fruition. Keep in touch with me, and send me a post card every month".

Udayar agreed, gave a promissory note for the amount and walked out.

Now, he was free; he could go where he liked, do what he fancied. No one knew who he was, where he came from and what his status in life was. He was dressed simply in a coarse cotton dhoti with a towel over his shoulders. He carried a bundle under his arm. As days went on, his

clothes became somewhat dirty – thanks to his indifferent washing in rivers and tanks where he had his baths. He was like any other wanderer in search of peace, enlightenment or salvation. There were always many such people in India and he became one of them, wandering from temple to temple, from one choultry to another. He ate when he felt like it and slept when and where it suited him. Anonymity gave him a sense of peace and in loneliness, what was a growing pain became a dull ache. He was learning to live with his grief in the solitude of his own mind.

Unconsciously, he found himself following the same route as he had taken when he went with Meena, visiting the same places and worshipping at the same temples. Perhaps, he was trying to recapture something he had lost, a mood he could not find. He wanted to give up this world and immerse himself in an orgy of Godliness, but it was a futile attempt. The image of Meena – laughing, crying, tantalizing – stood in the way. While he was listening to a religious discourse, or to the intoning of hymns at the temple, he was wondering if Meena had gone back to her dancing. And the memory of that first night, when he saw her dance, came back to him. He remembered the different poses she had assumed and compared them with the statues he saw in the temples he visited. No, he could not forget this world and he could not give it up. Attempts to forget himself in an orgy of Godliness were no better than his attempts to drown his sorrows in women and drink.

He was different from all the other wanderers in one respect at least. Others, whether they were sadhus or mendicants, were very gregarious. They travelled in groups, broke up and joined other groups. They chatted and quarreled with each other and often shared their meager belongings. But Udayar never spoke to anyone; nor did he encourage others to talk to him. This desire for loneliness was something that the others could not understand. In spite of his unkempt appearance, there was a dignity about him that was rather disconcerting to the others. Many of them never bothered to buy tickets on the train and were often turned out by the ticket collectors. Begging was always considered a respectable occupation among them since they always did it in the name of God. The fact that Udayar always bought a ticket when he travelled, invariably paid for his food, and never borrowed from anyone else, set him apart from the rest. After a few weeks, others began to eye him with curiosity, interest and suspicion. And in his absence, they discussed him freely among themselves.

“May be he is running away from the police”, they said. Living always on the outer fringes of the law, this was the first thing that occurred to them.

“He must have robbed some one, because, he is never short of money”.

“Who knows, he might even have committed a murder!”

“Whatever he might be, he is certainly not religious”, they concluded. “His knowledge of our mythology and our tradition and our festivals is poor. And he often walks away in the middle of a religious discourse”.

When once they came to these conclusions, they left him to himself. If he had a criminal record, he was best avoided. It was not that they were afraid or unused to a criminal record. Many of them had been in goal for petty crimes like thieving, for travelling without tickets and for quarrelling. But these were part of their life. They were not ashamed of them and even boasted how they had managed to evade the police. But petty larceny was one thing and a serious crime that necessitated running away was another. Such people were best avoided. But there was one man who followed Udayar, one who had a criminal record and who had made a note of the small bundle securely tied to the corner of Udayar’s dhoti. He knew, whether Udayar had a criminal record or not, he did have a lot of money. So, he followed him, watched his movements and his habits of eating, sleeping and living and waited for an opportunity.

17

After he had wandered for about two months, Udayar found himself back in Sri Rangam. He stood at the same bathing ghat where Meena had tried to commit suicide. He remembered how she had waded into the water determined to die and how he had brought her out. How could a girl who wanted to die because he had rejected her have left him without cause? Or, was even the suicide attempt just a pretence? If so, what was the purpose? And then, he remembered how they had gone and bought the doll Kaveri, the next day. They had told themselves that if they should ever have a difference of opinion, they would say ‘Kaveri’ and they would solve it through discussion. But she had not adhered to it; she had just disappeared and left the doll behind. How long ago was all that? Not even a year, and yet, it seemed a different age altogether. As he stood there and watched the mass of humanity washing away their sins in the holy river, an overwhelming sense of helplessness and misery gripped him. ‘There is no one I can talk to; no one to love me and none to weep if I should die’, he told himself.

But he was not the type to commit suicide himself. The meditative, actionless life of the past few months had brought him to the end of his resources. Now he wanted to act. An overwhelming desire just to see Meena, to try once more to find out what has behind it all, possessed him. ‘Yes, I will go back’, he decided.

But what if she should reject him again? What if there should be another lover? What would he do then? Suddenly, the solution came to him. There was only one way in which his honour could

be satisfied, his feelings soothed and his humiliation avenged. What did any husband do about a flagrantly unfaithful wife? – for he had treated her as his wife and promised love and protection for her for ever. If she was still pure, she would have to come back to him. If on the other hand, she had taken another man, then she should die. It was the only logical, honourable solution and as a man of honour, as one who never broke his word, as a Udayar, he had to kill her. No other solution seemed possible.

Having made up his mind, he felt better. The life of a sadhu was not for him. He was a man of action who took bold decisions and accepted the consequences of those decisions. He began to think once more about his village, about his farm workers and tenants and how they would miss his guidance and supervision. It was now sowing time in Achipatti and they would all be busy preparing the fields for sowing. He wanted to be there to give them instructions about the crops. He wondered if the rains were adequate and whether they had been able to collect enough manure for fertilizing. Was Ganapathy exercising his horses properly and keeping an eye on things in general? Thinking of these things, he almost felt cheerful. The terrible decision he had come to and its consequences seemed to him unimportant. It was like any other job that had to be done.

Having made up his mind, he wanted to go the post office but he did not know where it was and asked a sadhu who was standing nearby.

“You look like a man who has renounced the world”, the sadhu remarked. “Why do you want to go to the post office?”

Not having had any companionship for some time, Udayar was in a talkative mood. “You might say I have completed a penance”, he replied. “Or you might say I have fulfilled one vow and taken another. I want to return home to fulfill the second”.

“Where do you come from?” the sadhu asked him.

“I am from Achipatti village; it is near Palayam, about one hundred and fifty miles from here”.

“I too have taken a vow”, the sadhu went on. “It is to walk from Cape Comerin to Banares. And when I get to the holy Kashi, I am going to stay there till I die so that my earthly remains might be washed away by the mighty Ganges”.

“You have a long way to go yet,” Udayar laughed. “Particularly if you are going to walk the distance”.

“For those who walk through eternity, time and distance have no significance”.

“That sounds very profound, but I can’t say I understand it”, admitted Udayar.

“You don’t understand it because you are still bound by the bonds of this earth”, the sadhu remarked. “The soul is eternal; only the body is transient. I may discard the body, but my soul will journey through to the end till it attains salvation”.

“I wish Meena were here to listen to you”, Udayar sighed. “She is well versed in all the scriptures and can hold her own against learned man”.

“Meena?”

“Yes, Meena”, Udayar pondered for a second. “She is my wife”.

“Please do not mention women to me”, the sadhu remonstrated. “They are the worst of all temptations”.

“Perhaps you are right”, said Udayar bitterly, thinking of the decision he had just taken.

They walked in silence for a while towards the post office. “Tell me, how do you live?” Udayar asked, changing the subject. “For a man of God like yourself, begging must seem to be a life of degradation”.

Please do not mistake me for one of these wandering mendicants”, the sadhu answered severely. “I do not beg. I have an ashram where I used to give discourses and people from all over the country came to have my darshan. But a time comes in the life of every holy man when solitude and communion with God are more important than giving darshan or discourses. Now it is a question of preventing people from recognizing me and worrying me for advice. I have enough money for whatever I need”. Look and the sadhu exhibited some currency notes. Udayar was duly impressed.

“Pardon me, I did not realize your holy status”, he observed meekly.

“I have been observing you for some time”, the sadhu continued. “I know you are a good man persued by misfortune. You have been searching for a pence you could not find. God has sent you to me. Come with me and I shall solve your problems”.

“I am truly grateful”, Udayar said. He also began to wonder whether this holy man who seemed to be learned and wise would be able to solve this problems. He decided that should the

opportunity occur, he would tell him his story and ask for advice. Perhaps, he might have a less terrible solution to offer.

They reached the post office. Udayar bought a post card. Borrowing a pen and a bottle of ink from the clerk there, he wrote in his rather halting hand to his friend, Mr.Chettiar.

“I am well and hope you and your family is in good health also. I have decided to return and carry out whatever responsibilities I have to undertake. Please tell Ganapathy to have my horse brought from the village. I hope to be there in a few days”.

He addressed and posted it. When he came out, the sadhu was still waiting for him.

“Where are you going to sleep tonight?” he asked Udayar.

“I don’t know, I just got here today”.

“You can come with me”, the sadhu offered. “I am staying in the ashram of a fellow yogi who used to be my disciple. It will be quiet and peaceful there and you do not have to sleep among all and sundry as in a choultry”.

“I do not want to give you any trouble”, Udayar protested.

“It will be no imposition. I know you are in need of solace and it is my duty to offer you spiritual comfort”.

So, Udayar followed him. He was grateful for the sadhu’s company and for his words of wisdom. But Udayar was not one to accept such unsolicited hospitality without doing something in return – particularly from a sadhu. So, when they passed a fruit vendor, he bought some bananas and put them into the cloth bag he was carrying.

“You do not need to buy anything for me”, the sadhu commented. “I have only one meal a day”.

“I have not eaten all day”, Udayar said by way of an excuse.

They walked past the inhabited parts of the town. Suddenly, Udayar felt tired. The sorrow, anger and tension of the last few months, the decision he had made to return, and the relaxation it brought him made him want to lie down.

“How far is it to the ashram?” he enquired.

“It is not far”, the sadhu replied. “It is just beyond that coconut grove, off the main road. We will be there shortly”.

The sun was going down and it was beginning to get dark. The sadhu turned into a footpath between the coconut trees and Udayar followed him. Inside the coconut grove, it was almost dark. When they had gone some distance, the sadhu quickly turned. The man of God was suddenly turned into a brigand. He pulled out a knife from under his saffron robe.

“Hand me the money or I will kill you”, he whispered and raised his hand to strike.

Udayar was completely taken by surprise. The bag in his hand dropped to the ground and he raised his hand to ward off the thrust of the knife, but not quickly enough and the knife made a deep gash on his left arm.

But he quickly regained his presence of mind. “You rogue!” he shouted. “Who do you think I am?” With his left hand he got hold of the man’s flowing beard, pulled him down and with his right, he punched him and tried to make him drop the knife.

The sadhu who had not expected any resistance was dumb founded. He slashed wildly with his knife, but Udayar would not let go of his beard. “I will make you pay for this! Using the name of God to kill and rob people! You ought to be whipped in public!” And in spite of one or two more injuries he had received, Udayar went on punching and kicking him until he was forced to drop his knife.

All that the sadhu now wanted was to escape. “Let me go! Let me go!” he pleaded.

Still holding his beard, Udayar picked up the knife and dragged the pleading man on the main road. And that was how two farmers, returning from their farms found the victim and the culprit.

When Udayar explained the situation to them and told them who he was, they thrashed the sadhu soundly and tied him up to be handed over to the police. Udayar collapsed with tiredness and exhaustion and from the injuries he had suffered. They took him to their cottage for the night and the next morning, he was taken in a bullock cart to be admitted into the general hospital that had recently been set up at Trichinopoly.

It was about three months after the separation. Meena’s pregnancy had been confirmed by the midwife. It was also unmistakable in her figure. Muthu was coming to the end of her resources.

It was then that she met Ganapathy accidentally one day.

“I want to talk to you Ganapathy”, she said. “Will you not at least listen to me?”

“There isn’t much to talk about, is there, after the way you have behaved?” Ganapathy had been terribly unhappy after his master left the town and it showed in his face.

“Where is your master?”

“He is away at present”.

“Come with me to our house place; then, you will know everything”.

“I am somewhat busy”.

“I know I was wrong in what I did, but believe me, I had enough reason for doing so. I can’t explain everything here, in public. Please come. I am sure Meena will be happy to see you”.

He followed her somewhat reluctantly. When he went into the front room, Meena was sitting on a carpet, leaning against a cushion and he did not recognize her condition immediately. But when she saw him, she got up slowly, with some effort.

“Ganapathy! Where have you sprung from after all these days!” she asked.

Then he noticed her condition. “Amma, what is this? Why did you not tell us before? Why have you kept it hidden from us?”

“So much has happened to ruin me Ganapathy. I don’t know what to say”. Meena leaned against a pillar.

“Sit down, child; you look tired and pale. And you should not be like that in your condition”.

He made her sit down and be comfortable. Then he turned to Muthu. “Why did you not tell me about this?” he asked angrily. “Why did you turn me away when I come?”

I myself did not know anything about it when we left your master’s house”, Muthu answered. “But by the time I knew, your master would not see me”.

That was how Meena found out that her mother had lied to her about Udayar sending word and even coming himself. What agonies had she suffered because she thought he had ignored her! If only she had known! “How could you do such a thing to me mother?” she wailed.

“I thought it for the best”, Muthu said calmly. But of course, I didn’t know you were pregnant. And then it was too late”.

“But why did you leave us in the first place?” Ganapathy was still in the dark about it.

Then Muthu told him the whole story, about what she heard from Subban and how she had had it confirmed by Chettiar. Meena sat still, shedding tears.

“So you see, one day he is sure to go back to his wife”, Muthu concluded. “What will be Meena’s position then? I wanted her to leave while she still had a chance to go back to her career and not be left in the lurch. Can you blame me?”

“How little trust you have in my master!” exclaimed the loyal servant. Then he turned to Meena. “Amma, could you not at least have asked him for an explanation before leaving him?”

“How could I trust a man who had lied to me about his marriage?” asked Meena.

“Yes, that is true”, Ganapathy spoke almost to himself. “It is true he is married – in theory. His uncle made him get married against his will because the marriage was advantageous from his point of view. My master was forced to agree. But he walked out after the marriage ceremony and has since not spoken either to his wife or to his uncle. He wants to forget that he was ever married. That is why he did not tell you, because he himself considered that he is not married; not because he deliberately wanted to cheat you”.

“But one day, will he not go back to her?” Muthu argued. “Pressure from the two families and social demands will make him take her back. As time goes on, he will want a legal, socially acceptable son who can carry on his name. His conscience will smite him and he will leave Meena”.

“We cannot foretell what will happen in the future”, said Ganapathy. “But whatever might have happened, he would not have let Meena down if she had not walked out on him”.

“Poor girl!” sighed Meena.

“What poor girl?” her mother shouted.

“His wife”, Meena answered. “If I, who has a profession to go back to, who can think of other men if I wanted to, suffer as much as this, how much should that girl suffer? A discarded wife with no past and no future to look forward to, shunned by everyone as an omen of ill-luck, a burden on her family – her fate is worse than mine”.

Don't you worry about her!" Muthu cried. "Society guards her honour, upholds her rights and blames the man, but you have to fend for yourself. The moment he leaves you, your name is at the mercy of every clever rogue who wags his tongue. No one will protect your rights and when you are old and ugly, they will throw you on the scrap heap – as I was thrown".

"All the same, her tragedy is greater than mine", said Meena.

"Never mind her and think of what is to be done", Muthu said. "Where is your master Ganapathy?" she asked.

"I don't know", said Ganapathy helplessly. "He has not been the same since you left him. He has not taken any interest in his farms and neglected his affairs. Now he has gone on a pilgrimage. I do not know where. But I will find him". He turned to Meena. "Don't you worry Amma; I will find him and bring him back to you. And when I do, don't you ever do anything to lose him again".

19

Ganapathy had been in the habit of asking Mr.Chettiar frequently about his master. Now that he had learnt about Meena, it was most important that he should get in touch with him immediately. So, he went straight to Mr.Chettiar's house.

"Have you any news of my master sir?" he enquired.

"Yes, Ganapathy; I was going to send for you. I had a post card from him yesterday saying that he will be here in a few days. He wants you to have his horse brought here. He should be here within the next two or three days".

Ganapathy's melancholy face broke into a broad smile. He told Mr.Chettiar everything he had heard at Meena's.

"That girl Meena is highly perceptive", Mr.Chettiar commented. "Fancy her feeling sorry for the wife. But all the same, it is not right. A man is entitled to have a mistress if he wants to, but he has no right to discard his wife when she has done no wrong. It will bring him nothing but trouble, you wait and see".

"Everything will work out alright sir now that master is coming back", said Ganapathy brightly. "I will go to Achipatti and bring his horse".

He borrowed some money from Mr.Chettiar and gave it to Meena for expenses. He could see how hard up they were. He also told her about the post card and went to the village to bring the

horse. He knew his master would come by train. So, he waited at the railway station and met every train that came in. He slept in the station and woke up every time a train arrived. He waited with eagerness and anticipation and then, as days passed and his master did not arrive, with anxiety. At the end of a week, he went to Mr.Chettiar to find out if there was any further news.

“I haven’t heard anything”, he said. “May be he has changed his mind”.

“No sir, if my master says he is coming, he will not change his mind afterwards. He has had three months to decide. Something must have happened to him”.

“I don’t even know from where he had sent the post card”, said Mr.Chettiar, But his clerk who knew some English came to their rescue. “It was posted in Sri Rangam”, he announced after inspecting the card. “I can read the post mark clearly”.

“Then, he must still be there”, Ganapathy argued. “If he had left Sri Rangam, he would have come here. May be he has fallen ill. I must go and find him”.

So, after informing Meena, Ganapathy started on his journey. He had never travelled beyond Palayam; he was illiterate. But his native wisdom and an understanding of his master told him that something must be wrong. So, taking some more money from Mr.Chettiar, he ventured into the unknown towards Sri Rangam. He did not understand such things as trains and tickets and junctions where you had to change trains, but after laborious enquiries and having missed two trains at Madurai junction, he managed to reach Sri Rangam.

Everything in that holy place revolved round the big temple. So, he went there first to make his enquiries. “Hundreds of people come here every day and we don’t know who they are”, said one of the priests.

“But my master is an important man”, said Ganapathy in all his innocence.

“He may be important in your village my man”, laughed the priest. “But here, he is one of a thousand. Why don’t you try some of the choultries?”

So Ganapathy went from one choultry to another, taking them street by street so as not to miss any. Slowly, methodically, like a faithful dog following a scent, he covered them all. In one of the choultries, the keeper said. “Yes, I remember Mr.Udayar. He was here with his pretty wife and stayed for nearly a month. But they left many months ago”.

“Yes, that was my master”, said Ganapathy. “But didn’t he come again by himself about ten days ago?”

“No, I have not seen him for a long time”, said the keeper. “But he was a nice man though, very generous”.

Though this bit of news did not really get him very far, nevertheless, Ganapathy felt encouraged. If he could trace his first visit after so long a time, surely it should be possible to find out about his second that was so recent. But at the end of a long and tiring day, he had got nowhere. Exhausted and miserable, he went and lay down on the open verandah of the nearest choultry for the night, covering himself with the thick blanket he always carried with him. As he was thinking about what to do next, he could not help overhearing a conversation between some religious men who were lying a few feet away from him.

“One bad man is enough to ruin the reputation for all of us”, one of them was saying. “The police don’t give us any peace. I think we will have to be moving”.

“They say he will get at least two years in goal”, said another. “And he was such a clever talker. He knew how to impress people”.

“He chose the wrong man to try his tricks”, said the first one. “They say that in spite of seven stab wounds, the victim would not only not let go of his beard, but dragged him to the road. He must have been very brave”.

“Who are you talking about?” Ganapathy asked. He was eager for any bit of information that would lead him to his master.

“Haven’t you heard? It has been the talk of the whole town for the last ten days”.

“I came only today”.

They told him the whole story of the attack on Udayar. “Because of that, the police are checking on all innocent sadhus and making life miserable for us”.

“How old was the man who was attacked?”

“He was a young man they say. It seems he had a lot of money on him. The superintendent of police complimented him on his bravery”.

“Where is he now?”

“They took him to the hospital in Trichinopoly. What the European doctors have done with him, we don’t know”.

“I am sure he is my master!” cried Ganapathy. “He must be; no one would have exhibited such courage. I must go to him immediately”.

“You can’t go to him at this time of night”, they explained to him. “In these government hospitals, even to see your near and dear ones, there are fixed hours. The white man has made the rules and we have to obey”.

Early next morning, Ganapathy was on his way to the hospital. When finally, he was allowed to see Udayar that afternoon, he shed tears of joy that his beloved master was still alive.

“Oh, master! master!” he cried as he knelt by the bed side.

“Ganapathy! How did you find me? What a wonderful man you are!” exclaimed Udayar.

Ganapathy was not a fluent talker. Particularly when he was filled with emotion, words came to him most reluctantly. Slowly, haltingly, in broken sentences, he explained how Meena had come to leave Udayar. Starting with the first visit of Subban, he went step by step until at last he told him she was pregnant, that she had no money, that he had borrowed from Mr.Chettiar to give her some and also for the journey. He hoped that his master didn’t mind.

“What a fool I have been!” Udayar exclaimed when he had heard it all. “What unworthy thoughts I have had of Meena”!

“She is a wonderful girl sir, though she comes from the deva daasi caste”.

“I suppose I should have told her about my marriage. But it just did not strike me as being so important since I did not consider myself married”.

“It is all fate sir, and there is nothing we can do about it”.

“You are right, it is fate. Perhaps, it is because I thought of doing away with her for what I thought was her infidelity that I was attacked by that ruffian”.

“People are still talking about how you got the better of him sir”, said Ganapathy proudly. “Otherwise, I would never have been able to find you”.

“Yes, even the inspector of police complimented me”, said Udayar. “But these fellows who attack innocent people are really cowards at heart. If you resist them they are powerless”.

While Udayar recovered from his wounds, Ganapathy happily looked after his needs. He brought him food from a Brahmin hotel instead of depending on the insipid hospital food, washed

his clothes, posted a letter to Meena about their return and gossiped with the menial staff of the hospital about his master.

20

It was a period of supreme happiness for Meena. She had everything she wanted, love and affection, security and respectability and the pleasurable anticipation of a child. In such circumstances, she even forgot about her dancing. She was reinstated in the old house that Udayar had rented for her. But in view of her condition, her mother came to stay and look after her. Meena had long since forgiven her for lying about Udayar's visit and Muthu in return had reluctantly decided to accept a life of domesticity for her daughter though she still spoke of the life of excitement and fame that Meena had missed. Even Udayar put up with her under the circumstances.

Udayar too was happy at the turn of events. He could now settle down and attend to his affairs with greater energy and enthusiasm. As Ganapathy put it, 'The master had grown an inch taller since his return'.

"You know Meena", Udayar said one day. "You are as useful to me as Ganapathy". That was about the best compliment he could pay.

"Next, you will be telling me that I am as useful to you as your favourite horse", Meena said. "Surely, there are some things for which I am more useful than Ganapathy, though not just at present".

"I mean in your knowledge and judgement of people", Udayar amplified his original remark. "At least twice, you have stopped me from lending money to people who turned out to be rogues. More and more people are coming to me because they know I am here".

"I am glad I am useful to you in more ways than one", she said.

"And the additional expenditure of maintaining you isn't very much", he continued. "You don't demand things from me and you are always happy whether I give you anything or not".

"You have given me something I value most", she remarked coyly. "What does anything else matter?"

"You know I have recently bought the corner farm", he said. "It is a good and fertile piece of land and the well has plenty of water for irrigation. I am having it registered in your name".

“What!” she shouted in surprise. “What would I do with a farm?”

“What does anyone do with a farm?” he shouted back “Cultivate it of course! I will put a good tenant there and see that he pays his rent regularly, to you. You will have an income of nearly five hundred rupees a year”.

She did not know what to say. To a deva daasi, wealth was always in her looks and in her dancing. If she aspired for any wealth, it was always money or jewellery. In an emergency, jewellery could easily be converted to money and there were always emergencies in the life of a deva daasi. But ownership of land meant a stability and permanence which a deva daasi generally despised. It was the first step, Meena told herself, towards a staid and respectable, even dull way of life. She accepted the gift with mixed feelings in spite of infinite gratefulness to Udayar for having thought about it.

“If anything were to happen to me, what will be your fate?” Udayar asked and proceeded to answer it himself. “And what will be the fate of our child?” You cannot claim any share of my property and that uncle of mine will see to it that you starve. You will have to go back to your dancing and end up like your mother. But now, no matter what happens, you will have a steady income that no one can touch”.

Meena could only shed tears of joy, not only because of his love, but for his forethought and consideration. But Muthu, when she heard about it was somewhat scornful.

“Of what use is a farm to a deva daasi?” she demanded. “It is like having a male child. Since you have known him, he hasn’t bought you a decent Banares sari or a gold necklace, why don’t you ask him for something like that?”

“But don’t you see mother, with what he has given me, I can buy myself a gold necklace every year if I wanted to”.

“I only hope that he doesn’t expect you to pay for all the household expenses from now on”.

“At least, he has given me independence”, said Meena. “It shows he trusts me and I must be worthy of that trust. It also means that from now on, I must stop thinking of myself as a deva daasi”.

“Why shouldn’t he trust you?” Muthu demanded. “You have lived like a dutiful wife and not like a tantalizing mistress. But if he thinks you are going to live like a widow, to wear white and not to use make-up, he is mistaken. You will follow the custom of the deva dassies”.

“Don’t worry, nothing will happen to him”.

As Meena's date of confinement came nearer, pleasure and anticipation gave place to a sense of anxiety. There was no hospital in that small town and in any case, no one thought of going to a hospital for such and every day occurrence as child birth. An old woman who acted as midwife by virtue of long experience came and examined Meena and gave her advice.

"You are small made and you may have a difficulty delivery", she said. "But don't worry. I will look after you. Send for me as soon as the pains start".

But when the pains started, there was no one in the house, as they were somewhat premature. Udayar had gone to Achipatti and Muthu had gone for a bit of gossip with her cronies at the temple. The servant girl rushed round to fetch Muthu and then the midwife. By the time the midwife came, the pains were coming in a slow but regular rhythm. And they were gradually increasing in intensity.

"It will be a long time yet I am afraid", the midwife announced. "We just have to wait".

Meena moaned and groaned but managed to smile at her mother. "Have you sent for him?" she asked.

"A man's presence is superfluous at a time like this", the midwife laughed. "He had done his part; now you must do yours". No one laughed at her crude humour. But the midwife continued. "What you need is strength, strength and will power. He will only be in the way".

"Please send for him", Meena implored. "If he is here, it will give me strength". So Muthu dispatched a servant to bring Udayar back from his village.

In the hot stuffy room, Meena perspired and cried. Her mother fussed about solicitously, but the midwife shouted angrily. "Don't you fuss so much! Anyone would think that having a baby was an unusual event by the way you go on. You shouldn't worry about a bit of pain".

"But don't you think it has been going on far too long?" Muthu asked anxiously.

"Some take longer than others, particularly if they are small made", replied the midwife. "I have known it go on for one and a half days before the baby was delivered. There is really nothing to worry about".

Evening fell; the little oil lamp was lit. Muthu stood by and held her daughter's damp hand and wiped her forehead with a towel.

“It is still a long time yet”, the midwife announced after a cursory examination. “We just have to wait”.

Udayar arrived at ten O’clock. He was not allowed to see Meena but she was told about his arrival. She brightened visibly on hearing it and her strength which was ebbing seemed. “I will be alright now”, she whispered.

Udayar could hear her groans and it made him wince. “She is suffering Ganapathy, and there is nothing I can do about it”, he told his faithful servant.

“Women are born to suffer during childbirth sir”, Ganapathy philosophized. “That is how God made them”.

But he was an older and a more experienced man than his master. He went and asked Muthu how long the pains had been going on and how Meena was feeling. He also questioned the midwife.

“With her body, naturally it will take a little more time and trouble”, the midwife said.

“But is there any sign?” Ganapathy persisted.

“No”, said the midwife.

Ganapathy was worried. He knew Meena was weak and wouldn’t be able to stand the strain for long. He went to his master.

“I have a suggestion to make sir”, he said.

“What is it?”

“In the outskirts of the town, there is a white man who gives medicines to people. They call him a ‘doctor’ and say he is very good. May be we should ask him to come and have a look at Meena”.

“Anything to stop this agony and ensure a safe delivery”, said Udayar. “Let’s go and bring him”.

“There is one thing sir”, said Ganapathy. “They say that people whom he treats have to join his religion”.

Udayar paused. “How can he do that?” he asked. “We are born Hindus. We don’t want others to become Hindus. So why should he want us to become Christians?”

“It seems their religion is like that sir”.

Muthu, who had been listening, spoke now. “Please bring him”, she pleaded.

The midwife grumbled and said they were making a lot of fuss, but Udayar and Ganapathy were off in spite of her protests.

As they were on their way, Udayar remarked, “How can we have a man attending on her Ganapathy?”

“At a time like this, saving her is the most important thing sir”, replied Ganapathy. “I don’t trust that midwife. Meena has been in considerable pain and there is still no sign of delivery. And all that the midwife can do is to tell us to wait”.

“Yes, you are right”.

The doctor who came was middle aged Englishman, a medical missionary who had recently established himself there. He brought with him not only his bag of instruments and medicines and an assistant, but a bright kerosene lamp. He examined Meena for a long time. By now, she was exhausted and only a semi conscious. At last he came out.

“Are you the husband of the patient?” he asked Udayar in somewhat stilted Tamil.

“Yes sir, I am the father of the baby”.

“I am sorry the baby is dead”, the doctor said. “Perhaps, if I had been called in earlier, I might have been able to save it. But now, it is too late. I will however try and save the mother’s life”.

Muthu started wailing and the midwife mumbled about these new-fangled ideas and if only things had been left to her, everything would have been alright. Udayar had never imagined for a moment that the baby would be lost. That Meena’s life was also in danger came as a great shock to him. He realized how precious she was and prayed as he had never prayed before.

“Please do whatever is necessary to save her”, he pleaded with the doctor. “It does not matter how much it costs”.

“It is not a matter of money my friend”, said the doctor and went to work with the help of his assistant. After what seemed ages, he came out.

“I am glad to tell you she is out of danger”, he said. “But she has lost a lot of blood and is very weak and needs careful nursing. It may be two or three months before she can recover fully. I have given her some medicines and will come again in the morning”.

22

When Meena came out of her coma and realized that her baby was dead, she screamed with all her remaining strength and it was all Muthu could do to keep her in bed. The medicines that the doctor had given to her to make her sleep wore off all too quickly. But she was soon exhausted and was too weak even to talk. She just lay in bed with tears streaming down her pale cheeks. Attempts by Muthu and even by Udayar to make her take some nourishment were futile. Only once did she ask Udayar, “What sins have we committed that we should suffer like this?”

Meena’s recovery was naturally slow. It was made slower because she had really no desire to get better. At first, it was a deep and gnawing sorrow with no circumstances to soften the pain. But later, she desperately sought an explanation of why she should lose her child. What sins had she committed? Was it because of something she had done in her former life? Or because of the vow of dancing she had broken? She had been dedicated to the service of the Lord. How can she then seek to satisfy her own pleasures and hanker after love and security? After all, she was a deva daasi and she ought to have followed the immemorial tradition of dancing. It was a divine duty laid on her since birth and confirmed later by her own voluntary acceptance and she had lightly set it aside. Could such a vow be broken without inviting the wrath of God? She had no doubt performed ablutions, but could a vow of eternal service be so easily given up by performing a few meaningless ceremonies? Having taken such a vow, how could she expect happiness and contentment in a life of security and domesticity, however respectable it might be? In moments of such guilty feelings, she wanted to go back to the temple and to her dancing, but such thoughts were purely academic since neither her health nor her figure were then suitable for the life of a dancer.

At the same time, common sense and an innate wisdom told her that God could not possibly approve the kind of life that most deva daasies were leading, and were forced to lead. She tried desperately to find a rational explanation to the grief that had overtaken her. That was more important than anything else, not only to console her grief stricken heart but also to ensure that such a calamity would not be repeated. These questions kept bothering her, for she was a woman of education and she wanted to understand the why and the wherefore of things in her own limited way. She also felt that would cure her misery as well as ease her conscience.

In such soul searching, her mother was of no help. She merely said, "It is fate". "It was destined to happen and we must accept God's will". But that was not enough for Meena. She too believed in fate, but she felt there must be a way of understanding it and then, overcoming it. Udayar, that strong, yet silent and simple man, also could not help her. "When you get better, we will go on a pilgrimage and propitiate all the Gods in all the temples", he said. "Then, such a calamity will not happen. Meanwhile you must take the medicines that the doctor has given you and get better".

Sometimes, she spoke to the doctor about her grief. He generally worked among the poor and illiterate, for it was among them that he found his converts. Upper class Hindus rarely went to him or sent for him. He had never come across a woman of education and culture in India and to convert such a one would be a great thing for him. He tried to comfort her in his own way.

"It is difficult to know the workings of divine providence", he told her. "We can only accept His decisions and pray for guidance and understanding. We find consolation in His words". And he gave her a Tamil version of the bible to read.

"You religious books are the same as ours", she told him the next time he called. "They also talk in riddles and let you draw your own conclusions".

"But you see, we believe in one God", he explained. "A God who is full of mercy for the unfortunate and compassion for the sinners. We don't worship a thousand idols".

"We too worship one God", Meena countered. "But we worship Him in a thousand forms. There are infinite aspects of God and no individual or concept can fully describe Him or explain Him. And we worship that aspect that is in tune with our own mood or our own needs. As a dancer, I can tell you that is very important".

So the doctor found out that she was a dancer by profession and that she was not 'properly' married to Udayar. His sense of Victorian morality and Christian ethics were outraged. Though he continued to treat her, their religious discussions did not proceed very much further.

After about two months, Meena was well enough to go for short walks. Her first visit was of course to the temple. She was still pale and weak and a mere shadow of her former self. The spirit and the liveliness she had once had seemed to have gone out of her life. Now, she walked down the street slowly, with her mother for support. People hardly recognized the beautiful dancer who had thrilled them less than a year ago. The priests ignored her. She found this anonymity strangely

soothing to her grief. But suffering had given her a new dignity, maturity and self-reliance that had not been there before.

During all this time, Udayar showed a sympathy and understanding that one would not have expected from him. He too was deeply grieved that they should have lost their first offspring. But as a man, he could not make a public exhibition of his sorrow. He knew that Meena's grief was much greater than his and that it also involved a moral problem that he did not profess to understand. But his gruff, abrupt manner disappeared and he treated Meena as if she were a delicate and valuable piece of glass, to be handled with care. Meena understood and appreciated it and while her love for him was less demonstrative than before, it certainly matured and ripened.

But one day, he came to Meena. "Meena, how long are we to go on like this?" he asked. "It is only natural to be upset when we lose our first child. I too was greatly grieved at the time. But it is the kind of sorrow that one gets over, particularly when one is young. You cannot make it an everlasting grief".

"You have been wonderful to me and I am sorry for you", she said. "The fact that you loved me when I was beautiful is not important. But that you have stood by me when you could have walked out easily and have loved me now is very precious to me. But I am still seeking for an explanation of why God should have punished me like this".

"How can we explain God's actions?" he asked miserably. "Thousands of babies die at birth. Is it possible to find an explanation for each and every one of them?"

"But I must know".

"All I know is that it has nothing to do with your sins or mine", he said. "Babies born to the vilest of parents survive while those of the honest die. Good men suffer while rogues prosper. That is the way of the world".

But Meena was not satisfied with that sort of an explanation. "Something tells me that I must have gone wrong somewhere", she insisted. "It is a feeling I have. The more I think about it, the more I am convinced of it. It is like trying to remember something you have forgotten. I must know what it is so that I can love you without a feeling of guilt in the future".

"I am glad you are thinking of the future".

“The solution, I know is within myself; it is just that I have to find it”, and she added as an afterthought. “Perhaps, I should visit the holy man who has just come here. They say he is very good at advising people over their problems”.

“Holy men should be visited when you are mentally sick or spiritually troubled”, said Udayar. “But not in your case”.

“But I am spiritually troubled!” countered Meena. “That is exactly my problem”. And then, she changed the subject. “You have been so patient and so considerate all this time. You have a right to expect love and affection and I have given you nothing but misery in the last few months. But please give me a little more time”.

23

The swamiji was sitting on a tiger skin rug. In saffron robes, with dark piercing eyes and a flowing beard, he was very impressive. There was no one else present, as Meena had asked for a private audience. Meena knelt before him and touched the ground with her forehead in deep obeisance. He did not speak, merely looked at her with those deep penetrating eyes of his. She could feel his gaze upon her as she stood up with downcast eyes. For a long time he said nothing.

“Sit down, my child”, he said at last.

She obeyed him.

“You are spiritually perplexed”, he said. “You are in danger of losing your happiness. You have changed direction once in your life and wonder if you have done the right thing”. He paused. “Is it not so?”

“I see you know everything about me Swami”, Meena meekly observed. “There is no need for me to tell you anything”.

“When you asked for a private audience, I made enquiries about you”, he said. “You are an unusual girl. But I want you to answer my questions. You did change direction in your life, did you not?”

“Yes Swamiji, I gave up dancing, broke my vow to Lord Ranganatha because of my love for a man. Perhaps, I did wrong”.

“You did the right thing”, the Swamiji continued. “The life of a deva daasi is a degrading life today. The pristine purity and the ancient glory of a noble art in the service of the Lord has

degenerated into a socially and spiritually harmful institution. And it should be eliminated from our places of worship. Hindu society is full of a number of evils and I am trying to raise it to the purity and glory it once enjoyed. To seek love and affection and security is not wrong. It is only natural”.

“You are very kind Swamiji”.

“The Lord will not punish you for giving up a life of degradation and choosing one of self respect, but.....” he paused.

“Yes Swamiji?”

“But I understand that your the young man has a wife whom he has discarded”.

Suddenly revelation came to Meena; she bit her lip. She had herself said once to Ganapathy that that women’s tragedy was greater than hers.

When Meena did not speak for a few seconds, the Swami continued. “Is that correct, or am I mistaken?”

“You are not mistaken Swamiji”, said Meena. She suddenly felt a need to defend herself. “But that was not because of me. He had discarded her long before he knew me”.

“May be it is not you fault, but an innocent woman suffers”.

Meena did not reply.

The Swami was again silent for a while. At last he said, “I have nothing more to say to you my child. You are intelligent; you should be able to face your own problems and find your own solutions. I can merely point the way”.

And the Swamiji indicated that the interview was at an end.

It was as Meena was walking back home that the full import of the Swamiji’s words struck her. Her own happiness was based on another woman’s misery, for Udayar had left his wife and taken Meena. How could she hope to retain her own happiness at the cost of another woman’s grief and humiliation? But then, was it Meena’s fault? Perhaps not. But if she had not encouraged him, he might have gone back to his wife. How could she know that? He might easily have gone to another dancer.

These thoughts troubled her. She realized now that since she had heard about Udayar’s marriage, she had had a sort of guilty feeling though she had not been able to identify it in so many

words. Now that she had come face to face with the problem, she tried to analyse it and come to some definite conclusion. Was she wrong to have taken a man who was married – however unwillingly – to another woman? But then, she did not know that he had a wife when she fell in love with him. He was a stranger to his wife, might not even recognize her if he met her in the street. Still, she was his legally wedded wife, recognized by society, claiming respect for her status and sympathy in her loneliness. It will be the wife who would have to break the marriage string round her neck at his funeral and wear white for ever afterwards while Meena was only a concubine with no rights and no sympathy. Only a mutual love bound her to her man – nothing else. She now remembered the words of her mother when she first fell in love with Udayar, ‘You have no rights recognized by society to retain the man you love’. On the other hand, how could she give him up?

But of one thing, she was convinced – that her own love, security respectability, life itself, was not safe while another woman who had a moral as well as a legal right to all those things was denied those things. While she was bemoaning the loss of her child, another was bemoaning her virginity even after marriage. Whether it was Meena’s fault or not did not matter. While Meena was deeply perturbed over this and about what the future would hold for her, she had at last come to the end of her spiritual quest.

For two days, she did not speak to anyone; just sat in her room and thought deeply. Neither Udayar nor Muthu could get anything out of her. She told them to leave her alone for a little while and she would be alright. She did not say it in anger or in sorrow, but quite pleasantly. But they could see a change in her nevertheless. It was not grief or the spiritual perplexity that kept her quiet, but a deep concentration, as if she was trying hard to remember something she had forgotten. On the third day, she had found the solution she was searching for.

On the third evening, she had her bath, made up her face which was unusual these days, put on some gay clothes and came to Udayar.

“I would like you to come with me to the temple”, She said.

Udayar and Meena never went out together, in public. It was one of those things that was ‘just not done’. After all, they were not wife and husband, and in a place where they were well known, appearance had to be maintained. In any case, Udayar was not a great temple goer.

“You take your mother with you”, he said.

“No, it is an important occasion for me, and I would like you to come”.

Even Muthu objected, for she was a great one for keeping up appearances. "It is alright for you to go out with him in places where you are not known, but not in your own town. It is not nice for you to be seen outside with a man".

Meena lost her temper. "The whole town knows about us", she shouted at her mother. "And he is not just any man. He is the father of my dead child. So, why not go to the temple with me just once?"

Meena was no longer the shy, timid girl bullied by her mother and who deferred to the wishes of Udayar. Suffering had given her courage and self-confidence. Both Muthu and Udayar recognized it. They also wanted to humour her so that she could forget her grief and take an interest in life. So, Udayar went with her to the temple. But in true, traditional fashion, he strode in front while Meena, with the faithful Ganapathy, did her best to keep up with him a few paces behind.

At the temple, after the usual worship and meditation, she called one of the priests. "Swami, I have come to a decision", she said. "And I want to know if it is the right one. You can put some white and red flowers in different packets so that God can give me His guidance".

This was usual practice. A devotee, wanting to know God's mind would go to the temple and ask for a decision. Six packets, three containing white flowers and three containing red flowers would be placed at the feet of the idol and after Puja, the priest would pick one of the packets and hand it to the worshipper. If he or she got her flower asked for, then the decision was right; if not, the decision was wrong and the project or proposal should be given up. This was often resorted to by people finalizing a wedding, starting a business, buying a house or property, or things of that nature.

"What is it all about?" Udayar asked under his breath.

But Meena would not answer. When the plate with the burning camphor was brought by the priest after the puja, Udayar grudgingly put some coins onto the plate.

"If it is a red flower Swami, my decision is right", Meena announced as she took the packet from the plate and opened it. Her hand trembled as she did so, but her face brightened as red flowers dropped out of the paper.

"I have had my wish; we can go now", she said.

"I wish you would tell me what it was all about, instead of making such a mystery of it", grumbled Udayar.

“I wanted you to be a witness to this”, Meena informed him. “That is why I was so insistent that you should come with me to the temple”.

After this incident, Meena became her old self again, pleasant and humourous and provocative. She played with and teased Udayar and he was happy, but there was an edge to her gaiety about which he was a little anxious.

“Tell me, are you still fond of me?” she asked him.

“Don’t talk rubbish!” he chided her. Moments of tenderness always embarrassed him and he was likely to be abrupt.

“That means you are very fond of me, but hate to admit it”, Meena teased. “So many months of celibacy must have been hard for you”.

“Never thought about it”, admitted Udayar.

“Yes, you have been worried about me”, she said. “But lately, haven’t you been a little impatient with all my idiosyncrasies?”

“I suppose women are like that”.

“Tell me, will you do anything I ask? Give me whatever I want?”

Udayar was immediately wary. “Don’t be silly; you don’t need anything”, he said.

“But supposing I wanted you to do something for me, something that is important for both of us, will you do it?”

“It depends on what it is”.

“There is the careful man of affairs speaking”, pouted Meena. “You are never rash, never foolish and never promise anything before knowing what it is – even to me”.

“Yes, because, when once I promise, I do my best to fulfill it”.

“Just for once, could you not give me your word?” Meena had now become serious.

“What is all this about, anyway?” he asked. “First you drag me to the temple, make up your mind about something or other and then, ask me to promise things about which I know nothing”.

“You don’t trust me, do you?” she asked miserably. “After all that has happened, so you think I will ask for you anything that is impossible? Anything that will harm you or make you feel small?”

“It is not that Meena girl”, he replied. He was almost tender. “I know you will not do anything to hurt me; but I do not necessarily trust your judgement in everything, or substitute yours for mine in things that do not concern you”.

“But this is something that concerns me vitally. It is concerned with our happiness”.

“Then it is all the more necessary for you to tell me what it is”, he said. “Anything as important as that should be discussed seriously by us instead of your taking a blind promise from me”.

“Very well then”, she said. There was determination in her tone. “I want to be reconciled to your wife”.

“What!” Udayar shouted. Nothing could have given him greater surprise.

“Yes, I want you to take her back”, Meena said slowly. “At present, my happiness is built on the misery of another woman. To be neglected by a lawfully wedded husband is the greatest misfortune that can come to any woman. When she suffers and perhaps curses me in her prayers, our happiness will always be unstable. I can never have a clear conscience. I do not want to be the cause of another woman’s sorrow”.

“But that’s impossible!” shouted Udayar. “I hate her! I have vowed never to have anything to do with her!”

“But you made a greater vow. “Don’t forget that. When you tied that piece of string round her neck before the holy fire, before the rising sun and the morning star, you promised before God, to take her as your lawful wife. Yet, you have left her to the shame and loneliness of a neglected life. You have broken your solemn vow to god. And I have unknowingly helped you to break it. Knowing it now, how can I be happy?”

“Have I go to my wife and give you up? Is that what you want?” Udayar asked miserably.

“I have thought over it deeply”, cried Meena. “Night after night, I wondered what was the right thing to do. I considered whether I ought to give you up altogether, but then, I too have my rights; I too have sacrificed my career for you. Further, if I gave you up altogether, you might not go

back to her and I would have no further say in the matter. So, I came to the conclusion that you should be reconciled to your wife; and I will take my chance on your love”.

“Meena! Meena! How can you do this to us?”

“Do you think I want you to go back to her?” asked Meena. There were now tears in her eyes. “As a woman, every fibre in my body revolts against such an idea. But I can never be your wife. My son, if ever I have one, can never light your funeral pyre. You need a wife and children for your status in society. One day, may be five years, may be ten years from now, you will regret not having them and blame me for it. And then, it will regret not having them and blame me for it. And then, it will perhaps be too late. That is why I want you to have a wife now”. She paused as emotion choked her voice. She wiped her tears and continued. “I will always be waiting for you. You can come and see me whenever you want. But in your own village, in your house and in your society, you should have a mistress who can give you a position among your friends and relations”.

“And you want me to do this?”

“Yes, I want you to do this”, she repeated his words. “I have not only thought over it a great deal, but the Swamiji I went to see was also of the same view. And as you saw in the temple the other day, God has approved that decision”.

They argued far into the night. Meena’s powers of persuasion were great but so was Udayar’s resistance. At one point, she said. “Perhaps, if I loved you less, I would not let you go”.

“Then love me less”, he pleaded.

“When you have been with another woman, perhaps you will learn to appreciate me better”, she said.

“How can I have another woman after having known you?” was his answer.

“You may not love her at first”, Meena told him. “But she is your wife and you should treat her as such. It is your duty. As for me, I will always be your mistress. After all, many men have wives and mistresses. It is accepted by society”.

“I haven’t said I am going to take her back”.

“You will”.

“But supposing I don’t want her after a month?”

“It will probably be me whom you don’t want after a month with her”, Meena quipped.

In the end, Meena won.

When Muthu heard about Meena’s plans, she was furious. “How stupid can you be?” she asked her daughter. “In your circumstances, it is difficult enough to keep a man; but you deliberately push him into the arms of another woman who has every advantage over you”.

“I have to do it mother, both for his happiness and mine”, was Meena’s answer. “And if I lose him in the process, it can’t be helped”.

“The first thing that his wife would do, observed Muthu. “The first thing any woman would do, is to stop him from seeing you. Don’t you realize that?”

“Of course I realize it, but it is a risk I have to take”, replied Meena. “If his affections are so fickle, then perhaps, I am better off without him”.

“That is all you care about! Affection! As if affections will ever give you anything that is worth having!” and she gave her daughter up as hopeless.

At one time, Udayar would have treated such attempts by Meena to interfere with his life with scant respect and told her to mind her own business. But she had gradually got a hold over him and he found it difficult to resist her. Her reasoning in this as in everything else was so logical and persuasive. After thinking over it for some time, he found them convincing. ‘I am a lucky man to have a woman like Meena to love me’, he told himself. When he spoke to Ganapathy, he too agreed with Meena’s decision.

“It is not right that you should be without a wife sir”, he said. “Chinnamma is a very nice lady – as nice in her own way as Meena. You should not keep her away just because your uncle made you marry her through a bit of trickery. All the people in Achipatti will be very pleased to have a lady in the big house again”.

“But I may lose Meena!” Udayar protested.

“No sir, you won’t lose Meena”, Ganapathy replied. “She will always be there waiting for you. In these matters, there has to be certain adjustments, a bit of give and take on both sides. After all, some men have two wives living in the same house and they seem to get on alright”.

But reconciliation – even when both parties are eager – cannot be brought about easily. It has to be done without humiliation and without loss of face to either party if it is to be successful. This is particularly so between husband and wife. The husband cannot go across to the wife and just say, ‘I am sorry I sent you away. It was my fault; please come back’. It should appear as if the reunion was almost by accident and quite unintentional.

So, having agreed to do what Meena wanted, Udayar waited for just such an opportunity. Meanwhile, Ganapathy had paid a visit to Chinnamma’s village – ostensibly to buy some bullocks – and dropped in to see Chinnamma quite casually. After the usual enquiries, he said, ‘It is not right that you should be living here Amma; we all miss you in the big house’.

“What is destined will happen Ganapathy”, she said. “Such things are not in our hands”.

But she knew that Ganapathy would not have broached the subject without his master’s knowledge and consent and she was secretly happy. But she could not demean herself by showing an over-eagerness to go to her husband’s home after all that had happened. At the same time, Ganapathy knew that she would be glad to be reunited. If not, she would have vehemently protested at his mere suggestion. So, the hint had been dropped and understood.

Udayar wanted to send his horse and cart with a message asking his wife to come, but Meena said, “No, you left her, so you must go and bring her back. Otherwise, you will humiliate her and her family. And even if she came, she would always feel that shame”.

Udayar did not want to go there to invite her, because he felt his own dignity was at stake. But the opportunity was provided by the death of one of Chinnamma’s relations and Udayar had to go to the funeral. Naturally, he was invited to stay in Chinnamma’s parents’ house, spoke to her parents and after the funeral ceremonies were over, brought Chinnamma back to his own home.

Life with Chinnamma in Achipatti was very different from his life with Meena in Palayam. His wife was a simple, pleasant girl with only the rudiments of education. She was shy and timid and had to take on the management of the household straight away without any help of criticism from a mother-in-law. She did not know the art of conversation or the ways of pleasing men. She ministered to her husband’s needs, cooked his food herself though there was a paid cook and served it herself. But she knew so much more than about the management of the farms, about crops, about the farm workers and their problems. Udayar found that he could leave a lot of the work to his wife. Her love was of that fierce, possessive kind and having been neglected so long, she was determined

never to lose him again. Udayar found this a totally new experience. After the initial antagonism and the shyness had worn off, he began to be pleased and amused with his wife. But the picture of kept intruding itself in his mind's eye and without realizing it, he tended to compare the two. Meena's name was never mentioned. Officially, she did not exist and had never existed.

Before he left, Meena had told him not to come back for at least a month. "Stay with your wife for as long as you can", she had said. "Let her get used to you and to her new surroundings. When she is well settled, then if you feel like it, you can come back to me for a few days".

"I shall miss you Meena", he said.

"I shall miss you too, but it is for the best".

Now, Udayar found himself counting the days before he could get back to Meena. Exactly after one month, he gave his instructions to Ganapathy about what was to be done during his absence. Chinnamma knew he was going away and instinctively, she felt he was going to see Meena. Just before his departure, he came to her.

"I will be away for a few days", he said by way of goodbye.

She could not even say 'yes' though she tried to desperately. There was a lump in her throat so that she could not speak. She kept her eyes averted from him so that he could not see her tears.

"I have given instructions about everything to Ganapathy and things should be alright".

"I will go and come", he said the usual words of farewell, got on his horse and rode away.

Chinnamma did not know what to do. She had no friends or close relatives in whom she could confide. Her mother's home was far away. In any case, she did not want to go there lest it was considered an act of protest by her husband. When he came and invited her to come back with him, nothing was mentioned about Meena. Somehow, she had assumed in her innocence that he had perhaps give her up, though he had promised nothing. Her parents of course knew that he probably would not give up Meena, but they did not want to raise the issue in case the reunion did not materialize. 'Time will solve the problems', they told themselves. Now, she wondered if she would go back to her parents. But she knew what life was like in her parents' home. When she was an unmarried girl, she was the darling of everyone, petted and spoiled by her parents and brothers. Her sisters-in-law had deferred to her in everything. But when she had to stay on as a discarded wife, life was very different. There was kindness and pity, but she was none the less a burden. There were veiled references to her status by her sisters-in-law. At least now, she was the mistress of her own

home. She did not have to depend on anybody. She could nurse her grievance in secret. She also knew that many wealthy men had mistresses and it was not considered a particularly bad thing for a man.

But she was proud. She loved her husband, not in the romantic or even in the carnal sense of the word, but in a true spiritual sense, in the tradition of the chaste heroines of Hindu mythology. Her husband was her lord and master, not only in this life, but in every rebirth and regeneration until they attained salvation. Even if he did wrong, her own love and chastity should be strong enough to protect him from evil. She used all these arguments to excuse her husband and to convince herself that it was nothing. But she had the heart of a woman and it ached with pain and a sense of shame and humiliation that her husband preferred another woman for his pleasures. So she did what any other wife would have done under similar circumstances. She went and lay down in her room. She would not eat and the entreaties of the servants were of no avail. In the darkness and the loneliness of her room, she could shed tears unhindered and unseen by anyone. The fasting was a kind of atonement for any sins she might have committed in her former life, apart from the fact that she didn't feel like eating.

On the third day a servant girl came and told her, "Amma, the master has come". So, Chinnamma got up, tidied herself and behaved as if nothing had happened. At least, Udayar didn't notice any difference. As was his nature, he behaved in a rather brusque and abrupt manner with his wife in public, but tender and considerate in private. Still, Chinnamma could not get over the fact that probably, he was even more tender with his mistress and the brief pleasure she enjoyed was tinged with sadness.

Periodically, Udayar would go away and Chinnamma would retire into her room. Gradually, she was adjusting herself to the routine of his departures, at least she thought she was adjusting herself.

Chinnamma often wondered if she should discuss it with her husband. But how was one to start? What if he should be angry? One night, when all the servants had gone to bed and Udayar was in a tender mood, she asked him suddenly. "Is she so much better than me?"

"What!" Udayar said in surprise. His tenderness vanished. "Don't ask me such silly questions".

"I am not complaining; I merely wanted to know", she said miserably. She was beginning to cry.

“If it wasn’t for her, you wouldn’t be here at all”, his voice was hoarse. “Just remember that!”

The next morning, he got on his horse and rode away. She felt she had driven him away from her and was all the more miserable. Nor could she understand the meaning of his words, ‘if it wasn’t for her, you wouldn’t be here at all’. What did he mean by that? That a wife should owe her position to the goodwill of the mistress was not understandable to her. The more she thought about it, the more humiliating it sounded. After pondering a great deal, she decided that to stay with her husband with the permission of the mistress was worse than putting up with the minor humiliations of her parents’ home. If she didn’t like it beyond a certain point, there was the ultimate way out – suicide. But before deciding on it, she wanted to go back to her parents just once and ask their advice. She told one of the servants to have the bullock cart ready. It was then that Ganapathy who had been a silent and sympathetic spectator so far came and spoke to her.

“Are you going somewhere Amma?” he asked innocently.

“Yes Ganapathy, I am going to my parents”, she tried to keep the tears back.

“The master was annoyed over something, wasn’t he?”

“I suppose so”.

“Because, he was not due to go to Palayam until next week,” Ganapathy observed in his slow, sympathetic manner, “Amma, I don’t know what happened between you yesterday, but I want you to listen to me. After you have heard me, if you still want to go to your parents’ house, you can do so. But now, please tell him to untie the bullocks”.

So, the bullocks were untied and Chinnamma went into the house. Ganapathy followed her.

“It is not right you should be miserable like this”, he said in his halting language. “I will tell you everything that has happened, so that you can understand how these things have come about”.

So, beginning with Udayar’s quarrel with his uncle. Ganapathy told the whole story. He told Chinnamma how Udayar met Meena, how she did not know that he was married and how she left him when she found out. Meena giving up dancing, the lose of her baby, her visit to the Swamiji and the temple where her decision was approved and how she had persuaded Udayar to take Chinnamma back – Ganapathy did not leave a thing out. It took a long time, Chinnamma listened with rapt attention. He concluded, “So, you see Amma, Meena is not an ordinary deva daasi who

takes money in return for the pleasures she provides. She is very fond of our master and has proved it many times”.

“That makes it all the harder for me, doesn’t it?”

“You should not think like that”, said Ganapathy. “She has always wanted you to be happy; so you should not try and make her miserable in your happiness. Whether you succeed or fail, it will be bad for both of you. You should think of her as a sister rather than as a rival or any enemy. I can assure you she is one in a thousand”.

Chinnamma was confused. She had always thought of deva daasies as a set of loose, money grabbing women with no moral sense. But here was one whose sense of fairness seemed to be above her own. On the other hand, she still did not like to think of her own happiness as being the result of another woman’s unsolicited generosity.

“She probably thought she would lose him in any case”, she ventured when Ganapathy had finished. “That is probably why she sent him to me”.

“No Amma, it is not so”, Ganapathy remonstrated. “It was because she thought it was wrong for you to be neglected. She told us, “I cannot build my happiness on the foundations of another woman’s sorrow”. “That shows how good she is!”

“She must be very fond of him I suppose”.

“She is. She will do anything for him”.

Talking to Ganapathy was a great relief to her. It was better than fasting and brooding. She now thought of Meena and wondered what sort of a person she was and how she could compete with her. She was probably not only attractive, but was educated and sophisticated and could talk about things in which men were interested. She herself knew only about farm work and running a house. ‘I bet she doesn’t know the difference between a sheep and a goat’, she thought, to console herself. But it was poor consolation when she knew that her husband was spending his time in her company.

Ganapathy came again to talk to her the next day and she found a peculiar satisfaction in talking to him about Meena.

“After all, many men have two wives living in the same house”, continued Ganapathy more or less from where he had left off the previous day. “But you are a mistress in your own home. So you should not begrudge master, a bit of pleasure”.

“But she is not his wife!” Chinnamma cried. “A wife is respectable but a mistress.....well, she is only a mistress. He goes to her not because he is married to her, but because, he wants to. That is what hurts me”.

“You know Amma, if you meet her, you would like her. She is so much like you in many ways”.

“I suppose she is very clever and attractive”.

“She has told me so often she would like to meet you”.

“How can I meet a woman like that?” Chinnamma was angry. “What will people say? I don’t want to compare myself with her in any way”.

“There is no question of comparison Amma”, Ganapathy smiled. “She knows her place and she will give you the respect that is due to your position. She will not make you feel hurt or anything like that”.

“Why, have you talked to her about me?”

“Every time I go there she asks after you, how you are getting on, whether you are happy and whether master treats you nicely. The first time after you came here, she sent master away after only three days because she said it was not right for you to be left alone for too long. Since you were new here, she thought you would be worried and upset”.

After a few more conversations with Ganapathy, Chinnamma’s hatred of Meena slowly turned to curiosity and then to grudging admiration. She must be an unusual kind of woman, Chinnamma thought, to send a man away to his wife when she herself had no hold over him. Perhaps, she was not as bad as she had imagined her to be. It would be interesting to find out what it was that attracted her husband to her. Chinnamma had no friends of her own in the village as yet. Nor had she any sisters with whom she could discuss things. Gradually, she got used to the idea of meeting Meena, if only to see how she could beat her at her own game.

But any such meeting would have to be in secret and without Udayar’s knowledge. It had to be at a time when Udayar was in Achipatti and Chinnamma could find an excuse for going into Palayam. It was of course impossible for Meena to come to Achipatti.

One day, when Udayar had just returned from Palayam, Chinnamma went to him. “I haven’t been to see my parents for a long time. I would like to go and see how they are getting on”.

“Why didn’t you go while I was in Palayam instead of running away as soon as I return?” he grumbled. He was now used to Chinnamma managing things and would miss her if she were away.

“I will be away only for one night”, she said. “On my way back I want to buy some things in Palayam. That way, even if Udayar came to know of her presence in Palayam, she had a reason.

“Women are always buying things and spending money”, he grumbled.

“I would like to take Ganapathy with me”.

“Yes, take him. At least he will see to it that you are not cheated by the shop keepers”.

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Chinnamma went to her meeting with Meena with considerable anxiety and fear. She knew many men had mistresses, but they were not a part of a married woman’s life. Their existence went unrecognized, except on those rare occasions when a man foolishly spent all his money on his mistress and left his wife and children to fend for themselves. Even then, it was discussed only in private among his relations, and rarely mentioned in public. No wife went to meet her husband’s mistress, even in secret. But Ganapathy had assured Chinnamma that no mistress was like Meena and she had come to depend more and more on Ganapathy’s practical, earthy wisdom. She wondered if she was doing the right thing, what people would say if they found out about it and most important of all, what her husband would say.

She had dressed with considerable care for the occasion. She expected Meena to be fashionable and sophisticated, all the things that she was not. So, instead of competing in being modern, she decided to wear her most expensive sari and heavy gold jewellery. She was somehow quite sure that Meena would not have such expensive things.

But she need not have worried. Meena had been expecting her and treated her as if Chinnamma was her mistress and she, her slave. She was dressed in simple every day clothes and one or two gold ornaments which she had bought out of the rent from the corner farm. Chinnamma felt very over dressed and it made her feel more embarrassed.

Meena welcomed her and offered the only wooden chair in the house for her to sit. But Chinnamma refused it and preferred to sit on the floor on a mat. Meena placed a cushion for her comfort and herself sat at a respectful distance. When she offered something to eat, Chinnamma said ‘No’.

“Please have some light refreshments”, Meena pleaded. “You have been on a long journey from Sirumudi and you must be tired and hungry. I know your caste restrictions; everything has been prepared by a Brahmin cook and I have not touched them in any way. I merely told him what to make”.

Now that her caste scruples had been satisfactorily observed, Chinnamma washed her hands and feet in the back yard and ate some of the deliciously prepared snacks.

“Are you not going to have something?” she asked Meena

“I would not presume to eat with you”, replied Meena, for eating together implied social equality. Then she continued, “It is not often that I have the privilege of entertaining someone like you in a poor home. If you had sent for me, I would have come to meet you anywhere, because I have been eager to meet you. But I could not come to your house without your permission and without people talking about it. And we couldn’t have met anywhere else. That is why you had to come here”.

Chinnamma was overwhelmed by Meena’s charm and the respect she showed to her. Used as she was to the girls in her own village, with little or no education and no interests beyond farming and family, it was a revelation to her that a deva daasi who was considered a social outcast could have such politeness and culture and the ability to put someone at ease by a few well chosen words. But she was still a little reserved. “You are very kind”, she said trying to match Meena’s politeness.

“I want you to understand one thing”, Meena continued. “In everything, you come first. You are his wife; you have a status in society to maintain and you are recognized by the world. I am merely his plaything. I may be here today and gone tomorrow if he gets tired of me. And I will not forget your kindness in coming to see me. Most wives in your position would have done their best to prevent their husband going back to the mistress. But you have trusted me and I will be worthy of that trust. If at any time your interests clash with mine, I will give in without a murmur. You never need to worry on my account”.

Chinnamma was deeply moved by the sincerity and the affection in Meena’s words. Under other circumstances, she would have gone and hugged her and shed tears with her, but an innate reserve, generations of tradition, the fact that Meena was ‘after all’ a deva daasi, stood in the way. And one side of her was still wary. “Why have you done all this for me?” she asked.

“Oh! There are so many reasons”, said Meena shrugging her shoulders. “But most of them are selfish I am afraid. If he had neglected you permanently, he would have probably regretted it in his old age and would have blamed me for not having a son recognized by the world. Frankly, I could not bear to be blamed like that. Or sooner or later, he would have wanted you back, may be in a fit of anger against me, may be in a religious or moral fervor, or in a moment of family loyalty. Then, he might have left me. But as it is, he will be grateful to me for having made him take you back and knows that I have his interests at heart. He might think twice before leaving me now. So you see, my action was really selfish”.

Some how, this made Chinnamma feel better and think even more highly of Meena. “Not many women would have done what you did, in the circumstances”, she said.

“Not many women would have come to see me, like you have done”, Meena countered. “Most would have spent their time devising ways and means of stopping their husbands coming to see. But you have never spoken a word against me”.

May be her husband had not told Meena about the only conversation they had had about her. Even if had, the fact that Meena had ignored it showed her wisdom and tact.

“I would not know how to turn him against you”, said Chinnamma frankly. “Now that I have met you, I would not want to”.

“Yes, I can see you are very innocent; He is lucky to have a wife like you”.

They talked like this for some time. Slowly, Chinnamma became free and easy with Meena. The instant liking they took to each other was gradually becoming a warm affection. They discussed the man they both loved – never mentioning him by name since that was not considered polite – but always referring to him as ‘he’. Each loved him in a different way, but both, with true loyalty and devotion. That love as well as the innate goodness that each possessed brought them together and created bonds of sympathy and understanding. The jealousy and the humiliation that Chinnamma felt gradually gave way, though a little of the reserve still remained.

“But you are so clever”, Chinnamma said. “You can sing and dance and are good at conversation and.....” she hesitated. “You know how to please men”.

“Yes, I know all these things”, Meena replied with a sigh. “They help you to attract a man and enable you to take his money from him, but not necessarily to keep him. I have no claims recognized by society, no rights and no privileges.... and no permanence”.

“Yes, I suppose your situation in many ways is worse than mine”, Chinnamma could now afford to offer sympathy. “What will happen to you if he were to leave you?”

Meena told her about the farm he had bought for her and the child she had lost. “So you see, even if he were to leave me, I will have some income and need not go back to the life that had been planned for me from birth. I suppose I will live like a widow. Only, I cannot even wear white”.

“He will not leave you if I have anything to do with it”, Chinnamma declared.

“He has promised never to leave me”, Meena said. “He has never broken his promise, but where women are concerned, a man’s promise is only as good as his love. In the last two years, we have been through a lot together and I think he has full trust in me now”.

“I think he needs us both for his happiness”, said Chinnamma. “Each of us individually can fulfill only half his needs. But between us, we can keep him happy and contented”.

Then, having come to a satisfactory understanding about their own life, they talked about other things, about their families, about having children, about Udayar’s likes and dislikes and his moods. Far from being jealous or upset, Chinnamma felt that she had found a friend with whom she could share her innermost thoughts. After all, she was sharing her husband with her. However, one thing still bothered Chinnamma and she wondered if she should ask Meena about it.

“Do you mind if I ask you something, something personal?” enquired Chinnamma hesitantly.

“Please ask whatever you want”, said Meena. “As I told you before, you can treat me as your servant and I will not be offended”.

“It is just this. How do you manage to look so attractive with so little jewellery and no expensive sari?”

Meena smiled. “It is the one thing my former profession has taught me”, she said. She came over to where Chinnamma was sitting. “Please stand up”, she said.

Chinnamma stood up awkwardly. Meena walked round her. “You see, you have a very nice and expensive sari, but you wear it like a peasant girl”. Meena bit her lip lest she had offended her guest. “I hope you don’t mind my saying it”.

“Please tell me; I want to learn about it all”, said Chinnamma. “Not that I want to compete with you, but I would like to be a little more sophisticated. After all, I am really only a village girl who happens to have some money”.

“You wear you sari with a bunch at the back. It doesn’t do anything for your figure. Instead of using buttons, you tie your blouse in the front into a knot which is not very elegant. You use a lot of turmeric on your face which makes it very colourless. Come, I will show you what I use. Meena took her into her room. And for next half an hour, they were engrossed in the subject that her husband would not even know, existed.

At last, Ganapathy made his appearance. “Amma, we have to leave now if we are to get back before dark”.

Chinnamma rose to go. “I came here thinking of you as a rival”, she said. “And I am going back having acquired a friend”.

“Think of me not so much as a friend but as a loyal servant or companion if you like, for I will never consider myself your equal”, Meena said as they parted.

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About six months later, Udayar was getting ready to visit Meena when he saw Ganapathy carry an earthen jar into the horse cart.

“What is that jar Ganapathy?” he asked.

“Pickles sir”, he replied looking a bit sheepish.

“Pickles? shouted Udayar. “Why are you putting pickles in the cart? We are not going away for six months!”

“Amma asked me to take them sir”.

“But what for?”

“They are for Meena sir”, he replied looking at the ground. “Amma says Meena likes mango pickles and she can’t get good ones in Palayam”.

“How the devil does Amma know that?”

“Meena must have told her the last time they met sir”.

“What! Udayar spluttered. “What is all this about? When and where did Amma meet Meena? Why am I being kept in the dark about all this?”

“It is all my fault sir”, said Ganapathy.

“I might have known you were up to some mischief”, said Udayar. He had been under the impression that Chinnamma did not know anything about Meena beyond some vague surmises.

So, as they were driving towards Palayam, Ganapathy told him about Chinnamma’s sorrow and her decision to go back to her village, how he talked her first into postponing that decision and then into meeting Meena and how they had met quite a few times after that. “I thought it for the best sir, that the two ladies should get to know each other”.

Udayar pondered for a while rubbing his chin. “You know Ganapathy, women are the very devil to understand”, he said at last.

“You are right about that sir”, his faithful servant agreed.

Udayar urged his horse faster towards Palayam.

EPILOGUE

Ramaswamy Udayar was lying on a bench in the front room of his ancestral house in the village of Achipatti. His head was propped against pillows. A shadow from the doorway crossed his dim eye sight.

“Who is that?” he demanded. His voice was still firm in spite of his eighty five years.

“It is I, Meena”, the shadow replied. It was an elderly, but sprightly little woman who had entered the room.

“When did you come Meena girl?” he enquired. His voice had acquired a tenderness unusual for his age. “Did Kuppan bring you?”

“Yes”.

“He is still the best bullock cart driver”, Mr.Udayar said. “Here, come and sit down and tell me all your news. How is your family?”

Though it was just as much his family as hers, he always referred to her children and grand children as ‘your family’.

“They are all well”, she replied. “Naga is expecting her first child. But otherwise, things are the same as usual”.

Naga was their youngest child, born in the autumn of their love life, and consequently, his favourite.

“Fancy! Naga, that little girl expecting a child!” he mused. “We are getting on I suppose. But I will never see her again”.

“I can easily bring any of the children to see you if you like”, she replied, “Chinnamma has asked me to bring them many times”.

“You are always saying that, but you never do”, the old gentleman grumbled. “Even if they come, I can’t see them properly, with my bad eye sight”.

“Next time, I will bring one or two of the grand children”, she assured him.

“Here, come next to the window where I can see you properly”, he asked her.

She came and stood near him in the light and her wrinkled but still beautiful face had a young smile.

“That is better”, he said as he peered at her. “By the way, have you sold your tobacco crop?”

“Yes”.

“How much did you get for it?”

“I got eleven hundred rupees”, she said.

“That was for four acres, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, the crop was good, but it got some blight towards the end”.

“Two hundred and seventy five rupees per acre”, he calculated. “Not bad. I suppose that son of yours is quite an experienced farmer now”.

“He does his best”, she smiled. “How have you been keeping?” she changed the subject.

“As you see, helpless and useless”, he cried. “Lying here day after day, just thinking”.

They were silent for a while as old people are won’t to be when they are ruminating over their past.

“I have brought you some halva”, Meena interrupted their silence.

It broke his reverie. “What is that? Did you say halva? I hope you didn’t touch it or anything”.

“Do you think I have forgotten your orthodoxy after all these years?” she asked. “No, I did not touch it. I bought it from Krishna Iyer’s coffee club that you used to like. The Brahmin himself placed it in the bullock cart and when we came here, Chinnamma took it out”.

“That is alright then”, he said. “Ask the old woman to bring me some now”.

His wife Chinnamma, who had been standing behind the inner door listening to the conversation, now came into view. “You are a youth of sixteen I suppose; only I have become an old woman”, she grumbled as she went in to bring the halva.

“We are all old and it is no use denying it”, Meena mused. “We have nothing to look forward to except our children’s happiness, and perhaps a peaceful death”.

“Children’s happiness!” Mr.Udayar nearly exploded. “You should talk to my son some times; May be he will listen to you”.

“I hear he is doing well in business”, said Meena.

“I don’t understand all this business of his”, the old gentleman complained. “And what I don’t understand, I don’t trust. I earned whatever I did by charging a reasonable twelve per cent interest, so why can’t he do the same. But these things that Kumaraswamy is doing – factories and machines and foreigners – it are not within our power to control them. As if all these were not enough, he has now gone and bought a motor car. One day, these things will lead him into trouble”.

“We don’t understand these things”, Meena said. “But may be, he does. After all, he went to a high school and learnt English”.

“Just because he has learnt a few crooked letters, it doesn’t mean he knows everything”.

The coming of the halva interrupted the conversation. He ate it with relish as Chinnamma stood over him with a glass of water. “Halva is only sweet I can eat now. Even my teeth are gone, so I can’t chew anything”. Mr.Udayar complained.

After eating the halva, he slowly got up to wash his fingers and walked towards the door. Chinnamma tried to help him. “I don’t need your help”, he shouted. “My legs are still firm. It is my eye sight that is bad”.

The effort of eating the halva and walking to the front yard to wash his fingers seemed to have tired him and he closed his eyes.

Just then, his grand daughter Kamalam rushed in. "Meena! Meena! The little girl shouted. "You promised to bring me your anklet bells. Have you brought them?"

"Yes dear, I have brought them".

"They are teaching me dancing at school and if I could have a real dancer's anklet bells, may be it will improve my dancing".

"Anklet bells!" Udayar suddenly came to life again. "Why do you need anklet bells, Meena girl you gave up dancing a long time ago".

"But I have kept my anklet bells all these years", Meena said. "I am glad that at last they are being used".

"Useless things!" Mr. Udayar muttered.

"You remember the steel trunk we bought in Sri Rangam, the first time we went there", Meena asked.

"What steel trunk? I don't remember any steel trunk".

"I was cleaning it out the other day and I came across these bells at the bottom of that trunk".

"I know you were always buying things", Mr. Udayar said. "All women are the same in that respect".

"Do you remember the doll we bought, the doll Kaveri that caused all the trouble?"

"How do you expect me to remember everything you bought in all these years?"

'This is what happens to the deepest and the most precious of sentiments', Meena thought regretfully. 'With old age, they all disappear into the oblivion of forgetfulness'.

Chinnamma brought the anklet bells. "They are beautiful!" Kamalam shouted, "These are real bronze; what we get in the bazaar are made of brass and they don't have this quality of sound". The bells jingled as she waved them and danced away.

"In my time, only deva daasies were allowed to dance. A girl from a respectable family wouldn't dream of wearing those bells. Now they teach them dancing in school". Meena said to Chinnamma.

“Yes, the whole world is upside down”, Chinnamma agreed.

“The costume I had made for my farewell performance was all moth eaten”. There was regret in Meena’s voice as she said this. “And I had to throw it away last week”. It was exactly sixty two years ago. Only, it doesn’t seem so long some how”.

“Come Meena, let him sleep. We will sit at the back and have a chat”, and Chinnamma took Meena with her.

The two ladies settled down on a mat in one of the back rooms, pounding betel nuts and leaves together and chewing.

“How has he been keeping?” Meena enquired. He seems rather grumpy”.

“Having been a busy man all his life, he finds it hard just to sit and do nothing”, Chinnamma replied. “Losing his eye sight has been a big blow, because it makes him feel helpless. Further, his memory is not what it was”.

“I thought so. When I mentioned the steel trunk, he didn’t seem to know that I was talking about”.

“Was that when you wanted to throw yourself in the river?”

“Yes, I didn’t know you knew about it”.

“I myself have felt like it a few times in my life, but I suppose there have also been compensations”.

“On that first trip, we quarreled over a doll. But I bought it in the end. I still keep it. Silly sentiment!”

“Yes, one gets attached to things like that”.

“I wish I could look after him”, Meena said changing the subject.

“I can manage easily”, Chinnamma smiled. “He is really a child in many ways”.

“That is not what I mean”, Meena paused before continuing. “I know you can look after him without my help. What I mean is, every time he has been sick, whenever he has been helpless, and now in his old age, he has relied on you. I have not been able to do anything for him. He has only come to me... for his pleasures”.

“Kumaraswamy wanted to bring a doctor to see him”, Chinnamma said. “But he said ‘No’”.

Meena was in a reminiscent mood. “I wonder which of us is the luckier one”, she said.

“We have both been lucky; we have had a good a life as any woman has a right to expect”.

They talked about the old times, about the ups and downs in their lives, about their children and about the man who was the lord and master of both and who now lay helpless in the front room. They laughed and they shed tears, but on the whole, they were contented and happy. They had had a full life and could look forward to their death without regret or remorse.

The sound of a motor car interrupted their quiet chat. “That is Kumaraswamy arriving, I had better go and see if lunch is ready”, Chinnamma went into the kitchen.

“Hello, Meena! How are you?” asked Kumaraswamy as he came in and saw Meena. Everyone in the house called her Meena though she was always respectful and used the plural form to address all adult members. “You have not been for six weeks and because of that, father has been in a grumpy mood”.

“What with one thing and another. I have been busy”.

“Too many grand children, that is your trouble”, he laughed.

‘He is just like his father when he laughs’, she thought. “What have you been doing?” she asked.

“You know I have started a new factory, don’t you?”

“So I have heard”.

“You should invest some of your money in it”, he said. “It is called a limited company, so anyone can invest. It will do well and make good profits. From the point of view of industrialization, the war has been a great help. With the stoppage of goods from Europe, it has been possible for us in India to establish factories and textile mills. In fact, I am in the process of planning a mill now”.

“That is why you need the motor car I suppose”.

“Yes, would you like to have a ride in it? It will take you to Palayam in fifteen minutes”.

“I have managed with a bullock cart all my life and so has your father. I don’t want to change my habits now”.

“But the whole world is changing”.

“May be, but we are too old to change”, she said and added. “All these factories and things must keep you in the city a lot”.

“Yes, they need a lot of attention”, he admitted. “That is why I have taken a bungalow in Madurai. It is also useful for Kamalam and Ramu to go to school. These village schools are no good”.

“And you neglect your family and your lands”, she pursued her own train of thought.

“The family is alright here and the lands can be run by anyone, but factories involving a lot of money need my personal attention”.

“Your father is not happy”, she said.

“He doesn’t understand things”, Kumaraswamy replied.

“Let us hope all these now fangled ideas will not land you into difficulties”, said Meena. “I suppose there is a lot of risk involved in running these factories”.

“There are always risks”, Kumaraswamy shrugged his shoulders. “But one takes them provided there are compensating advantages. Even in lending money, there were risks. But father took them”.

“Yes, he was a brave man for his time”, Meena sighed.

“You know Meena, I can tell you these things and make you understand, but no one else in the family does”.

“Yes, everybody tells me things”, she admitted. “That is because I have no power. I have always relied on love and everyone understands and appreciates it. When you have power, then there is conflict and bitterness”.

“You are a wise old woman Meena”, he laughed. “It is a pity I couldn’t find some one like you”.

“But you have been searching often enough”, he said. “And that is not a good thing”.

“You know everything, don’t you?”

Janaki, Kumaraswamy's wife came and announced that lunch was ready. They all ate, first the men, then Meena in the outer room – as a lower caste woman, she was not permitted in the kitchen - and lastly the ladies of the house.

At three o'clock, Chinnamma brought her husband, his usual cup of coffee while Meena stood near her.

"Where is Meena?" he asked.

"I am here", replied Meena as she came forward.

"Come here where I can see you; don't sit at the back and gossip all the time".

The hot cup of coffee seemed to have revived him. He asked her in greater detail about her family, about her farms and about the people he had known in Palayam. The conversation was interspersed by silence in which they enjoyed the peace of quiet companionship, knowing that each liked the mere presence of the other.

Finally he asked, "Did you speak to my son?"

"Yes, I spoke to him", she replied. "We mustn't forget he is a grown man and has a sense of responsibility. He is also educated. He knows what he is doing. If we don't understand everything he does, it is not his fault".

"But he neglects his wife in preference to all those women he sees in the city. That is not a good thing, is it?"

"No, but which of us is perfect?" Meena asked him, "Did your uncle like what you did?"

"Old age is a terrible thing; there is no going back on it".

"We have had our time; let the youngsters have theirs now".

"I suppose so", he agreed reluctantly.

"The sun is going down and I should be leaving if I am to get to my village before dark", she remarked.

"Meena!" he spoke almost in a conspiratorial voice. "Why don't you ask Kumaraswamy to take you in his motor car? I haven't got into that thing myself, but you may enjoy it".

"I think I will stick to my bullock cart". "Yes, perhaps it is more reliable".

Suddenly, Mr.Udayar got up. "Ramu!" he shouted. "Ramu! That young scamp is never here when you want him".

"I will call him", Meena went to the back.

The old gentleman got up, picked up his stick and moved step by step into the central hall where he had his safe. Meena came back and tried to help him, but he pushed her aside saying, "I can manage".

He sat in front of his safe, took the keys from round his waist, felt for the key hole with his fingers and opened it. "Ramu, where are you boy?"

"I am here grand father", he came forward, full of mischief in his laughing eyes.

The old gentleman took out a bundle of notes from the safe and asked the boy, "What are these?"

"They are hundred rupee notes".

Mr.Udayar put them under his right foot. He took out another bundle. "What are these?" he asked.

"They are ten rupee notes", the boy replied.

He put them under his left foot. "Now run along boy", he cried.

"You have forgotten the money for my sweets grand father", the boy reminded him.

"Here, take this; now run along, run", the old man shouted.

"What a terrible thing it is to lose your eye sight and have to depend on a little boy even for identifying money", he said to himself. Then, he shouted for Meena.

"I am here", she said.

He carefully took two notes from the right foot and five from the left, counted them twice to make sure and handed them to Meena. "Here, take this, don't go throwing it away; if you have to spend it, spend it on something useful".

"There is no need for you to give me any money; Thanks to you, I am amply provided for".

"Don't be silly; take it".

She took the money. He carefully put the bundles of notes inside the safe, the hundreds on the right hand side and the tens on the left hand side and locked it. He moved back to the bench in the front room.

Chinnamma, who had been watching the whole thing from behind the door, came forward now. "How much did he give you?" she asked.

Meena showed her, Chinnamma remarked. "Two hundred and fifty rupees; last time it was only one hundred and fifty. He must be feeling more generous'.

'No,' Meena said. 'It is because I haven't been here for nearly two months'.

'Meena, how about some commission for me?' Ramu asked. 'After all, I helped grandfather to give you the money'.

'Here, you naughty boy', she gave him ten rupees and a big kiss.

'I have found out why grandfather gives you money', he whispered.

'You will be like your grandfather when you grow up. I can see it', said Meena.

She said her goodbyes and departed. 'Tell Kuppan to drive carefully. And don't be too long before you come again', was the old gentleman's parting remark.

