A

HANDFUL

OF

EARTH

KASTHURI SREENIVASAN

FOR RAJESWARI AND DAMOTHARAN

CONTENTS

PART ONE

THE EARTH IS DRY

I

The earth is dry; it is bare and brown. The sun drops his load of heat on her uneven face. In vain the plough is thrust into the heart of the unresponsive ground; in vain the seed is sown on the barren soil, for the earth no longer yields. Only the cactus grows here and there, raising its twisted, thorny head against the horizon. The trees stand like grey skeletons, thrusting from the earth, for the leaves are dead. The bright rays of the sun beat the land with fearful intensity and the cruel wind raises the dust, red and black dust from the fields and white dust from the road.

In an agricultural community, rain brings life and work, happiness and prosperity and plenty, and occasionally, misery and destruction. But men cannot live without it; it dominates their lives, dictates the terms under which they shall live, regulates the seasons of hard work and lazy indolence. It controls when they shall celebrate their weddings and festivals, gives them their faiths and their beliefs and their superstitions. It is their eternal protector, benevolent master, their blind avenger of fate.

But there is no rain. And the fields are barren. Even the wells are dry. The sun-baked earth crumbles easily and the soft brown soil is carried away by the wind, exposing the hard stony ground underneath. Life comes to a standstill. The farmer no longer ploughs his land. The blacksmith does not make his implements, for they are of no use. The weaver cannot sell the cloth he weaves. Women do not buy ornaments from the jeweller. Even the village priest, who presides over every celebration or calamity, is powerless; he rolls up his almanac and waits for the heavens to open.

Day after day, men look at the sky. It is clear and bright, and the cruel sun shines mercilessly, burning everything it falls upon. Will it come in time, they ask; and when it does not, will it come at all, they wonder. They wait and watch, hope and pray. They pray to the rain-god; they ask him to drive his golden chariot over the mountains of clouds and to flash his lightning whip across the sky so that it may rain. But they do not hear the thunderous rolling of those celestial wheels, nor see the brilliant flashes of his diamond whip. They look to the heavens above for divine help and towards the stars for their guidance. But the mute and powerful gods have let them down, as so often before. The heavens have failed to grant their wish and the silent stars that wink their eyes at earthly folly seem indifferent. And Mother Earth, once so loving and fruitful, is now barren.

Occasionally, a few wandering clouds gather together and cast a shadow over the village. Men look up with hope and expectation. Their hearts sing in silent ecstasy, but they dare not speak of it. They merely say that the priest had told them that it was an auspicious day for rain. They gaze at the sky for a while, until the wind disperses the clouds and the sun shines with greater intensity than ever before.

If the prices are high, it is the fault of the townspeople. If the taxes are high, it is the fault of the Government. But if there is no rain, it is fate. 'God is against us,' they say. 'It is beyond our hands; it is fate.' And they find consolation in that statement. That is their philosophy and that is their religion, for they know no other. That is their life. 'How long, oh, God, how long are we to suffer?'

In the village of Sirumudi, everything is idle in the afternoon. Emaciated cattle stand in the farm yards, moving their tails now and then in order to drive away the flies on their sores. Men and women stay indoors, for there is no work in the fields. The beggar rests in the dust under the banyan tree, too weak to walk to the next village in search of food. The washerman's donkey with its front legs hobbled is chewing an old newspaper for its dinner. A stray dog howls at the donkey as it walks past in search of something to eat. Only the wind blows, taking away some of the soil with each gust and filling the entire space with it. There is no fodder for the cattle, no grain for human beings and even drinking water is getting scarce.

The earth is dry; it is parched and cracked and waiting. But there is no rain.

II

The kitchen was dark and stuffy, with no windows to let the smoke out and light and air in. A few cracks in the titles of the roof allowed thin shafts of sunlight to penetrate the semi-darkness. Guruswamy was squatting on the floor and eating his midday meal. Meena carried some dirty pots into the back-yard. When she returned, she announced:

'There isn't any more.'

Guruswamy looked up from his enamel dish. 'What about some butter-milk?' he asked.

'There is no more butter-milk.'

'Didn't you get some from Mr. Udayar's house?'

'They gave a little and it was just sufficient for Muthu and your father. They also told me that there won't be any more butter-milk in future. Since young Mr. Udayar's wife quarrelled with her husband and went away, there is no woman to run that home and it is servants' rule now.'

He wiped the dish clean with his fingers and then licked them slowly until there was not a bit of food left anywhere. Then he got up and went into the yard to wash his hands.

'Is there any rice for you?' he asked when he returned.

'I am all right,' she answered evasively.

But he did not trust her. She had put away all the cooking pots in the yard which meant there was no food left. It would be just like her, to give everything to her little son and her husband and his father, and starve herself. He realised with horror that he had had a full, or almost a full, meal while she was probably starving. He went to the fire-place and peered into one of the pots that was still there. There was some *kanji* in it-the water in which the rice had been boiled.

'Is that all you have left?' he asked.

'There is also some rice at the bottom of the *kanji*,' she said. 'I have put it in there in order to clear away the pots.'

Guruswamy did not trust her. But he did not like to investigate further, lest it should make him feel even more guilty. Instead, he decided to go out and escape having to see what his wife was going to eat.

But just as he was going out, his wife shouted at him. 'All the grain we had is finished,' she said.

'What, so soon?' he turned round surprised, though he knew the situation as well as she did.

'How long do you think it will last when four people have to be fed?'

He knew it had lasted nearly twice as long as it would have done in the old days. He went to the corner in the kitchen where the hessian bag was kept, bent down and lifted it. It was empty and lying on the floor, shrunken and shrivelled.

Without speaking a word-for there was nothing he could say-he surveyed the kitchen. A couple of rusty tins containing condiments, a dark glass bottle with cooking oil but nearly empty, three brass tumblers and a metal jug, a few mud pots made by the village potter, a few sticks of firewood near the fire-place – and that was all. There was nothing that could be turned into money, much less into food. At one time, this kitchen had been full of shining bronze utensils that his wife had brought as her dowry. But within the last year, they had disappeared one by one without his knowledge, but nevertheless with his connivance.

'I have no money to buy grain,' she said.

She was cruel, relentless in exposing the desperate situation in which they were placed. He knew that there was no grain and no money, and yet she insisted on pointing it out to him. Every word she said was an accusation against him though it was merely the truth. He looked her over from head to foot. Not a piece of gold or silver anywhere on her body. Her ears, nose and neck, wrists and ankles and toes, were all bare. She wore nothing except her sari – and that was very old - and the 'tali', the string with a piece of gold hanging from it which he had tied round her neck before the holy fire on the day she became his wife, nearly ten years ago.

'What happened to the money I got for the buffalo?' he asked. Even if he knew, he had to ask, had to pretend, had to show his authority in some way.

'We sold a dead buffalo, not a live one,' Meena reminded him. 'If you had only listened to me and sold it when it was milking, we might have got something for it. But you waited until all the fodder was finished and we had no more and there was no grass and the untouchables took it away after it died of hunger. They complained afterwards that the meat was no good. And I bought grain in the black market for the ten rupees we got for it.'

Guruswamy was sorry he had ever raised the subject of the buffalo. There was only one way out of the argument and he resorted to it now.

'Is is my fault there isn't anything to eat?' he shouted. 'You know I have been looking for work everywhere and there is none to be had. How can I earn money when the whole world is idle?'

'Your brother isn't idle. His wife hasn't got to sell her jewellery to feed her husband. He is the right-hand man of the master and he can get just what he wants any time.'

'He is a rogue, and not fit to be called my brother.'

'All right, I will go and pawn my *tali* to provide your next meal,' and she began to sob.

Tears! Tears! They were sharper than the sword of a bitter enemy and more penetrating. How was one to resist it? How often had they made him feel ashamed, angry, futile and desperate!

'You needn't start howling now; I will see if I can manage something.' And he went out.

In the next and only other room in the house the old man was lying on a mat on the floor and shouted at Guruswamy ah he passed, 'What is the trouble?'

'Nothing,' he answered as he disappeared.

Muthu, his son, came dashing to him saying, 'Appa, I want a few nuts to eat. Give me an *anna* to buy some.'

The little boy wailed, for he had seen another lad munching.

'Ask your mother,' Guruswamy shouted and went out without stopping.

It was always the same. Whatever the trouble, the man put on his shirt if he had one, or if he hadn't, tied his towel round his head and went out into the village or into the fields and escaped it all. But the woman had to stay in, pacify the children, look after the infirm, and get a meal ready even when there was no grain in the house. In the evening, the man came back and sat on the verandah; he did not ask to be fed, but he looked and talked as if he had been working hard and the woman had to ask him to come and have his meal if only out of habit. He seemed to expect it and she felt rotten if she had nothing to give.

III

Losing his temper and shouting at his wife was a habit that Guruswamy had acquired only in the last year or two. In the past, he was used to facing every emergency with a smile. He usually started by grinning, and slowly, almost imperceptibly, it broadened into a smile. The broader the smile, the more his eyes sank into their sockets until they became two narrow horizontal slits across his face. It was an explanation for his actions, a method of defence, an excuse for his faults and an expression of satisfaction. At times, particularly in his youth, it was quizzical, with an air of irony about it. But there was one peculiar thing about it. It was conclusive. There was no getting beyond it. If he disagreed with someone, he just smiled and they knew that the argument was over and the difference of opinion was permanent. When it expressed confidence, or mockery of others, people had been attracted by it and said how nice he was.

But as time went on, it expressed nothing more than failure and helplessness, and certain obstinacy even in that; it merely exasperated his friends and relations and irritated others. Instead of being a positive smile, it became purely negative. People who had once been unable to resist it found that it merely succeeded in disarming adverse criticism and evoking a certain amount of pity or contempt. But it did not succeed in persuading people to help him or stand by him, for there was an element of the ridiculous about it. Somehow, he looked silly and absurd. When he was particularly nervous or embarrassed or afraid, he had also acquired the habit of passing his fingers through his thick, black matted hair. This action only emphasised the finality of the smile and put the finishing touches to other people's irritation and his own helplessness.

When he was about sixteen, a holy man had visited the village and had given a series of discourses on the Hindu epics and mythologies. He sang the verses and explained them at nights to a tired and half-sleepy audience with the help of a dim and smoky oil lamp. The audience dispersed late, praising the man's mastery of the classics and flow of language, but they forgot all about it the next day. But not so Guruswamy; the holy man had kindled a

hidden spark in his heart and it burnt with all the first enthusiasm of youth. Soon, the village boy with only the rudiments of reading and writing learnt by heart all the ancient classics of his religion and his language. But his was not the approach of an intellectual scholar. He was like a man parched with thirst at a fountain of cool, clear water. And the thirst was not quenched easily, for it was a thirst that came again and again. He drank deeply, indiscriminately. It was not the beauty of language, the turn of a phrase, the construction of a plot, the character of the gods that appealed to him. It was the ecstasy of faith and music and belief in mythology interwoven into popular religion that carried him away. The eternity of the after-life gave objectivity towards his present existence on earth that was not conducive to worrying about mundane matters. He liked to discuss with the village priest and one or two others similarly inclined, the mythological stories and concepts; he began to observe all the prescribed fasts and on Saturday nights, when they had *bhajana* in the temple, he used to sing and lose himself in an ecstasy of godliness.

For he had the soul of an artist. And the village community had only one outlet for the expression of his emotions. He himself did not know clearly what he wanted. He had a vague desire to lose himself in an orgy of emotions, to forget him and be one with the Infinite, as the holy man had instructed him to be the aim and end of all life. Some interpreted it as a love of music, others said it was a love of God; a few said it was laziness. But the village people were prepared to make allowances for him because his father had twenty acres of land and the son could afford to please himself to a certain extent, especially when he had a father and an elder brother to look after family matters. But they said he would be different when once he got married and acquired the responsibilities of a family. They said it not because they had any valid reasons for believing it, but they liked him and felt he ought to get on in life. Singing and godliness were all right in their place, but they did not make up for the life of a land-owner. Guruswamy did not say anything to all this; he just smiled.

So, according to custom, he was married when he was twenty. He neither resisted it nor desired it. But the physical intimacy brought about a profound, if temporary, change in him. His wife was considered a beauty, with a glowing brown skin and an attractive face and a desirable figure, and he was rather proud of her. When Guruswamy's friends made sly jokes about his good luck, he pretended to be annoyed, but he was secretly happy.

At nights, his father used to sleep in the verandah and his mother in the kitchen so that the only room in the house was made over to him and his young wife for the night. In the darkness of that small stuffy room, he learnt for the first time the delights of the flesh. Carnal pleasure was something he had learnt to ridicule in his religious fervour, but now he found it quite different to what he had imagined it to be. The emotion he had spent on the abstract love of God was transferred, temporarily at any rate, towards this new feeling he acquired for his wife. But he could not sing about it or talk about it and express it publicity in the same way as his religious feeling. He could only whisper to his wife in the darkness, and

in the beginning, she was too shy even to answer back. During the day, he did not even talk to her as that was not considered proper among newly married couples, and all his domestic requirements were attended to by his mother just as in the past. But his love for his wife was all the more intense because of the suppression of his feelings and he found himself looking longingly at her in the kitchen while his mother was serving him with food and talking to him about the events of the day.

People's expectations were fulfilled. Guruswamy was no longer punctual in his attendance at the temple and he missed even some Saturday nights. He did not go off on pilgrimages as was his habit when harvest had to be gathered, he did not hang about absent-mindedly, but worked as hard as any other farmer in the village.

As soon as he got married, the family plot of land was divided between himself and his brother and he was now the sole proprietor of ten acres of land. True, it was not very fertile and there was no means of irrigation, but he could legitimately describe himself as a land-owner and not just a peasant. At the same time, he wanted to improve himself and so borrowed money from Mr. Udayar to dig a well in his field. That was the beginning of his misfortune. The well proved to be dry, but the interest on the money went on mounting. It so happened that his field was adjacent to his creditor's who had had his eye on it for some time. So, the creditor got the field and Guruswamy became a landless peasant.

But everything Mr. Udayar touched turned into gold, for as soon as he bought the land, he deepened the well, brought fresh soil and manure, and within a couple of years it was the best yielding farm in the village, worth many times what Guruswamy got for it. Now, in spite of four year's drought, it was one of the few wells which still had some water for irrigation. Guruswamy became a paid worker on a field of which he had once been master.

But while he had come down in the world socially and financially, his pride had failed to keep pace with it. He was not the blustering show-off type who could carry off any unpleasant situation with a retort or witticism. His pride was of the sensitive kind that did not always express itself openly but took offence at every unintentional remark and attributed deliberate motives to every spontaneous jest. It would not allow him to plead or argue his cause even if he was in the right. He would rather suffer in silence than expose himself to the indignity of a quarrel. He would not ask lest he was considered coveting; nor would he assert himself lest he was thought bullying. But he was none the less proud. The result was, he soon found himself out of a job, thanks to the maneuvering of the other servants to get into the good books of their master. He got temporary employment a few times after that, and when the monsoon failed for a third time, he found himself one of the many who had absolutely no work and no prospects of work.

Everyone in the village – even those who had encouraged him in his venture – said he was a fool to have started digging the well with his meagre resources, a fool to have sold the land just before the prices went up because of the post-war boom, a fool to have gone into

Mr. Udayar's employment and a bigger fool still to have left it. His family, particularly his wife, concurred with that general view.

IV

Meena had come to him as a shy, obedient bride of sixteen, full of fear and respect for the man who was chosen as her husband. She did not presume to judge him because he was supposed to be her lord and master not only in this life but for all eternity, through every rebirth and regeneration; and because he had been chosen by her elders, she did not question their wisdom. Further, she had no opportunity to judge him, for she saw very little of him at first. But as time went on, the idealism of the Hindu wife gave place to the realism of the practical married woman running a home.

In spite of the fact that marriage had urged him into temporary enterprise and enthusiasm, she soon found out that he had not the capacity to plan or to organize even such a simple thing as digging a well in the field. He had no grasp of details, the lack of which cost so much money. He was frequently absent-minded and, while he himself worked hard, he let the others working for him slacken. Slowly, she found that she had to do so many things that were normally the province of the husband. Though he was still the 'lord and master' in theory, she was really the mainspring of action.

At first she started hinting to him, but he did not take any notice. She used to talk about things to her new-born baby but within her husband's hearing. Since it had no effect, she started to tell him about the farm, about a proper arrangement of work, about the various men they employed, about the prospects of getting water in the well. But he seemed to fare even worse with her advice than without it.

She urged him to abandon the well when there was no water, so that they could at least save the field for themselves before being involved in too much debt. But with the curious obstinacy of the inefficient and the incapable, he would not listen. Meena's jewellery was sold to deepen the well and there was still no water. Then, when the question of sale came, again she urged him not to sell, saying that they could get a couple of hundred rupees from the field which with their own labour would help to pay off the debt in course of time. He listened and grinned and passed his hand through his hair. But the next day he announced that he had sold the field to Mr. Udayar who had given him five hundred rupees over and above the money he had already lent. When she cried and wailed and shouted that he had been cheated and that he was a fool to have sold it, he gave her the five hundred and told her to buy back the jewellery which had been sold.

Up till then, there were frequent rows, quarrels and mutual recriminations, but there were reconciliations too, and an ardent coming together that was sweet and pleasant. But the loss of the field made a profound difference in their relationship. Till then, they were

husband and wife, having their disagreements perhaps, but essentially working as a team for the common good of the family. Meena was a real peasant woman, deeply attached to the soil, considering it not merely a means of livelihood but a part of her being and part of her life. Though she worked as hard as any peasant woman, the fact of owning land gave her a position in the village society; gave her dignity and status and a certain independence in dealing with others. This was very important to her self-esteem. Deliberate throwing away of all that it implied meant that her husband was no longer serious about looking after her and her family. There were no more reconciliations. She assumed an attitude of permanent sarcasm; he, a permanent aloofness. There was no longer any peace, only a respite between one battle and the next.

Of course, Guruswamy knew he had been wrong to have sold the field and he wondered why he had done it. Was it because of the honeyed words that Mr. Udayar had used, coupled with the vague threats he had implied about going to court if his money was not paid? Was it the temptation of the five new hundred-rupee notes he held out as a bait? After thinking a great deal over it, he came to the conclusion that it was the responsibility of owning a field that was too much for him. He did not like the worry and the constant preoccupation of his mind and soul that its possession implied. The selling of the field made him a free man, to a certain extent. He had not the capacity to get on in life in the only way in which it was understood and appreciated in the village. He had not the sustained enthusiasm, nor the energy for grasping the details and planning the running of a field. In fact he was a miserable failure. That was why he had sold it and though he was sorry for his wife's sake and his boy's, he himself was glad.

Those were the steps by which Guruswamy had come down from the lofty position of being a land-owner to that of a landless and workless labourer who did not know where the next meal was coming from.

V

Outside the house, the sun was hot and glaring, and Guruswamy had to shade his eyes with his hand in order to be able to look down the street. There was no one in sight and he walked down the narrow irregular path slowly, past other houses like his own, past the rubbish heap in the corner which the children used as an open communal lavatory, past the black slimy pool where water from the back-yards of houses had collected and dried. Perhaps, arguments similar to the one he had just had with his wife were taking place in these houses also. He did not know. May be they were a little better off, or perhaps a little worse than himself. He did not know, for no one spoke about such things outside the secret sanctuary of their homes. They complained about being idle, about the lack of rain, about the rations for the month not having arrived in the local ration-shop, about the exorbitant price of grain the black market. They even made jokes about it as when the village priest

who was also considered a wit, said, 'Black market is like God; it is everywhere but you can't see it. And you frequent either only in case of dire need.'

But no one said, 'We haven't lit the fire in our kitchens for the last two days.' No one admitted, 'I am hungry.' That is, no one except the children. But even they were told to shut up by their parents and soon learnt discretion. And yet, everyone was aware. It was one of those secrets that was so well kept because everyone had a part in it.

The priest was just locking the doors of the temple after the afternoon *Puja*. Anyone, seeing his smooth, round shining belly protruding over his loosely tied *dhoti* and the freshly painted *namam* on his forehead, would not know that he had offered only some left-over *kanji* as prasadam to God, which he was going to take afterwards. But he shouted cheerfully at Guruswamy.

'Where are you off to in this heat?' he asked him.

Guruswamy had no idea where he was going. 'I am going to see Mr. Udayar on some business,' he said, and made it sound as if he had some very important work.

'All roads lead to Mr. Udayar's house now,' said Mr. Iyengar the priest, with a sigh. 'He can give us what even God cannot, if he can be persuaded. But he will be in the arms of the goddess of sleep at this time of the day.'

Mr. Iyengar knew the habits of almost everyone in Sirumudi. And Guruswamy was surprised that his unconscious thoughts should have been so easily exposed.

'I will go and wait there,' he said.

'Are you coming to the *bhajana* tomorrow night?'

'Yes, I will come,' and he went briskly on.

Having said that, Guruswamy thought he might as well go there as anywhere else. May be he might even ask Mr. Udayar for a loan. The idea struck him as original and rather brilliant and he wondered why he had not thought of it before. He had repaid it before, even when he had to sell his land to do it and he did not see why it should be refused. Perhaps, Mr. Udayar might even employ him again. As these ideas struck him, he told himself that God would always show a way out when he was really in need. It gave him hope, if only temporarily. He could just imagine going home and counting twenty-five rupees in front of his wife. She would stare in amazement and he would look triumphant! Such thoughts induced a pleasant sensation in him and he forgot for a moment the desperate situation in which he was placed.

VI

Though the majority of people in the village of Sirumudi belonged to the Udayar community, when they spoke of Mr. Udayar, they always referred to Mr. Ramaswamy Udayar, the biggest land-owner in the village and a man of considerable influence in the neighbourhood. In letters and official documents he described himself as 'Land-lord and Mirasdar.' In the village, most people were either going to him or coming back from him, for many were employed on his various farms, some were his tenants, some his debtors. Those who had nothing particular to do just hung about his house hoping that he would notice them and they would be able to please him in some way. The fact that so many of the villagers were found in and about his house was a tribute to his wealth and power, and he treated them as a minor autocratic ruler might treat his retinue.

Mr. Udayar lived in a huge tiled house with an open yard in front. The front door, huge and studded with iron knobs stood open, as always, and Guruswamy went through it into a pillared hall and waited there leaning against one of the pillars. There was a mat on the floor and a couple of cushions, but he would not sit down. The social gradation in the village was such that only some people could sit down without being asked, others could sit down when told to but not on the mat, and the rest had to keep standing. Being seated on the mat in someone's house meant an implied equality and Guruswamy could not lay claim to it, particularly since he had sold his land and become a labourer.

So he stood, leaning against a carved pillar and wondered what his chances were of borrowing money. The more he thought about it, the less confident he became. The last time he had borrowed money, his circumstances were very different. Also, he had quarrelled with Mr. Udayar before he left his employment. And in a moment of anger, he had told some people – he had not the courage to say it to Mr. Udayar himself – that he would not set foot in that man's house or speak to him if it was to save his own life. He knew it had been reported to Mr. Udayar.

If it had been for himself, Guruswamy would not have come here even now, but he was even more ashamed of his wife's accusing looks and bitter comments, and he had only come as a last resort. In any case, he hated to ask a favour from anyone, even his friends, because he was always afraid of being misunderstood and that secret pride of his stood in the way. He stood there for an hour, hesitating. Nobody came there, for even the servants were resting. And just as he made up his mind that it was no use and prepared to leave, Mr. Udayar came into the hall from inside.

Mr. Udayar was of medium height, but well built, with a bushy mustache and hairy arms and chest. It was easy to verify these things because at home he did not normally wear a shirt, unless of course he had, or expected, any visitors from town. Now he came out fresh from his sleep, wiping his brown body with a towel, for it was shining with sweat.

‘How did you find your way here?’ Mr. Udayar asked as he wiped himself under the arms and round the neck.

Guruswamy stood glued to the spot, unable to speak or to move. He was nervous and embarrassed.

‘I thought you were not going to set foot in this house, even if you were starving.’ That was a cruel thrust, but Mr. Udayar never forgave anyone who opposed him any way.

‘I came to see you, sir,’ Guruswamy brought out with difficulty.

‘What about?’

Guruswamy was silent again, looking down and rubbing his hands, a sign of meekness that almost everyone exhibited in the presence of Mr. Udayar.

‘You didn’t seem to care very much for me the last time you were here. Have you changed your mind since?’

‘I behaved without sense then,’ Guruswamy said, swallowing his pride.

‘You fellows always seem to acquire sense when you are in difficulties. All right, what is it you want now?’

‘I have a favour to ask you, sir.’

Mr. Udayar waited for him to proceed and while waiting shouted into the next room for his servant.

‘I have been without work for some time now and I have not saved up any money lately. There are some urgent domestic expenses. I have to feed my father as well….’

The servant brought a brass jug full of water and Mr. Udayar, without waiting for Guruswamy to finish, went into the front yard to wash himself. He happened to meet one of his farm-hands there and asked him what he wanted and talked to him for about ten minutes while Guruswamy waited inside. Guruswamy shifted his weight from one leg to another while Mr. Udayar returned and settled down on the mat, reclining against one of the cushions.

‘My father is dependent on me and times are bad. So, I wondered if I could come to you.’

‘Come to me for what?’

‘I thought perhaps you would be generous and lend me twenty-five rupees until this emergency is over. I will return it in a couple of months.’

‘Have you no shame?’ Mr. Udayar shouted at him. ‘You quarrel with me and leave my employment in a huff and say that your shadow will never cross my door-step again and then you come to me asking for a loan.’

Guruswamy listened in silence.

‘You come and beg from me when you are hard up. But the moment your stomach is full, you think you are the lord of everything. Do you think I am here just to help you out of your difficulties? Is that all my work? Eh, what?’

Guruswamy knew he would be given a lecture, a scolding and advice all combined in one. Mr. Udayar liked to show his authority and never more than when people were at his mercy. It was not that he was deliberately cruel; it was just his method of showing his importance and his indispensability in the scheme of things. He liked to show that he could not be ignored or slighted without the person incurring grave consequences. But he was also known for his generosity and for helping the villagers in times of need just as the patriarchs of old. All this Guruswamy knew vaguely and he thought, what did a bit of shouting matter as long as he got the money in the end? He might swallow his pride and lose his respect with Mr. Udayar, but he would be able to triumph over his wife. At that moment that was more important than the possibility of starvation.

‘Why are you standing mum? Say something,’ Mr. Udayar shouted at him.

The servant brought a tumblerful of hot coffee and Mr. Udayar gulped it down quickly and returned the brass tumbler to the servant.

‘You have to help us poor folk when we are in trouble,’ Guruswamy brought out.

‘Yes, that is what I just said. I have to help you when you are in trouble and as soon as you get out of it you don’t have a bit of respect or fear for me, have you?’

‘You have to protect poor people in times of trouble. Who else can we turn to if you don’t help us?’

‘I am afraid I can’t lend you any money,’ Mr. Udayar pronounced his verdict.

‘I wouldn’t have come to you if I wasn’t in need.’

‘I know you wouldn’t; you are too proud to come to me unless you had absolutely nothing to eat. But if I were to lend twenty-five rupees to every man in Sirumudi who has come to me in the last few weeks, I would be bankrupt.’

‘At least, if you could give me some work, any work in your fields…….’ Guruswamy began. But he was cut short.

‘You know what work there is in the fields now, don’t you?’

Guruswamy stood there a little longer, without a word being spoken. This man, by a slight show of generosity and without very great cost or inconvenience to himself, could raise him from the depths of misery to a life of contentment. To help the poor and the needy was one of the bounden duties of the wealthy man as laid down by the Hindu epics. But Mr. Udayar would not do it. Guruswamy almost felt sorry for this hard-hearted man who did not realise what he was doing or saying. He wondered whether he should plead once more, should appeal to his better nature, kindle the spark of mercy that might lurk in some hidden and unfrequented corner of his heart, for his own good. But pride stood in the way.

'I shall go and come,' Guruswamy said the usual words of parting.

Something must have melted Mr. Udayar's heart. 'Here, have you eaten anything to-day? Go round to the back and have some food.'

This was too much even for Guruswamy. That pride of his came surging forward and he was temporarily blinded by anger and passion at this show of contempt in the form of charity.

'I have not come to that yet,' he said and walked out.

VII

Once outside, Guruswamy repented of those rash words. It was not that he was afraid of Mr. Udayar's power or anger, though that would be bad enough if it was directed against him. But what affected him was that he should have spurned the offer of hospitality with such rudeness. May be Mr. Udayar did not mean to insult him. May be it was his method of helping people. After all, he couldn't give money to everyone and to feed people was the greatest charity, for if he gave them money, it might be used for sinful purposes and its effects would go to the giver. But feeding the hungry would not have any such consequences. Mr. Udayar knew these things as well as he did and it may be, in these times of trouble, he had adopted that form of charity. And he, who considered himself religious, had spurned it, thereby committing a grave sin. It was this pride that ruined him again and again. He tried to be deliberately humble, but it got the better of him in moments of anger.

He had half a mind to go back and accept the food as a corrective for his rudeness, but something – and not pride alone this time – wouldn't let him. It would have been best if he had refused it politely, saying he had just eaten and he was not hungry. Thus it was he went out of his way to justify his opponents and condemn himself or his family and friends, always giving others the benefit of the doubt that was the despair of his wife.

Slowly, he turned his feet away from the village. He had nowhere in particular to go and he did not want to go home. And yet, he wanted to talk to someone who would

understand and sympathise with him. There was only one person who could be depended upon to do this. It was his friend Raju who was still employed by Mr. Udayar to repair and maintain a hedge round one of his farms. It was to him that Guruswamy went now. He would be in the field and they could have a quiet chat undisturbed by others. It would at least be soothing to the mind.

So, he turned his feet away from the village, past the street where the potters and the masons and the barbers lived. There was the earthen kiln of the potters, dirty and sooty, but idle. The mason's pigs, black and filthy, were sniffing and grunting round it in search of some rubbish to eat. He wondered for a minute if those pigs were not better off, but when he looked at those ugly things, eating and rolling in the mud heap, it turned his stomach inside out even to think of it and he walked hurriedly on. Even in dirt and filth there were degrees, and Guruswamy, whose own domestic environment was none too clean, was horrified at the filth of this part of the village. It was not so much the hygienic element that nauseated him, though that was bad enough. It was the lack of spiritual cleanliness, which had nothing to do with hygiene. The eater of meat was dirty when compared to a vegetarian and the eater of pork and beef was worse and he felt much better when he finally got past the untouchable quarters at the outskirts of the village and came into the open air of the fields.

The sun was descending beyond the distant hills and the sky was a puzzling pattern of red and gold and blue. The tall scraggy coconut trees against the horizon made dark silhouettes and an occasional human being could be seen moving slowly in the distance. In the fields, it was calm and peaceful. But Guruswamy was not interested in the beauty of the sunset, nor in the peacefulness of the scene. As he walked across a fallow field, the black-crusted earth was hollow and it crumbled easily under his feet. There was no life, no vitality in it. He looked at it sadly and wondered when it would yield again. It was not so much his own desperate situation that worried him just then as the general misery. He loved this earth that collapsed so easily under his feet. He loved to work on it, to see the crops grow, watch the grain ripen into a rich golden brown. He was glad when the dust of the earth mingled with the sweat of his body and an unconscious unity between them was achieved. The smell of the earth was a part of his being. Without being able to explain it, he was attached to the soil that gave him food and he could not imagine any other life.

As he came near his destination, he saw a little boy of about ten, son of his friend Raju, digging on the mound that separated Mr. Udayar's field from someone else's. Guruswamy climbed on to it to see what the boy was up to and to ask him where his father was.

'Look, uncle,' the boy shouted in great triumph. 'I have found some grain.' He was hot and sweating and his fingers were dirty with digging in the earth. But he exhibited proudly a few ounces of dirty grain that he had collected carefully in a corner of his loin-cloth.

'Where did you get it?' Guruswamy asked him.

‘It said in my book that ants collected grain and stored it underground for the rainy season when they won’t be able to go out. So, when I saw some ant holes, I dug them and found it.’

‘Clever lad,’ Guruswamy patted him on the back.

‘You see,’ the excited lad continued. ‘We are always short of grain in our house and I thought it might be useful.’ The boy was justly proud of his achievement.

Meanwhile Raju had seen Guruswamy and walked towards him.

‘What are you doing here, you little imp?’ he shouted affectionately at his son. Then, he greeted his friend, ‘I haven’t seen you for a long time. Where have you been hiding?’

But the boy interrupted his father, repeating everything he had told Guruswamy but with greater excitement.

‘Get off, you rogue,’ cried Raju. ‘As if that bit of grain is going to feed the family for the next six months!’

‘He is a bright boy though,’ said Guruswamy.

‘Yes, I want him to study, but what with one thing and another, we can’t keep him at school.’

The two men walked slowly along the mound leaving the boy to amuse himself with any more ant holes he might find.

‘How is the job going?’ Guruswamy enquired.

‘They are keeping me busy,’ said Raju reflectively.

‘Minding the four sides of a hundred-acre field is no joke, especially when people are always trying to steal the cactus from the hedge to eat.’

‘How do they eat the cactus?’

‘They boil the root with some salt and chilly powder and eat it. Poor devils! But we will all be reduced to that before long.’

‘I suppose so.’

Raju pulled out a piece of tobacco from a knot at the top corner of his dhoti, broke it into two and handed one piece to his friend. They chewed the tobacco appreciatively and spat as they walked along. This sharing of a precious bit of luxury established a bond between them and emphasised their friendship.

‘At one time they used to come for the dried leaves of the cactus for lighting their fires. Now they dig the plant whole because it is the root they want; and it makes a hole in the hedge. The more tender the root, the more tasty it is I believe.’

‘But why does Mr. Udayar bother about a hedge when people have no food to eat?’

‘You know how it is, first they ruin the hedge, then they walk across the field as if it was public land and when once that happens, the crops will never be safe in future. In any case, if I don’t maintain it properly, I will lose my job. So I have to chase people off even when I know they are starving. Even the prickly pear has gone now. It used to be a nuisance for farmers trying to keep it out of the fields, but in times of famine most of the untouchables used to live on its fruits.’

‘Yes, things are getting more and more difficult. We were much better off when the white man was here.’

This was what Guruswamy liked, to talk peacefully and quietly to his friend, to chew tobacco and spit, and curse the bad times in which they were living.

‘Yes, times are bad,’ said Guruswamy, philosophically. ‘People are getting more and more selfish. There is no truth and honesty anywhere and no fear of God. Everyone is after money all the time, as if they are going to carry it on their heads to the other world when they die.’

‘Look at that!’ said Raju who knew his friend’s inclination to moralise and tolerated it with good-humoured indulgence. He pointed a finger at what was evidently a new opening in the cactus hedge. ‘I walked past here only two hours ago and I can swear not a rat could have got through that hedge and now you can go through without getting your legs scratched. They have dug the root out and not even bothered to cover the hole, the rogues!’ He broke a branch from one of thorny shrubs and planted it loosely where the gap was.

‘That will have to do for now. I will do it properly in the morning.’ Raju wiped his hands on the back of his *dhoti* and joined his friend.

Guruswamy wanted to tell him about his situation, about his visit to Mr. Udayar, about his relations with his wife. What he wanted more than anything else at the moment was sympathy, and he knew he would get it from Raju. But how much was he to tell? If he said there was no more grain for the next meal, Raju was sure to ask him to share his and that would be embarrassing. Even with one’s best friends, there were certain things one could not discuss. Something had to be private and belong to the individual.

‘I went to Mr. Udayar,’ he said. ‘I asked for a loan of twenty-five rupees.’

‘What did he say?’

‘He refused.’

‘You shouldn’t have gone. He wouldn’t lend any money unless he was sure of getting it back and he thinks, now that the rains have failed again, no one will be able to pay a loan back. Only yesterday, I heard him saying he didn’t want to stay in the village because so many people were troubling him for loans. You should have gone to the big uncle. He is generous.’

‘I don’t know him very well. Isn’t he sort of…….’

‘I know what you are going to say,’ Raju warmed to his subject. Where life is monotonous and moves in a narrow, pre-ordained groove, a bit of scandal is a great entertainment. ‘He is always after some woman or another. But what do you expect? He is married to a woman who is sickly and who has given him neither pleasure nor children. He has money and very little work and his aim in life is not to get power or influence like our master, but only to amuse himself.’

‘But how do the women agree?’

‘He chooses his women with care, not only for their looks, but also for their discretion. Some of them think it an honour to be his mistress even for a day! And now, so many of them are hard up that any income they get is quite useful. I have heard he treats them liberally.’

‘Don’t the husbands find out?’

‘Have you been living in the village or have you been away somewhere?’ Raju asked surprised at his friend’s innocence. ‘You ask questions like a stranger. Most of the poor fellows never find out, but if some of them do, I suppose they think discretion is the better part of valour. But I have always advised him to be careful because some hot-headed fellow might take it into his head to beat him up.’

I have heard about it vaguely,’ said Guruswamy.

‘You know the story going round among the women, don’t you?’

‘What is it?’

‘When he has a woman to visit him at night, she is first given a good bath and has to put on powder and scent. And when the women go to work in the fields the next morning or to fetch water from the well, they sniff at each other to see who has been with him the previous night. It is quite a joke among them.’

He related the story with relish. It was something to take their minds off the sordid realities of their own existence. But Guruswamy brought him back to it.

‘If women lose their chastity and men their honour, no wonder there is famine and the rains fail.’

‘It is surprising what people will do when they are hungry,’ Raju said by way of reply.

The conversation was not going as Guruswamy expected. He wanted Raju to ask why he had gone to Mr. Udayar for money, whether he was really hard up, and so on. But Raju had been so interested in the love affairs of the big uncle that he forgot all about his friend’s distress. May be he was getting too much engrossed in his own worries, thought Guruswamy, to bother about his friend.

‘If the rains fail this time also, I should think it will be the end of the world,’ remarked Raju.

“That was what we were saying last season. I expect the world will go on as before.’

It was this objectivity of Guruswamy that others could not understand and attributed to indifference and laziness. Even his best friend would not agree with that view.

‘Can you deny that we suffer?’ he asked.

‘Why do we suffer so much?’ Guruswamy asked in reply, and proceeded to answer it. ‘I will tell you. It is because evil predominates the good. Nobody is contented; they are all restless and worried lest others should have more than themselves. That is what is wrong with the world.’

‘It is true that nobody is honest; my wife has been to the ration-shop every day this week, but they say the grain hasn’t come. And yet, they are selling grain in the black market in the very same place.’

‘But that is only one instance. The ration shop-keeper is making money; but he has to pay somebody else to get off from being jailed. So, we blame the Government. The Government blames us in return and says if we don’t pay black market prices, there will be no black market. What does it all prove? Only that we are all dishonest. But God will not be idle. Sooner or later, he will destroy the evil and preserve the good. You will see.’

‘Oh well, if we wait for that, we will all be dead by then,’ said the more sceptical Raju.

It was getting dark. The slender margin of twilight between sunshine and darkness was fast disappearing. The trees were like standing ghosts in a vast emptiness. The two men picked their way carefully along the narrow footpath that led to their homes.

‘I am thinking of going away,’ said Raju.

So, he too had something on his mind, thought Guruswamy.

‘Where to?’

‘They are starting a new factory near where my cousin is working and he knows the supervisor there. He has promised to get me a job.’

‘Are things better there?’

‘Oh yes, much better. You get seventy-five rupees a month after the first three months and one day’s holiday every week. Of course, living away from one’s home, expenses are also high. You have to pay house rent and buy firewood, and so on, but you get your rations regularly. They will not stand for it if the rations are delayed. It will be in all the papers. My brother says even the Government is afraid of the workers and they do anything to keep them from going on strike. It is only we villagers who are neglected.’

‘Do you think you will like it there?’

‘I suppose it won’t be so bad as here. My son will be able to go to a high school and perhaps to a college. And I can always come back if things take a turn for the better.’

‘At this rate, you will be a rich man soon.’

‘I haven’t gone yet.’

‘But you will; only I will be here and there will be no one even to talk to.’

‘That is what I wanted to ask you about. Do you want me to see if I can fix up a job for you also? It would be nice if we could both go together. We could even share a house and that would reduce expenses.’

‘I have spent thirty years here; I might as well spend the rest.’

‘There is nothing definite yet.’

They reached the spot where they had to separate for their respective homes.

‘I will go and come,’ said Guruswamy and went home to face what was in store for him.

VIII

When he returned home, Guruswamy was surprised to find his brother Ramakrishnan there. The presence of his brother usually annoyed him. It was especially so now, when the domestic situation was delicate. There was no logical reason for the irritation he felt. There was not one single instance in which his brother had behaved badly towards him or wronged him in any way. On the other hand, Ramakrishnan had been scrupulously fair. But Guruswamy’s annoyance was all the greater because of it. It was a suspicion based on conjecture, a resentment that a simple man instinctively feels towards a clever one and a disappointed and inefficient man feels towards a successful person who has the knack of getting on in the world.

One had only to look at their faces to recognise not only their similarity in physiognomy as brothers, but their difference of temperament. They had similar features, the same type of face with small eyes and a well-shaped pointed nose, a broad forehead and a pointed chin. But while Guruswamy's eyes had a far-away, absent-minded look, his elder brother's were alert, restless and very much on the things that surrounded him.

When Guruswamy went in, his father and brother were sitting in the room on a mat, and Muthu was already asleep in a corner. Probably without any supper, thought Guruswamy. The dull smoky flame of a small oil lamp cast a gloomy light over the room. His wife stood behind the open door of the kitchen so that she could listen and take part in the men's conversation but not be too prominent since convention demanded that she should be modest in the presence of her elder brother-in-law. But in actual fact, she was guiding the conversation into channels that she desired by putting in a right word or a sob at the appropriate moment.

Guruswamy walked right through the room and the kitchen without a word of greeting to his brother. He washed his feet with a jug of water in the back-yard and returned slowly to where the men were.

'What did you light the lamp for?' he asked his wife, for the lamp had become a luxury in their home these days and he realised it was only lit in honour of his brother's visit and he did not like to honour him in any way.

But his wife who still wanted to keep up appearances felt this question was tactless and in bad taste. 'See, what I told you is true,' she wailed. 'He will not even let me light the lamp.' This was addressed to her brother-in-law. Evidently, they had been having a sort of family council over Guruswamy's conduct and his remarks had only confirmed what his wife had said previously.

'Go and mind your own business,' Guruswamy shouted at Meena.

Meena did not answer back, not because she was afraid of her husband, but she had to preserve her modesty in the presence of her husband's elder brother. She contented herself with a sob.

They sat in silence for a while. But it was not an easy, comfortable silence in which people who were fond of each other enjoyed quiet companionship, without any need of words to reinforce it. It was a tense and suspicious silence, like the black sky before the breaking of a storm or the ominous silence of a battle-field before a bloody engagement. Guruswamy could feel it in his bones. From that one remark of his wife and even more from her sob, he could sense that he had been discussed, that perhaps decisions had been taken about him and that any moment now they would be revealed to him in all their nakedness and cruelty. He would be forced to abide by them as if he were a child; and the tragedy was that he would. He would yield, as so often before, and then suffer for it. He could feel all

this in that silence, in the tense breathing of his wife behind the kitchen door, in the bent posture of his father and in the thoughtful, meditative gaze of his brother.

'You went to see Mr. Udayar this afternoon?' his brother asked Guruswamy after a while.

Ramakrishnan worked for Mr. Udayar as a sort of confidant and had quite a lot of influence with him. So, it was not surprising that he knew so soon about Guruswamy's unfortunate visit. He had obviously come about that, for there was hardly any social calling between the brothers. There were a thousand things Guruswamy wanted to say to his brother, but he could not say them. Years of nervousness, docility, over-consideration for the feelings of others, desire to please and to avoid trouble had made him what he was, and protests and exclamations that rose in his heart died on his lips. He suffered untold agonies, but all he could offer in the form of an answer to his brother's question was a monosyllabic affirmative.

Ramakrishnan continued. 'Why didn't you tell me first? I could have spoken to him gently and gradually persuaded him to do something for you.'

Here was an attempt to run his life and arrange things for him. He wanted to protest and to tell them all to leave him alone and thus assert his independence. But the tragedy was, he knew their assumptions and implications were only too true and that he was no good. He wanted to say, 'Why should I come to you first? Are you my guardian? Am I your servant? Why do you keep interfering in my affairs? Why do you come talking to my wife behind my back?' and so on. But he could not. All he could say was,

'I don't know.'

'Of course you can't expect him to do anything for you after the way you behaved towards him.'

The way he had behaved! And what about the way Mr. Udayar had behaved towards him? Because of a paltry sum of a thousand rupees, he had been permanently dispossessed of his land, sacked from his job without adequate reasons, and finally, when he went back, he was insulted and sent away. And people talked about the way he had behaved!

But all he could do was to say 'Yes' and wait for his brother to come to the point.

It was his aged father who spoke now. He had long since ceased to take any active interest in the affairs of his family, except to groan and complain about the bad times and his own interest as being more with the next world than with this one. 'It is no use displeasing big people,' he said, 'because, sooner or later, we have to depend on them.'

The silence continued. Guruswamy felt that perhaps his brother had come to give some sort of help and his heart softened towards him for a moment. He thought of their

relationship over a period of years and could not remember a single instance when Ramakrishnan had done him any harm. But why did he have to make every bit of help he gave sour and unpalatable by combining it with generous doses of smug, complacent advice?

'What do you propose to do now?'

This question was designed to prove to him his own helplessness in the situation, for there could only be one answer to it. 'I don't know.' He wished so desperately to be able to give a different answer just for once, so as to make his family gape in wonder and ask him eagerly for details. Then the light shone in his mind for a moment and he felt equal to the situation.

'I am going to get a job in a factory.'

Temporarily at any rate, it produced the desired effect in that it was an answer that the others had not expected and Guruswamy felt triumphant. But his victory was short-lived.

'Which factory?' his brother asked him.

'The new one that is being built on the road to the city. Raju knows a supervisor there and he has promised to get us both jobs.'

But Ramakrishnan was not taken in by this show of optimism. 'You won't get a job there, nor Raju for that matter,' he asserted. 'Mr. Udayar has shares in that factory and they won't employ anyone from Sirumudi unless they are recommended by him.'

Guruswamy felt disappointed that his one attempt at independence should have been so easily disposed off. Why did his own near and dear ones conspire against him and take so much pleasure in proving his helplessness and in humiliating him? Was it his fault? Why did not they leave him alone?

'Everybody wants to go into towns,' his father grumbled, 'leaving their homes and their ancestral work. Who is going to cultivate the land? They talk about growing more food. How can they do it if everybody runs away to the factories?'

'We have to live somehow and keep our stomachs full,' Meena ventured from behind the door. 'You must do something about that.'

'I can get a job all right,' Guruswamy asserted vaguely.

But Meena was not satisfied with that answer. She was impatient about her husband's vague hopes even after they were effectively destroyed by his brother. She had no faith in him and did not want him to have any in himself. On the other hand, she wanted him to put himself in the capable hands of her brother-in-law so that he might take over the responsibility and help them.

‘It is not enough that we go round begging in the village,’ she said referring to Guruswamy’s visit to Mr. Udayar. ‘We have to do it in the town as well.’

‘I tell you I did not go begging,’ Guruswamy shouted. ‘I asked for a loan in all sincerity and I was offered food. I refused it, I hope with sufficient rudeness.’

‘Who will lend us money when we have no food and no work? It is nothing but begging,’ she retorted. ‘But even in that you had to show your pride. You did not know how to do it.’

It was all right to beg if it was done discreetly and politely. In her present circumstances Meena would not have objected to that. To approach her brother-in-law, who would have interceded on their behalf with his employer and get work or even a measure or two of grains, would have been the right thing to do.

‘But even if you get a job in a factory,’ his brother conceded, in order to carry on with the argument, ‘you still have to live until then. You have no work, and since I have some spare cash, I thought I would let you have ten rupees.’

This was something so utterly unexpected that Guruswamy did not know what to say. His heart suddenly overflowed with love and gratitude for his brother, and he cursed himself for having behaved so badly towards him in the past. This offer of help at a desperate moment, unsolicited and spontaneous, moved him deeply. It was good to have relatives, he thought, and to have to put up with their criticism and interference, for they would always come to the rescue of their own flesh and blood.

But Ramakrishnan went on.

‘Of course, ten rupees won’t last you a long time and I can’t give you anything more. As soon as Mr. Udayar told me you had been to see him, I pleaded with him on your behalf. He is annoyed of course. But if you can do something to please him, then, I could talk to him again and get you a permanent job.’

So, there was a catch in it! Guruswamy wondered whether his brother was doing this to help him or really to help his employer and thus ingratiate himself more than ever. The brotherly love and affection he had felt a moment ago vanished, and instead he became suspicious and on guard.

‘Are you giving me the money or has your master sent it?’ he asked.

‘Mr. Udayar wants to send some grain to his uncle’s village, which you know is twenty miles away. But since there is control and it is illegal to move grain without a permit, it has to be done in the night. We will load the bullock cart tomorrow night and all you have to do is to drive it there, unload the grain and return the next day.’

‘But you have to go through town to get there, haven’t you?’

'Yes, that is why it has to be done tomorrow night. It being Saturday night and Sunday being holiday, there won't be any checking.'

'Why don't you go?'

'I have other work here, and I thought it would be a good opportunity for you to get back into Mr. Udayar's favour.'

'I suppose if I get caught by the officer, it doesn't matter.'

'Only if we take risks like that, we can expect to be looked after. But you won't get caught; Mr. Udayar will see to that. He knows all the officers and if you should be caught, he will use his influence to get you out. But the main thing is, if anyone should question you, you must never mention Mr. Udayar's name. You must say that the cart and the grain are yours.'

It did not strike any of them to enquire why Mr. Udayar did not get a permit to move the grain. They all knew that it was being moved, so that it need not be given to the procurement officers, who would only pay the price fixed by the Government. On the other hand, if it was sold privately, Mr. Udayar would probably get twice or three times as much as the Government was likely to pay. The fact that he was being persuaded to help in an illegal transaction and that it was morally and socially wrong did not bother Guruswamy for a single moment. Used to a stubborn independence, he like the majority of the villagers resented Government interference and did not see why a man should not sell the grain that he had grown in the way he wanted. After all, when the prices were low in pre-war days and the grain was lying idle for want of buyers, the Government did not give them a fixed price. Guruswamy's sense of right and wrong, based on religion and custom and on the requirements of a bygone age, broke down under the stress of circumstances. What worried him most was his brother's part in the affair and he was not at all sure whether he was being implicated in some sinister conspiracy that would involve dealings with rationing officers and police, all of whom he hated. His brother, Mr. Udayar and even his wife seemed too deep in their thinking, too complicated in their behaviour for him to understand them. What did they actually want? They took short-cuts that he never seemed able to follow.

Then he thought of another line of attack to find out if his brother was sincere. 'Will you give me the ten rupees even if I refuse to drive the cart tomorrow night?' he asked.

'As a matter of fact, I have already given the money,' Ramakrishnan answered, 'to your wife.'

So, he had already been implicated and the freedom of decision taken away from him. The money was not only given but probably spent as well. His son was peacefully sleeping in a corner of the room which meant that he had had something to eat. By taking the money, Meena had committed him and there was no way out.

‘Why didn’t you wait to ask me instead of giving the money to her?’

‘When I came here, Muthu was crying of hunger and there was no food. So I told her to go and buy some grain quickly. We didn’t know what time you were coming.’

‘I will come tomorrow night.’

‘You had better come early, as soon as you have eaten. You may have to give a hand with the loading of the cart and you must get to the other end before the light breaks in the east.’

IX

Saturday night was bhajana night in the Sirumudi temple.

There was a time years ago when that was an important event. Many people’s lives had moved from one Saturday to the next. The temple used to be crowded. They used to have singers from the neighbouring villages who used to compete with the local talent. There was an atmosphere of gaiety mingled with deep devotion, for it was a social as well as a religious occasion. Then, the gods seemed more powerful, prayer more effective. The village had unity and the temple was its soul. It was an age of peace and contentment if not plenty, when things seemed unalterable and fixed for ever; an age when the mention of God evoked reverence and when the religious marks on one’s forehead were a sign of holiness and not a matter for flippant remarks. To have one’s hair cropped in the European fashion was a mark of irreligion. The village was full of life, its heart steady and sound. It was a community with common interests, aspirations and beliefs, not just a conglomeration of individuals. It was an age when there was respect for the high and contempt for the low and everyone knew his place. The richest man gave precedence to the village teacher for his knowledge and wisdom and to the priest for his holiness. But then, they were wise and holy in those days. The untouchables used to raise their hands in respectful prayer every time they saw a caste Hindu, not half-heartedly and almost insolently as they did now, but willingly, as if it was a privilege conferred on them by providence. Now, the height to which they raised their hands depended upon the amount of help they hoped to receive from the individual. In those days there had been competition among the land-owners of the village as to who should be the trustee of the temple, a competition that occasionally led to factions and feuds.

But now, things were different. The power and the glory were all gone. People still prayed when they were ill, when the rains failed or when there was an epidemic of small-pox or cholera. They still consulted the priest about auspicious days for celebrating weddings. It was not because they were religious, but because it was customary. The dead hand of habit moved them and they behaved like automatons. Deep in their hearts, they

were afraid that there might be some truth in what the religious books said. It was a sort of insurance against bad luck. They did not have positive belief, only superstition. Only the phantoms lived; their meaning was dead. The ceremonials went on as mere expressions of dead ideas, frightening the ignorant and laughed at by the intelligent.

Guruswamy was perhaps the only person in the village who felt a positive belief in his heart. When he was in the temple, he forgot himself, his environment and all his domestic troubles. To him, heaven and hell were realities to be faced, and not mere abstractions; prayer was an end in itself and not just a means of overcoming an attack of fever or raising better crops. At least, if it had an end at all other than itself, it was the supreme one of eternal salvation, of freedom from the unending cycle of births and deaths and the ultimate submerging of the individual with the universal. He had learnt all this partly by reading moth-eaten religious books that some mendicant had left with the priest, and partly by that innate intuition that was the foundation of his deeply religious nature. But there were not many who shared his emotions with him even on the bhajana night at the temple. He went to the temple not merely to sing, but also to feel one with God. The others went merely to sing or to ask for some favours. And not many of them did even that.

Guruswamy sang well for the standards of musical appreciation in the village. A harmonium, a drum and a stringed instrument were the accompaniments and the others who came joined in the singing as a choir, which did not exceed three or four persons. Though Guruswamy did most of the singing, the others also took turns at leading and the priest acted as a master of ceremonies. A few children also came and sat on the cold stone floor, sleepy-eyed, in the hope that something to eat might be distributed at the end.

The temple consisted of three rooms, one leading into the other. The innermost as well as the smallest was the sanctum sanctorum, where there was a stone image of Vishnu, the Creator in the Hindu Trinity. With years of being anointed with sacred oil, it was black and could hardly be seen, since there were no windows or doors in that room. In front of the statue were three bronze idols about two feet in height representing Sri Krishna and his two consorts. All the images were clothed in multi-coloured silk brocade, inlaid with gold thread, and shone brilliantly in the dim light; but they were so old that it was only with difficulty that the priest could hide the holes, oil marks, etc. Only the priest was allowed into this room and the movement for allowing untouchables to enter temples, so strong in the towns, had not yet come to the village. The outer room to which all but the untouchables had access was large and airy and was used for prayers and bhajana by the worshippers. In between the two was a medium-sized room in which the priest kept the various paraphernalia required for festivals, processions, ceremonies, etc.

The men began to come in one by one at about eight o' clock. The first to arrive was the village goldsmith Kandaswamy Asari. Socially, he was below the level of the others, who were mainly small land-owners while he was only an artisan, but he was the only drummer that the village could boast of and so he was tolerated as an equal. Big and burly in figure,

with hairy arms and chest and a tuft of hair knotted at the back, he was a typical drummer and rather proud of the privilege of being allowed to take part in the bhajana.

'What, Swami?' he addressed the priest as he came in. 'You have not even lit the lamp yet. The house of God should not be in darkness.'

'There is only a little bit of oil, my man. I don't want to burn it when there is no one here. I have not even been able to give the usual holy oil bath to the images this morning. I don't know what is going to happen next week.'

'You get five rupees a month for buying oil, don't you?'

'Yes, and it is used to be plenty before the prices went up. But now I have to buy kerosene oil in the black market for the hurricane lamp; it only lasts me for a week or ten days.'

'Even God has to get his needs in the black market nowadays.'

The priest lit an oil lamp; a small wick dipped in a little bowl of castor oil and placed it in front of the idols in the inner temple. The flame threw a mellow light on the dark statue while it brightened up the bronze idols. The drum, harmonium and the stringed instrument were brought out into the semi-darkness of the room, ready for the devotees.

'I suppose I had better get the hurricane lamp from my house,' muttered the priest as he went out.

Chinnaswamy, the village shop-keeper, was the next to arrive. He was one of the people in the village who had benefited by the shortages and showed it by complaining about the hard times more than other people.

'Did you go to the market today?' Kandaswamy Asari asked him.

'Yes, but what is there to buy?' muttered the shop-keeper. 'Everything is controlled or you have to get a permit which means a lot of trouble. The profit you get isn't sufficient to cover the bribes you pay the officials. And then, providing them with coffee and tiffin every time they come for inspection and cringing before them is just awful. Now, I can't sell rice, sugar or kerosene, can't buy any lentils except in the black market and who has the money to pay such prices these days?'

'But all the same, I hear you have some sugar for sale.'

'Yes, I bought it from a wholesale dealer in town at twice the controlled rate and had to pay five rupees to the checking-inspector to bring it out. But I can tell you I am not buying any more like that. There is no profit in it.'

'It is the same everywhere.'

‘If you buy in the black market you have to sell in the black market, so the prices keep going up and up. There is no end to it.’

Others arrived one by one and as they entered, they raised their hands in solemn prayer towards the deity for a few seconds and then joined in the conversation. They sat down in two rows on either side of the entrance to the inner temple. The tuning of the instruments began. The harmonium, whose bellows were in a sad state, puffed and panted and produced a wailing note interspersed by the hissing noise of escaping air. The drummer banged on the edges of the drum with a wooden block and stone in order to stretch or loosen the tension and the man with the stringed instrument kept plucking them with his fingers and producing a monotonous basic note. And there was a background of conversation by those who were not engaged in any of their operations.

There they were, the men of the village, talking about their troubles. To an outsider, they seemed merely pathetic.

‘Where is Guruswamy to-night?’

‘I don’t know; he said he was coming when I saw him yesterday.’

‘He is usually early.’

‘Poor fellow, I think he has been very hard up lately.’

‘His wife should have been the man and he should have been the woman. She can manage things much better.’

‘She would never have sold that land.’

‘Give me that note once more,’ this from the drummer to the harmonium player.

The harmonium wailed and the drum was hit with the wooden block.

‘He would have been all right if he had not partitioned and gone to live separately from his brother.’

‘Oh, Ramakrishnan. He is a clever fellow. They say he is worth a few thousands now.’

‘Naturally; he is swindling Mr. Udayar in every direction.’

‘Guruswamy is honest, but he got sacked.’

‘That is the way of the world.’

The tuning was now complete and the harmonist who usually commenced singing the first song burst forth.

Won't you hear my call, Oh, Krishna
Won't you hear my call!

The conversation came to an abrupt end and the others sang in chorus, beating time with their hands.

Won't you hear my call, Oh, Krishna
Won't you hear my call!

X

It was the night when Guruswamy was supposed to drive Mr. Udayar's bullock cart with the load of grain. When he left his house, after a meagre meal of rice and lentils which had been paid for out of Mr. Udayar's funds, he had every intention of going straight to his brother's house and taking over the cart. His own determination was reinforced by Meena who warned him as he left the house. 'Don't you go to the temple to-night and be late for the work.'

'Of course, I know it! he replied.

Outside the house, the night was cool. All the squalor and the ugliness was hidden in the darkness and only the vague outlines of the houses were visible in the faint starlight. With the keen eye-sight of a villager, Guruswamy walked through the narrow lanes without any difficulty, towards his brother's house which was at the other end of the village. In the stillness of the night, with nothing to disturb him, his thoughts turned invariably towards God. And he hoped and prayed that there would be no untoward incidents in his attempt to smuggle the grain. He knew vaguely that it was illegal, but he knew also that there were so many laws these days that it was impossible to keep them all. He knew all about Gandhi breaking the laws to obtain Independence and that it had been successful. The fear of law and the respect for it entertained by a previous generation was no longer a compelling force. The old allegiance and the loyalty that his father had held inviolable had gone for ever and, as yet, no new loyalty had taken its place. There was a vague patriotism and support for the Government but no active allegiance. There was only restlessness and discontent and disappointment at the various shortages and difficulties that followed Independence. So, Guruswamy did not consider he was doing anything wrong; his anxiety was only that he might be caught.

Unfortunately for his determination, the temple lay directly on the route to his brother's house. As he neared the place of worship, he was seized by a longing to go in if only for a minute and to take part in the devotional singing. It came over him suddenly, almost unawares, and when he was in the grip of that religious excitement, there was no

help for it but to give in. Then he became a totally different being and was no longer responsible for his actions. In vain he tried to marshall all the arguments in favour of going straight to his brother's home, to reinforce his rapidly weakening determination. He thought of the reproaches of his wife, the plaintive cry of his son when he was hungry, the dull eyes of his father who seemed to reflect so much misery even in his silence. If he failed in this job that had been assigned to him, he knew he would never again receive any help even from his brother and he knew that success depended upon starting early. He knew also that God would not demand his presence in the temple that day when his work was so important for the preservation of his family. But from past experience he knew also that these arguments were of no use. The temple was like a powerful magnet and he was a mere piece of iron that got attracted and he went along helplessly.

As he walked hesitantly, nearer and nearer to the temple, he heard the noise of the harmonium. He stopped, wanted to turn back and go by a devious route to his brother's house that would have avoided passing the temple. But his religious spirit was as cunning as his determination was weak. There were a few moments of indecision. Then he told himself, 'To go round will take too long. I shall walk straight on but I will not stop at the temple. In fact when I get nearer, I will run.' So, he went forward, his determination temporarily renewed. The devotees were singing the refrain of the first song:

Won't you hear my call, Oh, Krishna
Won't you hear my call!

Determination went overboard. He did not even give himself the excuse that he had previously thought of. He was a mere automat without the will to decide and act accordingly, but obeying a stronger power that dragged him into the temple, past the stone steps and into the outer hall. Only then did his conscience hurt him and he became miserable. But side by side with the misery was the ecstasy and it was all the deeper because of the mental struggle he had just undergone. 'One had to go through hell in this world to attain salvation in the next,' he told himself.

Directly, a new spirit was introduced into the singing, a greater sincerity, a deeper fervour. They were no longer a bunch of individuals, each with his own troubles and worries, taking part in a bit of very poor singing. Guruswamy's presence raised what was a babel of untrained sounds and noises into a devout appeal to Krishna to listen to their call. Others knew and felt this power of Guruswamy, the power to inspire religious fervour in others around him. But they could not define it or understand it and attributed it to his singing.

As it progressed, the rhythm became faster and faster. The drummer shook his head more violently than before and his tuft of hair became loose and fell majestically on both sides of his shoulders and kept time with the rhythm as his head moved. Sounds arose from his fingers as they hit the sides of the drum like flashes. The harmonium wailed more pitiously and Guruswamy was transported to greater heights of ecstacy. As the crescendo of

music rose, he not only sang but beat time with his hands and urged others around him with his eyes to keep up with him. But the others could not, and he cried and pleaded alone with his face and movements expressing every mood he felt until with a final crash on the drum and an impassioned pleading to Krishna to hear their call, the music came to a halt. With one voice, the whole congregation shouted an invocation to their favourite God.

Narayana! Govinda! Govinda!

This was the period of rest before the next song began. They wiped the sweat from their faces and bare bodies, the drummer tied his hair again into a tuft, made minor adjustments to the drum and changed its position from his left leg to his right leg and cracked his finger joints in order to make them more supple for the next song.

'What, Guruswamy, you are excelling yourself today,' someone remarked.

But Guruswamy was still in a haze of bewilderment. He had been moving in the clouds, completely oblivious of his environment. It was a state of ecstasy that he reached only occasionally, but he could not stay there because the others distracted him and he came down to the earth, shy, bewildered, embarrassed and utterly exhausted. But again and again he tried to reach that state of forgetfulness, the state of bliss when he was one with his divine beloved, and stay there for ever and ever. In sober moments, he tried to recapture that mood, tried to figure out if he saw or heard anything, but he could not. From the coloured pictures and the bronze idols he had seen in various temples he tried to imagine what Krishna would be like, but in his bliss, there was nothing but a void that seemed to envelope the whole universe. Perhaps, it was a prelude to something else but what that something else was he did not know, for he did not stay there long enough. Was it the intensity that he lacked or was it merely the time?

The others spoke about their troubles, they laughed and joked and even got angry between one song and another. To them, it was not only a time of devotion but of recreation as well. But Guruswamy gave monosyllabic answers to their questions until they ignored him completely. He waited in feverish excitement for the others to finish their conversation so as to commence the next song. He was particularly excited today because he felt he should not be there at all and that at any moment his brother or his wife might come to take him away.

The drummer adjusted himself to a convenient position, the harmonist straightened the flaps of the bellows that had been temporarily undone and the conversation slowly petered out. Guruswamy gave an impatient nod to the others and began.

Grace me with a sympathetic eye, Sri Rama
And shed your divine light on me.

This was Guruswamy's favourite song. He began slowly, pleadingly, in a quiet voice, and the others sang in chorus after him. Then followed a catalogue of the nine mythological incidents in which Vishnu in his various avatars had been born in this world to destroy evil and preserve the good and saved his favourite devotees who had prayed for his help. It was a narrative poem and went something like this:

You answered the call of the elephant
Whose foot was caught by a crocodile
You saved the boy Prahlada from his cruel
Father because he pronounced your name.

and so on, and ended.

Again and again you come into this world
To destroy what is evil and preserve the good.
You always respond to the call of your slaves.
Won't you therefore grace me with a sympathetic eye
And shed your divine light on me?

After each incident the burden of the song was sung in chorus by all. Slowly the tempo increased and with it the fever of excitement. Guruswamy was not merely singing it. He was acting, feeling, and living in each of the stories as he related them one after the other. They were as real to him as fairy stories are to a child. His face and bodily movements expressed every attitude and reflected every emotion as he ended up after each verse with an appeal to Rama. He was by no means pleading all the time. Sometimes, he begged and pleaded of course. But at other times there was suspicion and questioning and his voice and expression cast a doubt on Rama's intentions, about shedding his light on this particular devotee of his. Sometimes he sang in a tone of command and compulsion, sometimes with a sense of urgency and desperation, sometimes with a feeling of disgust and despair that Rama should be so callous as not to have responded so far to this most devoted of his slaves. Again he returned to a mood of beseeching appeal, for at these moments Guruswamy did not think of God as some super-human being, distant and unattainable. No; God was his divine beloved whom he loved beyond endurance, with whom he quarrelled and made up, who caused a lot of exasperation, played a kind of cat and mouse game with him and finally revealed the secrets of divine bliss. God was his father, brother, child, his supreme lover and eternal desire, the centre of gravity of all his thoughts and actions and ideals. Guruswamy expressed all these in his singing and his face was smiling, pathetic, confident, loving, crying as emotions succeeded one another. He lost all sense of objective reality and only the imagination remained and his illusion became the supreme reality of his self. The words,

Won't you grace me with a sympathetic eye
And shed your divine light on me?

were made a vehicle of all expressions. Music and words were merely the channel for the attainment of bliss, but the channel itself became charged with inspiration merely because it was used for a divine purpose. Guruswamy did not believe that music had any other purpose. He did not sing for recreation or enjoyment. To him it was a magic enchantment that transported him from the cares of everyday life to the universal, divine reality and oneness with God which was otherwise impossible of attainment.

When the song came to an end there were tears in his eyes, his lips trembled and his face was suffused with a feeling of contentment and relief. But he was utterly exhausted with the storm of excitement and tension that accompanied his singing. He leaned against the wall and rested. There was relief; he was still living in the world of his imagination though he was aware of what was happening around him.

Let us sing and dance
For now we are free.

Someone started the next song. With that Guruswamy's spell was completely broken.

Though it was a devotional gathering, it had been usual to sing occasionally during the bhajana one or two patriotic songs, partly because they were modern and different from the old tunes and partly because some of the devotees were sympathetic towards the national movement. But Guruswamy considered it a sacrilege to sing such earthly tunes in the house of God and they failed to inspire him. He was also quite disgusted at the idea of putting such a divine instrument as music to such mundane purposes as national liberation. In any case he could not distinguish between freedom and slavery as others understood it. He did not want to be free. He wanted to be a slave, a slave of God, a loving, obedient, willing slave. To him, that meant freedom and release from worldly cares and miseries, from the bondage of the flesh, from the eternal cycle of births and deaths. That was the only freedom that he understood and he did not want the freedom of objective reality on this miserable earth. So, the spell was completely broken.

Then, Guruswamy remembered about his appointment with his brother.

XI

As Guruswamy came out of the temple, the voice of his brother called out to him in the darkness.

'Who is it?'

‘It is only I,’ replied Guruswamy.

‘Is this how you come to my house early? I waited for such a long time and then I went to your house. Your wife said you had left ages ago. So, I knew you would be here. Couldn’t you miss your temple for one day?’

‘I only went in for a few minutes.’

‘Hurry up, or you will never get started. We still have to load the cart and we can’t stand here talking all night.’

They walked in silence until they reached the back-yard of Mr. Udayar’s house. There was a bullock cart waiting to be loaded and the bullocks were patiently munching the fodder in the shed nearby. On the verandah were two of the farm workers, talking quietly by the side of an oil lamp. The master had evidently gone to bed.

‘No one does anything if I don’t stand over them all the time,’ Ramakrishnan muttered under his breath. Then he turned to the men. ‘Why didn’t you load the cart while I was away?’ he asked.

‘We were waiting for you,’ the men replied.

‘You could have been bringing the sacks out while you were waiting.’

The men took the lamp and went into the godown where the grain was stored. ‘You bring them out and we will load them on to the cart,’ Ramakrishnan shouted after them.

The bags were brought out one by one. The men carried them on their backs. Guruswamy helped to hoist them up while Ramakrishnan climbed on the cart and adjusted the bags so that they were neatly piled and their weight was evenly distributed along the length of the cart. As he was doing it, he was shouting instructions to the others.

‘Be careful now! Drop it gently. Don’t let the bags touch the wheels or they will rub against them while moving. Guruswamy, pull that bag straight and let it fall nicely into the hollow!’ And so on.

When the men went back to get more sacks, he gave Guruswamy some advice. ‘If anyone should stop and question you, say that the cart and the grain are all yours. Whatever happens, don’t let Mr. Udayar’s name come into it.’

‘You said yesterday that it being early Sunday morning, there would be no one at the chowki post,’ Guruswamy asked suspiciously.

‘I am only telling you in case anything happens,’ his brother assured him. ‘If the railway gate is shut at the level crossing, wait about a furlong away. When once you get past

there you will be all right. Even if you should get into trouble, Mr. Udayar will get you out provided you don't bring his name into it. He has plenty of influence.'

The possibility of getting caught became very real to Guruswamy when he heard these words and he did not like it. He had always avoided any sort of trouble with the officials of the Government. It was partly from pride and partly from fear. But he did not dare to back out now. 'I am a coward', he told himself miserably.

'When you get to the other end, go straight to our master's uncle's farm. You know it, don't you?'

'Yes'.

'Well, he will be there in the mornings but if you should be a bit early his servants will go and fetch him from the house. Then you can unload the grain. They will give you your food. After the bullocks have had a rest, if you start at midday you can be back here at this time tomorrow night.'

Twenty bags were loaded and that was about the maximum that the cart would take. 'That is enough,' said Ramakrishnan lifting the cart from the front on its wheels to see if the load was uniformly distributed. 'Go and get the rope to tie it up,' he told the men.

'It is in the store room.'

'All right. I will go and get it,' Ramakrishnan who had the store room key went to get the rope.

'How did you come to do this job? ' One of the men asked Guruswamy.

'My brother asked me.'

'I heard there is a new officer now who is very strict and he is coming here in two or three days to check the whole village. This is why they are sending the grain off in a hurry.'

'Why didn't one of you people go? Guruswamy asked out of curiosity.

'If we get caught, we can be identified as one of the master's servants, but if you get caught, they won't be able to fix it on him. Even the bullocks are a new pair and not many people would know they are his'.

Only now did Guruswamy realise the depth of conspiracy in which he was involved. And he had imagined that Ramakrishnan was doing it out of brotherly affection! It just proved that he was a simpleton that was all.

'May be you won't get caught', said one of the men encouragingly as Ramakrishnan returned with the rope.

As they were tying the bags securely to the floor of the cart, Guruswamy asked his brother, 'Is it true that you don't want to send one of your own men, because if they get caught, Mr. Udayar's name will be out?'

'Have you chaps been talking to him?' Ramakrishnan asked the men. Then he became confidential and took his brother aside and whispered to him. 'Look here, Mr. Udayar asked me to find someone dependable and honest. He didn't want to send any of these fellows, not because of getting caught, but because they are not trustworthy. By the time the cart gets there, there will be a few measures short in every bag. So, when he asked me to find someone, I thought it would be a good opportunity for you to earn something and also get a permanent job. So, now you understand?'

'Yes', Guruswamy murmured, vaguely giving up any further attempts, to probe more deeply.

The bullocks were yoked to the cart and the driver climbed on to it.

'Drive carefully', Ramakrishnan warned him. 'You have a heavy load. And remember what I said'.

The cart moved on in silence.

XII

The iron wheels moved slowly along the well-worn grooves of the irregular path. The bullocks breathed heavily and snorted as they strained under the heavy load of twenty bags of rice. In the faint star-light, the leafless trees stood like tall ghosts and the hedges of scraggy bush and cactus lined the sides. The wheels ground against the hard stones and dropped into the depressions, the rope creaked with the weight of the bags and with the irregular movement of the cart, but all else was silence.

Guruswamy sat on the bag in front. But the bullocks knew the road just as well as he did and he did not have to urge them or control them. So long as they did not have to turn, they would be all right and since the turn was not for another eight miles he could easily sleep for a couple of hours. But he was not able to sleep.

The evening's experience at the temple had left him a bit dazed and puzzled. Had he had a vision? Did God appear to him in person? Was it an answer to his prayers? He did not know. He merely gave himself up to the contemplation of that feeling of thrill and excitement that had temporarily possessed him. It gave him a serene feeling of relief and contentment. Under the influence of that serenity, his troubles seemed unimportant, even insignificant. He felt lighter in body and mind, as if the flesh was slowly melting and the spirit was becoming one with the universe. He had felt such thrills when he was first married,

in the physical union with his young wife and in the contemplation of her beauty in secret. But this seemed far deeper, and far superior in every way. It gave him greater satisfaction and left him with a greater yearning. It did not leave him with that uneasy feeling that always followed his relations with his wife. Here there was supreme satisfaction and supreme desire, but the desire did not seem selfish as all other desires did. It was the height of sacrifice as well as the peak of fulfilment; it was everything rolled into one. Having experienced it once, he waited, knowing fully well that he would experience it again. It was his and no one could take it away from him.

Yet, in the reality of existence, it was the familiar that he loved, and viewed with suspicion and doubt anything that was unusual or strange. This path leading from the village was familiar and he loved it. He knew every tree at the side of the road, the irrigation tank in the distance that was now dry, the ruined hedges and the desolate farms. He loved them all, the more so because others were neglecting them and were attracted by the lure of the towns. He loved the places as much as the people; to him they were inseparable. His friend Raju was thinking of leaving the village as many others had done. He did not look at it as a separation but as a break in friendship, for once he went to town, he knew he would be lost to the village. For himself, he could not visualize being happy anywhere except in the village and he felt a pang of regret every time he had to leave the village and go somewhere else even temporarily.

Slowly the influence of the vision wore off. The night air became chilly and Guruswamy covered himself with the towel, and the things of this world began to assume greater importance. Wife, child, father, brother, became flesh and blood figures instead of vague abstractions in the background. Why he had got himself into such a mess, he wondered. His brother was well off. He had always felt that it was a mistake for him to have got married. If only he had put his foot down and refused! He would be free, free from the bondage of the flesh and free in spirit. His only worry would be salvation and not food. He would then be concentrating on the eternal instead of worrying about the transient. He would be pursuing ultimate reality instead of the illusion of which he was now a slave. He had been trapped and, in this life at any rate, there was no escape. ‘Release me from this bondage, O God!’ he called helplessly.

Yes, he had been thrown into the unknown depths of this domestic ocean and only God could help him to swim to the shore.

After travelling for about eight miles, the path joined the main road. Now he had to be more careful, because there might be some traffic, because it was a well paved road that connected two big towns. Also, the railway line ran parallel to the road and if a train were to pass, the bullocks might get frightened of the noise of the train or the whistle. But the road itself was considerably better and Guruswamy urged the bullocks to go faster in order to get to his destination all the sooner. The road ran parallel to the railway line for about five miles and then there was a level crossing. He knew that many carts had been caught because they

had to wait there when the gates were shut. If he shouted get past the level crossing, he knew he would be safe. Fortunately there were no cars at that time of the night.

It was about four when he reached the railway crossing. Ahead of him he could see the red lights of the railway signal indicating that the gates were shut. He stopped the cart about hundred yards away because if he went too near the gates, he was likely to draw the attention of the signal man and possibly of others who might be waiting there. This was just the thing he had been told to avoid. He did not know how long he would have to wait. He drove the cart towards the edge of the road and waited. Minutes passed and still there was no sign of the train. May be the fellow shut the gates and had gone to sleep which was quite likely in an out-of-the-way place like this. He had been sitting for the last five hours on top of a hard bag in a precarious position. Now he got down to stretch his legs a bit. Walking towards the gates, he saw the signal go up. The vague figure of the signal man came down the ladder from his cabin; Guruswamy was relieved.

But the catastrophe happened before he had time to realise it. As he was returning to the cart, he saw the headlights of a car coming towards him. And before he could even decide to run and hold the bullocks, it flashed past him raising a column of thick dust. The bullocks, unused to the noise of a motor car, were frightened, and with no one to hold them, tried to run away and the cart landed in the ditch by the side of the road.

When Guruswamy reached the cart, he found that one of the wheels was in a pit about two feet deep while the other was on the unpaved edge of the road. One of the bullocks was standing in the ditch while the other had fallen on the ground. The yoke and the harness strings were all twisted anyhow and the cart itself with its heavy load was precariously balanced at an angle. He surveyed the scene in misery and cursed his fate, but there was very little he could do. He loosened the strings, straightened the yoke and got the bullock that was lying down to stand up. The animals were not hurt, but the rope round the bags had got loose and he tightened it so that the bags wouldn't topple over. It took him all his strength to do this and he heaved and strained to the utmost to prevent further damage. Now he tried to urge the bullocks to move forward in a desperate attempt to get the wheel out of the ditch and on to the road. If he could only do that, he might still save the situation. He himself put his shoulder to the wheel but, though every muscle in his sinuous body was stretched and strained, the cart refused to move. He knew it was impossible without other help.

He walked to the signal cabin. No trains were expected for a couple of hours and the signal man was about to go home.

'Give me a hand with my cart,' Guruswamy called to him. 'One of the wheels has gone in the ditch.'

The man came towards him. 'How did it happen?' he asked.

‘The bullocks got frightened by the motor car.’

They walked silently to where the cart was. The signal man walked round it judiciously and then turned to Guruswamy.

‘What is it, rice?’ he asked.

‘Yes.’

He walked round it once more, this time examining the cart to see if there was any damage. ‘Hm’ he said. ‘There must be at least thousand rupees worth of grain there.’

‘If you could help me to lift that wheel and if we can urge the bullocks at the same time, we can get it out of the ditch.’

‘Where do you come from?’

‘Sirumudi.’

‘What are things like in your village?’

‘Things are the same everywhere.’ Guruswamy answered non-committally.

‘You must have had a good crop.’

Guruswamy remembered his brother’s instructions to claim the grain as his own in case there was any trouble and allowed the assumption of his proprietorship to go unchallenged, but added, ‘How can you get a good crop these days?’

‘I am not very well off myself,’ the signal man continued with his train of thought. ‘My pay is very poor and what with a large family and high prices and one thing and another…..’ The sentence trailed off.

Guruswamy was beginning to have an idea of what he was driving at. ‘If you help me you can have a measure or two of grain,’ he said.

‘I wasn’t thinking of that,’ the signal man replied. ‘If your cart is left here till daylight, you are sure to be caught and probably sent to jail, because a policeman comes here at seven o’ clock every morning on duty. So, I was thinking, the cart is heavily loaded now and if you could push a couple of bags off, there will be less load and then the two of us could easily move the cart from the ditch.’

Only now did Guruswamy realise what the man was driving at. He wanted not a measure or two but two whole bags for his services. And he was in a position to demand it. ‘This is what people in towns are like,’ he thought. ‘Always trying to profit by other people’s misfortunes.’ If it had been a villager or a peasant, Guruswamy knew that he would have

helped him with no thought of reward and walked on with a smile. But the signal man continued.

'I have seen so many farmers being caught here,' he said. 'Even when they were going without any trouble. So if you want to hurry off, the best thing is to remove a few bags from the cart.'

'I couldn't do that,' said Guruswamy.

'Why, would you rather be caught?'

'To tell you the truth, the rice doesn't belong to me. I am only a cart driver and even if one bag should be missing at the other end, my master will take me to task.'

'Would he rather lose two bags or all the twenty bags? If you explain the position to him he wouldn't say anything. It will be much better for him than have to bribe the police and pay for the lawyers afterwards.'

'Really it is not my rice or my cart,' Guruswamy pleaded naively. 'So, won't you just give me a hand?'

'I have no objection, but we can't do it with so much load.'

'Let us try,' Guruswamy cried eagerly.

With a half-hearted attempt on the part of the signal man, Guruswamy was not able to achieve anything.

'I have been awake all night and I have to be back again on duty at eight o'clock,' the man said. 'So, I had better go and get some sleep.'

'Let us try just once more,' Guruswamy pleaded.

The man got into the ditch again and bent down to have a look underneath the cart. Then he called out to Guruswamy.

'Look, the axle is broken; you can't do anything. You will have to get another cart and transfer the load.'

Guruswamy came to examine it and he could see in the dim light that the axle was in two pieces and any attempt to move the cart would only mean a complete collapse of the load into the ditch and further damage to the cart itself.

'What shall I do now?' he asked helplessly.

'Have you far to go?'

'About five miles yet.'

‘Well, I can’t see where you can get another cart anywhere here. If you could run there and bring one, then you can have the load transferred.’

‘Am I to leave it all like this?’

‘I shall keep an eye on it if you like,’ said the railway man with a grin.

XIII

Guruswamy returned about three hours later with another bullock cart and a couple of men to help him with the bags. To achieve that feat, he had had to run across fields and meadows, wake up Mr. Udayar’s uncle and explain the situation to him and get a bullock cart from his farm as well as put up with the shouts and abuses of that gentleman about his carelessness in allowing the cart to go into the ditch. But he had no time to think as he was bent upon finishing the job he had undertaken.

The situation that faced him on his return was very different to the one he had left behind and confirmed his worst forebodings. As he neared the railway line, he saw the signal man standing near his cabin with an indifferent air as if he was at a loose end that morning. Guruswamy went to him and asked, ‘You told me you would look after the cart.’

‘Go and see what is happening there,’ he replied.

As he neared the cart, he saw a small crowd of people and the red hat of a policeman. The other men who had come with him and who had had strict instructions from their master not to get mixed up with the police in any way refused to go further and told Guruswamy so. After all, it was Guruswamy who had got himself into the mess and there was no use in others getting involved in it as well. So he walked alone towards the small bunch of sight-seers and the representative of law and order. The cart he found was now lying on its side, one of the wheels having come off completely and the bags of rice were all over the place in the ditch and in the sandy waste.

As he examined the cart, the policeman came to him. ‘Are you the driver of the cart?’ he asked.

‘Yes’, said Guruswamy.

‘What is it, rice?’

‘Cant you see?’ and he pointed to the bits that were scatted everywhere.

The policeman became officious. ‘Have you a permit to move this rice?’

`No, but look….’

‘I think you had better come with me to the station and explain to the inspector as to how you came to be in possession of this much rice.’

‘Here, there were twenty bags when I left early this morning and they were all on the cart. But now there are only fifteen and somebody has toppled them over. The railway man will bear witness to what I say.’

The signal man was now leisurely strolling to where they were. ‘You ask him’, Guruswamy pointed to him.

The policeman turned to the new arrival. ‘Were there twenty bags when the cart was upset?’ he asked.

‘I didn’t count them,’ the railway man answered. ‘He asked me if I would help him move the cart from the ditch and when he found the axle was broken he asked me if I would guard it till he came back. I told him that it was illegal to move food grains without a permit and in any case I went to sleep before coming on duty again.’

‘He has stolen the grain’, Guruswamy shouted. ‘He wanted two bags to be given to him before he would help. Can’t you see he had taken the bags away after I left and that’s why the cart has toppled over?’ He was more worried about the five bags that were missing than about the probability of the whole lot being confiscated and himself fined or sent to prison.

‘Stop shouting and come to the station with me’, the policeman insisted. ‘Or it will be the worse for you’.

Guruswamy followed the representative of law and order helplessly, grumbling all the way about the perjury of the signal man.

He was kept in the lock-up till ten o’clock when he was produced before the inspector of police.

‘Your name?’ asked the inspector without looking up from his writing pad. As Guruswamy replied, he went on asking particulars one after the other making notes.

‘Village?’

When Guruswamy gave the name of his village, the inspector looked up. ‘That is where Mr. Ramaswamy Udayar lives, isn’t it?’ he asked.

Guruswamy’s heart beat fast. He had been told not to have Mr. Udayar’s name brought into it under any circumstances and now here was the inspector himself asking about him!

‘Which Ramaswamy Udayar sir?’ he asked.

‘You know, the district board member’.

‘Yes sir’.

The inspector became more interested. ‘Is the cart yours?’

‘Yes sir.’

‘And the rice?’

Guruswamy again answered in the affirmative.

‘Do you know it is illegal to transport rice without a permit?’

‘I am a poor villager sir, and I don’t know about all these rules’. So far Guruswamy had done well in protecting his master.

‘Where were you taking the rice to when the accident happened?’

Guruswamy gave his destination.

Immediately the inspector pricked his ears, for he knew that that was where Mr. Udayar’s uncle lived. But he was not going to mention it lest his prisoner became wary.

‘And you say the rice and the cart belong to you and to no one else?’

‘Yes sir, and there were twenty bags this morning. When I came back with another cart there were only fifteen. It was the signal man who stole them.’

‘Tell me,’ the inspector continued, ignoring the accusation against the railway man, ‘did you grow this rice or did you buy it from someone else?’

Guruswamy hesitated a little before answering the question and the inspector knew that whatever he said was a lie.

‘I… I grew it on my own field,’ he said.

‘How many acres of land have you got?’

Again there was hesitation. ‘Ten acres,’ came the answer after a while.

‘Look here, my man’, the inspector was getting a bit severe now. ‘It is very easy for me to have it verified. So, if you start telling any lies, it will be the worse for you. No man of your status can grow so much rice. Where do you get the water from? If I find you have been telling a lie, you will not only be charged with trying to sell rice in the black market but also with stealing it and you will spend a couple of years in prison. So, you better tell the truth.’

‘I didn’t grow the rice sir, I bought it’, Guruswamy stammered.

Even in telling lies, he was not consistent and he got frightened easily, so the inspector knew he was a raw hand at the game.

'Come on, out with the truth!' the inspector shouted. 'I have no time to sit here listening to your silly lies. If you are not careful I shall have you thrashed'.

'That is the truth sir'.

'What is the truth, that you bought the rice? All right, who did you buy it from? Who are you going to sell it to? Where did you get the money for the transaction? Tell me about them and I shall have them all arrested'.

Guruswamy did not speak. 'Why are you silent? Have you got something stuck in your mouth?' the inspector stormed.

But still there was no answer. Then the inspector tried another line of argument.

'If you tell the truth you will probably be let off without a sentence. But if you don't tell the truth, we will find out in any case and you will be charged with being an accomplice and go to prison. So, take your choice'.

'The rice isn't mine.'

'Oh, that is better; you were driving Mr. Ramaswamy Udayar's bullock cart with his rice to his brother-in-law's house. Isn't that so?'

'Yes sir'.

'Will you sign a statement to that effect?'

'Will I be let off if I sign it?'

The inspector wrote out the statement without answering his question. Then he read it out. 'Is that correct?' he asked.

'Yes sir'.

'If you go back on it afterwards, you will know about it,' he said. 'Sign it'.

Guruswamy took the pen and put his signature to it, incriminating the man who had given him ten rupees.

'When am I to be released?'

'When the case is over; we will want you far a witness'. He was taken back to his lock-up again.

XIV

Three days later, Guruswamy was released. No explanation was given. He was merely told to clear out and not show his face again. When he attempted to find out what had happened to the rice and to the bullock cart and the case against his employer, he was told that he should thank his stars that he had got off so easily and was thrown out of the police station.

Guruswamy was puzzled; he did not know what to do or where to go. He was too innocent to realise what had happened and too ignorant of the law to demand an explanation as to why he had been detained if there was no charge against him. But various questions kept cropping up in his mind, questions for which he had no answers. He felt vaguely uneasy and troubled. A suspicion that he had somehow let his employer down haunted him. What had they done with the statement he had signed? What answer was he to give to his brother when he got back? And above all, to his wife? How was he to face her?

Slowly he walked towards his village, not because he particularly wanted to go there, but because he had nowhere else to go. Tired and hungry, he reached home soon after it was dark. He knew the news of his arrest would be known to everyone in the village and he dreaded meeting people. Police lock-up, prison, etc., had always been associated in his mind with thieves and murderers and involved social degradation in the village. He was thoroughly ashamed of having spent three days in police custody. The fact that he was not convicted of any offence did not in any way lessen his feeling of shame. For a moment his thoughts turned towards God. 'Why do you make me suffer like this, O God', he thought. 'What sins did I commit in my former life that I should be tried like this now?' He knew that sins, whether committed in this life or in the past life, had to be paid for in physical suffering and mental anguish; the budget had to be balanced and there was no escaping it. And he found consolation in that thought.

Nevertheless, he was glad the streets were deserted and it was dark as he entered the village. As he neared his house, he could see the bent form of his father crouching on the narrow verandah. As he squatted beside the old man, he called out, 'Who is it?'

'It is I', said Guruswamy.

'So you have come, have you?'

'Yes.' He wondered how much his father knew, but dared not question him. There was silence, for there was no more to be said.

Hearing a noise outside, Meena came out to see who it was.

‘You had better come inside’, she said when she recognised him. ‘You don’t have to exhibit yourself before everyone as if you had achieved something wonderful!’

He followed her silently. She did not say anything else, and was strangely silent. But it was an oppressive silence. For the moment, the situation seemed to have overwhelmed her and the usual insinuations and the catalogue of complaints seemed inadequate to the occasion.

Finally, she said, ‘At least you had the sense to come home when it was dark.’

‘What has everyone been saying here?’ he enquired.

‘Mr. Udayar is very angry and they say he is determined to see that you don’t set foot in the village again.’

‘It was not my fault’.

‘I will go and tell your brother you are here’.

Guruswamy waited in the darkness.

Within a few minutes, Ramakrishnan came with Meena. ‘Do you know what you have done?’ he asked, and proceeded to answer it. ‘You have ruined any chances you may have of living peacefully in this village and you have nearly ruined me as well. Fortunately, Mr. Udayar still trusts me, but if he knew you have come back, he would dismiss me from his service.’

‘But I tell you I couldn’t help it, Guruswamy insisted.

‘I suppose you couldn’t help driving the cart into the ditch! And you couldn’t help telling the police that the rice belonged to Mr. Udayar! And you couldn’t help signing a statement to that effect! And after all my instructions too!’

‘The cart was overloaded. That was why the axle broke,’ Guruswamy answered. ‘That was not my fault, was it?’

‘It was all right on the rough country road for eight miles. Why should it break on a good road? And when it did break as a result of your negligence and stupidity, why didn’t you go to the nearest village and quickly rent a cart and a couple of men and remove the rice before daybreak?’

‘I didn’t think of that,’ said Guruswamy.

‘And when you were caught by the police, why did you have to implicate the people who gave you and your family food when you were starving?’ Ramakrishnan was relentless. ‘Have you no gratitude?’

‘I didn’t implicate him; the inspector knew about it all before I told him.’

‘But why did you tell him? Without your telling him, he could have done nothing’.

‘He threatened me’.

‘You are a stupid fool; and I am a bigger fool to have tried to help you.’ Ramakrishnan sighed.

‘Have they arrested Mr. Udayar?’ Guruswamy enquired anxiously. In spite of his own troubles, he was concerned about his benefactor.

‘You don’t suppose that Mr. Udayar is a fool like you and me, do you?’ Ramakrishnan asked vehemently. When he found out how you had let him down, he saw the right officials, spent a few hundred rupees and everything was squared up. Of course he couldn’t get all the rice back, what with the signal man and the policeman who found it, but the cart was returned to him yesterday. The worry and the expense and the loss of rice have made him very angry, though’.

Guruswamy was relieved that his employer had got off easily.

Ramakrishnan continued to shout at him. Now Meena spoke for the first time. ‘What has happened; nothing can be done about it. But what are we going to do now? How are going to live?’

‘You can’t live here now’, said Ramakrishnan. There was a finality in his statement even in its mildness. ‘There are no jobs to be had here if Mr. Udayar doesn’t want you here. Best thing is to go somewhere else’.

‘But where can we go?’ asked Guruswamy. At least here we have a roof over our head.’

‘Anywhere, but don’t stay here’, said Ramakrishnan.

‘What is to happen to my family?’ asked Guruswamy.

‘As if you have ever cared for your family!’ Ramakrishnan sneered. ‘They can stay here till you find some work. I will do what I can for them. Father, of course, is coming to live with me from now on.’

Guruswamy hesitated a minute. Again his simple mind was faced with the complicated machinations of others. What lay behind all this he did not know. But he hesitated only for a minute.

‘I am not going away,’ he announced.

Ramakrishnan flared up immediately. 'I have done all I can for you and you have only repaid me with ungratefulness,' he shouted. 'Don't expect me to go on helping you anymore. If you continue to stay here, we will be as strangers from now on.'

But Guruswamy's mind was made up. For once, he was not going to allow others to run his life for him. Nothing more degrading could happen to him than being in a police lock-up. And that was his brother's fault anyway. As for making a living, it was the same everywhere. And he would rather starve in his own village, among familiar surroundings, than in a strange place where people scoffed at him. From then on, the threats of his brother and the entreaties of his wife only hardened his decision. He did not even bother to reply; he merely grinned, and they knew it was final.

'You are no longer my brother,' were Ramakrishnan's parting words.

The next morning, Guruswamy's father said, 'He wants me to go and live with him.'

'I know', said Guruswamy.

'It will be one mouth less to feed here'.

'Yes.'

'I will go and come,' said the old man as he departed.

XV

Meena hardly spoke to him now. If she had to, she addressed a few oblique remarks to Muthu and Guruswamy replied in the same way. At meal times, if Guruswamy happened to be at home, some food was left in his dish which he ate. If he was not there, no one asked him why or if he had had anything to eat. He did not know where the food came from and did not bother to enquire. His attempts to get work were, needless to say, completely unsuccessful. From day to day, he wandered aimlessly in the village, missing as many meals as possible, coming home only when he felt really famished.

He also noticed that his social position had come down considerably. Many whom he considered his equals only a little while ago now treated him with condescension and even rudeness. This was not because of his having been in police custody as he imagined, but because he had lost everything and was hardly better than a beggar in their eyes.

But the real difficulty was at meal times. He did not like to stay in anyone's house. If the family was going to eat, it was awkward for them to go off to eat while he was sitting there. The village generosity would force them to invite him also and he did not like to deprive people of a meal which they could ill afford. On the other hand, if they had nothing to eat, they would not like him to be a witness to that fact. At the same time, he did not

want to go to his own home to face the disapproving glances of his wife and the complaints of his little son.

Once, he happened to be in his friend Raju's house and as it was getting dark, he prepared to leave. Raju asked him to stay and have something to eat. He did not want to, but hunger combined with Raju's persuasion got the better of his determination. He partook of a humble meal of corn and lentils. But as he went into the yard to wash his hand, he heard Raju's wife remonstrating with her husband for having asked that 'good-for-nothing fellow' to stay for a meal in these hard days. From then on, he left sufficiently early so as not to be invited.

His place of refuge was the temple. No one could disturb him there, for no one went there except on Saturdays and on occasional festival days. He could sit there hour after hour, sometimes talking to the priest, but mostly just thinking about nothing in particular. Even his family seemed to bother him less and less. But he found that on Saturday nights, singing on an empty stomach soon exhausted him and the flights of ecstasy which he experienced tired him enormously.

Gradually, he began to neglect his personal appearance; he did not have a bath every day and did not bother to wash his clothes regularly. These things were an effort now and, in any case, he did not care. He was gradually degenerating from the position of a family man to the status of a religious tramp.

He and his wife had been drifting apart gradually for the past few years and their relationship had now ceased to be anything other than keeping up appearances to the outside world. That was the one thing to which Meena still attached any importance now-the fear of what people would say. Society still had a hold on her mind though it had ceased to exercise any influence on her husband. To leave her husband, or to be left by him, was still the greatest humiliation for a woman as far as she was concerned. In any case, she had nowhere to go-unless of course she took the sly hints of the Big Uncle seriously. But there was Muthu to consider. She did not want to do anything that might in any way jeopardize a decent life for her son. But if anything should happen to Muthu, then she had made up her mind what to do.

XVI

During one of his frequent and aimless wanderings on the outskirts of Sirumudi, Guruswamy met the Big Uncle one afternoon. He was returning from a trip to the neighbouring town in his horse and cart.

He shouted at Guruswamy in a jovial manner.

'What is wrong with you, Guruswamy?' he said. 'You look like a tramp.'

Guruswamy replied with a sickly grin.

'I heard about your encounter with the law on behalf of our great Mr. Udayar,' he continued. 'For all the trouble and difficulties you underwent, he ought to have made you his manager instead of that scoundrel of a brother of yours. But I notice he has neglected you.'

'Well, you know it is…' Guruswamy trailed off.

'Come over to my farm now and we will talk about it', he said as he urged his horse forward.

His real name was Kumaraswamy Udayar and he was a cousin of Mr. Udayar, their grandfathers having been brothers. But while Mr. Udayar had concentrated on acquiring wealth and influence, his younger cousin was interested in a gay and easy-going life and in being popular with all and sundry by a generous distribution of money rather than in gaining their fear or respect. He laughed and joked with everyone; he had no respect or fear for the high and mighty and no contempt for the low. He was therefore referred to as the Big Uncle, the word 'Big' referring to his height and the word 'Uncle' referring to his popularity in the village. While there was no enmity between the cousins, Mr. Udayar always referred to the Big Uncle as 'that loafer' and the Big Uncle reciprocated it by referring to his cousin by a number of choice epithets such as 'the little Hitler', 'the great Mr. Udayar', and so on.

Unlike most other people in the village, the Big Uncle lived alone on his farm while his wife, a weak, complaining woman, lived in his house in the village, next door to Mr. Udayar. He paid her an allowance so that she could live in reasonable comfort, but otherwise left her severely alone. This arrangement by itself was sufficiently unorthodox to cause quite a bit of village gossip. And his occasional amorous adventures in the town and one or two in the village, had made him out to be a real Casanova in the eyes of the local people. But he was none the less a popular man.

Guruswamy had never been friendly with the Big Uncle. Their paths as well as their temperaments were different. Guruswamy was therefore surprised at his friendly attitude at a time when most people avoided him and so followed him to his farm house.

'Come in and sit down,' the Big Uncle shouted at him heartily.

With the instinctive fear of those who had come down in the world, Guruswamy fumbled and hesitated.

'Come on man; sit down and have some coffee,' the Big Uncle said. He shouted for the servant to bring two tumblers of coffee and then resumed as Guruswamy sat tentatively at the edge of the mat. 'You were also born a Udayar, so you don't have to be afraid of sitting on my mat just because you have no money. You can observe all these formalities in my respected cousin's house.'

The servant brought the coffee and looked askance at Guruswamy as he handed him a tumbler. Guruswamy drank it eagerly and the hot sweet liquid revived his sagging spirits and tired body.

'Tell me, what have you been doing since that affair of the police station?' the Big Uncle asked.

'Nothing, sir Guruswamy replied. 'I have not been able to find any work.'

'Did you know that my elder cousin had spent about five hundred rupees to get out of the situation?'

'Yes sir', Guruswamy nodded uncomfortably. He did not want to be involved in these affairs any more.

The Big Uncle chuckled to himself. 'It hurt his pride, you know; the great Mr. Udayar having to offer brides and ask for favours so that he may not be prosecuted! I wish they had put him in the lock-up instead of you.'

Guruswamy did not understand this kind of talk. But he was glad of any sympathy that came his way and he was certainly glad of the coffee.

'I don't understand all these things', he replied. 'I did what I was told, but things went wrong. However, it was not my fault.'

'That is just what I am saying,' the Big Uncle went on. 'You spent three days in the lock-up through no fault of yours, and the man who was responsible gets off because he has five hundred rupees to spend. And he hasn't even looked after you.

'They asked me to leave the village,' Guruswamy said. A little sympathy and understanding made him speak about his desperate situation. 'I would rather starve here than live anywhere else.'

'Things are bad for you'.

'Yes sir, very bad.'

They went on like this for some time. Finally, as he got ready to leave, the Big Uncle gave him ten rupees.

'Take it and don't think anything of it,' he said. 'It will keep you going for a while. Return it when you can'.

As Guruswamy walked home, his heart overflowed with gratitude not only for the Big Uncle, but for the whole of humanity. 'What a good man!' he muttered to himself. 'There are still such people in this world who do good to others with no thought of reward. I knew that

God would not let me down.'

When he gave the money to Meena, she asked:

'Where did you get it?'

'What does it matter to you?' he said. 'I didn't get it from Mr. Udayar'.

'Where then?'

'The Big Uncle gave it to me'.

'Do you mean to say that you went and asked him for money?' she shouted at him.

'No, I didn't ask him for anything,' said Guruswamy. 'He asked me to visit him, gave me coffee and lent me the money.'

'Lent!' Meena spat the word out. She gave him a peculiar look, full of pity as well as contempt. 'Do you realise what you have done?' she asked.

'What do you mean?'

Meena hesitated for a moment; she wanted him to take the money back, but it was too precious to be thrown away.

'Never, never take anything from him again', she said vehemently. 'I will see if I can get some grain and cook some supper for Muthu.' And she went out.

Guruswamy began to wonder.

XVII

About three months after Guruswamy's return from police custody, he came home one evening to find his son sitting in a corner and crying.

'What is the matter, Muthu?' he asked.

'I am hungry, I want some food,' the boy announced between his sobs.

Meena came out of the kitchen, slapped the boy hard and shouted at him to lie down quietly and go to sleep.

'Here, don't hit him; it is not his fault,' Guruswamy intervened.

The boy was encouraged by his father taking his side and started complaining. 'I had only some kanji for my midday meal and now mother won't give me even that. She is keeping it for herself.'

Guruswamy went into the kitchen and examined the cooking pots. In one of them, there was a bit of gruel. The thought struck him that Meena was perhaps keeping it for herself. He himself had not eaten for two days. He was in no mood to think or argue; blind passion took possession of him—an anger that he had never felt before. All the repressed despair and frustration burst forth. He caught hold of Meena's hair with one hand and hit her hard with the other.

'Yes, hit me; you are only fit to hit a woman. You can't earn anything to feed your wife and child, but you have enough strength to hit me. Go on, go on; kill me while you are about it. At least then my troubles will be over.'

Her words inflamed him all the more and he went on hitting her until his hand was sore and he was exhausted.

Muthu who had rushed in to see what was happening was too frightened to say anything, even to cry. He crawled back quietly into the next room and lay down on the mat.

'Why have you stopped?' Meena yelled at him. 'Why don't you kill me and finish what you have started?'

Then she collapsed in a corner of the kitchen and whimpered for a while; then even that ceased. They were silent for a long time.

Finally, Guruswamy asked her, 'Why didn't you give him the gruel?'

'I kept it for myself', she said adamant as ever. But Guruswamy knew now that was not true.

His anger had spent itself in the violence of his behaviour and he could now think calmly. He wondered how long she had been without any food; he had not bothered to ask. He felt that even if she had kept it for herself, it was quite pardonable. A sudden sympathy for her took possession of him and for the first time in months, he felt tender and kind towards her.

'How long is it since you had anything to eat?' he asked her.

'What does it matter to you?' she retorted.

After a while he tried again.

'Did you have anything at midday?'

'Yes, I had a large feast with different varieties of sweets and savouries.'

He walked to the fireplace and brought the gruel to where his wife was sitting.

'Here, drink this'; he said handing the bowl to her.

This was his way of apologizing to her for the brutal way in which he had treated her just now; he knew no other way.

'Go away and leave me alone', she said turning over on her other elbow and refusing to face him.

'Well, you wanted it, didn't you?' he shouted. 'That is why you wouldn't give it to the child'.

Only then did Meena realise why her husband who had never before laid hands on her, behaved so violently. 'So that is what you think,' she shouted. 'That I would rob my own child of its food and let it starve while I filled my stomach? You though that I would be capable of such conduct. Do you think I am like you?'

'Then why didn't you give it to him?'

'Because he has had one meal today and this will do for tomorrow. It would last longer that way. That is why.'

'I didn't realise that.'

'No, you don't realise anything. Oh, God, I wish I could get away from it all'.

'There is no need to shout now', he said.

'If it wasn't for Muthu, I would go away and throw myself into a well.' Then she continued in a calmer tone. 'If I give him a meal during the day, he only complains of hunger at night when he is at home; in any case, he soon goes to sleep. But if I give him a meal at night, he wakes up hungry and complains all day in the streets to all and sundry and that makes me ashamed.'

It was then that Guruswamy realised the full extent of his wife's sacrifice. Hunger had to be planned even more carefully than eating, for hunger had to be hidden from public view and children are apt to be indiscreet.

He felt a great tenderness towards his wife and contempt towards himself. But he had no way of showing what he felt. It could only be shown in the shape of food.

XVIII

In order to relieve the famine conditions existing in the village, a gruel centre had been started by the Government. Many wealthy citizens, both in towns and villages, contributed money as well as grains for the running of such centres. Mr. Udayar had contributed considerably towards running the centre in his own village and the

management of the centre, though officially in the hands of a famine relief committee, was in reality in his hands.

Every day, half a bag of grain was ground and made into thin gruel in a huge metal cauldron with a bit of salt to flavour it. If the grain had been stored in a Government godown for a long time-as was often the case—it had a musty smell about it. There was no time to have it cleaned properly and in any case no one bothered about that. At such times, the people who took the gruel had to have an onion in their mouth before they could drink it without being sick. But it provided some nourishment and helped them to survive when otherwise they might have starved to death.

A queue started forming at about 11 o'clock in front of the village choultry. Queuing was one of the customs of civilization that they had been forced to learn. It consisted mostly of untouchables and other low caste people to whom charity or public assistance did not mean any further degradation, local beggars and any strangers who happened to be passing from one village to the next in search of food or work. There were always a certain number of people to whom begging was an alternative occupation to working and their number had increased enormously as a result of famine conditions. They came day after day with tin or brass or earthenware jugs in their hands, took their places in the queue, chatted and quarrelled and complained, even joked and laughed, and drank the gruel and dispersed. Even hunger could not make them permanently miserable, nor stop the march of life. They had reached the end of their misery and degradation; nothing could make it any worse.

But there were a few others to whom a life dependent on charity was unknown. They were the farm workers who owned tiled houses instead of thatched ones, who in times of prosperity educated their children, went on pilgrimages and even fed the poor and the lowly to the extent possible. They too starved but they starved in secret and hid it under a cloak of respectability. They would normally have died rather than admit being hungry. They sometimes stood about in the outer fringe of the queue with a certain amount of envy and longing, but had not the courage to join the queue. To them the final degradation was still to come.

But in the end, it was the body, not the will that broke down. The spirit was still proud, unbending; but the small empty space in the abdomen cried out, dictated to the appropriate nerve centres in the brain, which moved the hesitant legs slowly, inevitably, towards the expectant queue of ragged men, women and children. And they stood there in all their pride and in all their shame, with bowed heads, averted eyes, helpless, desperate, wanting to run away and yet unable to do so.

The rest of the crowd eyed these people suspiciously. They were not of their kind. Instinctively, they were hostile to the new-comers, who had not yet conquered their feeling of shame. In the presence of these strangers they became silent and wanted them carefully

for any move that would enable them to pick a quarrel or at least complain. Further, any addition to the number meant a little less for each possibly no second helpings.

At twelve o'clock, the pot of gruel was brought out. Immediately, there was an animation in the crowd and a collective forward movement. One of Mr. Udayar's farm workers kept order among them and saw to it that no one tried to break the queue. The children were served first-one ladleful for each child and two for grown-ups. They drank their gruel and gradually dispersed, to meet again the next day and go through the same routine. It was not enough to give them sufficient nourishment; most of them were thin and weak and emaciated and they certainly could not do a day's work with nothing but gruel. But it kept them alive and enabled them to produce children.

Since the amount of grain issued each day was the same, if it so happened that there were more people on a particular day, or if the men who prepared the gruel-who were only human and rather hard up themselves—happened to steal one or two measures, the gruel was more watery. But generally, the number of people was more or less constant. They came every day, took their places in the queue, argued with the man who distributing the gruel, saying he had given too much to some and not enough for themselves, pleaded for more, but went away when once they understood they could not have any more. But a few enterprising ones hung about in the hope there may be still some at the bottom of the pot and often managed to get a little.

Mr. Udayar was not an enthusiastic social worker. He felt sorry for the poor devils who were starving. Brought up in the long tradition of charity and poor feeding that is so important a part of Hinduism, he undertook to run it at some expense and inconvenience to himself, but he could not supervise it and left it more or less entirely to his workers. Needless to say, Ramakrishnan took a prominent part in it and organized the whole thing. But even he was too important to be supervising the distribution of gruel and confined himself to the issue of the daily ration of grain and paying a visit sometimes to see that the gruel was properly distributed.

Two days after Guruswamy had quarrelled with his wife; he wandered about in the village and found himself near the gruel centre. He watched the crowd, a little enviously, but nevertheless with a certain degree of contempt. He was shocked to see one or two people in the queue who were of his own community and though wistfully to himself, 'It won't be long before I too join the queue'.

As his eyes wandered round, he was shocked to discover his son Muthu standing among the urchins ready to receive gruel. He had picked up a coconut shell from somewhere to collect the gruel and was now slowly moving forward with the crowd. As soon as he saw his father, he tried to hide himself by standing behind someone taller, at the same time desperately trying not to lose his place in the queue. Hunger teaches many things even to children and they grow up to learn the various tricks of getting food.

But the moment Guruswamy discovered him, he rushed forward and dragged him out of the queue and gave him a couple of hard slaps saying, 'You naughty devil! What do you want that stuff for?'

The man who was keeping the queue in order shouted at Guruswamy, 'Here, let him have a bit of gruel if he is hungry.'

'He has just had a meal', replied Guruswamy with a silly grin. 'He is just mischievous, that's all' and walked rapidly away dragging the yelling boy by his arm.

'I am hungry, I want some gruel,' the boy kept whimpering, but another blow silenced him till they got to their house.

XIX

Meena was lying on a mat in a corner. Guruswamy stood in the middle of the room with the boy.

'He went to the gruel centre,' he said.

'Did he get any gruel?' she asked without looking up.

'No, I dragged him away,' Guruswamy said.

'Do you want him to starve to death at his age?'

'You keep him here; I will find something,' he said and walked out of the house. But it was not so easy to implement that promise. He could only think of stealing. He would not have minded it so much then, but temperamentally he was unfit for any such undertaking. He did not even know how to set about it. He would probably be very clumsy and get caught any way. But the problem was desperate and urgent.

It was then that he thought of the cactus root. Many people seemed to be eating it now a days. No one admitted to eating it themselves, but they all discussed it as having been told by someone else. Since it grew on hedges and on public land only, Guruswamy did not consider it stealing.

He walked towards the outskirts of the village. The sun was burning hot and he had to put the towel round his head to protect himself from the heat. When he reached the first hedge, he looked furtively round, but there was nobody to be seen anywhere. Before the urgent necessity of digging all other feelings disappeared. He had no implement and had to use his bare hands. The thorns scratched his palms and prevented him from getting a good grip. After what seemed ages of struggle, he was able to pull it out, but the root broke and he was able to secure only a small piece.

At home, he showed it to Meena very proudly.

'Is this what we have come to?' she asked.

'It is that or nothing,' he said. 'Cook it and give it to the boy; and eat some yourself'.

She took it from him, washed it, cut it into little pieces and boiled it with some salt and chilly powder.

'Do you think it is all right?' she asked him just before serving.

'Everyone is eating it now a days', he replied.

Muthu ate it without complaint or remarks. Then she called out to her husband. 'You have some too', she said. 'There is enough left for both of us'.

This was the first meal to which his wife had invited him and he did not refuse. He ate the peculiar tasting mess in silence and, later, he could hear his wife eating and washing the pot. Though he had eaten only a little, it seemed to fill his stomach. His wife went to sleep on the mat and as he watched her, he felt a peace that he had not felt for a long time.

XX

That evening, Guruswamy took a knife with him, dug out two large cactus roots and brought them home. Meena boiled one of them each day and three of them had half of it in the morning and the rest for the evening meal.

On the evening of the third day, Guruswamy came home with two more roots. He was rather pleased with himself because he had just hidden it successfully from his friend Raju who had come to him just as he was leaving. He had felt the agony of suspense lest he was discovered, and the joy of escape. He was ashamed of having deceived his friend, but the ultimate feeling was one of relief.

As he went in, Meena said, 'Muthu is ill; he has been sick and seems to have fever'.

'It is strange; I have also a slight stomach ache,' he said.

'So have I', said Meena, 'It must be this stuff we have been eating. I do hope there is nothing seriously wrong with the boy'.

'He will be all right tomorrow,' said Guruswamy feeling his son's forehead. Then he handed Meena the two roots he had brought.

'Do you want to poison us all?' Meena shouted. 'I am not going to touch that again.' And she threw them into a corner.

‘How do you feel, Muthu?’ Guruswamy asked his son.

‘I feel sick,’ the boy answered weakly.

‘How long has he been like this?’ he asked.

‘He had his mid-day meal,’ Meena replied. ‘Then he started suddenly; didn’t even have time to run into the backyard. And he has been like this ever since.’

The boy groaned and moaned and asked for water. Meena gave him some, but he did not seem to be able to swallow.

‘I have heard that cactus root poisoning is serious’, she said.

‘Other people seem to eat it without any trouble,’ Guruswamy said impatiently.

Guruswamy was troubled about it, because it was he who had brought the cactus root home. But he did not want his wife to see it.

‘It is just my fate,’ cried Meena.

‘I will fetch the priest’, said Guruswamy and went out.

There was, of course, no doctor in the village. But the temple priest was also a physician in the ayurvedic system of medicine and some people claimed that he had brought about cures even in cases where doctors of western medicine had given them up as hopeless. He was not trained in any way, but had learnt to make some powders and oils and ointments from herbs which he administered to the sick in the village for a nominal consideration—and quite often for no consideration at all—and with a fair degree of success.

Guruswamy returned with the priest in a few minutes. The Brahmin felt the boy’s pulse for a long time, touched his forehead and peered into his eyes in the semi-darkness. Muthu was thoroughly exhausted, too weak even to speak or be conscious of what was happening.

‘It is the same wherever I go,’ said the priest. ‘You can’t eat cactus root on its own. It is harmless if you eat it in small quantities mixed with other food and get accustomed to it gradually. But otherwise…’ The old man paused. ‘What are we to do now?’ asked Meena.

‘The priest took out a little paper packet from a knot in the corner of his dhoti. ‘Give half this powder to-night and the rest in the morning,’ he said. ‘It should be dissolved in milk; but if you can’t get any milk, mix it in water before giving it.’

‘Where can we get any milk?’ moaned Meena as she took the powder from him.

‘If the sickness stops, give him some butter-milk or at least some gruel,’ said the priest.

‘Will he get well?’ Meena asked with pleading eyes.

‘What can I say?’ the priest spread out his hands. ‘I can only give the medicine. The rest is in His hands.’

As he was leaving, he mumbled to himself. ‘The times are bad; I don’t know when there will be an end to all this.’

Guruswamy had never prayed for anything specific before. He had always considered it wrong. But now he prayed for his son. Meena too prayed; but she generally prayed because she wanted God to do something for her. She vowed that if her son should get well by the grace of God, she would take him to the famous temple of Thirupathi and have his head shaved there as an offering to God. Then, she gave the powder as the priest had directed her and kept vigil throughout the night. The room which was normally stuffy now became smelly also, and Meena’s half-hearted attempts to clean it were not very successful. Guruswamy lay down on the verandah outside and muttered prayers to himself. Periodically he went in to have a look.

‘How is he now?’ he would ask.

‘About the same,’ Meena would reply.

He would stand about for a few minutes and then come on to the verandah again. In the face of this common tragedy, the antagonism between the wife and husband seemed to have disappeared. There were no recriminations and no harsh words; only a common anxiety for the boy.

By morning, the sickness, though reduced, had not completely stopped and Meena gave the second dose of powder. Muthu was perspiring and breathing hard and though his eyes were open, he seemed to be completely oblivious of what was going on around him.

About ten o’clock, the sickness stopped completely and Guruswamy and Meena were both relieved. But there was the problem of giving the boy some nourishment.

‘Why don’t you go to Mr. Udayar’s house and ask for some butter-milk?’ Guruswamy said. ‘Surely, they won’t refuse in a case like this’.

‘I can’t go there again’, said Meena.

‘They are not so hard- hearted as to refuse some for a dying child,’ said Guruswamy.

‘I tell you I can’t go,’ she shouted, ‘after the way you behaved towards him.’

‘Then I will go,’ said Guruswamy. ‘And fall at his feet if necessary’.

‘No, I will go,’ she said and departed with a brass jug.

But she was back in a few minutes with the jug empty. ‘There was no one there,’ she said. ‘Only the servants; and they say all the butter-milk is finished. All my pleading was no use.’

‘I will get some gruel from the gruel centre,’ said Guruswamy as he went out in his turn.

XXI

He walked slowly, hesitatingly, with the brass jug in his hand. When he got to the place, there were already a number of people there. They were the scum of the earth, for whom Guruswamy had so far had nothing but contempt, mixed with a slight feeling of pity. Now he was going to be one of them. He did not walk quickly as some of the others did in order to get in front of the queue. He wanted to hide behind someone or shrink to nothingness so that he would not be visible.

Unfortunately for him, there was a commotion when he joined the queue that drew the attention of everyone to his presence. The people who came for their daily ration of gruel were as closely knit and as much of a brotherhood as a secret society and they resented the presence of an interloper. Apart from anything else, additional people meant a little less for everyone else.

‘Look who is here!’ shouted the man in front of Guruswamy.

Everyone turned round to see who it was and they all started speaking at once.

‘What are you doing here?’

‘How did your wife let you?’

‘We thought you had breakfast at home every morning.’

The noise brought one of Mr. Udayar’s workers to see what it was all about. When he discovered Guruswamy, he said in surprise, ‘What are you doing here?’

‘I have come for some gruel for my son who is sick,’ replied Guruswamy mechanically.

‘So, it has come to that,’ said the man.

He felt sorry for him and shouted at the others to keep quiet and leave him alone. But in spite of this there were furtive glances, whispers and giggles. Guruswamy bore them all and stuck to his place in the queue.

XXII

Guruswamy's visit to the gruel centre happened to coincide with the arrival of a distinguished visitor. Special preparations had been going on. The choultry had been whitewashed and the dirt and filth of the surroundings had been hastily removed. There were more hangers-on than usual and those in charge were urging the people to keep quiet with a special sense of urgency. From the whispered conversations, Guruswamy learnt that one of the ministers of the State Government was due to pay a visit to them that day. The distribution of gruel had been held up in anticipation of the visit and the people in the queue were getting more tired and restless than usual.

Soon, they saw three cars coming along the road, hooting their horns and raising a cloud of dust. There was a sudden forward movement in the queue of get a good look at the minister and the attendants forced them back and tried desperately to keep some semblance of order among them as the cars pulled up under the shade of the banyan trees. From the first car, the minister got out, along with the collector of the district. Mr. Udayar travelled in the second car which was his own, along with other officials and a member of the local legislature. The third car was crowded with the usual hangers-on of any ministerial party and a newspaper correspondent and photographer. Guruswamy was surprised to see his brother in the third car. 'He is getting on in the world', he said to himself.

Mr. Udayar rushed forward and garlanded the minister. He had wanted to have a temporary platform erected and have a meeting, but the collector had over-ruled it. So, Mr. Udayar had to be content with garlanding him and being photographed while he was doing it. He had instructed the photographer to take as many pictures of himself as possible with the minister.

'We are glad to welcome you to Sirumudi, sir,' said Mr. Udayar.

The minister smiled, with the bored smile of a man who had heard it a dozen times daily since he took office. He enquired about the number of people fed daily at the centre, the quality of gruel, the possibilities of providing work for people, and so on. He walked towards where the gruel was kept and said, 'Let me taste it.' This was something that had not been anticipated and there was an immediate search for a clean spoon. While they waited for the spoon, the minister talked to a few people in the queue and the photographer went to work at various angles.

Meanwhile, Ramakrishnan had seen Guruswamy and went across to him.

'What are you doing in this place?' he whispered to him angrily. 'Have you no shame?'

'I want some gruel for Muthu', Guruswamy replied.

'Get out of here,' he said. 'Do you want to humiliate me before all these people?'

But the ministerial party was approaching and Ramakrishnan walked away.

Meanwhile, the spoon had been brought and the minister tasted a little of the messy liquid. He gave a sickly grin as the staring audience watched him in awe.

'Not bad,' he said.

Then, he took the ladle and distributed the gruel to the first few children and the photographer went to work again. He watched the distribution for a few minutes and slowly walked towards the car.

Before getting into the car, he complimented Mr. Udayar.

'I am very glad of the good work you are doing, Mr. Udayar,' he said.

'I do my best to help the unfortunate people in the village sir, said Mr. Udayar. 'But with times as they are, I don't know long we can carry on.'

'But you must carry on', said the minister. 'We hope to start some major irrigation works in this part soon, when it would be possible for all the able-bodied men to get work and I hope the situation will be easier.'

'I will do my best sir,' said Mr. Udayar.

The cars moved away; the visit was over. It had taken less than ten minutes.

Guruswamy collected the gruel and walked hurriedly home. As he neared his house, his heart beat faster. He saw one or two people standing outside and he could hear the wailing of his wife. He walked in and saw Meena beating her breast and crying. The priest had come too. He took Guruswamy by the arm and brought him out of the room.

'It is God's will,' he said. 'No one can do anything about it. It is out of our hands now'.

Guruswamy started at the jug of gruel he still held in his hand. 'This is no use now,' he said looking at it. He walked straight back to the gruel centre. The distribution was over now and people were drinking their gruel and resting in the shade of the banyan tree.

'Here, you can have your blasted gruel back, 'Guruswamy shouted at no one in particular. Everyone turned round. 'My son is dead,' and he threw the jug violently to the ground.

An old man rushed forward to catch the jug and save whatever was still left in it. 'There is no need to waste the gruel,' he said as he picked up the jug from the dirty ground and drank what was still left in it.

PART TWO

OUT OF DUST

I

When Man is master of his environment, he tends to overlook the forces of Nature; or at least belittles them. The occasional rude shocks that Nature provides are not sufficient to damp his spirits or curb his enthusiasm with regard to his own power. Though he may agree that 'Man proposes and God disposes', his faith and his actions are pinned in the saying 'God helps those who help themselves.' He develops an attitude of mind and a code of conduct that generally leave out of account the unpredictable vagaries of external forces.

But when external forces—whether those of Nature or of circumstance–are too powerful to cope with, Man becomes helpless. And when this happens over years—perhaps generations—he tends to give up a struggle that is so heavily weighted against him. He has a magic word to explain his failure. It is 'Fate'. It is a justification for his failure as well as a consolation in his misery. The only way of making this unequal struggle fairly evenly balanced—according to him—is to propitiate the forces of Nature so that instead of acting against him, they will act on his behalf. That is his faith and his hope and he devotes his entire attention to it.

Like a drowning man clutching at a straw, he tries to hold on to anything that give him hope; and if there is no straw, his belief creates one out of anything, out of nothing; and his imagination coverts it into a raft and he clings to it with faith and longing. He sacrifices everything for this product of his belief and gains strength from such sacrifice. Does he get drowned? The surprising thing is, he often succeeds in swimming to the shore.

Out of clay, gods are made; out of dust, saints are created. It is the faith of the multitude that makes images godly; that makes frail, human material saintly.

II

Men and women stood about and listened, some in wonder, some out of curiosity. Those who had known him in the past, just laughed and walked away.

He stood in the centre of a ragged throng. They had all been given two large ladlefuls of gruel each. They had nowhere to go and no work to do; no recreation other than listening to him. It was like going to the pictures and to the temple at the same time, for he provided entertainment as well as religion. So they stood and listened, but not always politely. Many carried on a conversation of their own, and not in whispers either. A few sympathized with him; others laughed.

But he was beyond their sympathy or their laughter, their reverence or their ridicule. For now, he was one with God. He spoke the word of God and cared not who listened. Life, and consequently death, meant nothing to him, for he was not of this age or time; he was living in eternity. And yet, he was peculiarly a product of his environment.

'This world is Maya: It is an illusion that throws a hundred attractive images to lure you into unholy paths. And you, poor, ignorant mortals, chase these phantom shadows that lead nowhere and become slaves to physical desires and aspirations. The divine spark of life that is in everyone of you—the pure, eternal spirit, the Athman – has become impure and polluted. It is lost in a quagmire of ambition and lust. Self-denial, renunciation of all earthly things, eternal soul-seeking, is the only way…'

'Where is the next meal to come from while we are doing all the renouncing?' someone shouted.

There was laughter from the audience at this irreverent remark.

'Yes, laugh at me,' he cried. His eyes shone out of a gaunt and dirty face. His long, black beard and hair were thickly matted. 'Yes, laugh; do you think I am ashamed of your laughter?' he shouted. 'No, for there is nothing but evil and greed in your hearts. You will suffer for it'. He raised his voice. 'Yes, you will suffer. The evil that is in you will destroy your souls and you will revolve endlessly in the cycle of births and deaths and go through greater misery and toil with each succeeding birth'.

'He has been like this since his son died', said one of the men at the fringe of the crowd to a new-comer. 'Poor fellow, I think he is a bit touched.'

'He goes on like this every day,' said another. 'But sometimes he sings devotional songs. Then he is good'.

'I am sorry for the poor man,' commiserated an old woman. 'Only a few years ago, he was quite well off. He lost all his property and couldn't even get any work. His son died of eating cactus root and his wife left him. I believe she is now living…' Here, the woman lowered her voice and whispered, 'Now, he just talks about God. Of course he has always been inclined a bit that way. It affects their heads one way or another when they come down in the world like that'.

'Or when they go up', a young woman said with a wink in the direction of a well-dressed young man smoking a cigarette sitting on the verandah of the choultry.

'There isn't any chance of that happening to you', retorted the old woman. 'Or, is there?' she asked, again looking pointedly at the young man.

'Don't insinuate things like that about me,' the young woman shouted back.

But they were not allowed to finish their argument. Someone said, 'Look at Mr. Udayar; there's one who has come up in the world, hobnobbing with the ministers….'

The speaker's voice rose above the hum of conversation. He moved the long matted hair back from his face and assumed an expression of benevolence. 'But he will come,' he said. There was hope and sincerity in the ringing tones of his voice. 'He has come nine times before and he is not going to disappoint us the tenth and final time. He will come, punish the wicked, destroy the evil that is in us all; He will purify the world.'

'What are we to do until he comes?' someone shouted. 'How are we to fill our stomachs?'

'Will he bring us some rice when he comes?' laughed another.

'Your stomachs!' shouted the speaker. 'That's all you care about! If there is no goodness in your hearts and no reverence in your souls, it is better that your stomachs should be empty rather than full. Food will turn to poison and you will face in hell greater tortures than you can dream of.'

'Like your son', someone said.

'That's cruel', 'Don't taunt him', 'Don't talk like that', voices rose from the crowd.

'Yes, like my son who was poisoned,' the speaker continued unperturbed. 'And why was he poisoned? Because my heart was full of evil thoughts. I did not place myself in the hands of God. I was not free from the lure of lust; I coveted earthly things. But now, I am free', he shouted. 'Free! Now, the earth is my bed; the sky is my blanket, the air I breathe is my food'.

'There is no doubt he speaks well'.

'And he speaks the truth; there is a lot of evil in the world. That is why we are so wretched.'

The crowd dispersed slowly. The women were particularly impressed with him for they were generally more religious than the men. They felt sorry for him and angry at his wife for having left him.

'He speaks like a saint,' said one of them. That was the first time that the word 'saint' had been used to refer to him.

III

The well-dressed young man was still sitting there on the verandah of the choultry with his friends. He was Govindarajan, son of Mr. Ramaswamy Udayar, the biggest land owner in the village. Two of his friends from the city, Venkatraman, a budding journalist, and Kumar, a young lawyer, had come to spend the week-end with him. The young men in their spotless, mercerized white dhoties and shirts presented a startling contrast to the drab environment of the gruel centre.

'We have talked so much about the food shortage in the abstract,' Govindarajan remarked. 'But the reality is bit grim, is it not?'

'Reality is always grim, my friend,' Venki answered. 'But what interests me at the moment is your speech-making yogi. I would like to talk to him. In the words of a popular magazine, "he is the most unforgettable character I have ever met!"'

'Yes, he is rather funny, isn't he?' said Govindarajan. He was pleased that his sophisticated friends were so easily entertained.

'Let us take him with us to your house, Govind,' Kumar, the lawyer, suggested. 'May be he will throw some light on the perplexing problems of our time.' He imitated Venki sarcastically.

Govindarajan did not like to take Guruswamy to his house. After all, he had his position in the village to think of and his father's feelings to consider. It might lead to complications. At the same time, he did not want to disappoint his friends.

Meanwhile, the crowd dispersed. 'Go! Now that your stomachs are full, go! That's all you care about,' the speaker shouted.

'If you had cared about your stomach a little more, you wouldn't have come to this', cried one of the men.

'God has set me free. Now, I have no earthly ties. I have cast them away one by one, first land, then gold, then lust…' he went on muttering to himself.

As Guruswamy started to walk away, Govindarajan called out to him.

'Hey, come here'.

Guruswamy turned round. 'I answer to no man's call', he shouted. 'If you want to speak to me, you come here.' And he stood exactly where he had stopped.

Govindarajan was a little flustered. He was used to being obeyed by everyone in the village and he did not know what to do.

'He is really mad, you know,' he explained to his friends.

‘If you have nothing to say to me, I shall go’, said Guruswamy and started to walk away.

But Venki took charge of the situation. ‘Where are you going?’ he asked.

‘I have nowhere to go except heaven, and till God chooses to call me, I am just carrying the burden of my sins.’

‘He is very original, isn’t he?’ asked Govindarajan.

‘Won’t you take us to heaven with you when you go?’ asked Kumar with a wink at the others.

Guruswamy turned and came back. ‘Do you really want to go to heaven?’ he asked.

‘Yes, but we don’t know the way’.

‘The way is straight ahead of you, but you don’t see it because your eyes are blinded by passion and your hearts are full of pride and desire.’

‘We would like to follow you’.

‘Then, do what I did; control your senses, give up ambition, and get rid of all your possessions. That is the only way. Are you prepared?’

‘Yes, we are prepared,’ said Venki with a twinkle in his eye. As they were talking, they were gradually walking towards Govindarajan’s house and Guruswamy was following them.

‘It is not as easy as you think,’ said Guruswamy. ‘I was like you once. I was a land-owner with a wife and child and I had to go through untold misery and suffering before I realised the cause of it all. But God has saved me in the end.’

He was speaking more to himself than to the others. His eyes had a far-away look and he seemed lost in the contemplation of something great and wonderful. Even the young men, whose aim was nothing more than to have some fun at his expense, watched him seriously now.

‘I can see it all clearly’, he mused. ‘God planned every move carefully and deliberately, though I was kept in the dark till the very end. First he robbed me of my land, then took away the little money I had; he starved my family and finally, he took my son away. It was then that I realised that these were not a series of misfortunes, but a master plan to free me from all bondages of the flesh’.

‘What happened to your wife?’ Kumar asked. ‘You haven’t told us about her’.

‘I am not yet free completely from pride of shame’, Guruswamy said. ‘God has sent you to test me. My wife left me and I have heard people whisper things about her. I know in my heart that those things are not true, but I have not had the courage to contradict them.

She is full of lust and entirely of this world, but she is moral. In fact, she wanted me to accompany her. But I would not. When she left me, she said, "We are no use to each other, but if ever you need me, I shall come back." I was ashamed that she should have left me and afraid to contradict the rumours, but now, thanks to you, I have completely conquered pride.'

'That is clever of you', said Venki, feeling slightly embarrassed. But Guruswamy continued.

'One day, she will come back, as a sinner asking for forgiveness, and I shall take her back, not as a wife, but as another soul in search of God.'

The young men felt guilty that they should have tried to laugh at such innocence.

They were nearing Govindarajan's house. 'Would you like to come with us and have something to eat?' he asked.

'I have had my gruel.'

'Wouldn't you like something more substantial?'

'If God gives me anything, I eat. Otherwise, I starve. I ask no man for food.'

'But I say, isn't that pride?'

'No, it is not from pride that I refrain from asking. If no one offers me food, it means God wants me to die of starvation and I don't go against His plans'.

'God has told us to give you some food to-day.'

'I will come', said Guruswamy, and followed them into the house.

IV

The next day when Guruswamy took his usual place at the gruel centre, there was a greater interest in him and as greater curiosity. It was rumoured that Guruswamy had said things which had greatly impressed the young men from the town, that he had been treated as if he was a real saint. No one knew the source of all this information, but it gathered momentum as it went along.

'I believe he told their fortune', said one.

'Go on, he can't tell fortunes any more than you can.'

'Anyhow, they gave him sweets and coffee,' and at this point, the speaker lowered his voice with glances all round. 'And even brandy it seems.'

‘They probably did that out of devilment,’ remarked a cynic.

‘But he was allowed to sit on one of the cushion sofas that the young master has in his room and afterwards he was put to sleep on a velvet bed.’

‘Won’t Mr. Udayar be annoyed if hears about it?’

Many thought that the young men were having some fun at Guruswamy’s expense, but no one was sure just what it was that Guruswamy had done which had impressed the young men from the town. The general impression was that somehow or other they were interested in Guruswamy’s doings. So, when Guruswamy started to speak as usual after he had his cup of gruel, people listened with greater attention. There were practically no interruptions. Whatever conversation there was, was carried on in whispers. In one of the pauses that followed, a woman in the crowd shouted at him.

‘You did yourself rather well yesterday, didn’t you?’

‘I showed those sinful young men the pathway to heaven,’ said Guruswamy.

‘Did you tell their fortune?’

‘What is there in telling one’s fortune?’ he shouted. ‘I can tell you yours if you want. You will go on living and you will have nothing but gruel till you die. One day God will take pity on you and remove you from this misery.’

Govind, Venki and Kumar had arrived during the discourse and were watching everything from a distance. ‘No one could have given a better answer to impress the crowd,’ Venki was whispering to Govind. ‘He has neither denied nor confirmed his skill at fortune-telling and yet left the impression that it is all child’s play to him. It disturbs the scepticism of the few, confirms the belief of many and leaves them more curious than ever. And yet, it was done in all innocence.’

There were no further interruptions from the people who were a little overawed by the presence of the young men. But Guruswamy burst into song.

Release me from the cycle of births and deaths Oh lord,
And let me rest at your divine feet.

‘And he is a good singer into the bargain,’ muttered Venki.

‘I told you so before,’ said Govind.

‘Handled in the right manner, he is a potential gold mine,’ said Venki.

Guruswamy went on singing for about ten minutes. As he went from one verse to another, he became more eloquent, more pleading and more insistent with God. He was

completely oblivious of his environment and was transported on a series of waves of divine emotion. When at last he returned to earth, he was completely exhausted and leaned against the platform almost in a faint.

While others listened, immersed in the compelling power of the singer, Venki was busy taking photographs from various angles, trying to catch that mystic quality that compelled others to stop and listen.

'I will show you copies of these pictures when they are developed', he told Guruswamy.

'I don't want pictures of myself', answered Guruswamy weakly. 'Who would want to see my pictures when they can just as well have a vision of God?'

V

Mr. Ramaswamy Udayar returned from his visit to the town two days later. Most people in the village were afraid to speak to him freely and consequently, Guruswamy's recent rise to fame and his son's part in it reached him in subtle hints and oblique references. He questioned his faithful servant Ramakrishnan about it. He related what happened, but added it was all in fun.

Mr. Udayar next paid a visit to the gruel centre. Among other things Ramakrishnan had told him that Guruswamy had refused to stand in a queue for his gruel; he refused to beg for food, he said. One of the attendants brought him his mug of gruel. Mr. Udayar wanted to see things for himself.

His visit was sufficiently unusual for it to cause a stir there. The attendants were more alert in their behaviour. Everything went on as usual. But before the actual serving of the gruel to those in the queue, one of the attendants took a jugful and handed it to Guruswamy who was sitting under the tree a little apart from the rest. He drank it and returned the jug. Then, the serving began. But the strange thing was that the people waiting to be served, who normally quarrelled about precedence and pushed each other in order to be served first, did not object to this procedure at all.

Mr. Udayar called the attendant.

'Why did you give him the gruel first? Doesn't he stand in the queue like everyone else?' he asked.

The attendant was confused and afraid. 'I don't know sir,' he stammered. 'We have always done it like that'.

'Always?'

'For nearly three months now'.

'Well, you mustn't do it in future', said Mr. Udayar. 'Everyone has to stand in the queue if he wants any gruel. Do you understand?'

'You are quite right sir', said one of his satellites who always went round with him. 'The fellow has no business to be served as if he were a guest.'

'He thinks he has become a holy man now, sir', said another, not to be outdone. 'It is time he was put in his place.'

'This is not a private charity,' announced Mr. Udayar in pompous tones, loud enough for all to hear. He did not want to seem as if he was doing it out of personal animosity. 'Though I provide the grain, it is really government charity and the government orders are that everyone should be served in the order in which they stand in the queue. No one is to be given preference. We can't break government rules, can we?'

'No, sir, we can't do that,' said one of the yes-men.

The next day, when the serving began, Guruswamy was not given any gruel first. He, however, did not seem to notice it and went on talking to himself. But the crowd shouted at the attendants, 'What about our Swami's portion?' They started calling him 'Swami' now; shortened form of Guruswamy. 'We can't have our gruel until Swami has had his.'

'Yes, divine offerings come first.'

May be they were serious; may be it was half in jest. Many of them were tramps who disliked authority in any form and it pleased them to resist rules made by Mr. Udayar. Others joined in merely for the fun of it. Serving him first had already acquired the sanctity of tradition.

'Our orders are to serve only those in the queue', said the attendant as he poured gruel into the jug of the man first in the queue.

'Give the first jug to Swami,' someone in the queue shouted. The man who received the gruel took it straight to Guruswamy and gave it to him.

'Here, drink this, Swami,' he said. 'I will go without for one day.'

'If God wants me to live on this miserable earth, he will send me food,' said Guruswamy as he drained the gruel.

The others were impressed by this spirit of sacrifice on the part of the man and begged and shouted at the attendants to give him some more, which they did.

However much they might have quarrelled and shouted in order to get a little more than the others, the brotherhood of hunger was nevertheless a closely knit relationship and they would no more let one of their members starve than any exalted body of men and women.

From that day onwards, the first person in the queue gave his gruel to Guruswamy and generally managed to get a second helping.

VI

The offer of gruel to Guruswamy each day by a different member of the starving fraternity, became within a short time not a mere habit, but a sort of ritual dutifully performed by the faithful. He became a holy mascot-if such an expression can be used—a keeper of their conscience. He represented one aspect of their life and beliefs and aspirations which had deep roots in their tradition.

It was not done merely to satisfy Guruswamy's hunger or out of sympathy for him, though that was how it originated. It was no longer an objective act. Now it became a sacrifice offered for the purification of their souls. There was so little that they could sacrifice even if they wanted to, and this little act made them feel better, more virtuous. It was not a fast undertaken by the well-fed and the corpulent in certain religious days in order to propitiate their favourite gods; it was a sacrifice by those who were themselves hungry, by the lowest of the low, and as such, could not fail to attract attention.

The gruel centre was patronised not only by the poor of Sirumudi, but by a few of the neighbouring villages as well. They too had become members of his hungry fraternity by dint of perseverance, and had won their places in the queue after a great deal of struggle in the beginning. They did not usually drink their gruel immediately but took it home, many of them sharing it with those members of their families who were too old or too young to walk to the gruel centre.

One of the women from Kallupatti, a village about four miles away, Kuppa by name, was at the head of the queue on a particular day, but she did not offer her portion of gruel to Guruswamy. There were shouts and protests at this, but she turned round and shouted back.

'Why should I give it to him?' she said. 'I am taking it to my mother who can't even walk. If he is too big to stand in the queue with the rest of us, then he can go without,' and she walked away.

But a curious thing happened. When the woman next in line took her share of gruel to Guruswamy and offered it to him, he refused it. 'God doesn't want me to eat to-day', was all he said. The woman went off a little annoyed that he should have refused her offer, but

quite pleased that she could drink it herself. Within a few minutes everyone forgot about the whole incident.

But the next day, there was plenty of excitement at the gruel centre. One of the women who had come from Kallupatti said that Kuppa's mother had died immediately after taking the gruel the previous day. 'It just choked her and stopped her breath,' she said panting, for she had hurried all the way in order to give them the news. 'They say in my village that the Swami put a curse on the gruel because it was not offered to him.'

As people came in twos and threes and joined the queue, they learnt the news, discussed it, interpreted it and passed it on. Even the shouting of the attendants to make them keep quiet had no effect on their excitement. They realised they were in the presence of power—a divine power that was greater than anything they had come across before. The suggestion that the death of the old woman might have been a mere coincidence was treated with contempt. It was a power they had to propitiate, to submit to and to make use of for their own good.

Soon, there were as many versions of this incident as there were people. It grew with repetition and vivid imagination raised it to the level of a holy episode in the epics. Men and women looked at Guruswamy in fear, in wonder and in admiration.

'It is God's vengeance on Kuppa for not giving the gruel to the Swami.'

'I have always said he has magical powers.'

'They say the woman died the moment the gruel touched her lips.'

'Anyone who drinks his gruel before Swami's hunger is satisfied will go the same way'.

'His son died, because he could not get any gruel and that is why this gruel is cursed by him. The curse is removed only if he drinks it first'.

'What are we going to do in future?'

'We will have to offer him gruel without fail. That is the only way out'.

'But if he refuses? He refused yesterday, you know.'

'Kuppa has paid for her sin of not offering gruel to him with the loss of her mother. That wrath has been paid off with a life. Now, he will accept.'

'May be, if we got the priest to perform some ceremony.'

'If he casts a spell or a curse, only he can remove it; what is the use of going to the priests?'

When the gruel was served the next morning, the first man who received it took it to Guruswamy, placed it at his feet, removed the towel round his head and tied it round his waist as sign of humility and prostrated before Guruswamy as he would have done before the image of a god. In that tense moment when everyone watched him, it gave dignity and poise to his movements and added a touch of solemnity to the occasion. He stood with folded hands and asked Guruswamy to forgive their sins and not to put any more curses on them. They had now realised his divine powers and would behave accordingly in future. Finally, he requested the Swami to accept the gruel as a sign of his forgiveness.

Guruswamy seemed either completely oblivious of or indifferent to what was happening. He was talking to himself as usual. But when the gruel was offered he merely accepted it.

The ceremonial was repeated by everyone; they offered their gruel to Guruswamy in a symbolic manner, muttered a prayer and then drank it.

When Guruswamy spoke to them that day, there were no jeers, questions or interruptions from the crowd. They listened in silent reverence.

'This life is hell; there is no other hell but this life. And yet you cling to it; lie and cheat and rob in order to preserve it. What is there in this life but hunger and misery and sickness, pain and fear and suffering? So get out of it and try to reach the bosom of God. That is the only escape from all this….'

The people who listened to him—even those who had ridiculed him in the past-found a new and deeper meaning in his words. In his reference to death, they inferred that he was alluding to the death of the old woman in the next village. He was telling them that really he had not cursed the old woman at all, but had merely released her from the bondage of the flesh.

'The wisdom of the saints is too deep for us poor mortals to fathom; we can only have faith,' they said as they departed. The events of the day were reported to Mr. Udayar that evening. He listened without speaking; he too wondered.

VII

Two days later, Kuppa came and told her story. She made it more dramatic, and to all who believed, more meaningful. As she went on repeating her story, emphasizing each detail more vividly than before, even the apparently unimportant things acquired new significance. They were not just a sequence of events leading to the death of a half-starved old woman. They were events that were divinely ordained.

Kuppa also insisted that on that day it was her privilege to offer gruel to the Swami which she did with all due ceremony. Later when someone offered her some gruel, she vehemently refused it.

'What is the use of offering gruel to the Swami if you are going to drink someone else's afterwards?' she said. 'I think whoever has the privilege of offering gruel to the Swami should fast for that day'. And so it became a tradition that those who offered gruel to the Swami fasted for the day.

They soon forgot how only a few months ago, they had laughed and ridiculed their Swami. He was no longer considered mad; to have suggested it would have been considered a sacrilege. His most preposterous statements were taken to be literally true; they were analysed and interpreted and searched for hidden wisdom. Daily, new stories grew around his past life. Many ordinary incidents were given a new twist and quoted as examples of his supernatural powers. Others which would not lend themselves to such interpretation were ignored and, finally, forgotten.

Because of his constant preoccupation with God, the children started calling him 'Swami', short for Guruswamy and a word they often used to refer to the priest or even God. Then he became 'Samiar', meaning one who had renounced the world, and finally he became 'Kanji Samiar' meaning a saint of the gruel. It was singularly appropriate, since he was one of the hungry fraternity and had risen above them all to conquer that most fundamental of all desires—the desire for food.

As weeks succeeded each other, a transformation had come over the gruel centre. It was no longer a place where hungry masses of people pushed one other and quarelled in order to get a little more gruel than the others. They did not laugh and jeer and make crude jokes. They were well-mannered, orderly and even polite to each other so that the attendants had very little work. Dignity was added to the tragedy that was theirs. But more than anything else, they had acquired the distinction of a religious congregation. They were elevated, purified, ennobled not only by his presence, but by their own behaviour. They had not assembled there merely to satisfy an animal appetite; they had come there to cleanse their souls of all evil and they behaved accordingly.

VIII

All this could not go on without the rest of the village taking notice. For the gruel centre was only a small part of the village, composed of the lowly and the hungry. There were still the people who could afford to eat in their own homes, such as the men with work, money or land or some means of livelihood. At first they were mere spectators who watched what was happening at the gruel centre with amusement and curiosity. They had

known Guruswamy in the old days and could only laugh at him. But after the death of Kuppa's mother, they began to take more interest. Some of them wondered if perhaps there was something in Guruswamy after all. It was not positive faith, but the fear of unbelief—that there may be something they had overlooked as a result of which they might be the sufferers; or at least losers of something they might otherwise have gained. So, they came to the gruel centre to watch, so that they may not be out of it if anything should happen.

Out day, Raju came to see if the priest was there.

'What do you want the priest for?' one of the attendants asked him.

'My son is sick; I thought he might be able to give some medicine.

One of the women in the queue who heard it shouted. 'The priest's medicine is no good. Why don't you ask our Samiar to cure him? He will do it for a jug of gruel.'

'Go on, try it,' one of the villagers who was standing by said. 'It can't do any harm and it may do some good. You can give the medicine also if you want.'

There it was, the fear that, 'there may be something in it'.

With some coaxing from a few others present, Raju approached his old friend. 'Do you recognise me?' Raju asked.

The Samiar glared at him for a few seconds. 'Yes, you are Raju,' and the old friendliness came back for a few moments. 'How are you?'

'Go on; prostrate yourself before the holy man, 'shouted some of those who were watching. 'Do you think he will grant your wish if you asked him as if you were asking him the time of the day?'

Raju prostrated before him. He stood up and with folded hands said, 'My son is sick. I have come to ask you to cure him.'

'I cannot cure your son, 'the Samiar said. 'But God will cure him.'

'These people tell me that you can cure him if you want to', Raju persisted.

'These people are fools,' the Samiar said. 'I am powerless; I merely speak the word of God. But God will cure him. He did not cure my son; but he will cure yours.'

Raju went home. Whether it was because of the Samiar's powers, or because of the priest's medicine, the boy was cured. Raju was convinced however that his son recovered solely through the powers of the Samiar. Therefore, the next morning, Raju's wife prepared

some special gruel with milk, at some sacrifice to themselves, and reverently offered it to the Samiar; she also fasted for the day according to the tradition set by Kuppa.

From then on, the village people started coming to the Samiar to tell him of their problems and their troubles in the hope that he would find a way out. Other changes appeared in keeping with the new status of the Samiar. Someone had managed to persuade him to have a bath and he had been given cleaner clothes. Kuppa, who claimed a special relationship to the holy man by virtue of the fact that it was through her that he first revealed himself, became his attendant and supervisor of the ritual of gruel offering.

At first, apart from those who came to collect gruel, there were one or two each day. But soon, the number increased, though it was still modest and confined to people from one or two villages who had heard about the Samiar through the people from the gruel centre; and they were all of working class origin. The hungry fraternity took a special pride in all this, for it was their Samiar who was becoming famous. Were it not for them, he might have remained unknown, unrecognized and unworshipped. But now they stood to benefit by him. For everyone who came to worship the Samiar brought some gruel—of better quality than what they usually got—and as the Samiar could not drink it all, it was distributed among the waiting throng.

There was only one person who was unaffected by all this. It was the Samiar himself. He carried on as if nothing had happened. He took his place on the platform at ten o'clock every morning and went on talking to himself and occasionally addressing his devotees.

IX

Soon, the Samiar was known to a wider audience through the following article in a local newspaper.

'In the grim and squalid surroundings of a gruel centre in the village of Sirumudi is a man who claims to show everyone the pathway to heaven. This may seem rather a tall claim to many of our readers, but the local people—particularly those who out of hunger are forced to patronise the gruel centre- believe in him. In spite of their own hunger and that of their near and dear ones, they take turns to offer him their own gruel and fast for that day. They call him "Kanji Samiar" for he is a product of the gruel centre and specially favoured by the starving men and women.

'There is nothing dramatic or showy about him. He is just an ordinary man who was a small land-owner and who has lost everything, including his wife and child. Many of his devotees are men and women who have known him intimately since childhood and who have slowly come to realise that this simple villager is endowed with divine powers. But he

is not a quack or a charlatan; he does not know the art of impressing people; he does not claim to cure illnesses or confer favours on those who come to him. In fact he does not want people to go to him at all. He merely says, “Give up all worldly ties, cast off fear and passion from your heart and I will take you to heaven.” It is as simple as that!

‘But there is no doubt that he is inspired. There is a fire in his eyes that draws people to him and they come in their hundreds, offer their simple gruel, tell him their troubles and return satisfied. He sits under the Banyan tree in a remote village, as a modern example of the essential spirituality of his ancient land of ours. It would be a good thing if some of our cynics were to visit the village and see the simple faith of the starving villagers as they file past this saint of hunger and reverently offer their gruel before partaking of it themselves.’

This item of news accompanied by photographs of the Samiar and the gruel offering was the topic of conversation in many circles in the city on the day it appeared. Some thought it was a hoax; others said that the editor must be very short of news to print stuff like that. But there were enough believers and a few of them at least made up their minds to pay a visit to Sirumudi at the earliest opportunity.

X

The first to do so was Venki’s mother.

‘I am fond of visiting holy men wherever they are’, she had told Govindarajan. ‘It always makes me feel so elevated. Even if we can’t lead a noble life, we ought at least to pay our homage to those who do. My husband and I will come on Sunday.’

Govind was now worried that the Kanji Samiar may not come up to the expectations of these educated and sophisticated people from the city.

‘He is not as noble as all that you know,’ he tried to curb her enthusiasm. ‘It is just that all these poor people at the gruel centre think that he is a saint.’

‘If he is a saint, it is all the same whether he is worshipped by rich or poor,’ she said. ‘God does not make any such distinctions. We will come next Sunday.’

And she was true to her word. She brought specially cooked gruel from her home and an unwilling husband. He was a high government official who exercised considerable powers in his office, but obeyed his wife implicitly in domestic matters. It was a matter of pride for Mr. Udayar that these people from the city should come to his house, but he was not very pleased about the reason for the visit. He had kept severely aloof from the gruel centre. The visit of these people was therefore a little embarrassing.

News had already spread that some important people had come in motor car from the city to receive the Samiar's blessings and there was an air of expectancy as Venki's mother and father, followed by Govind, walked to the gruel centre. Their servant followed them with a silver jug full of gruel. Another carried a large basket of sweets to be distributed to the poor after the ceremonial offering of the gruel.

Govind had arranged, with some forethought, that a rug should be spread in front of the Samiar so that Venki's mother need not kneel in the mud. As the hungry multitude gathered round to watch, she knelt on the rug and offered gruel to the Samiar. He drank it and handed back the jug to the servant.

'I want you to bless us, Swami', she said.

The Swami gazed at her for a few minutes. She felt very uncomfortable. 'You are rich', he said.

'Yes, by the grace of God, we are not badly off', she said.

'Give up your riches', he shouted, 'and join these people who have nothing. Then you will have, not my blessings which are of no use, but His.'

'We give a lot in charity', she pleaded.

'Give away everything', he said.

'Yes, you are right,' she said. 'But we poor folk are still bound down to earthly things. We do not have the power.'

'God will give you power.'

Venki's father and Govind were standing at a distance watching. 'The fellow is not asking for money, is he?' he asked Govind.

'No', replied Govind. 'He is really mad, you know.'

'These cranks seem to have an appeal for women,' he said.

It was then that the Samiar broke into song. He very rarely did so nowadays, but he seemed to sense the importance of the occasion.

Set me free from the bonds of desire, Oh Lord,
Set me free from the cycle of births and deaths.

As he sang, the noise and confusion subsided and people listened in silence. Gradually, his voice rose and filled the air. Ragged women with starving babies in their arms, old men with bent backs leaning on their sticks, naked children hanging on to their mothers' torn sarees—none of them moved while the song lasted. They were in a different world; the dirt

and filth and hunger were forgotten. They were transported to a new world where nothing seemed to matter. He sang one verse after another, beating time with his right hand and making appropriate movements with the other. The singer himself was completely lost in the melody of his own music, lost in a series of visions till he himself was free of all bounds and set completely free.

As the song came to an end, the Samiar fell backwards. The spell was broken.

'He has fainted', Venki's mother said as she rushed forward. 'Bring some water'.

Confusion broke out in the crowd as everyone came forward to see what was happening. But she took charge completely. 'Let him have some fresh air,' she shouted at them. 'Do you want him to suffocate or do you want him to recover?'

The attendants moved the crowd back as she washed his face in cold water and slowly brought him round.

'Where am I?' he asked as he came round.

'Have I been thrown back into this miserable world? And I thought I had attained the feet of God!'

He was weak and tired and could not speak very much. But he kept muttering a prayer to himself.

'He has had a vision', Venki's mother announced. 'And we are extremely fortunate to have been witnesses to it.'

'But he will be all right,' the pious lady went on. 'It is this diet of gruel that has made him so weak. He should have other food as well'.

The sweets she had brought were distributed to the multitude by Mr. Udayar's servants and for a little while confusion prevailed. Their discipline could withstand the temptation of gruel which they had every day; but sweets were a different matter altogether.

XI

Since the day Ramakrishnan said, 'You are no longer my brother, and I will have nothing more to do with you', he had been as good as his word. When Muthu died, it was different. He not only went to offer his sympathy, but took charge of the arrangements for the funeral and paid for all the expenses which it was his duty to do. But after that, he kept away from his brother. When Meena left him, he told himself it was inevitable. When their father died, Guruswamy came to the burning ghat, but that was about all. He did not take

part in any of the ceremonies that as a true Hindu Ramakrishnan performed for the purification of his father's soul. And he saw his brother going to the gruel centre for his food every day, being teased and laughed at and called mad because of his habit of talking to himself about God. All this was a blot on the family honour and respectability and Ramakrishnan smarted under such disgrace. But it only made him hate his brother all the more. If he had come to him pleading for help, he would certainly have helped him, not out of love and affection, but to save humiliation for the family. But lack of shame he could not understand or sympathize with. Only a strong love or family ties can turn into strong hatred; so it was with Ramakrishnan.

Many a time, when he saw his brother standing under the banyan tree as the centre of a motley throng, he could easily have murdered him. He could equally easily have taken him home, given him a bath and clean clothes and a meal and put him to bed. But he did neither; pride, dignity, self-respect, stood in the way. He suffered, but he suffered in secret.

And then, this happened; a man who was the object of everyone's ridicule was suddenly turned into an object of reverence. The man whom the children teased, adults laughed at and respectable people avoided, became a saint. Ramakrishnan was not immune to public opinion. The feeling of humiliation and shame gave place to a grudging and secret admiration for his brother. Now, when his name was mentioned in the family circle, Ramakrishnan was no longer angry. He merely said, 'Of course we have always known him to be religious.' Later still, his comment was, 'We can't judge him by ordinary standards'.

By now, he was ready to be reconciled; in fact, as days went on, he was eager. But he was not going to demean himself before his own younger brother by prostrating before him. Further, everything had to be done at an auspicious time. People could not be enemies one day and friends the next with no reason whatsoever. Reconciliations between relations took place only at the time of weddings, funerals, grave illness and so on-when some emotional stress brought the estranged parties together. Ramakrishnan was still a slave to the conventions of a society which his brother had discarded and waited for just such an opportunity.

So when the Samiar fainted and people like Kuppa fussed over him and ministered to his needs, Ramakrishnan's heart was moved. 'Pride and enmity should not stand in the way of one's duty at a time like this', he told himself. 'After all, we are born of the same womb'.

XII

The people of the gruel centre were very perturbed when, on the following day, the Samiar did not make his usual appearance. It upset their routine. The ceremonial of presenting the gruel, the religious talk, the worship, had all become a part of their everyday life. When once they had offered their miserable pot of gruel, it was holy food and they did

not think about its taste. Now it was just gruel which smelt foul and tasted worse. They grumbled and were inclined to be quarrelsome. The order and the dignity which had been a conspicuous feature of their behaviour during the past months were beginning to crumble. The few people who had come to see the Samiar from the neighbouring villages were also disappointed.

'That brother of his has taken him to his house,' Kuppa explained to those who cared to listen. 'He has hidden him and won't let him out. I think he is afraid of the curse of the Samiar on him for having ill-treated him in the past. Otherwise, why should one who had ignored him for so long show so much solicitude for a bit of fever?'

'But are you sure it is only a bit of fever and nothing worse?'

'He would have been all right if I had looked after him,' she said. 'I think we ought to take our gruel and offer it to him there. I have vowed never to eat anything unless it has been first offered to him.'

'After all we are only low class people; they won't let us into their house.'

But Kuppa was persistent. It was she who was responsible for the fame of the Samiar in a way and had been taking a proprietary interest in him. She was not going to let him be taken away from her without a fight.

'He has become one of us', she insisted. 'If they wanted to look after him they should have taken him away earlier. And we have been looking after him all these days. Now we have a right to have his darshan whenever we want and they can't hide him from us.'

'So after the distribution of the gruel, many of them, led by Kuppa, marched in a body to Ramakrishnan's house and called out.

'We have come to have darshan of the Samiar!'

Ramakrishnan was not at home. 'Go away form here!' shouted Ramakrishnan's wife.

Kuppa, as the leader of this motley throng, shouted, 'He is our Samiar; you have no business to hide him from us. We will sit here with our gruel until we have seen him.'

Ramakrishnan's wife hesitated, and seeing her hesitation Kuppa became violent and even abusive. Others in the mob also started shouting.

Hearing the commotion, the Samiar came out.

'God has sent you to me,' he said. 'I cannot refuse God's gift.' And he drank the gruel from Kuppa's none too clean mud pot.

'Don't drink it; it will upset you', protested Ramakrishnan's wife feebly.

'What do you think he has been living on all these days?' Kuppa shouted exultantly. 'He has been drinking our gruel and he has starved with us. He was living on gruel while you were stuffing yourselves with things from Mr. Udayar's kitchen. It won't affect him, for evil smelling gruel turns into the food of the gods when he touches it!'

XIII

The next day, the entire crowd at the gruel centre followed Kuppa and the whole routine was repeated. Fortunately, the Samiar's fever was not serious and he was restored to health in the course of the next few days. But during those few days, an unnegotiated compromise had been arrived at, by which Kuppa was allowed to offer the first cup of gruel ceremonially while Ramakrishnan and his wife attended to everything else. It was satisfactory to all concerned.

It was also during this time that the Samiar's appearance began to undergo a gradual change. He was no longer dirty and uncouth. He was forced to have a bath every day; his thick flowing locks of hair, instead of being matted and twisted, was washed and fell gracefully over his shoulders. His beard was neat and flowing. He had a necklace of beads round his neck. The dhoti that was thick with dirt and sweat was replaced by saffron robes. The old and tattered leather sandals he had been using for the last ten years were replaced by wooden ones which were the sign of a Hindu saint.

All these changes added poise and dignity to his appearance. The poor people of the gruel centre, who used to think of him as one of themselves, more sanctified perhaps, and who used to touch him and feel happy in being in close proximity with him, now felt an instinctive hesitation to go near him. Kuppa no doubt performed her ceremonial with her usual aplomb, but the others made their obeisance from a distance. The cleanliness of his attire, the environment of Ramakrishnan's house and yard which was swept and cleaned with cow dung and decorated with designs of 'Kolum' was very different from the dust and the banyan tree near the gruel centre and the people of the gruel centre felt alien and strange in these new surroundings.

But the sadness in the eyes of the Samiar was still there; his frequent talks on the evils of this world did not change either in tone or content and his occasional singing still attracted people to him. He was completely unaffected by the changes that were taking place and by the fact that instead of being a part of the scum of society, he was becoming a power with the cream of society.

As months succeeded weeks, his fame spread throughout the district. In the beginning, almost all his visitors came walking from the neighbouring villages. Then came the bullock carts in ones and twos and threes and, later still, in tens and twenties. On some days, a car was to be seen, parked prominently in the village square. Gruel of grain changed to rice

gruel and milk until it was indistinguishable from a sweet known as payasam. Mud pots changed to brass mugs and these again to silver jugs, carried, not by the owners, but by neatly-dressed servants, while the owners preceded them to pay their homage to the Kanji Samiar, the saint of gruel. Men, women and children, young and old, in various types of vehicles and on foot, in rags as well as in muslins and silks, with full stomachs as well as empty, came in their hundreds, raising the dust of arid, waterless plains, just to have the darshan of the Samiar, to drink the gruel that had been blessed by him and to ask for earthly things and to feel more holy.

When Ramakrishnan invited his brother to come to his house, he had not bargained for all this. As one week succeeded another, he was beginning to realise that it was more expensive and troublesome to play host to a saint than he had imagined. Visitors had to have somewhere to sit. The low class people could fend for themselves and Ramakrishnan did not care for them anyway. But the other visitors had to have somewhere to sit. The bullock carts had to be parked and the bullocks given water. Many who were known to him or came with introductions had to be invited into the house and offered refreshments. His house had become a sort of public thoroughfare or choultry where people came and went as they pleased. And in the evening, the mess made by children and by the spilling of various types of gruel had all to be cleaned up, and made ready for the next morning. Then, there were the people from the gruel centre who now came not only in the anticipation of religious exaltation but also in the hope of better quality gruel from the visitors, and they were not usually disappointed.

XIV

A jeep pulled up in front of Ramakrishnan's house one morning at about ten o'clock and a lady in European clothes got out, accompanied by a guide. A small crowd had followed the jeep as it negotiated the narrow streets.

'Is this the abode of the Kanji Samiar?' she enquired with a marked American accent of no one in particular.

'I think this is where he lives', said her guide.

The lady seemed rather disappointed. 'I had expected some sort of an Ashram,' she said to her companion. 'You know, a hut surrounded by shady trees and all that.'

'He is the saint of hunger', her guide replied. 'He is of the lowest of the low and the down-trodden. That is why he is called the gruel saint. And you cannot expect shady trees in an area where there has been no adequate rainfall for quite a few years.'

While this conversation was going on, Ramakrishnan's wife had heard the noise of the jeep and came out to see who it was. By now she was used to having visitors coming in cars

to see the Samiar, but a white woman in a short frock was something new to her. She despatched her daughter to fetch her husband and stood behind the door, shy and giggling.

'Please ask this lady if I can be permitted to see the Samiar', Mrs. Homer went on, 'and whether I should remove my shoes'.

'I don't know', Ramakrishnan's wife giggled when this was translated. 'My husband will come now', she said.

The arrival of a jeep with a white woman in it had attracted a number of children and villagers who crowded round and started while the driver of the jeep made half-hearted attempts to keep them back. But Mrs. Homer was neither put out nor self-conscious. She smiled at the children and nodded pleasantly to the grown-ups.

'I wish I could talk to them', she continued to her guide. 'And really get to know them and understand their problems first-hand.'

Meanwhile, the best mat in the house had been spread for her on the verandah and she sat down on it with difficulty. Ramakrishnan arrived. Betel leaves were produced and two tumblers of strong coffee were offered to the visitors.

'Please tell the lady that we are pleased to welcome her,' Ramakrishnan told the guide. 'And if she would not mind waiting a little, the Samiar will come and bless the gruel. May be, he will talk to her then. Please tell her, I am the Samiar's brother and these are my wife and children.'

The guide explained to Ramakrishnan that the lady had not brought any gruel, that she was the representative of a big magazine in the United States and that she had come to interview the Samiar and write an article about him. At that moment Ramakrishnan felt truly proud of his brother.

Meanwhile, the crowd was increasing. Besides the usual people from the gruel centre and some others from the neighbouring villages, the entire village population had turned up to see the American lady. Her presence had increased the air of expectancy. There was whispered speculation among the crowd of people as to what her purpose was. Had she come to ask for some divine favour through the Samiar? Sickness? Money? Marriage? Surely not at her age? May be she was already married and separated from her husband and she wanted to be united with him? The idea of curiosity—idle or intellectual-never occurred to these simple people who guessed at the aspirations of others from their own simple needs.

The Samiar came slowly out of the house looking at no one in particular but straight ahead into the far distance. Mrs. Homer stood up as did many others. She started to speak, but Kuppa, that self-appointed high-priestess, indicated silence. She then knelt before the Samiar with a great show of reverence and highly exaggerated gestures and offered the first bowl of gruel to the Samiar.

‘Isn’t that cute!’ shouted Mrs. Homer in admiration and delight. ‘Would you ask her to do it again please, so that I may get a movie?’

She took out her camera while her request was repeated and Kuppa was only too glad to oblige. But the Samiar would not touch the pot of gruel a second time and Mrs. Homer’s pictures remained incomplete. Then the whole procession started as the people came in ones and twos, offered their gruel, fell at the Samiar’s feet reverently and walked away. Some in rags bringing the gruel that had been doled out to them at the gruel centre, others in clean clothes and with carefully prepared payasam with milk and sugar-all fell at his feet in silent reverence. For those few minutes, all were equal, all were humble and all united before a common power. Then they went back to their poverty or affluence, to their arguments and squabbles and their ever-present problems. All the time, Mrs. Homer was busy taking pictures from various angles.

When the gruel offering was over, Ramakrishnan said, ‘This is the time for the Samiar to speak.’

‘Please tell the saint that I come from a great and distant country known as the United States,’ said Mrs. Homer. ‘Tell him that I bring him greetings from millions of religious-minded Americans.’

This was translated word for word. ‘I am a writer and a journalist and I am travelling in your country in order to learn something about your people and your problems.’

When this was translated, the Samiar asked, ‘Why?’

‘That is a very profound questions.’ Mrs. Homer observed.

‘Knowledge of others is useless; only knowledge of the self is truly revealing.’

‘Let me write that down,’ she said when it was translated.

‘Knowledge will make you proud; only ignorance will teach you humility and understanding’.

‘I have come a long way from my home to meet you. Have you a message for my countrymen?’

‘Only the restless wander; those at peace with themselves stay where it has pleased God to place them,’ the Samiar replied. ‘God is in your country just as He is in mine. I cannot slow Him to you; look within your heart and you will find Him. If you walk in the path of evil, lust and greed, in the path of worldly desires. He will reveal himself to you as an arrow that brings death, as a poison that corrupts your mind, as a demon that brings you sorrow. But if you cast off worldly desires and throw yourself at His mercy, then He will reveal himself to you as eternal bliss.’

When it seemed that the Samiar was not going to speak any more, Mrs. Homer turned to her guide.

'I have had a most interesting and unusual day', she said. 'I would like to make a donation towards the good work that is going on here'.

'They will be offended if you offer them money.'

But Mrs. Homer was insistent. 'Please suggest it to the Samiar's brother,' she said.

When it was translated, Ramakrishnan refused it without any hesitation.

'We are poor', he said, 'but we are proud to do God's work. The Samiar doesn't accept anything except gruel which is distributed to the poor people who come.'

But when he saw a hundred-rupee note in Mrs. Homer's hand, he was rather sorry that he had refused it so quickly. He was beginning to feel the strain and expense of looking after a popular saint and a hundred rupees would have been quite useful.

Gradually the people dispersed, talking among themselves. They commented about the foreign lady, about her immodest appearance, about her short dress and short brown hair and painted face and her attempts to look younger than she actually was. They tried to guess her age which was beyond their comprehension, but they concluded she was not young. 'She is not like our women; she has no modesty and no shame'.

When some of this conversation was translated at her request, she was highly amused and said, 'Tell them I am fifty-four.'

There were giggles and a fresh buzz of conversation as this was repeated. 'What are they saying now?' she asked.

'They say that at your age, you should not use make-up and you should be thinking of the next world'.

XV

The offer of a hundred rupees by Mrs. Homer had set Ramakrishnan thinking. The crowds were increasing day by day and soon, his front yard would no longer be adequate to accommodate them all. Further, the number of well-to-do people was increasing and you could not expect them to stand in the hot sun at mid-day and his house was too small. Already, his house was like a public thoroughfare with people coming and going all the time and his wife complained of the extra expenses as well as of the lack of privacy, of extra work and about the neglect of their children. He was so busy looking after the Samiar that he was not able to attend to all the duties assigned to him by Mr. Udayar. While his master had not

complained, it was obvious that he could not carry on like this much longer. He would have to leave his job, which was very remunerative, to look after his brother. How could a poor man, with wife and children to support, afford to do that these hard days? On the other hand, can God's work be neglected? Could he leave his brother to the tender mercies of people like Kuppa? What would the world say of him if he did that?

XVI

So, the small farm house on Ramakrishnan's farm was cleaned and whitewashed and made ready as the Samiar's private apartments. A large shed was constructed in front, with palm tree trunks for pillars and coconut leaves for roofing. The sides were also covered with interlaced coconut leaves. This was the prayer hall and it was spacious and airy. At one end of the hall was a platform for the Samiar to sit on, receive offers of gruel and deliver his discourses. A tall bronze lamp with seven wicks was always left burning on the platform. A large portrait of Sri Krishna, the Samiar's favourite god, adorned the centre of the back wall and was decorated with a paper garland. Portraits of Gandhi and Nehru were hung on either side. Near the platform was a small enclosure which was reserved for wealthy visitors. While the entire flooring in the hall was paved with cement, the enclosure had carpets spread on it. On an auspicious day, fixed by the village priest, a procession started from Ramakrishnan's house with music and singing of hymns and the 'Grahapravesam' – the opening ceremony— of the ashram was performed. There was burning of incense and camphor and breaking of coconuts, besides the usual offer of gruel. Everyone praised Ramakrishnan's generosity in spending so much money out of his pocket for religious work.

But there was a 'hundi'–a sealed metal box with a slot for receiving donations—placed discreetly in a corner near the platform and it carried the legend, 'voluntary contributions towards charity.' While some people remarked about it, there was no criticism since it was only voluntary.

Wherever religious fairs and festivals are held in India and large crowds congregated, a number of people also come to serve entertain them. Sirumudi thus became a focal point for a large number of mobile tradesmen, entertainers, beggars and mendicants of all sorts. Conjurors with performing monkeys, astrologers and palmists, established themselves under the shade of the few trees available to practise their trade with the visiting public. A number of shopkeepers had also come there to sell little glass mirrors, glass beads and bangles, coloured ribbons for the hair, balloons and wooden toys that people usually buy when they go to temples or on pilgrimages. There were others who sold coconuts, bananas and betel leaves, cigarettes and beedies, camphor, scented sticks and sandal-wood paste, necessary for worship. After the ashram was constructed, the simple ceremony of offering gruel was supplemented by the offering of flowers, coconuts and betel nuts and leaves, by

the burning of incense and other appurtenances of Hindu worship. All these people who had overnight became residents of Sirumudi had to live somewhere.

Soon, a small village grew up on the open field that belonged to Ramakrishnan. No one planned it or realised it had happened; it was so rapid. It was built of mud walls and coconut leaves, broken bits of plywood and rusty tin sheets. In these hovels, men, women and children ate and slept and performed their ablutions, carried on their trade or nursed their sick, got married and had children. Ramakrishnan was soon to realise the potentialities of what was happening and charged a rent of two rupees per month per hut as ground rent. As the fame and popularity of the Kanji Samiar began to spread and as more and more people began to come daily, every square inch of land was occupied and the owner was getting a substantial rent from it. Stray dogs and crows and donkeys began to congregate in search of food and there was no one to clear away the dirt and filth that accumulated. Pools of dirty water collected in the ruts between the huts into which were thrown the garbage of banana leaves, coconut shells, ashes from cooking and broken pots. It came to be known as the 'new village' as distinct from Sirumudi which was referred to as the 'old village'.

With true business instinct, Ramakrishnan had built, a little away from this mass of humanity, a few huts neatly whitewashed and tiled and kept clean for the use of temporary visitors who could afford to pay for them. It was also possible for such people to have a private interview with the Samiar. While the wealthy and the influential had interviews without any difficulty, the others had to wait for days or make repeated trips. They were not charged for it, but the ever-present hundi was always visible and they usually put some money into it.

Taking advantage of the increasing crowds visiting Sirumudi every day, an enterprising bus company managed to start a bus service to the village and advertised the fame of the Kanji Samiar. A touring cinema had established itself in an open field nearby and a loudspeaker poured forth music from scratched, old gramaphone records all day long. One enterprising individual sold ready-made gruel 'specially prepared according to the Samiar's taste' in order to save the devotees the trouble of having to prepare or bring their own gruel.

As dawn broke, this conglomeration of people woke to life and became active. Every woman was out with two pots one on her head and another on her hip, in search of water. They went from one well to another, argued, cajoled and quarrelled, first for the privilege of drawing water and then with other women, in order to do it quickly. Sometimes they found that the water was exhausted by the time their turn came and the struggle had to start all over again in another place. Occasionally, there were blows, broken pots, tears and screams. For those who could afford it, arrangements had been made by Ramakrishnan to supply water at four annas a pot. But on days the crowd was particularly large, the price went up.

By about eight o'clock, the first bus load of visitors began to arrive. Bullock carts, followed and the shops opened. The mendicants and the astrologers and the beggars took

their places and the business of the day began. Gradually, the crowd increased with the arrival of more bullock carts, with pedestrians walking from the nearby villages, with the arrival of a second and a third bus load. The wealthy people, coming in cars, also began to arrive at this time. By about ten o'clock, there was confusion, the crowds jostling and pushing, shouting and bargaining, the religious people singing hymns, and above all, the noise of the loud speaker blaring from the cinema tent. There was dust and noise and pandemonium and the relentless sun shone over it all.

Because of large crowds, the Samiar's hours of public appearance had to be regulated. According to the tradition which had its origins in the gruel centre, his darshan to the public was still between eleven o'clock and midday. During this hour, he sat on the platform in the large hall, received offerings of gruel from all and sundry and delivered his message if he felt like it. By about ten thirty, there was a general exodus as the crowd moved towards this hall. Once inside the holy precincts, a deep and solemn hush fell on the people. Even the loudspeaker was silent during this hour. The motley throng became a solemn congregation. The men tied their upper clothes round their waists in reverence stood in a queue to offer their gruel. This was then handed over to one of the attendants. It was collected in a big metal pot, and later distributed to the beggars and those from the gruel centre. When the gruel offering was over, the Samiar spoke or sang and the audience went into ecstasies. But since this could not always be ensured and the Samiar was not predictable, there was a substitute who sang some of the Samiar's favourite verses.

The Samiar was the only person who was completely oblivious of the changes that were taking place around him. He told his daily congregation: 'This is an age of evil. You have forgotten the existence of the Supreme Power and behave as if everything depends on yourselves. But God has not forgotten you even if you have forgotten God. He will surely come once again on this earth to destroy the evil and preserve the good. Prepare yourselves for that day'.

The merchants and the shopkeepers listened in reverence and calculated their profits for the day.

XVII

They came from far and near, men, women, and children, old and young, rich and poor, virtuous and wicked. They all come to have his darshan and receive his blessings. Barren wives came in order to be blessed with children; the incurably sick came in the hope of being cured. The merchants and businessmen visited the Samiar to receive his approval for new and doubtful ventures; religious men to get enlightenment and to be confirmed in their wavering faith. Abandoned wives came because they wanted to be taken back by their husbands and parents because they wanted to find suitable husbands for their daughters.

Students came because they wanted to pass in their examinations, and those who had passed because they wanted jobs. Government officials wanted promotion; politicians desired to win elections; scientists and engineers wished to achieve eminence in their profession. They all came to find solace from their sufferings; even thieves and prostitutes, for they too wanted prosperity in their professions as well as forgiveness for their sins. They came by foot, in bullock carts, in buses and in motor cars. Some came in the morning and returned in the evening. Others stayed for a few days in the hope of receiving a more personal, a more optimistic message. Quite a few came and did not go back. To them all, the Samiar gave the same message.

'Trust in God; believe in Him; worship Him every minute of the day; think of Him all the time. Cast off your worldly goods; cease to think of this miserable, transient world of sorrow and suffering and concentrate on the eternal world hereafter. Then, you will have true peace and joy.'

They listened to him and felt the better for it. The message was the same for all, but each read into it an answer for his own longings. When he told them to give up wealth, they put a little money into the hundi and felt satisfied. When he told them to give up the pleasure of the flesh, they fasted for the day, walked barefoot in the hot sun to his ashram, slept for a night on a mat instead of a mattress and felt they had done their duty to God and their favourite Samiar. They got spiritual comfort and mental consolation, and returned to their homes and their troubles and their problems and sufferings with a sense of satisfaction.

One such visitor was Meena. At first, her presence went almost unnoticed among the large crowd of strangers. And she did not do anything to identify herself in any way. Just like any other poor woman coming to the Samiar for spiritual comfort, she walked with the rest, offered her gruel and left the prayer hall along with the rest. But unlike others, she did not leave Sirumudi; she came every day. She spent the nights in her old house which was now falling to pieces.

After she had been there for three days, rumours reached Ramakrishnan about Meena's arrival. A wife with doubtful reputation can be no asset to the Samiar or to the ashram. Already, the village people were whispering about her and rumours were spreading among the visitors. So, Ramakrishnan was determined to get rid of her. But when he went to see her, she was adamant.

'It is true I left my husband,' she said. 'But I went to live with my brother who is working in a factory in the town. I wanted him to go with me, but he would not. And anyone who says anything to the contrary is lying. So, why should I be ashamed?'

'But why didn't you stay with your brother?' Ramakrishnan pleaded. 'Why did you have to come back?'

‘I was angry with my husband; like you and everyone else, I thought he was useless. He couldn’t look after me and I couldn’t do anything for him. So I left him. But I told him that if he ever needed me, I would come back like a true wife.’

‘But he doesn’t need you,’ said Ramakrishnan.

‘No, but I need him’, she said. ‘Why should I not receive his blessings which are given free to all and sundry? If he notices me, he will forgive me.’

Threats, offer of money, were no use. So Ramakrishnan decided to leave her alone for some time. It was no use making unnecessary fuss.

Among the visitors and among the village people, there were whispers about her, sly glances as she walked past, a change of tone or a pause in the conversation, laughter from groups of men. She could feel the change in the atmosphere and it became more and difficult. Then, there were others who engaged her in conversation for the purpose of learning more about the past life of the Samiar and again, she found it difficult. There was only one course open and she took it.

One day, when the offering of gruel was over, but before the Samiar had begun to speak, during that uneasy and expectant silence, she rushed forward towards the Samiar and fell at his feet.

‘My lord and master, forgive me! In a moment of sorrow and anger, I forsook you. The loss of my son blinded me and I was still full of lust and passion. I promised to return if you ever needed me; but it is I who need you now. Take me back.’

The Samiar looked at her for one long moment; it was a crucial one for Meena, for her future depended on what happened in the next few seconds. The audience waited tense and expectant; Ramakrishnan too waited anxiously, for it might turn out to be a great and dramatic moment in the history of the ashram, or it might lead to scandal and gossip.

‘I know you would come back like a beggar asking for alms.’ The Samiar spoke slowly and deliberately. He looked straight into her eyes. ‘Ask God for his blessings; He will surely protect you.’

‘But people point accusing fingers at me; they whisper and laugh behind my back. Am I to suffer all that?’

‘This world is full of suffering, but I know you are not guilty of what they speak. Do not attach any importance to what others say. Think of God and serve Him.’

‘I want to stay here and serve you,’ said Meena.

‘God has sent you to me,’ the Samiar said. ‘Stay here and serve Him.’

After that there was little that Ramakrishnan could do; and in a few days, he came to accept her willingly, particularly as she did not interfere in any way and concentrated only on looking after the Samiar.

XVIII

An outcome of all this was an unprecedented prosperity for the village.

Almost everyone had a job now; selling water to those who needed it, letting their houses to the new influx, doing odd jobs such as procuring fire-wood or helping with the preparation of gruel for those who still wanted to cook their own. The gruel centre was closed since hardly anyone went there. Begging was more remunerative and there was the excitement of people coming and going. Even to the poor, there was a feeling of movement, of adventure, of something always happening, instead of stagnation.

Ramakrishnan naturally got a big share of the money that flowed into the village. He got rent from the huts and shops; then, there was the money collected in the hundi. No one knew how much it amounted to and there were wild rumours about it. It was supposed to be given to the poor-and a lot of it was-but some of it was retained for expenses, for putting up the sheds, for running the ashram, for celebrating auspicious days, and so on. It was rumoured that all shopkeepers—particularly those from outside the village—had to pay him a commission on their turn-over. Though he was on very good terms with his former employer and still showed him due respect, it was said that Mr. Udayar did not approve of the new developments that had taken place in the village.

In all this, Ramakrishnan showed he was a true man of business. He saw to it that the village people benefited as much as possible. ‘My brother has brought godliness to the world,’ he used to say. ‘But he has not forgotten his own people. He has brought them food and work’. Jobs at the ashram were all given to local people only; the gruel that was collected was all distributed free to everyone. Wealthy people from outside were encouraged to take the village people for work, not only temporarily, but even permanently.

But the elders, the middle class people with small farms and a little money, who were too high to profit from this boom but not high enough-like Mr. Udayar—to ignore it, shook their heads in silent disapproval.

‘He is making use of God’s name to make money; that is not right’, they said. ‘Sooner or later, it will end in his downfall.’

‘And that poor brother of his doesn’t know what is going on; he may be holy but he is being used as a pawn in a dirty game.’

But they too went to offer their gruel, put money in the hundi, and told their troubles to the Samiar.

XIX

At about 7.30 a.m. one morning, before the usual crowd had begun to gather, a car pulled up in front of the ashram. An elderly lady and a gentleman got out followed by a shy, timid girl of about twenty. Ramakrishnan came out to see who it was. He welcomed them most cordially, for it was none other than Janaki, the wife of Govindarajan, and her parents.

He took them to one of the rooms kept for wealthy visitors and made all arrangements for their comfort. While the ladies were busy preparing the gruel, Mr. Kuppuswamy, Janaki's father, talked to Ramakrishnan.

'We have heard a lot about the Kanji Samiar, but we did not know it was your own brother,' he said.

'Yes sir,' Ramakrishnan replied. 'My family has been blessed by the grace of God.'

Mr. Kuppuswamy came straight to the point. 'There is no use hiding anything from you', he said. 'After all, you know both the families and I am sure you have the best interests of us all at heart. My daughter is married and yet, not married. He has rejected her. How long is this to go on?'

Just then, Mrs. Kuppuswamy joined them. 'We have heard so much about the powers of the Samiar. We thought that, perhaps, he would show us a way. Who else are we to go to if not to a holy man in a situation like this?'

'The Samiar will do what is in his power', Ramakrishnan said non-committally. 'But he never promises anything to anyone.'

'Even to see and receive the blessings of a saint is good, don't you think?' Mrs. Kuppuswamy asked.

'I will arrange for you to have darshan as soon as possible', said Ramakrishnan and left them.

The Samiar was in a communicative mood that morning. 'This life is false; it is an illusion,' he said when Mr. Kuppuswamy and his family offered their gruel and sat at a respectful distance from him. 'This body is ridden by disease; it has to be fed, protected and preserved against cold and heat, hunger and thirst; its appetites have to be satisfied and you spend all your time doing that. And in so doing, you forget that the spirit is eternal, that it is God whom you must seek. You forget that the only aim in life is to become one with God'.

Mr. Kuppuswamy agreed politely and wondered how he could broach the subject for which he had come there. But Ramakrishnan, who was with them, took charge.

'You know this Amma is married to Mr. Govindarajan, son of Mr. Udayar. But he won't speak to her. She is miserable and unhappy…..'

But Mrs. Kuppuswamy interrupted him. 'After all, for a woman, her husband is her God. She is born into this world to serve him. Even the scriptures say so. But what can she do when he will not speak to her, look at her or even have her in the same house where he lives? Not only her life on this earth, but her spiritual, eternal life is ruined as a result. Therefore, we wondered if you could show a way out of the situation.'

'Of course there is a way out', said the Samiar raising his voice. The lady's scriptural approach seemed to appeal to him. 'There is always a way out; it is the way of God, of austerity and sacrifice. Trust in Him, obey Him implicitly. He will show you the way.'

'She has observed all the fasts and worshipped all the gods whom she is supposed to propitiate', the mother answered.

'Give us your blessings so that our wish may be fulfilled,' Mr. Kuppuswamy asked.

'Blessings!' the Samiar nearly shouted now. 'Everyone who comes here asks for my blessings. Of what use are my blessings when there is lust and evil in your hearts? Ask God for His, and if you deserve it, you will certainly get it.'

They waited a little longer. But the Samiar seemed to have dozed off and become completely unaware of their presence. It was rather an unfortunate ending to the discussion. Ramakrishnan felt uncomfortable. At times like this, he wished his brother was a little more practical and diplomatic and gave some sort of spiritual help and encouragement at least to the more influential visitors.

'I think perhaps we have disturbed him in his trance, said Ramakrishnan by way of apology. 'That is why he is like this.'

'But he has given us hope,' Mrs. Kuppuswamy asserted. 'He has told us to trust in God. What more can he say?'

Suddenly, the Samiar broke into song. He not only sang but went into ecstasy which happened only rarely. His eyes had a far-away look, his body shivered and his voice rose and called the name of God. Faces peered in at the windows-for the doors were still not open to the public—and soon, there was a big crowd and clamour for the doors to be opened. People came in and sat reverently as the song reached the crescendo.

But the important thing was that the song was particularly appropriate as far as Janaki's problem was concerned. It was the song that the Gopikas (the milk maidens of Dwaraka) sang when forsaken by Lord Krishna.

‘How appropriate!’ Mrs. Kuppuswamy whispered to her husband. She was obviously pleased and excited.

‘This is indeed most unusual,’ exclaimed Ramakrishnan. ‘The Samiar hasn’t sung this song for months. Surely, your daughter will be united with her husband just as the Gopikas were.’

‘True saints never give direct answers to our problems and anxieties,’ Mrs. Kuppuswamy said, ‘And we were foolish to expect it. They talk or even sing in parables and it is for us to understand the truth from it.’

Meanwhile, there were whispers among the crowd as to who the important visitors were and what their purpose was in coming so early to see the Samiar. Within five minutes of the ending of the song and the dispersal of the crowd, everyone knew about them and discussed the possibilities of reconciliation of Janaki and Govindarajan as the most interesting and important topic of the day.

After making arrangements for the visitors’ lunch, Ramakrishnan went to see Mr. Udayar and related to him the story of what happened at the ashram.

‘This is the first time that the Samiar has ever made any kind of a prophecy,’ Ramakrishnan concluded. ‘If we can interpret it at all, it definitely points to a reunion between these young people.’

Mr. Udayar who had always wanted a reconciliation was secretly pleased about the whole thing. ‘Talk to Govindarajan,’ he said. ‘Meanwhile they must immediately come to my house. I shall personally go and invite them. If they come all this way, then I must show my respect.’

The main cause of the quarrel between husband and wife was Govindarajan’s occasional inclination to stray from the straight and narrow path. While many girls might have put up with it or created a few scenes in the privacy of their own room, Janaki was headstrong and obstinate. She was an only child, petted and spoiled at home and used to having her own way in all respects. She threatened to leave him and finally did. But a year in her mother’s house, with subtle and veiled references to her state almost constantly, had shown to her that life with her husband, even if a little degrading, was better than her existence with her parents. But she could not go back without being asked. And Govindarajan, though he too missed her, had always maintained that it was beneath his dignity to go and invite her. ‘She left of her own free will and she knows her way back if she wants to come,’ had been one of his favourite expressions whenever the subject was mentioned by people interested in his welfare. Both were ready for a reunion and the Samiar acted as a catalyst.

So, when Ramakrishnan spoke to him, Govindarajan offered but token resistance. ‘She can come back. I have no objection’, he said.

‘She has come all the way from her village to the ashram. Surely, you can go there and invite her. After all, the ashram is like your own house.’

‘No’, said Govindarajan.

‘You know the Samiar wants you to be united,’ Ramakrishnan said. ‘If his wishes are not fulfilled, we can’t say what will happen.’

‘All right, I will come’.

Mr. Udayar and Mr. Kuppuswamy were chatting about vague generalities in the front room. Govindarajan, guided by Ramakrishnan, went past them into the back room where the mother and daughter were waiting. He felt shy and awkward in speaking the first words to his wife. She stood there, small and delicate and, it seemed to him, helpless. The pride he had felt in the past, the pride of manhood that had insisted that she should come and ask for his forgiveness, was no longer there. All that he thought of now as he looked at her was that she was thinner than he had remembered her. And strangest of all, she seemed very beautiful, a thing he had never noticed before.

‘I have come to take you home’, he said almost in a whisper.

She did not answer for a moment and a thought passed through his mind that, perhaps, she did not intend to come back to him at all and the whole thing was arranged to humiliate him.

It was the mother-in-law who spoke. ‘Answer your husband: say you are coming.’

‘I will come,’ Janaki said.

Within a few minutes, they had all left for Mr. Udayar’s house in the old village. And everyone who came to the ashram knew all the details.

XX

Mr. Kuppuswamy had no sons; all his affection was lavished on his only daughter Janaki, and he was prepared to do anything to ensure her happiness. He was also a very religious man who believed not only in the efficacy of prayer for attaining certain objectives, but also in the power of holy men in bringing those objectives to fruition. Therefore, he could not overlook or treat lightly the part played by Kanji Samiar in uniting Janaki and Govindarajan. He wanted to do something in order to repay his debt to the Samiar in a permanent form. After consulting Mr. Udayar and Ramakrishnan, he decided to build a

prayer hall where devotees could offer gruel and listen to the Samiar's discourses. This would replace the present make shift arrangement which was totally inadequate. He also made a secret promise to himself and his wife that if his daughter had a son within a year, he would put up another building with cooking facilities and sleeping quarters for the large number of poor and middle class families who were coming in increasing numbers to visit the Samiar.

He also proposed that a trust should be set up to administer these and other properties that may be created and all donations received should be paid into the trust and it should be managed by a committee consisting of Mr. Udayar, Ramakrishnan and himself. While Ramakrishnan was not too keen on all these new-fangled ideas, and saw in them a threat to his own position, he knew nevertheless that this would mean even greater publicity and fame for the Samiar, and would lead to his acquiring greater popularity among the more well-to-do people. Any doubts he had were totally removed when it was suggested that he would naturally be the managing trustee.

XXI

Preparation of large quantities of gruel was not possible without enormous quantities of rice or grain. True to the law of supply and demand, grain appeared from nowhere and was selling at fantastic prices. The larger the crowd of devotees, the higher the prices became. The control on the movement of grain imposed by the government, in order to ensure fair distribution, was totally ineffective. At first, the grain changed hands surreptitiously, in whispers and in the back-yards of houses. There was always the fear of the law, that some official might come and ask questions and confiscate the lot. But gradually, fear gave place of boldness and grain was sold openly.

At last, the officials were forced to act; but they acted in a half-hearted way, for they knew the strength of public sentiment. And if anyone did not believe in Kanji Samiar, he could easily stay away. No doubt they too wondered in the secrecy of their souls if there was some power, some divinity that radiated from this poor ignorant villager who had become so popular in so short a time.

Some carts carrying grain to Sirumudi under cover of night were intercepted and the drivers prosecuted. They claimed that they were carrying it for the ashram, to be made into gruel to be distributed to the poor and were let off with a fine. The effect of this was not to stop the smuggling of grain, but merely to push its price up in the village.

A special officer was deputed to visit the village and report on the conditions there. He listened to the Samiar.

‘Nothing moves, nothing changes, nothing is born and nothing dies without His power. Not even an atom agitates without His knowledge. The whole universe, the worlds above and below, revolves at His bidding. The sun rises and sets, the moon waxes and wanes at His will. Trees put out shoots, flowers blossom, fruits ripen and plants wither and die according to His laws. He rules, directs and manipulates. We are mere puppets. Everything is in His hands. And yet, you poor mortals behave as if you were masters of this world, as if you were going to live for ever and conquer the world. You transgress the laws of God and commit untold offences against His orders. You sin….’

The Samiar warmed to the subject of sin. His voice rose as the audience listened uneasily and in silence.

‘Yes, you sin,’ he shouted. ‘To satisfy your mean appetites. Don’t you see, sin weakness your will, it darkness your conscience, it makes you lead a double life. You become slaves to your own selves. It brings you to your ultimate spiritual ruin…’

He paused and then continued.

‘You come to me day after day with your mundane problems. What can I say to you? How can I cure your illness, marry off your daughters, find jobs for your sons, or prevent your pathetic little domestic tragedies? What can I do for you? My answer is always the same. Seek His help and guidance; obey His laws; depend on Him; love and worship Him. It is Him you must seek…’

After the discourse was over and the people dispersed, the officer questioned the Samiar.

‘Do you claim to have any divine powers?’ he asked him.

Ramakrishnan-a little anxious about the visit since he was aware of the criticism—waited anxiously hoping that everything would go off all right.

The Samiar took his own time to reply. He was becoming more and more forgetful of his environment and the question had to be repeated.

‘He does not claim to be divine, sir,’ Ramakrishnan said.

‘Let him answer the questions himself’, the official snapped.

‘Are we not all divine? We are all created by God and therefore, have inherited a spark of divinity from Him’, the Samiar replied.

‘But do you claim any special powers, such as the ability to cure the sick, or to predict the future?’

‘Who am I?’ again the Samiar paused while the official waited. ‘I am but a speck of dust in the great emptiness that we call the universe. A speck of dust at the feet of God. How can I cure the sick or foretell the future?’

‘Then why do so many people visit you? What is it that attracts people to you?’

‘I tell them to go back to God; it is something that has to be said in every age and to every generation. For people have a habit of forgetting it in the midst of what they think are important aims and ambitions and aspirations. So, I tell them the simple truth.’ The Samiar paused again. ‘And I tell you the same; for your are drunk with power and drowned in self-conceit. Give up everything and go back to God.’

The officer was a bit disconcerted at the way the Samiar spoke to him. He was generally used to being spoken to with respect, but there was no fear in the eyes of the Samiar as he spoke to him. There seemed to be nothing underhand about this man whatever others might be up to. If a man takes it upon himself to tell everyone to give up worldly pleasure and turn to God, surely that was not a crime.

Soon, the officer was able to find out everything about the entire set-up. But as far as he could see, it was no different from similar places to which the poor and the credulous thronged.

‘These huts are dirty and very insanitary,’ the official remarked. ‘Look at all that rubbish everywhere; you must get the place properly cleaned up. Otherwise, I shall order them all to be pulled down.’

The official had no authority to do so and he was also aware that if he were to attempt anything like a thorough clean-up of the whole place, he was sure to get into trouble with the religious and the orthodox for having interfered with their religious freedom, but he hoped to achieve some results by a little judicious threatening. It had the desired effect.

‘I will clean the place immediately, sir’, Ramakrishnan agreed eagerly. ‘In fact we have formed a committee with Mr. Kuppuswamy as chairman to provide permanent arrangements for the comfort and convenience of the devotees. Mr. Udayar is also a member of the committee. But I shall employ someone to keep the place clean. But it needs money and I am a poor man.’

‘You can do it from the exorbitant rent you are charging these poor people,’ said the official.

Ramakrishnan readily agreed.

The mention of the name of Mr. Udayar, of whom the official had heard, naturally led him to the big house. Mr. Udayar’s views which were non-committal merely confirmed the official in his deductions. He wrote his report pointing out the bad conditions under which

the gruel was cooked and distributed and under which many people lived, and suggested some minor improvements.

XXII

Wherever dirt and filth accumulates, there are rats and it is rats that carry plague. If there is a dead rat in a house, it should be immediately sent for examination to find out whether it is plague-infected. If it is, then the whole house should be completely fumigated and should not be occupied for at least ten days. Huts should be pulled down, since it is not possible to disinfect them properly. But while is being done, where are the affected people to live? For life must go on even in the midst of disease and death. The inescapable necessities of eating and sleeping must be carried on somehow, somewhere.

In the old days, when plague or cholera appeared in a village, the entire place was evacuated and people went to live with their relations elsewhere. There was fear of these dread diseases. No one went to a plague-infected house or even to the funeral of a plague victim. But the old prohibitions had given way and the new preventive measures were not yet in full operation. The stresses and strains of life had made people take calculated risks.

So, when an odd dead rat was discovered in the filth among the huts in Sirumudi, it was just removed and thrown away in the rubbish. After all it might have died a natural death! It was just ignored. Many knew of it; but no one spoke about it. And the fleas with the deadly germs crawled unseen.

Meanwhile, Ramakrishnan had employed an untouchable whose duty it was to clear away the rubbish every morning. He made a half-hearted attempt to do his work, but the immensity of the task was beyond him. He was more interested in getting tips from the wealthy visitors by doing odd jobs for them and by keeping the surroundings of their rooms clean than in tackling all the rubbish about the huts. In any case, most of the people were used to the conditions in which they found themselves. They kept the inside of their huts very clean but dumped the dirt just outside. They had not heard of environmental hygiene or modern ideas of sanitation. And Ramakrishnan, having appointed a man to do the cleaning, was quite happy. And the dirt continued to accumulate.

So, the deadly disease got a foot-hold and continued to spread gradually. With a continuously changing population, it was difficult to locate, for the people who contracted the disease had long since left the place. Attacks of plague were reported from various towns and it was not easy to trace them back to Sirumudi. And every visitor thought, ‘After all, I am only going to be there for one day. Even if there is plague, I won’t get it’.

After a little time, an inspector was sent to inoculate the people against plague. Again, the problem was too much for one man and the people did not want to have it done. It was

the people who needed the most protection, those who lived in the huts, who were loath to have the inoculation. They had heard it gave them fever and that meant the loss of earnings for a day or two which they could ill afford. They gave excuses, said they had been inoculated already or merely avoided him.

The first suspected case of plague in the village was an untouchable who used to frequent the gruel centre in the old days. He started with aches and pains in the joints, and had diarrhoea. After a few days, there was a lump under the arm pit. The younger people did not know it was plague but the older people shook their heads silently. Before the lump burst, the poor man died. It was given out that he had died of fever. Many suspected the truth and yet no one wanted to believe it. It was in the interests of everyone to hush it up, to prevent the spread of fear or panic. Any reduction in the number of visitors would mean that the shopkeepers would have less trade, the cinema and the bus company would lose money, the beggars and the mendicants would have less alms and the ashram would have less in the hundi. Therefore every vested interest conspired to keep up the morale and prevent any talk of plague.

The village munsif had been ordered by the Government to take preventive measures against plague by destroying any huts where dead rats were discovered. By he was a mild, harmless and ignorant man, who was afraid of the officials, but even more afraid of hurting the local population. After all, he had to live among them. And if it was fated that they had to have plague, they would have it whatever they did. The government had not been able to stop plague all these years. It was the will of God. If people were destined to die of plague, of what avail was human effort? However, he announced that any rat deaths were to be immediately reported to him. After that, any dead rats were no longer thrown on the rubbish heap. They were discreetly buried so that there was no evidence, and the village munsif had done his duty.

But the people continued to come in increasing numbers, ate bad food, washed themselves in muddy, polluted water, rubbed shoulders with the sick and the suffering, slept in plague-infested hovels, listened to the Samiar's discourses, laid bare their troubles and their quarrels and their tragedies and felt uplifted as a result.

XXIII

One day, a dead rat was discovered within the ashram precincts. It was Ramakrishnan himself who found it. He knew that if it was publicly known, the ashram would have to be vacated and fumigated. What was going to happen to all these people, to all the crowds that were coming in every day? He was now drunk with the power and the importance he had acquired. He was in the grip of an adventure, but he told himself that for the sake of the public, he could not afford to have the ashram closed down. He felt that when once the

spell of the Samiar was broken, when once it was known that the Samiar was subject to the same infirmities and fears of disease, people might lose faith in him. When once the continuity was broken, people may not come again. He knew where his duty lay. Quietly he removed the rat, hid it somewhere, and after dark, buried it in the back-yard.

But nevertheless, he was troubled. He spoke in confidence to the village munsif and asked for his advice.

'Here, take this powder,' said the munsif. 'This is supposed to kill the fleas that carry the plague. I haven't used any of it yet since no one has come to me before. Sprinkle it in the room where you found the rat and sweep it thoroughly. But be careful, it is poisonous.'

Not only the room, but the entire ashram was hurriedly disinfected during the night, secretly, with two trust-worthy assistants. The next day, the devotees entering the hall felt a peculiar smell and wondered what it was. Even the burning of incense and camphor did not get rid of the smell.

Days succeeded each other and occasional deaths among the hut dwellers went on. But Ramakrishnan heaved a sigh of relief that in spite of the dead rat, no one in the ashram was hit by the disease. And then, the blow fell.

One evening, the Samiar was suddenly taken ill. The next day the congregation was informed that the Samiar was slightly indisposed. There were no discourses for a few days; but the crowds kept coming since the news of Samiar's indisposition was not known outside Sirumudi. The vested interests were not eager to publicise the fact. And Ramakrishnan kept announcing that it was only a slight fever and he might appear the next day. The hall was full every day, with men and women chanting the Samiar's favourite verses and praying for his quick recovery.

Ramakrishnan was afraid that if it was known that the Samiar would not appear for a week or ten days, the crowds might stop coming. He liked to keep things moving. But he was a troubled man. He felt a big responsibility to the crowds that assembled every day. He was also worried about recent happenings, about rat falls, warnings from Governments officials comments in newspapers, and more than anything else, about the few, but nevertheless noticeable, deaths that had taken place in the huts during the past two weeks. Things were moving inevitably to a climax and he was powerless to do anything about it.

Meanwhile the Samiar lay in the private room inside the ashram to which no one was admitted. Meena nursed him and attended to his needs.

'I am tired of this world, fed up with its follies and its miseries; now God has decided to take me to His bosom and I shall find eternal rest.'

'Please do not talk so much; it will make you weak,' said Meena.

‘How can I be weak when God is by my side? I feel stronger than I have ever felt before. Soon, this miserable body, ridden by disease, will be cast aside and I shall become nothing but a spark and acquire a true spiritual personality.’

There was no doubt that he was suffering; but it was difficult to say what he was suffering from, since he never spoke of what he felt physically. And his mind was beginning to wander more than ever. Meena went and brought the temple priest, an old friend of the Samiar. As soon as the Samiar saw the priest, with the namam painted prominently on his forehead, he started talking again.

‘Here is the messenger from God to take me away; I have been waiting for you for so long! I have looked for you everywhere, morning, noon and night. Why have you forsaken me all these days? At last, the search is over. Now, I shall never let you out of my sight. But what are we waiting for? Why don’t we hurry? Don’t you see, I am in a hurry to leave this world? If you delay any longer, God will punish you for not bringing one of his true devotees to Him quickly.’

Mr. Iyengar, the priest, looked at the Samiar for one long moment, but there was no sign of recognition. He felt his pulse, touched his forehead, and then felt under the arm pit. Then he rose and looked at Meena.

‘There is nothing I can do’, he said. ‘I have no medicine for this kind of illness’.

‘It is not…?’ Meena did not want to utter the dreaded word.

Silently, the priest nodded his head in affirmation.

‘Oh, Krishna, why do you still keep me waiting? Why do you play a game of cat and mouse with your trusted slave? Have I not suffered enough? Have I not sacrificed enough? I have nothing more to sacrifice except this miserable, disease-ridden body. Why don’t you take it away from me?’

There were tears in Meena’s eyes. ‘Why does he have to suffer so!’ she wailed. ‘He has provided spiritual comfort for so many in this world. Thousands sing his praises; remember him in their prayers. But who can comfort him?’

Ramakrishnan came into the room. ‘What is all this?’ he said. ‘It is only a bit of fever.’ ‘Then he saw the priest. ‘Hello Swami!’ he said. ‘I did not know you were here.’

‘Tell him,’ Meena told the priest.

‘What is it?’ Ramakrishnan enquired.

‘It is not just fever,’ Mr. Iyengar said.

‘You don’t mean?’ But the words died on Ramakrishnan’s lips. He had suspected the truth all along; he had been worried about it. In his heart of hearts, he knew it. For the last few days, he had merely kept up appearances for the sake of the crowds and for Meena. He had been moving and acting like automation, moved by forces which were beyond him. Yet, when it was brought to his notice by others, he was surprised and shocked beyond measure.

‘My God’, he said. ‘What are we going to do? What is going to happen to us all?’

‘That is all you are worried about!’ For the first time, Meena openly taunted him. ‘What is going to happen to you! What is going to happen to you and your precious hundi and to your rents and your importance! What is going to happen to my husband, the poor, godly man who lies suffering? And what is going to happen to you when you die, for all the sins you have committed in exploiting this man? You have a lot to answer for.’

‘I did not exploit him,’ said Ramakrishnan. He was meek and his voice was low. ‘I did what I did, because he was my brother and I could not let him be idolized by the hooligans in the gruel centre’.

‘If you loved your brother so much, why did you let him go to the gruel centre in the first place?’ she asked. ‘Why did you not take him to your house when there was no one to look after him?’

‘I neglected him in the same way and for the same reasons that you left him,’ Ramakrishnan’s anger was rising within him. ‘Because he was a useless, good-for-nothing loafer. How was I to know he was going to be a saint? In any case, when you came back, if you thought what I was doing was wrong, why did you not protest then? You too have benefited from whatever I did’.

‘What is the use of blaming you for my own sins?’ Meena bitterly commented, as tears welled up in her eyes once more.

The conversation was very embarrassing to Mr. Iyengar. ‘It is all God’s will’, he said. ‘We are merely His instruments. We cannot change our destinies or those of others’.

‘Cannot you bring a doctor?’ Meena was practical now. ‘May be it is still not too late.’

There was only one motor car in the village belonging to Mr. Udayar, but he had taken it to the town. So, Ramakrishnan despatched one of his assistants on a bicycle to bring a doctor who was about twenty miles away.

While the Samiar mumbled his prayers and called on the gods with decreasing frequency, Meena and Ramakrishnan waited in the adjoining room. It was a long, futile wait. Ramakrishnan’s wife was there to attend to routine work and to answer questions. During that long, silent period of waiting and praying, they had time to examine their consciences, to see where they had gone wrong, what they could have done or not done in order to

avoid what seemed to be a catastrophe. Having done that and having found no answer to their own soul-searching questions, with true humility and fatalism; they were able to compromise their consciences with what was obviously inevitable. 'It was destined to happen; it was God's will,' they told themselves.

'Neither of us realised he was godly', Meena said. She had already begun to speak of him in the past tense. 'We judged him by the standards of this world. That was our mistake.'

'When he was at the gruel centre and people started calling him Kanji Samiar and coming to him, I was proud he was my brother', Ramakrishnan said. 'I took him into my house out of brotherly affection and pride'.

'That pride was a mistake', Meena said.

'May be, but I am only an ordinary man,' Ramakrishnan continued. 'Anyone would have felt proud that his brother had become famous. That is the way of the world. But I swear I did not take him in order to make money'.

'That would have been a sin, 'Meena interposed.

'Yes, that would have been wrong', Ramakrishnan agreed. 'But the trouble was, having taken him in, what was I to do? Refuse to allow people to see him? Or, send him back to the gruel centre?'

'That too would have been wrong', said Meena.

'That is why I had to do all this', said Ramakrishnan bitterly pointing to his environment. 'But once the ashram was built, everything happened automatically; the crowds, the shops, the cinema, everything. Things began to move and I had no control over what happened. It was like a flood and I was just dragged along with it.'

Not being an educated man and not used to self-analysis, he found it difficult to choose the right words. And yet, it was important that he should explain and justify himself before at least one person, the most important person. Then, he did not mind what happened.

'I am only a poor villager caught in a network of big events. And I didn't think', he said. 'Yes, I was so busy; I had no time to think. That was the trouble.'

'But don't you see, it was all pre-ordained,' Meena seemed not only contented, but she even brightened. 'He used to say that God has planned everything. I remember the exact words, "First he robbed me of my land; then, He took away the little money I had; He starved my family and finally, He took my son away. These were not a series of misfortunes, but a master plan to free me from all bondages of the flesh."'

'Yes, I remember, he used to repeat it very often in his discourses,' said Ramakrishnan.

Meena was animated now. ‘Don’t you see,’ she cried. ‘This is the final part of that master plan to free him from the bondage of the flesh. How is he to be free of that bondage unless he got rid of the flesh altogether? And with true saintliness, he chose not an ordinary disease, but the worst, as supreme sacrifice! It is the final step in the plan devised by God.’

This explanation came as a great relief to Ramakrishnan. ‘Yes, we are but playthings in the hands of God. He is the one who is responsible for all our actions, not we,’ he said.

They found comfort and consolation in this thought. Now, they did not even mind whether the doctor came or not.

Meanwhile, rumours had spread that the Samiar had got the plague and that he was dying. Vague, unconfirmed rumours, but anxious people came enquiring, questioning, demanding to know what was happening. Ramakrishnan’s wife tried to put them off, but they would not be put off and demanded to know the truth. The crowd was increasing and there was loud clamour among them. Finally, Ramakrishnan came out and spoke to them.

‘Please do not make so much noise. The Samiar is seriously ill and a doctor has been sent for. We are expecting him any time now. If you are really anxious, please go into the hall and pray.’

‘What is it ?’ they insisted.

‘Plague’, Ramakrishnan shouted back in sorrow and anger. He hated all these people now.

The shopkeepers, the beggars and the mendicants grumbled. ‘We should have been told before.’ ‘Why have you kept us in the dark?’ ‘Why didn’t you send for a doctor earlier?’ ‘Why are you hiding things from us?’ they shouted.

Meanwhile, the Samiar’s voice came loud and clear from the next room.

‘Won’t you hear my call, Oh Krishna
Won’t you hear my call!’

His body was racked with pain and fever and he was perspiring terribly, but still, he only thought of God. Meena went in with sobs and tears.

‘Did you hear his favourite song?’ Ramakrishnan asked the crowd of people. ‘Please go and pray and wait for the doctor to come’.

After that, the crowd dispersed, some to their hovels and huts, others into the prayer hall, to sing the Samiar’s favourite verses.

‘Won’t you hear my call, Oh Krishna!’ said the Samiar more feebly, a second time as Meena poured a little water into his mouth.

Those were the last words that the Samiar spoke.

XXIV

The past few weeks had been much hotter than usual. That particular day was the worst of all. Everything was still in the afternoon. The hobbled donkeys, after having rooted in the rubbish heaps all morning for something to eat, rested idly in the dust. The stray dogs slept peacefully in the little shade provided by the mud walls. The ugly, perilous rats, having done their share of destruction, went into their holes and corners, to die of deathly infection. The crowds of people who had waited patiently in the hope of seeing the Samiar, returned disappointed to their shacks or other resting places, to escape the blazing heat of the mid-day sun. There was drowsiness in the air.

Then, the news about the Samiar spread among them and they all returned to the ashram at about three o'clock to find out the truth.

As the devotees were singing in the prayer hall, there was a gentle breeze, cool and soft, and everyone felt an intense relief from the heat and the dust and the perspiration. Quickly, the gentle breeze became a strong wind, raising the dust, whistling through the few trees and the low huts. As it blew stronger and stronger, the flimsy tin roofs and coconut leaves began to get blown off and people made frantic attempts to keep them in place by placing stones on them. There was confusion among the hut dwellers as each tried to protect his own precious little property.

Suddenly, the wind dropped. A few clouds had gathered in the sky, dark and heavy. As evening came, the darkness increased. The first drops of rain began to fall.

The people, so unused to the phenomenon of rain, started at the sky unbelievingly. They had been disappointed so often before.

'Can this possibly be true?' they wondered.

The children who had been frightened by the storm and were huddled indoors now came out to gaze at the sky. Rain was a new event in the lives of many of them.

'The divine power of the Kanji Samiar is at last working for the general good of mankind,' said the devotees singing inside the prayer hall. 'Even on his death bed, he has not forgotten us!'

The farmers in the village of Sirumudi looked up at the sky and wondered from whom they could borrow money for planting crops.

Red dust, suspended in hot air for so many seasons, will now settle down; the grass, scorched by the pouring rays of the hot sun into a yellowish brown, will turn green again;

trees will put out new shoots and women will once more gossip by the village wells instead of quarrelling. Children will paddle in the muddy pools of rain water in the streets and catch colds….

Large, heavy drops of rain began to fall. They smashed against the tin roofs like bullets against an iron wall. The flimsy coconut leaves shivered against the weight of the attack. The rain drops hit the loose earth and made dents in its surface. But the parched earth soaked them up and left no trace. Then a sudden, brilliant flash of lightning shot across the dark sky, followed by a violent roll of thunder. The rain came in torrents and the hungry earth received the offering from heaven with open arms.

In the old village, men sat in groups on their little verandahs with beaming faces and watched the rain with fascination. In the new village, however, people huddled inside their precarious little shacks and wondered how long it would be before their leaking roofs gave way altogether.

The deluge went on and on. It came down in all its tropical fury. All sounds ceased except the continuous noise of water beating against the roofs, rain pouring and flowing through holes and depressions. The birds that had taken shelter among the leafless trees had disappeared long ago. The dogs took shelter where they could and the bullocks and the donkeys stood where they were, facing the force and the power of the downpour.

Pools of water became little rivulets and they flowed from higher to lower levels. And the old village of Sirumudi was at a higher level while Ramakrishnan's field on which the new village had sprung up was at a lower level. Red, muddy water entered the huts through the narrow, doorless openings; what was ankle deep soon became knee deep and it was no longer possible for children to stand up….

As dusk fell over the ashram, one could hear the screams and wails of women and children, shouts and curses from men as each tried to get out of the enveloping water and help his family. One could make out vague forms of human beings against the horizon. They stumbled and fell, bumped into each other. Some got deeper and deeper into the swirling waters as they rose and pitifully called for help. They called the names of all the gods to come to their aid. They tried to rescue what was left of their meagre belongings, lost souls with little bundles under their arms or on their heads, trying to escape from a fate that seemed to be relentlessly pursuing them.

There was the bird astrologer with the bird cage on his head, trying desperately to climb on to a bank as the birds chirped their meaningless chatter. There was the man with the performing monkey which shivered as he tried to carry it to higher ground. The bangle seller tried to get out with his load of glass bangles as they rattled and broke against the tin roofs that were beginning to come down. Other shopkeepers collected what they could of their wares and waded through the water. The ribbons lost their colour in the muddy waters.

Cigarettes and match boxes were soaking wet. The jewels and ornaments lost their shine. The wheel of fortune got knocked about as its owner desperately tried to bring it out of the shack. Children climbed on to the shoulders of men. Women tried to hold on to any support that was available as they tried to get out of their hovels and on to a firmer ground. The magician with his bag of tricks, the mendicants with their beads and their begging bowls, wailed and bemoaned their fate at his sudden turn of events.

'God is angry with us', they cried.
'This is the end of everything'.
'Oh, Krishna, save us from this deluge.'
'Why did we ever come to this place?'

In the din and the noise and the confusion, Ramakrishnan shouted to them.

'Move towards the old village! Move towards the old village! The water level is low there.'

As they escaped from their huts and came to firmer ground and lower water level, their wails and curses gave place to complaints and demands.

'Where are we to go?' they cried. 'Where are we to take shelter?' 'Why did you put us in a place where there is so much water? Give us a place to stay. What about the goods we have lost in our huts?'

'Go to the choultry.' Ramakrishnan shouted back.

'There is room for all of you there for the night.'

Facing the sheets of water that hit them in their faces as it came down, they walked towards the choultry, saying it was all Ramakrishnan's fault. He now became the focal point of their anger.

Even the prayer hall was tottering with the weight and the force of water. Only the farm house was still standing because it was built of stone and was on higher ground. And Meena sat there, refusing to move, tears flowing down her cheeks, keeping guard over the cold, inert body of her husband.

Ramakrishnan followed the crowd and went on to Mr. Udayar's house. There was no one there except Janaki.

'What are you doing here in this rain?' she asked him.

'Amma, we must prepare some food for all the hut dwellers,' he said.

'Why, what happened?'

‘Water has entered the huts,’ he replied. ‘There is water everywhere. I have asked everyone to take shelter in the choultry. Many of them have lost their belongings. And they are all wet and cold and shivering. Soon, they will be hungry’.

‘I will give them some food,’ she said. Then, knowing that he had been there earlier during the day to enquire about the motor car for the doctor, she asked him, ‘How is the Samiar?’

‘The Samiar has gone,’ he said, ‘and the ashram along with him. God seems to have planned it that way.’

Janaki gave a sigh. ‘We can do nothing against His will’, she said. ‘I will see what I can do about the food.’

She was young and inexperienced but, as a true Hindu wife, she knew by instinct, how to feed people in distress. All the servants of Mr. Udayar who were on the spot were pressed into service for cleaning the rice, for keeping the fires going with damp firewood, for cooking whatever vegetables and lentils were available. Soon, two huge cauldrons of rice and one of vegetables and lentils were cooking over large fire places. Men were hurrying hither and thither in all that rain, for Mr. Udayar’s Kitchen was not sufficiently large for such cooking and it was all being done over improvised fireplaces in a covered shed at the back. Over them all was Janaki, shouting instructions, orders, distributing salt and condiments and ensuring everything was done as quickly as possible.

As soon as the rice was cooked, the water was drained off and the rice and the curry were mixed together in smaller brass utensils which could be carried by one person. These were covered with banana leaves and a thick sheet of cloth as a protection from rain and carried to the choultry where people waited in hunger and cold, grumbling and complaining against fate. Large portions were distributed to each and they ate avidly, praising the good qualities and the charitable disposition of Janaki. Except those who had lost their goods and chattels in the flood, others were already beginning to feel more cheerful….

But the rain went on and on; it was a moving sea of water, making islands of mud walls and thatched roofs. It flowed through the shacks and hovels, rolling, spreading, ravaging, eroding the mud walls and tearing up from the face of the earth, the tottering little swellings, overcoming all obstruction. It rapidly extended its boundaries, embracing all, respecting none within its domain, distribution cruel justice equally in all direction, and yet, preserving and purifying that which is indestructible.

Yes, rain is Nature’s guard against Nature’s evil; it is the accessory of Man, the terror of his folly, an ordeal by Nature, of right and wrong.

XXV

At last the violent forces of Nature were spent and tired out. The battle was over, peace restored. The morning sun, not so intense, shy but shining, tried to hide its blushing face among pale clouds that kissed the brows of far off hills.

A silent group of people started from the ashram, carrying a corpse on a bier made of bamboos. At one end of the desolate field, a pit had been prepared with cowdung cakes and firewood for the cremation. Meena walked behind the bier and with her were Ramakrishnan and his family. There was the temple priest Mr. Iyengar to recite a few verses from the Vedas; there was Raju who had come because his one time friend had passed away; there was Kuppa, who for a brief period had known power and glory, sobbing and calling on all the gods at the injustice of it all. A few people from Sirumudi had come to condole with Ramakrishnan. Some of the devotees who were still there had come to pay their last respects. A few of the old regulars from the gruel centre and a few of Mr. Udayar's servants made up the rest of the party.

The corpse was placed on the cowdung cakes. Every one present walked round and threw a few grains of rice according to custom. Bits of firewood were piled on top as the priest intoned some verses. Ramakrishnan, as the nearest male relative, took a burning log and lit the funeral pyre and the remains of the Kanji Samiar were consumed by the flame. The women wailed and beat their breasts and surrounded Meena. Soon, they would remove her tali, bathe her in cold water, and dress her up in white, as a sign of widowhood.

One of the men remarked, 'It won't burn quickly. The firewood is damp.'

The field was a mass of wreckage, with bits of tin roofs and coconut leaves strewn about the place. Half collapsed mud walls stood like the ruins of pre-historic civilization. Broken mud pots and pieces of clothing were lying everywhere and men and women were searching among the rubble to see if they could locate any of their lost belongings. There was nothing but destruction and desolation everywhere.

There was desolation everywhere, in the countryside and in the hearts of men and women.

PART THREE

A GIFT OF GOD

I

The problem of food shortage is agitating the nation.

Editorials are written; conferences are held. Panels of advisers, working groups and study are constituted and voluminous reports are prepared. A new strategy is evolved and plans of various sorts are implemented. Foreign experts are imported. Occasionally, even the minister for food is changed.

Population experts predict dire disaster unless there is family planning. Dieticians recommend changes in food habits. Wheat-eaters are asked to consume more rice; and rice-eaters are asked to consume more wheat. Agricultural scientists talk of soil erosion, fertilizers, and afforestation; about the rotation of crops, scientific farming and increasing the yield per acre.

Politicians blame the merchants; wholesalers accuse the retailers. The people blame the co-operative societies, hoarders, capitalists and controls, depending on the colour of their political skin.

Foreign sociologists, so generously provided by friendly governments, talk wisely of liberating the motivational forces that lie dormant in India's villages, of inducing a desire for achievements. They talk about providing meaningful incentives to the peasant. Though the food shortage continues, everyone is proud of the new terminology they have acquired.

Politicians, journalists, civil servants, scientists and social reformers-they all mean well. They are all eager to do something, are doing something; but not one of them has ever missed a meal except through medical advice or for religious considerations. Not one of them knows starvation, first-hand.

II

In the village of Sirumudi, everything is quiet, peaceful. The temporary prosperity that came with Kanji Samiar has departed with him. The beggars, the shop-keepers, the entertainers and the astrologers have all gone. The loud-speaker no longer disturbs the serenity of the village with its blaring music. The frequent horn of the bus and the grinding of its gears as it pulled its load of passengers along the narrow road are no longer heard. Even the stray dogs and the donkeys and the rats have departed in search of food elsewhere.

For, there are no more devotees coming to Sirumudi. They have all gone with their troubles and their problems to another place of pilgrimage, in search of another God.

The storm had wreaked its havoc and left only the debris behind. The huts and shacks have all been completely destroyed by the fury of the flood and where once people lived and loved and traded and quarrelled, where there were hundreds of little dwellings, there is nothing but broken bamboo mats, rusty tin sheets and mud pots strewn about the place. Even the prayer hall of the ashram is in a state of collapse, with a few bamboo rafters in mid-air, like accusing fingers, pointing heavenwards.

Before the rains came, people used to pray and hope for rain. 'When once the rain comes, our troubles will be over', they used to tell themselves. Now that the rain has come and gone, there was nothing more to wish for.

Days follow each other in monotonous succession, bringing with them no promise and no hope.

But life does not stand still; man's hold on life, though precarious at times, is more or less permanent. This hold drives him to action even when everything seems hopeless…

One result of the flood is that the fertile top soil in many fields has been washed away. But in the other fields, men are already preparing the ground for planting, trying to borrow money for expenses till the harvest comes. Others are trying to clear their fields of the rubbish that the flood has left behind and level the ground. There is now water in most of the wells, and at least the drinking water problem is solved.

The gruel centre, once the haunt of the hungry and the poor, and later the scene of so much excitement in the early days of the popularity of the Kanji Samiar, is no longer functioning. It was assumed by the authorities at the distant capital that rain automatically brought food, work and prosperity and, particularly after the popularity of the Kanji Samiar, an order was issued closing the gruel centre. So, the poor have dispersed to other places, other centres. But there is talk of opening it again, at least until the next harvest came in, because, Janaki, that shy and timid girl who was so recently reconciled to her husband through the good offices of the Kanji Samiar, has now taken over the reins of management in Mr. Udayar's household, and even Mr. Udayar listens to her sensible and generous arrangements. She feels a moral responsibility for the well-being of the village people.

In a corner of Ramakrishnan's field is a small platform of stones crudely put together without the benefit of mortar or cement. A small black stone has been placed on the centre of the platform-not very straight, but sufficiently firm to withstand a gust of wind or the pranks of urchins. Every morning Meena, dressed in white, comes to pay her homage to this stone. She has planted a margosa tree to provide shade for the idol, but it will be a long time before it grows. Meanwhile, it stays there, exposed to the sun and wind and rain.

That is all that remains of the Kanji Samiar. Only his wife worships by his grave every day.

III

Ramakrishnan stood and gazed at what was once his proud domain. It was now in ruins. The field was uneven with the remains of what was once a flourishing habitation. It was also barren, the flood waters having taken away most of the top soil leaving the hard stony ground exposed. It would be a long time before that soil could be replaced and the farm restored to its original fertility. It would take money and Ramakrishnan did not have it.

Whatever money he had was used up in the final settlement of the ashram. Suddenly, everyone was making demands on him. In the confusion and the panic, which was the aftermath of the passing away of the Kanji Samiar, it was as if the passions that were held in check by his divine person were let loose all at once. Ramakrishnan, who was so recently a power to reckon with, a man to be respected, a person of means, suddenly became the focal point of everyone's wrath. The plague, the flood, the passing away of the Kanji Samiar, was all considered his responsibility. He was accused by all, defended by none. Instead of being the manager of a flourishing place of worship, he became, overnight, a swindler and a black marketer who made money by pandering to the credulity of the masses.

Again and again, Ramakrishnan examined his conscience. He asked himself,' what did I do that I should not have done? Where did I go wrong? Why am I the target of everyone's attack?' He had not attempted to exploit his brother and make money. In fact, he was now much worse off than he was before. His actions had sprung from pure motives, at least in the beginning. It was prompted by family pride rather than a desire for money. But afterwards, he was carried away by forces beyond his control or understanding. He was a victim of circumstances. Having thought over it for a long time, he could only conclude that the ways of God were unpredictable and it was the lot of poor mortals to suffer what was ordained by their fate.

After a few weeks of indecision, Ramakrishnan had no other option but to ask Mr. Udayar for his old job, which his erstwhile master gave him willingly.

IV

As in the old days before the gruel centre and before all the excitement of the Kanji Samiar, the villagers again gathered in the village square in the evenings. They used to sit on the platform under the shade of the banyan tree (from where the Samiar used to give his discourses in the early days) and discuss the price of crops, about cattle, about each other's affairs and about government and politics as it affected them. They grumbled and they

criticized, but life had gone on very much the same as always, a little better or a little worse, but not much different. Now they talked about the hard times, about the havoc caused by the flood and about the brief glory of the Kanji Samiar.

'Fire, however devastating, can be put out by water', they said. 'But what can we use to stop the fury of the flood?'

'Yes, a flood is worse than a fire', they commented.

They also talked about the people who were leaving the village. Respectable famers or farm workers, who had lived there for generations, were now leaving because of economic pressures. The social cohesion and the status of people were crumbling under threat of unemployment and starvation. Every day, there was rumour of someone leaving Sirumudi. They were going in search of jobs elsewhere, in the city, in factories, to relations who had offered some hope or on the strength of contacts with town's people who had come to visit the Kanji Samiar. Or, they were just going.

They all hoped to come back when times were better, for they left a little bit of their hearts behind them, and most of what they loved. But they knew that Sirumudi would still be there for them to return and they did not mind it so much because of that.

Kandaswamy Asari, the village goldsmith, was leaving; it was said, to work in the foundry of workshop. 'Instead of melting gold, he will now melt iron,' they said. The son of the temple priest, Mr. Iyengar, who had passed the school leaving certificate and had been unemployed for some time, had got a temporary post in the electricity department. It was rumoured that Govindarajan was going to live in the town and manage a new engineering workshop in which Mr. Udayar had invested some money. A number of village people had already been to see him about giving them jobs in the workshop after he had become manager. Even Kuppa, that persistent and indomitable follower of the Kanji Samiar, was reported to have set up as a minor saint in her own right in one of the smaller towns and was reported to have achieved a fair degree of success in fortune telling.

All these happenings were discussed in the village square and commented upon as a sign of the bad times they were living in. Mr. Udayar rarely paid a visit to the village square since everyone went to see him in his own house. As he passed the banyan tree on his way to one of his farms, everyone would stand up out of respect and he would make some remark and walk on. Therefore, when he stopped there one evening, the villagers knew that it must be something important that he wished to tell them.

'You have been away the last few days, sir,' one of them remarked.

'Yes, I have been in the town and then I had to go to the city suddenly', Mr. Udayar replied.

'His there been any rain in those parts?' he was asked.

‘No, there has been no rain there,’ replied Mr. Udayar absent-mindedly.

The Big Uncle, who also happened to be there, remarked in an aside, ‘He must have gone to see the ministers.’

There was a slight tinge of sarcasm in the Big Uncle’s voice, but Mr. Udayar ignored it. And the remark gave an opportunity to say what he had come to tell them.

‘As a matter of fact, I did see one of the ministers,’ he said. ‘The minister for public works, Shri Kandaswamy.’

‘Wasn’t he the one who came to visit our gruel centre?’ someone remarked. ‘You know, before the Kanji Samiar.’

The chronology in Sirumudi was now dated as ‘before’ or ‘after’ Kanji Samiar.

‘Yes, he is the one,’ Mr. Udayar continued. He was speaking not so much to the people who questioned him or to Big Uncle, but to all of them. ‘Perhaps, you do not know, but there is a proposal to build a dam across the Parvathi river just a few miles from here.’

‘What! That little stream that is dry for nine months in the year?’ a villager said in surprise.

‘Yes, we have heard about it,’ the others said. ‘In fact some of the folk here are hoping to find some employment there as soon as the work starts.’

‘That little stream as you call it can irrigate one hundred thousand acres they say,’ Mr. Udayar said, ‘provided the water is stored instead of being drained away. It would also be a flood control mechanism so that we won’t have what we had to undergo a few weeks ago.’

The news was sufficiently important for everyone to start talking at once animatedly. But Mr. Udayar kept the most important bit of news till the very end.

‘But as far as we are concerned,’ he said,’ all that is no use. Sirumudi will be right in the middle of the reservoir, under one hundred feet of water’.

‘But that’s impossible!’ the Big Uncle shouted. ‘They can’t do that to us!’

The rest were silent, stunned and tongue-tied. It was like hearing the death sentence pronounced. As far as they were concerned, there was nothing more to be said, or done. It was the final blow. In the past two or three years, they had had too many troubles, too many misfortunes, to be able to resist or even to protest at this final misfortune.

‘That is why I went to the city’, Mr. Udayar continued. ‘To see the minister and if possible, to save all this,’ he stretched his hands wide as if to embrace everyone and everything around him. ‘To see if anything could be done to save our village. But they tell me it is impossible. You cannot build a dam in flat, open country; nor can you store a large

volume of water there. I believe there is only one point where a dam can be conveniently built, between the two hillocks over there', he pointed his hands towards the little hills that stood above the horizon a few miles beyond. 'And if the dam is built there, then Sirumudi will have to be submerged'.

'In that case, we don't want a dam!' the Big Uncle exploded. 'Why should we lose everything we possess so that others may benefit?'

'We will all get compensation, of course,' Mr. Udayar pointed out.

'Who wants their miserable compensation?'

But the situation was too overwhelming even for the Big Uncle. He had stood up in excitement when he heard the news, but now, he sat back again as the full import of what it meant began slowly to sink into his mind.

'Is there anything we can do about it, sir?' asked the temple priest, Mr. Iyengar.

'There is very little we can do, I'm afraid', Mr. Udayar said. 'I also consulted some lawyers in the city. They say that the Government has powers to take over whole villages for an important and public purpose. In the construction of this dam they are only submerging three small villages, Sirumudi, Kalluppatti and Pudur, while in the case of bigger dams, many more have been submerged. All we can do is to ask for a higher compensation.'

'Has there been anything in the papers about it?' someone enquired.

'Oh, yes', Mr. Udayar said. 'It has been included in the current five year plan and many of us knew about it. In fact, I thought that Sirumudi would benefit from the scheme. The preliminary work has also been going on for some time and, because of the difficult conditions existing, we have been urging the Government to start work on the construction quickly in order to provide some work for people. But the details of the exact location of the dam, the area of the lake, etc., have been published only recently and I came to know about it only a week ago'.

'Yes, we have seen some engineers taking measurements in the hilly areas,' someone remarked, 'but we didn't know what it was for'.

'Often, these dams are planned, but hardly ever built,' the Big Uncle who was a born optimist remarked. 'That is why this country is in such a mess. May be, it will remain on paper for many years to come.'

'There will be no delay in the construction of this dam,' said Mr. Udayar. 'The work on the dam site has already begun. Soon, we will all be getting notices to vacate. The foundation stone for the dam is to be laid in a month or so'.

‘There will be plenty of work for all of us during the construction of the dam. That is definite,’ one of the farm workers remarked.

‘I have seen some of these dams being constructed’, the Big Uncle, who was one of the few people who went on purely sight-seeing trips, explained. ‘First of all, they will build a road to the dam site, then they will build houses for the engineers and staff. And the dam construction itself will only start after that.’

‘The road construction is over,’ Mr. Udayar said. ‘We have not seen it because it is on the other side of the hills. If the road was on this side, then that would also be under water when the dam is completed. The work on the houses and township has been going on for the last few months and the houses are nearly ready. The work on the dam itself will commence shortly’.

‘How is it we have not known anything about all this?’ the priest asked.

‘A few people from Sirumudi have already got jobs there, but we have been too busy with the Kanji Samiar and the flood afterwards to bother about the dam,’ said one of the farmers.

When Mr. Udayar had left them, Raju remarked, ‘It just shows, doesn’t it?’

‘It shows what?’ the Big Uncle shouted.

‘We thought that the master was all powerful and that the Government would listen to him. But in this matter, he seems to have no power to stop the dam.’

‘Yes, there was disappointment in his face and voice; I have never seen him like this before,’ said the priest.

‘What is going to happen to us all?’ someone asked.

‘I will tell you what is going to happen to me’, shouted the Big Uncle with sudden resolution. ‘I am going to stop that dam or perish in the attempt!’

The others started at him in wonder.

V

The next day, the Big Uncle and a few of the land-owners in Sirumudi went to see Mr. Udayar. The Big Uncle was their spokesman.

‘We have been talking about this dam,’ he explained. ‘It ought to be stopped. We think that as first step, we ought to present a petition to the Government.’

‘It is like this, sir’, one of the others continued. ‘We have always lived here. How can we go anywhere else? We don’t want to lose our lands or our homes. We have had the same neighbours for generations and if we have to go to a new and strange place, we wouldn’t know what to do or how to live.’

But the Big Uncle was more impatient. He had never got on with his cousin and he did not want to waste many words with him.

‘If you agree to take some of us and give a petition to the minister, we shall get the signature of every man and woman in Sirumudi as well as in the other villages that share a common fate with us. What do you say?’

‘This affects me as much as it affects any of you,’ Mr. Udayar explained. ‘Perhaps more, because my ancestors are supposed to have founded this village….’

‘They are mine too’, said the Big Uncle aggressively.

‘Yes,’ Mr. Udayar continued, brushing aside the interruption. ‘I have a tradition, a sentiment attached to this village, to this house which was the first building in the village. I have more land to lose than any of you. And I have done all I can to save Sirumudi,’ he spread his hands in a helpless gesture. ‘But it is no use. Our rulers are not moved by mere sentiment. They do not understand that people may want to put up with frequent droughts and occasional floods and suffer willingly, even happily, rather than be uprooted from their ancestral homes, and be separated from their friends and neighbours. They talk in terms of increasing production, of water conservation and of flood control and do not seem to care what misery they cause in the process of achieving it. As the chief engineer told me, “outmoded sentiment has no place in national reconstruction.” Their plans and policies are more important to them than the precarious existence of a few backward villages.’

‘But this is supposed to be a democracy!’ the Big Uncle exclaimed. ‘We must have some redress. They cannot act against the unanimous wishes of each and every one of us!’

‘The Government says that they are doing it in the national interest,’ replied Mr. Udayar.

‘What is that to us, if our own interests are forgotten?’

Mr. Udayar was a dejected man now. In Sirumudi, he was someone to reckon with. He had power, position and respect, not only as a result of money, but mainly as a result of generations of family leadership, of giving support and protection to the villagers and of identification with their interests. In Sirumudi, he was a king; anywhere else, he would be a monarch in exile. In this common disaster he felt one with them all, but he knew it was hopeless.

‘What we would like to know is’, the Big Uncle delivered his ultimatum. ‘Will you help us to draft the petition and present it to the Government or not?’

‘Our family has always come to the help of the whole village in moments of crisis,’ Mr. Udayar said. ‘We have never let the people of Sirumudi down. And I am not going to start now. But I lay down one condition. There is to be no violence and no agitation. I am prepared to help you through every legal and peaceful means. Is that accepted?’

‘Yes,’ they all agreed.

‘Do you agree also?’ Mr. Udayar asked the Big Uncle.

‘Let us see where it gets us,’ said the Big Uncle. ‘If it doesn’t help, then, I will go my way and you go yours.’

‘So long as I associate myself with you, there will be nothing unseemly or violent.’

‘Yes sir’, they all agreed.

‘In that case, I will have the petition drafted,’ said Mr. Udayar. ‘It can’t do any harm and it may do some good’.

The next day, Mr. Udayar went to the town and instructed his lawyer to draft a suitable petition to the Government. Meanwhile, the Big Uncle got busy with the signature campaign. The leading people in the other two affected villages were contacted and they too agreed enthusiastically with the idea of a mass petition. Soon the signature campaign got under way. Sheets of paper were distributed and the Big Uncle went round to the other villages to urge the people to sign the petition. Those who were illiterate were asked to affix their thumb impressions.

This hectic activity brought new hope, a new optimism to Sirumudi. People talked vaguely of forcing the Government to yield, of not vacating their homes, of the dam being built in such a way that Sirumudi would benefit from it. And the Big Uncle encouraged such talk.

VI

Originally, the delegation was supposed to consist of five people besides the lawyer and Mr. Udayar. But many others wanted to go and they all had to be accommodated in order to avoid displeasing anyone. There was also some delay in fixing an appointment with the minister, since the members of the delegation insisted on an auspicious time for the interview and the minister was busy. Finally, a suitable time was fixed and a delegation of about fifteen people left the village of Sirumudi two days earlier than was necessary, as that

was considered the most auspicious time for travelling. A very large crowd of people saw them off as they filed into three cars, full of optimism.

The minister gave the delegation exactly fifteen minutes. Having expected only five people, he was put out at having fifteen people crowded into his room. The lawyer presented the petition and proceeded to explain the grievances of the villagers affected by the dam construction. But the minister cut him short.

'I know your problems,' he spoke to the villagers in their language, ignoring the lawyer's old fashioned, legalistic, and phraseology. 'Yours has been a depressed area for a long time. Records of the last seventy years show that you have suffered from long droughts interspersed by occasional floods. The building of this dam will ensure water for irrigation for a hundred thousand acres which will help to increase food production and to avoid the shortages which we have been facing for the last few years.'

He spoke as if he was addressing a meeting and the members of the delegation turned uncomfortably in their chairs.

'You people who belong to the three villages which are going to be submerged will be rehabilitated. For those who lose their lands or their homes, compensation will be paid. There will be increased employment for everybody. If you feel that the compensation paid is not adequate, you can always appeal to the special tribunal which the Government proposes to set up. Therefore, I do not see what more the Government or anyone else can do to help you.'

'On behalf of my clients, I would request you to look at the human problems involved in the destruction of their hearths and homes, sir,' the lawyer began.

'The Government is not unaware of the human problems involved,' said the minister. 'As far as possible, communities will not be disrupted. As and when additional land becomes available after the dam construction, your claims will be considered and as far as possible, you will all be rehabilitated in the same areas.'

'What compensation do we get for all the love we have lavished on our soil for so many generations? What do we get for losing our homes where we were born and where our ancestors were born? How do you propose to measure this loss and suitably compensate for it?'

It was the Big Uncle. He had been told that he should not speak and let the lawyer do all the talking. But emotion got the better of him and he stood up from his chair and spoke vehemently and loudly.

'Please sit down and do not shout,' said the minister. 'What we are concerned with are the larger interests of the nation. Many dams have been constructed in various parts of the country and many villages have been submerged. But the people of those villages have

been rehabilitated elsewhere and they are very happy and prosperous. Progress means change, and change, while it benefits most people, does affect a few adversely. But that is purely temporary. Our ability consists in adjusting ourselves to such changes and profiting by them. An officer will soon be appointed, who will no doubt take all these points into account in fixing compensation.'

'Ministers should set an example before asking others to sacrifice their homes,' shouted the Big Uncle.

'I think we can consider this interview at an end,' said the minister in anger and rose from his seat.

'I am sorry, sir, that one of the members of my delegation has lost control of himself', apologised the lawyer. 'I hope his bad manners will not stop you from considering our request favorably'.

'What! Stop the construction of the dam for which we have planned for years and on which we have already spent lakhs?' the minister shouted. 'Don't you realise, we have a duty to our people to ensure enough food? How are we going to do it unless we conserve our meagre water resources? Conserving water means dams across rivers and streams at appropriate places. Stopping construction of the dam is impossible, gentlemen'.

Then he turned to Mr. Udayar. 'I am surprised, Mr. Udayar, that you have associated yourself with such a futile and meaningless demand. It was your name that prompted me to grant this interview. I am sorry I did so. Now, good-bye gentlemen.' And with these words he signalled that the interview was over.

And the delegation trooped out arguing and gesticulating, some shouting at the Big Uncle and the others talking to the lawyer.

'We have still many legal avenues open to us; we shall explore them all,' the lawyer was saying.

'I will have nothing more to do with any of this,' said Mr. Udayar and walked away from them.

VII

The dam site beyond the hills was a hive of activity. Huge earth-moving machines, working like some prehistoric monsters, were levelling the ground. A temporary township was being created. Houses were going up, for engineers, supervisors, clerical staff, stone masons and others. They were all suitably graded as 'A', 'B', 'C', and so on, to be occupied according to position and salaries of people and located in different areas. The road work was nearly complete. Shops, coffee clubs and schools were being built. A temporary hospital

was already set up to deal with any accidents and illness among the new population. A police outpost was functioning. Though built on a temporary basis, since they were likely to be abandoned after the dam construction was over, they were well laid out and supplied with water from the Parvathi river. At least in front of the larger bungalows, gardens were springing up with hedges and flowers at the front and vegetables and bananas at the back. The clerical staff and even some of the others were imitating the engineers as far as the kitchen gardens were concerned.

Beyond the township and a little away from the main road, was a colony of huts and shacks. It was not possible for the authorities to provide houses for everyone and a large number of temporary workers and others who had come in search of work had put up these shacks for their own accommodation. Here, there was no water supply and no gardens and the conditions were very insanitary. Water had to be brought in pots from a public tap about two furlongs away. People lived anyhow and the authorities turned a blind eye since it was not visible from any of the main roads.

A guest house had been one of the first buildings to be completed. It was well furnished with rugs on the floor and comfortable cushion chairs in the lounge, with spring mattresses and dressing tables in the bedrooms. It was named 'Project House' and was intended for the use of ministers and other V.I.P.s on their periodical tours of inspection and could only be occupied after getting the permission from the construction engineer on the spot.

Huge storehouses were also constructed for storing cement, iron and other materials for dam construction and these godowns were protected by double rows of barbed wire. Workshops for repairs and maintenance of machines, bulldozers and lorries, and for fabrication of steel structures were also going up. A laboratory had been set up and chemists were testing the various types of soil from the river bed and in the neighbouring areas, to decide on the specification for the foundation and other scientific details. The entire township was electrified on a priority basis and at nights it was a blaze of light.

In view of the plentiful supply of stone from the neighbouring hillocks, it had been decided that the central portion of the dam would be constructed of stone and cement while the rest would be an earthen dam. The engineers were rather proud that they were designing and constructing the first earthen dam in India. Some of them had been sent abroad to inspect similar dams in other parts of the world.

Skilled stone masons from hundreds of miles were coming to find work at the dam site. It would be their job to chisel the huge boulders of stone into neat rectangular blocks of more or less identical size. Surveyors were taking measurements, calculating levels, estimating the load bearing capacity of the different sections and finalizing a thousand details that have to be co-ordinated in the successful completion of such a project. Draughtsmen were producing hundreds of blue-prints of various sections of the dam and

these would be used by the engineers and supervisors during the actual construction. The engineers were designing the location of the turbines and the power house, since this dam would be multi-purpose, serving irrigation, flood control and hydro-electric generation. When the dam was completed and the lake was formed, it would be used for fish culture also.

At a prominent spot near the dam site, an information centre had been set up. It contained a relief map of the area, a scale model of the dam and the reservoir, and gave impressive details about its construction such as length, height, cubic feet of earth and concrete to be used in the construction, the areas to be irrigated, etc.

Night and day, lorries rolled in bringing machinery for the workshops, building materials such as iron, cement and so on.

Side by side with all the dam building activity, plans were prepared to dig canals that would carry the water from the reservoir to parched lands. There were already arguments among people living beyond the dam as to how the water ought to be distributed to various needy areas, and what tax they would have to pay for the water they would be receiving. But for the people of Sirumudi, Kallupatti and Pudur, these discussions were academic, for they would not be there at all.

Plans were also being prepared for a large park with fountains and coloured lights, with lawns and flower beds under the shadow of the dam. A tree planting programme was already in progress and thousands of trees had already been planted along the main roads and avenues. When all this was completed, it would be a beautiful picnic spot for the tired and jaded people of the city to come and relax for a day.

A temporary cinema and the loud-speakers from the coffee clubs - the inevitable adjuncts to any kind of marginal prosperity-were already there. Even a social club had been organized where in the coolness, after a hard day’s work, senior engineers argued over bride tables and their juniors played badminton. There was even talk of laying a tennis court.

The engineers and officials with all their plans and technical details, the contractors expecting to make money, the workmen hoping to get high wages, the tradesmen, thinking it terms of big profits, they were all busy. Here was new life, throbbing with activity, pulsating with a new vigour. Here, there was no room for fate; no room for the vagaries of Nature, for they were taken care of in the plans that the engineers had drawn up.

The people of Sirumudi watched all this with sullen hostility. Every day, a few of them would go to the dam site under some pretext or other-drawn towards it like moths towards a flame-and would come back and make disparaging remarks among themselves. Even the Big Uncle visited the place once and remarked on his return: ‘In Sirumudi, we spend water like money; but the Government is spending money like water. More money has flowed through that river in the last six months than water in the last six years.’

'It is strange,' muttered the priest, Mr. Iyengar. 'I have heard so much about the dam. They seem to have built everything except a temple.'

VIII

After the failure of the delegation to the minister, Mr. Udayar refused to have anything to do with any organized activity of trying to save the village from extinction. He was too worldly-wise not to know a lost cause. To those who listened to him, he said, 'It is a pity that this village has to go. I am more sorry about it than any of you, because I stand to lose more, but the Government is right. If we stand in the way of progress, we will be wiped out'. But he was a sad man.

But the Big Uncle was a man who thrived on lost causes. When Mr. Udayar withdrew his support, many others became lukewarm. But evening after evening, he sat under the banyan tree and aired his views to the men of Sirumudi. His optimism and his enthusiasm were contagious. He talked about consulting lawyers and engineers, about the fundamental rights guaranteed under the constitution, about the dam not being economical and about going to the Supreme Court. He talked vaguely about successful demonstrations in other parts of the country as a result of which the Government was forced to change their decisions. He talked of Satyagraha, of not vacating their houses when the time came…….. And the villagers listened. They knew that what he was suggesting was probably not possible, but the desire to believe was strong.

The Big Uncle was also busy, going to the town frequently, consulting the lawyers about the legal position. He also consulted some retired government engineers about whether it was possible to construct the dam in such a way that Sirumudi would still be above water. It was then that he learnt that if the height of the dam could be reduced by about a hundred feet, Kallupatti and Pudur might go under water, but Sirumudi which was on higher ground would be just on the banks of the reservoir. But the engineers also told him that if that were done, the storage capacity of the reservoir would be reduced by more than half and electric generation would not be possible. This would make the dam very uneconomical and not worth constructing.

For the Big Uncle, and for those who listened to him, this brought new hope. Perhaps, the Government could be persuaded to reduce the height of the dam even if they could not be forced to abandon the scheme altogether. And then, if the scheme became uneconomical, they would have to give it up. It was therefore advocated as a happy compromise and a fresh signature campaign was organized.

But this proved to be a tactical error since the people of Kallupatti and Pudur would not support it. No amount of persuasion on the part of the Big Uncle that this was only a first step and the total abandonment of the dam would be a logical consequence would

impress the people of those two villages. Memories of old feuds between the villages were revived, generations of pent-up ill feeling brought to the surface. And the people of the other villages decided that they would rather have their villages submerged than co-operate with the people of Sirumudi. They also decided to organize a separate campaign of their own to protect their rights on totally different lines from those suggested by the Big Uncle.

IX

When it was announced that the minister for public works, Sri Kandaswamy, was coming to lay the foundation stone for the dam, it gave an opportunity for both sides to demonstrate.

Two hours before the minister was due to arrive, the Big Uncle had collected about a hundred people and lined them up at a road junction near the dam site. Many of them had placards in their hands with slogans. 'Minister Go Back', Reduce the Height of the Dam', 'Our Homes are Sacred', and so on. The Big Uncle, who had witnessed other demonstrations in the towns, knew the effect of shouting these slogans in unison. But the village people whom he had gathered, unused and untrained in the shouting of slogans, made a poor show and felt embarrassed.

And the people of Kallupatti and Pudur had not been idle. One of the former residents of Kallupatti who was at present a worker in a factory and an important member of a trade union had got of his friends together. They too had placards, but their legends were different; 'Give us land', 'Give us Adequate Compensation', Give us Job'. Being used to frequent demonstrations in the town, they were a better organized group, shouting in unison, marching in step, singing songs of liberation of the workers and peasants. They too came and occupied the same road junction, but on the opposite to the Big Uncle.

There were a lot of others too, people who had come to see the minister, people who had come out of curiosity to see the demonstrations and those who happened to be out of work that day. They chewed betel nuts or tobacco and talked and chatted about the minister's coming and the arrangements for the foundation stone laying ceremony.

Soon the police arrived in a couple of vans and stood to attention along both sides of the road and the officers patrolled up and down anxiously, lest there should be any trouble.

In the beginning, everything was peaceful. Visitors from the city who had been invited for the function went past in their cars, raising the dust. The population of the neighbouring villages walked along. A newspaper correspondent who was going to cover the ceremony saw the demonstrators and got out of his car to find out what it was all about. Both the leaders of the rival factions wanted to talk to him at the same time and that led to an altercation. Their supporters started shouting slogans and began to surge forward. The

people pushed them back. The demonstrators from Kallupatti who were used to dealing with the police every day, laughed and shouted, but moved back. But the Big Uncle, who was already smarting under a humiliation because the others were so much better organized, urged his followers to rush forward. Immediately, a scuffle started and the police charged with their lathis. People started running in all directions and the Big Uncle was left in the middle of the road grappling with a couple of policemen. He was unceremoniously hustled into a police van and the crowd was dispersed. By the time the minister passed along that way, there were only a few stragglers standing aimlessly and a few torn down placards.

'I understand that some kind of demonstration has been organized, to protest about the construction of the dam,' asked the minister.

'As a matter of fact, there were two rival demonstrations, sir,' said the official who was travelling with him. 'They more or less neutralised each other.'

'That is the trouble with our people', the minister said. 'They are never united.'

The minister not only knew about the demonstration, but he had also heard that it was organized by a cousin of Mr. Udayar. However, he was not told that Mr. Udayar himself had opposed it. The minister referred to the demonstration in his speech and was sarcastic about it.

'We are advised by some local experts to reduce the height of the dam. We are also told that we are wasting money by constructing this dam. If we followed the advice of these self-styled experts and reduced the height, we certainly would be wasting money. When the Government is doing everything in its power to improve the lot of the villages, it is unfortunate that some misguided people motivated by selfish interests and backed by some wealthy landowners should object to the construction of this dam. But they cannot stop the march of progress…' and so on.

Mr. Udayar, who had been invited to the function and who as the local dignitary was in one of the front seats, winced at the reference to local, selfish interests.

X

The fizzling out of the demonstration did nothing to curb the enthusiasm of the Big Uncle. It merely added frustration and bitterness to a deeply rooted sense of wrong. The village playboy, who had been interested in nothing other than the curves of a woman's torso, was soon learning all about curves and angles of concrete structures, stresses and strains in dam constructions, water seepage in porous soils and so on. He had somehow managed to get some blueprints from the executive engineer's office at the dam site as well as some notes jotted down on the margin of some official papers. Armed with this

information, he consulted some private engineers in the town and came to an important conclusion. It was this; if the dam were to be constructed across two different hillocks, a few miles above the present dam site, no village need be submerged under the water at all. Evidently, in the early days of planning, these alternatives had been considered by the engineers and rejected on the ground that the storage capacity of the reservoir would be too small.

Now, the Big Uncle became the champion of these rejected plans. He was constantly travelling to the town, consulting engineers and lawyers, drafting petitions, organising signature campaigns and using indiscriminate threats against all who considered his agitation futile. He wrote letters to the newspapers, had handbills printed and distributed in the villages. In these he accused the Government of deliberate callousness in destroying villages, of wasting public money, of showing favouritism in awarding contracts and so on.

He did succeed in one thing. The local member of the legislature, who was sensitive to any public feeling and anxious about his chances at the next election, raised the issue in the legislature in the form of a question.

'Is the Hon. Minister for public works aware of the strong feeling that exists against the construction of the dam across the Parvathi river and, if so, what does he propose to do about it?'

The minister replied that everything possible was being done to satisfy the legitimate grievances of the people of the area, but he was not prepared to submit to misguided or ill-conceived agitation by a few disgruntled individuals.

This was reported in the papers and the Big Uncle read it out to whoever cared to listen, saying, 'Now, they are talking about it in the legislature; soon, they will be discussing it in Parliament'.

People marvelled at his energy and at the fact that anyone, as easy-going as he was, should be capable of such concentrated and sustained effort. But he was like a man who had been blindly searching for a vocation all these years and at last had stumbled on what was to be his life's work.

It was at this time that the Big Uncle became acquainted with Venki, that other champion of lost causes. Govindarajan introduced them to each other when they both came to see him at his house in the town. A few minutes' conversation was enough to show that these two were kindred spirits, interested in similar kinds of activity and nothing pleased Venki more than to have a chance of participating in the 'anti-dam' campaign. Soon, he and the Big Uncle were inseparable. While the Big Uncle provided the energy and the drive—and the money—Venki provided the brains and the organisation. From then on, the agitation could be said to have become public.

It was Venki who made the suggestion that Sirumudi might be historically and culturally important. Together, they searched the historical records in the District Office in the town to prove that Sirumudi had existed even before the British days. Little recorded history is available with regard to places in India—unless they have been of religious or cultural importance. They also consulted scholars in the local language to find out if there were any references to Sirumudi in ancient literature. Sirumudi meant a small peak and no one had ever bothered to wonder which peak it was. In the village itself, it was generally assumed that one of Mr. Udayar's - and the Big Uncle's-ancestors had founded the village about a hundred and fifty years ago. But one of the scholars consulted was able to find some oblique references in some minor classics to a 'Sirumudi' where a great sage had once lived and taught. Though of extremely doubtful validity, the Bit Uncle and Venki hailed this as one of the greatest findings in literature and claimed that the 'Sirumudi' referred to in the classics was their Sirumudi which the Government, with no consideration to culture and sentiment, was now proposing to submerge into oblivion for all time.

In a democracy, any public controversy soon becomes a political issue. There are always politicians and parties ready to support any cause as a means of undermining the strength and popularity of the existing government. Thanks to Venki's contacts in the political and the newspaper world, the Big Uncle soon found himself the centre of a movement over which he was gradually losing control. While the Big Uncle had very little else besides an abiding enthusiasm for his cause, his new supporters were seasoned political agitators and experts in adding fuel to the flame of discontent. They had organizing ability, subtle methods of propaganda and ready-made audiences for meetings. Thanks to these people, the Big Uncle soon became, in the minds of some people at any rate, a symbol of oppression, of frustrated justice. He was made to appear as a man who was sacrificing his personal fortune for the sake of a public cause. And in India, as elsewhere, such a man easily gains public sympathy irrespective of the cause itself.

It was also Venki who thought of the idea of enlisting the support of the Kanji Samiar for their cause.

'The Kanji Samiar was a great and famous saint,' Venki argued at the small meeting arranged to finalise their plan of campaign. 'Thousands of people visited him during the short period of his earthly existence and his grave is sure to become a place of pilgrimage in course of time, but not if it is submerged under a hundred feet of water. Are we going to deny spiritual comfort and consolation to many generations of devotees because of one foolish act on the part of our government?'

None of them at that meeting was religious. In fact, many of them were agnostics who had no use for religion, and only went to temples or performed ceremonials in order to satisfy their wives or their mothers. Not one of them-except Venki–had visited the Kanji Samiar during his lifetime. But they all knew that a bit of religion added respectability to any agitation and is likely to make it far more popular. It made the movement dignified,

appealed to people's higher emotions and would win their sympathy easily. In the hands of these experienced people, the Big Uncle was like a child and he was easily sold on the idea.

So, the 'Save Sirumudi' campaign was launched with the holding of a public meeting at which a resolution was unanimously passed, requesting the Government to construct the dam in such a manner that the village of Sirumudi, with its historical, cultural and religious associations would be spared for the benefit of posterity. Disgruntled politicians, misguided literary scholars and an editor of a sensation-mongering newspaper made speeches in support of the resolution and threatened various forms of agitation if their request went unheeded. They spoke of mammoth processions, hartals, strikes, and even fasting. They talked of a 'holy war' and the forces of righteousness against the forces of darkness, of the need to exterminate the vested interests that were entrenched in power. They talked in terms of 'a fight unto death' and an agitation 'for a hundred years' if necessary.

The Big Uncle felt heartened by all this and gladly paid the price for the loud-speaker system, the cost of garlands and other incidental expenses. But from then on, he was a mere figurehead in the campaign. The power of decision making was taken away from him by others who had their own motives and aspirations.

The politicians among them said, 'The construction of the dam is not an isolated incident; it is but the culmination of a series of incompetent and selfish acts of the government. The only way of setting things right is to change it'.

The scholars among them declared, 'This is the result of the refusal of our government to recognise our mother tongue as the official language; if our mother tongue were given its due importance, Sirumudi's importance would automatically be recognised.'

The newspaper editor cried, 'As a first step towards the achievement of our objective, the minister for public works must resign; he has forfeited the confidence of the public by ordering the construction of this dam without proper investigation and adequate discussion in the press.'

In the subsequent meetings that were organized, Sirumudi went into the background and these various issues tended to take a more prominent place in the speeches. The Big Uncle was confused and bewildered by all this. The problems were too complex, the arguments too subtle, for his simple and untutored mind. But he had trust in these men who had come to his aid willingly and enthusiastically when he was alone and friendless. He merely carried out their instructions, deferred to their superior wisdom and continued to pay the bills.

XI

The agitation started with all the usual fanfare that is generally associated with such agitations. Meetings were held; well-known speakers, capable of attracting large audiences, and likely to be sympathetic to such causes were invited. Naturally, they expected to be paid liberal expenses for their services. Processions were organized with placards; these again had to be paid for, since posters had to be made and those who participated in the processions had to be given at least some refreshments at the end. An attempt was also made to enlist the support of the students in high schools and colleges. As the leaders were quick to point out at the end of the students' strike, 'We have advised the students that they should not participate in political agitations and should devote their attention to studies. But when the entire nation is agitated over a vital problem, students cannot remain aloof.' However, it came to nothing as the majority of the students were not interested in the fate of Sirumudi.

The agitation however got a certain amount of publicity in the local press. Articles were written in one or two papers about the antiquity of Sirumudi; photographs of the Kanji Samiar were unearthed from old files and republished with articles on his philosophy and teachings. A retired chief engineer was persuaded to write a learned article on the technical aspects of saving Sirumudi. He pointed out the example of the Aswan Dam in Egypt where some ancient and historical monuments were being preserved with the help of the United Nations, and suggested that the Government of India might approach the international body for similar assistance in the case of Sirumudi.

At long last, when the agitation had been in progress for some time and when intelligent people and the newspapers were beginning to ask, 'What is the government doing about the agitators?', a statement was issued from the department concerned. It gave facts and figures regarding the cost and storage capacity of various alternative schemes and explained why that particular scheme was accepted and implemented. The statement also gave the benefits that were likely to result on the completion of the dam, such as the number of acres to be irrigated and the amount of electricity to be generated. It even gave the tonnage of fish per year that is likely to be caught in the reservoir. The statement also made it clear that all those who had to give up their hearths and homes would be adequately compensated and that a special officer was already at work assessing the amount of compensation. Under these circumstances, the government did not see the need either for the agitations or for changing it s policy. Finally, the statement appealed to people not to be carried away by the propaganda of misguided elements and political agitators.

From the very beginning, the 'Save Sirumudi' campaign had suffered from lack of funds. The Big Uncle was the only contributor, and he did so willingly. In return, he was always seated at a prominent place on the platform of meetings, and though he did not make any speeches himself, his name was brought in by other speakers as one who was sacrificing everything to save a holy place for posterity. But the Big Uncle was not a wealthy

man and he had always lived imprudently. In order to finance this campaign he had borrowed heavily and soon he had come to the end of his resources. When he mentioned this to Venki one day in a very embarrassed manner, he said with his usual cheerfulness, 'Don't worry, we shall start a fund raising campaign now. In fact that is how we should have started it. Money is the life-blood of every agitation, just as it is of everything else of course.'

So, the 'Save Sirumudi Committee' issued an appeal through the press for funds which were badly needed for continuing its activities. 'If you want to protect democracy, protect Sirumudi,' the appeal declared. But it had a singularly poor effect on the public. Very few people, apart from those directly involved, were interested in the campaign. If they attended meetings, it was more as a form of diversion rather than because they actively supported the cause. The people in the city would not care what happened to a small village that no one had heard of till then. Slowly, the campaign fizzled out along with Big Uncle's money and soon people heard no more about the 'Save Sirumudi' campaign. Many active members gradually dropped out. If the committee had to function, it must function at other levels and other areas.

XII

The Big Uncle was dejected; he was not sorry about the money he had lost or the debts he had incurred, though he could ill afford such extravagance. He was sorry that all his efforts and those of his friends had come to nothing. But he was not allowed to brood over his misfortunes for long.

One of Venki's friends, an active member of the 'Save Sirumudi' committee from the very beginning and a trade unionist by profession, came up with a suggestion.

'If you want to save Sirumudi', he argued, 'you cannot do it here in the town. Even if the campaign is popular it will come to nothing so long as it is confined to the town. Don't forget that while we are holding meetings and making speeches, the dam is going up, stone by stone, every day. The time for speeches is over. Since the government has refused to listen to our pleading, it is now time for action.'

'Why do you mean?' the Big Uncle asked.

Venki, who knew the direction of his friend's thoughts, said, 'You mean to organize the workers at the dam site into a trade union and declare a strike?'

'Exactly,' his friend replied.

But the Big Uncle did not follow it. 'Why should they go on strike?' he asked. 'They are getting good wages in these days of hardship, and if the construction stops, they will lose it.

Even some people from Sirumudi have gone to work there and I haven't been able to stop them'.

'You don't understand these things Uncle', Venki said. 'We don't tell the workers that we want to stop the construction altogether, we merely tell them their conditions are bad, their wages are poor, their supervisors are arrogant and domineering and they should go on strike in order to remedy these things.'

'But the wages are far better than anything they have ever received before,' the Big Uncle protested.

'If you want to save Sirumudi, you leave everything to us,' the trade unionist cried. 'All we want from you is local support. My union will meet the expenses if any'.

Again, the Big Uncle could not comprehend the subtleties of the situation. Again, he let himself be led by others.

XIII

There were about ten thousand workers at the dam who were employed on manual work. They had come from far and near. Many of them had left their families in their villages and lived the life of nomads, working during the day, eating in coffee clubs of cheap hotels, and sleeping where there was shelter. Many who had brought their families and whose wives were also working, were living in shacks under very insanitary conditions. While all permanent workers were provided with quarters, those others were left to shift for themselves. They did not get many of the privileges of the permanent employees. They had many grievances and there was an undercurrent of discontent, not visible to the casual observer, but ready to come to the surface at the slightest opportunity.

In order to gain the confidence of the workers, it was suggested to the Big Uncle that the committee should not call itself 'Save Sirumudi' committee since the workers might suspect it, but its name should temporarily be changed to "Parvathi Dam Workers' Welfare Committee." The letter-heads were changed accordingly, retaining the same office-bearers with the Big Uncle as president. It was felt that the name of the Big Uncle, who was well known in the area, would infuse confidence among the workers and enable the nucleus of a trade union to be formed.

At the first meeting of the workers organized by the committee, there were only a handful of people, mostly from Sirumudi and personally known to the Big Uncle. Even they were afraid to come, they said, because of what their supervisors and engineers would say. Unused to the ways of organized labour movement and distrusting all those who promised them anything, the workers felt it was best to stay away. The engineers, on the other hand, were a bit nervous as to how the movement was going to shape, but decided to ignore it.

After the failure of the first meeting, the members of the committee decided to investigate and find out what the real conditions of the workers were. They went to their houses individually, asked about their well-being, made friends with them and tried to gain their confidence. In the process, they also learnt about their real problems and difficulties. After such preliminary spade work, their second meeting was a modest success. At this meeting, speakers talked about the inhuman treatment that was meted out to the workers by the engineers and by the government, about the need for them to organize themselves into a proper trade union so that their rights would be respected, and so on. After the initial reluctance and the fear was overcome, the workers were only too eager to listen. When the day's work was over there was nothing for them to do, nowhere to go or pass the time in a pleasant manner, and they treated these meetings as a welcome diversion. Nor many of them had much hope of anything coming out of all these speeches, but still, it was something.

A workers' union was formed, demands were formulated for increased wages, for allotment of houses to temporary workers, for making all workers permanent, for promotion of workers to supervisory ranks, for greater welfare facilities and, most important of all, for the recognition of the union. A committee was formed to take necessary action for achieving these demands. Tactics such as disobedience of orders and going slow at work were adopted by the workers in order to get their demands accepted.

Again, the Big Uncle was confused. 'If we want the dam construction to stop, then we should ask the workers to stop work', he said. 'What is the use of abusing the engineers and the contractors? If the conditions of the workers are improved according to our demands, what then? Are we to accept the dam?'

But the organizers of the union had already forgotten their original objective of saving Sirumudi. 'It will come to that in the end, Uncle', they said. 'You wait and see!'

And the Big Uncle waited.

The engineers and the supervisors, used to having their orders obeyed without question, were completely paralysed by a few aggressive and discontented workers, who did not do things according to instructions or on time. This was the first time that the engineers had come across such a situation and they did not know what to do. They were not trained in trade union relationship and not used to taking decisions beyond the narrow orbit of their technical interest. So, they wrote to the government for orders and waited.

As far as the government was concerned, this was a serious matter. Funds had been allocated in the current five year plan and the construction had to be completed and the money spent within the allotted time. Any delay in completion would mean that the anticipated increase in agricultural production would be delayed by one more year. They were already behind schedule in the progress of the dam due to various reasons and

wanted to complete the work as quickly as possible. The government therefore issued a warning to the workers not to resort to agitation and go-slow tactics in pressing their demands and promised to consider their legitimate grievances, if presented through the normal channels. But that was just what the leaders of the workers were not prepared to do.

The government had also issued instructions to the engineers on the spot not to tolerate misbehaviour or insubordination.

The tense situation continued. Workers who were loyal to the engineers were beaten up under cover of darkness. No prosecutions could be launched since there were no witnesses. Supervisors who carried out their orders strictly and impartially were called 'traitors' and occasionally they too were beaten up. The change from a master-servant to employer-employee relationship is a painful one and many people suffer in the process. Mean while the work was slowing down as a result of a number of factors. Everyone was waiting for the inevitable showdown that would come soon.

When the situation did explode, no one was prepared. A worker spoke rudely to a supervisor; the supervisor complained to the engineer. When the engineer sent for the worker, the worker refused to go. 'If that engineer wants to ask me anything, he can come here', cried the worker. He was dismissed on the spot. But again he refused to leave his work saying that no one could dismiss him. A couple of watchmen were sent for and the worker was forcibly ejected from the work spot. The worker hit one of the watchmen who hit back. Soon there was a scuffle in which a number of workers were involved on both sides. Police were sent for and by the time they arrived, a few people were badly hurt, many had received minor injuries, but most of them except for a few engineers and supervisors had left the place.

The injured were taken to the local hospital and next day the leaders of the union announced that because of an unprovoked and dastardly attack on an innocent worker by some supervisors the workers had gone on an indefinite strike. They demanded that the supervisor and the engineer responsible should be dismissed, compensation should be given to the injured workers, and all workers should be paid full wages for the strike period and all their demands conceded. They complained of lack of attention in the hospital, intimidation and coercion of union members, withholding of weekly wages due to them and various threats on the part of the authorities to terrorise the workers into submission. The authorities made a statement giving their version of the story and placing the blame on 'saboteurs' intent on fomenting trouble and warning them of dire consequences. Questions were raised in the legislature, articles were written in the papers, an enquiry was demanded.

But work on the dam site had come to a standstill. At last, the Big Uncle was happy and triumphant.

XIV

The situation was tense. Meetings and processions were banned. Additional police forces were brought in order to preserve law and order. The government also announced that loyal workers who wished to return to work would be given protection. Many wanted to return since they believed neither in the union promises nor in their ability to hold out, but those who did found it unsafe, as they were beaten up under cover of darkness. The police could not protect ten thousand people spread over a fairly wide area. After a few days, the leaders of the strike including the Big Uncle were arrested.

Meanwhile, efforts were being made by some leading public men to settle the dispute. They met the minister, the chief engineer and the union leaders and put forward their own proposals for a compromise settlement. But the union leaders merely added another clause to their increasing demands, that all arrested people should be released forthwith. The government on the other hand was firm that the strike should be withdrawn and normal conditions restored before any demands could be considered. There was a stalemate.

The workers had neither the industrial discipline nor the economic stamina to withstand a prolonged strike, and when wages were not forthcoming and they found they had no grain in their homes, they had no means of livelihood. Their leaders who had promised them so much were either in jail or had disappeared. There was nothing to sustain their morale. They started trickling back to work, a trickle that soon became a flood.

'We were fools to listen to those clever chaps from the town', they said.

In order to pacify the workers and restore normal conditions, the government announced the release of all arrested persons, and the appointment of an officer from the labour department to enquire into the working conditions of temporary workers and make suitable recommendations. This was hailed as a victory by the leaders of the union and a victory procession was held after getting permission from the police. But it was very thinly attended. The strike had lasted exactly twenty-three days.

The Big Uncle was asked to participate in the procession. 'What! Celebrate the commencement of work on the dam?' he shouted at his erstwhile colleagues. 'I may be a fool, but I don't give up my basic principles for anyone'.

'You didn't really think we could stop the dam construction for ever, did you?' one of them asked.

'Strange as it may seem to you, I did,' he replied bitterly.

He returned to Sirumudi, a sadder but a wiser man.

XV

During these months of hectic activity for the Big Uncle, the people of Sirumudi had watched him with interest and sympathy.

News, gossip and rumours came to them from various sources. It was said that the agitators were secretly planning to blow up the dam that the chief engineer had been beaten up on his way to the office, that all plans and blue prints of the dam had been set on fire and the work could not proceed until new plans were prepared. There was no other topic of conversation in Sirumudi for months and they became spectators in a struggle over their future.

In the beginning, there was frustration and helplessness at what they considered to be a gross injustice to themselves. Then, as the Big Uncle's activities began to spread and attract public attention, there was enthusiasm, even hope. And finally, when the work on the dam came to a stop, there was jubilation. But now, there was resignation, a bowing down to what was inevitable.

Now, there was peace in Sirumudi. People went about their jobs and did not talk much. There was little to talk about.

The Big Uncle had always been popular in the village. But no one took him seriously. Now, at the moment of this final tragedy, he became ennobled in their eyes. Even those who had considered his activities futile were moved by them. He returned to his home with frustration and bitterness in the heart. Opposition from his enemies, he could understand and respect, but the betrayal of his friends-or those whom he considered his friends—was too much for him. So the people of Sirumudi took him to their hearts for his grief was theirs; his tragedy was theirs also.

During the long life of Sirumudi, there had been too many droughts, too many floods, too many catastrophes in their existence for them to worry too much over this last and final one that would end them all. It was fate. It was beyond their powers. That was their consolation and that was also their strength. They would survive it individually if not collectively, as they have survived so often before. Life would go on even if Sirumudi was not there.

Some of the young men from Sirumudi now had jobs at the site. Economic pressure, the desire for survival, drove them there. They also looked upon it as an adventure, an opportunity. They were vaguely discontented with the traditions and limitations of the village society, impatient of its slow movement and fine social distinctions that put them permanently at a disadvantage. Prospects of high wages, the glamour of electric lights and cinema posters, the blaring music from the loud-speakers, all these attracted them. They had painful and divided loyalties, and during the strike, they were all with the Big Uncle. But now that it was all over, their number was increasing.

In the early days, these young men were criticized by the others for their lack of attachment to the village, and at one time there was even talk of a social boycott of such people. But now, they were looked upon with indifference, even tolerance.

The threat of extinction was bringing about a new unity in Sirumudi. People were more considerate towards each other, more affectionate. They pampered each other like parents who spoil a sick child who they know will not live long. Quarrels and feuds that had dragged on for generations were forgotten. People who had not spoken to each other for years made up their minds to be friendly. The Big Uncle was now reconciled with his wife and lived in the same house with her. Mr. Udayar called him to his house and told him, 'I know you have spent a lot of money on all this and I hear you are in debt. If you are hard up, you can draw whatever you want from me.' This was very unusual for Mr. Udayar. But what was even more exceptional was that his cousin accepted it gratefully. Kuppa, the temporary guardian of the Kanji Samiar, who was herself, successful as a fortune-teller, had now come back to Sirumudi. She was quite friendly with Meena and did menial jobs for her. When people joked with her about giving up a lucrative practice as a minor saint, she replied, 'At a time such as this, my place is here by the grave of my master where I received enlightenment, and among my own people'. Raju who had never been on friendly terms with Ramakrishnan was now reconciled to him and they could often be seen discussing the work on the farms belonging to Mr. Udayar. Mr. Udayar himself ceased to look at the village people from a lordly height and became kind and considerate to everyone.

XVI

The most important event in Sirumudi at this time was that Janaki gave birth to a male child. Mr. Udayar was very happy at becoming a grandfather, at listening again to the chatter and laughter of children in his house.

Janaki attributed her good luck to the blessings of Kanji Samiar, for it was he who had united her with her husband when they were estranged. She had kept a photograph of the Kanji Samiar along with other gods and goddesses in her puja room where she offered prayers every morning and evening. But after she became pregnant, she used to visit the grave of the Kanji Samiar once a week along with Meena.

Meena had become her constant companion. Knowing that she had nowhere to live, Janaki asked her to stay with her as a sort of companion-cum-housekeeper and Meena gladly agreed. During the evenings when Mr. Udayar and Govindarajan were out either in the fields or in the town, Meena used to talk to Janaki about her husband. Time had softened her memories and subsequent events shed a new light on many trivial happenings and darkened some of the more ugly ones. The sainthood of her husband had added a romantic tinge to her married life and she painted colourful pictures of their life together

and gave new interpretations to common occurrences. And Janaki was never tired of listening.

It was the custom in Mr. Udayar's family that the girl generally went to her mother's home for confinement and returned to her husband's house when the baby was about three months old. The departure as well as the return was usually an occasion of celebration and Mr. Udayar decided to celebrate the coming of his first grandson very lavishly, not only because of the occasion, but also because it would be the last big celebration in his ancestral home before it was submerged under water. Mr. Udayar himself was born in that house and he had not known any other home. His joys as well as his sufferings were all associated with it.

So, a number of friends and relations were invited. Janaki's parents were there, of course, with some of their near relatives. In addition, some of the engineers who were in charge of the dam construction were also invited and the entire village came for lunch that day. Though there was a rule that not more than twenty-five people should be fed at any function, no one bothered about it. Rice that had been stored in Mr. Udayar's godowns was lavishly used for the occasion. Sirumudi was having one final fling and the village people realised the importance of the occasion.

It was after the lunch when everyone was relaxing that Mr. Kuppuswamy made his announcement. 'I had made a vow,' he said, 'about two years ago that if I got a grandson, I would build a permanent structure for the Kanji Samiar. He passed away soon after that. But that does not absolve me from the vow I have made'. He hesitated a little and then went on. 'After considerable thought, I have come to the conclusion that the best way of fulfilling my vow will be to construct a temple to the memory of the Samiar. If the people of Sirumudi agree, I wish to construct it here over his grave.'

There was surprise astonishment among the assembled crowd. No one spoke for some time.

'Service of God should always be welcomed,' said the priest, Mr. Iyengar. 'You are a lucky man, sir, to be able to serve God in the manner you chose. It is not given to all of us to do so!'

'While I will pay for the cost of construction, the temple will belong to the people of the village', said Mr. Kuppuswamy. 'I do not want my name to be associated with it in any way.'

It was on everyone's lips to ask, 'But what is the use? Don't you know that this place is going to be under water, may be a year from now?' It was left to one of the engineers to ask that question.

‘Your intentions are very noble, Mr. Kuppuswamy,’ he said. ‘But as you know, when the dam is completed, this place will be under water. How can people worship at a submerged temple?’

‘I am aware of it,’ said Mr. Kuppuswamy. ‘We have temples on islands, by the rivers and on high mountains, in the hot deserts and on snowy peaks. The idea is that man should go to some trouble in order to reach his God. Therefore, why not under water! It will be the first temple of its kind in the world.’

‘But people just can’t worship there, because they can’t get there, except of course when the water level is so low that the temple may be accessible. That would mean that the rains have failed not only here but in the hills also and there would be famine conditions everywhere.

‘Exactly’, said Mr. Kuppuswamy. ‘Kanji Samiar was a product of famine and starvation. It was those who were starving who gave him their allegiance first. This dam that you are now building is supposed to eliminate famine. If this temple that I propose to construct is ever visible to the naked eye, it would mean that your efforts have also been unsuccessful. It would also be a reminder to the people that they have failed in their duty to God’.

‘I will put it this way,’ said the priest. ‘If we do not keep the temple constantly in our mind’s eye, then we will see it with our naked eye which will be a tragedy for all.

‘But isn’t the idea of building a temple to enable people to offer worship every day? From that point of view, your temple will not be of much help, will it?’

‘It is for others to undertake that task if they so desire,’ said Mr. Kuppuswamy cryptically.

To the people of Sirumudi who were listening to this conversation, this was hope. It meant that their village would not be permanently destroyed, that there would always be an unseen symbol under water. It would be a symbol of their faith and their continuance. There was animated talk among them and they eagerly supported the idea.

‘I want the temple to be small because my means are limited’, said Mr. Kuppuswamy. ‘But I want it sufficiently strong to withstand permanent submersion under water. You gentlemen who are experts in construction must help me,’ he said to the engineers.

It was a social occasion and it would not have been polite a carry on an argument too long. The engineers murmured politely and went on to discuss other topics.

XVII

Whenever any government officials toured in the Sirumudi area, and they had to do it more and more frequently, food was a problem. There were no restaurants or coffee clubs and they had to depend largely on the hospitality of the local people. That meant Mr. Udayar. A special officer of the revenue department, Mr. Shenoy, had been appointed as the person responsible for assessing the value of land and property in the three villages and for fixing compensation. With the help of the village officers, he surveyed each and every field, its extent, whether it had any irrigation facilities and farm houses and so on, and fixed suitable compensation taking all these factors into account. The villagers treated him with suspicion, gave little information and avoided him as much as possible. Most of them had made up their minds to appeal against his valuation to the judicial authority.

Mr. Shenoy frequently called on Mr. Udayar and stayed for lunch and often Mr. Udayar was in a reminiscent mood on such occasions.

'My family has lived here for seven generations, he said. 'My seventh grandfather destroyed the jungle, built the first house and raised the first crop. That was more than two hundred years ago. This has been our home ever since.'

'This house doesn't look so old', Mr. Shenoy suggested.

'I will show you the oldest part'. Mr. Udayar took him to the back part of the house. 'You see these walls; they are three feet thick, built to withstand the marauders of those days. Notice the carvings on these doors and pillars and beams. Five expert carpenters worked continuously for about ten years to complete them. That was the work of my third grandfather'.

'These are beautiful carvings, Mr. Udayar', Mr. Shenoy cried. 'You must do something to preserve them'.

'No, they will go with the rest of the village', Mr. Udayar murmured. 'They will not look appropriate anywhere else. They are part of a tradition and when that tradition dies, it is no use preserving the corpses. You like them because of their beauty and the craftsmanship; but I love them because they are a part of my family tradition'.

'But Mr. Udayar', Mr. Shenoy exclaimed, 'If you don't arrange for these to be removed, you won't get any compensation for them, only for the house. The government regulations have clearly laid down……'

'My dear sir!' shouted Mr. Udayar. 'Do you think I am showing these carvings in order to get a higher compensation? Do you think you can compensate me adequately for what I am losing, even if you paid me ten lakhs of rupees? Don't you realise that we people would rather live here with all our miseries than lead a better life anywhere else?'

‘I am sorry, Mr. Udayar’, the official apologised. ‘I have no roots like you have. I was born in one town where my father was working, educated in another to which my mother moved after my father’s death; I have been transferred frequently even in my short period of service. I was born in a rented house and I expect I shall die in another. But I realise that deep roots are difficult and painful to pull out. I am sorry.’

When they returned to the front of the house, the temple priest was waiting to see Mr. Udayar.

‘What Swami! Is the morning puja over?’ Mr. Udayar asked.

‘Yes sir,’ replied Mr. Iyengar and then hesitated. He obviously had something on his mind but did not like to discuss it in the presence of the officer.

‘Have you made any plans, Swami, as to what you are going to do afterwards?’ Mr. Shenoy asked him.

No one referred to the impending submersion of the village directly. Everyone carried on as if nothing would happen. But if they had to refer to it, it was referred to as ‘afterwards’.

‘God will have something in store for us, I suppose’, the priest sighed.

‘You must have some plans as to what you are going to do,’ Mr. Shenoy argued with perfect logic. He was educated, practical, efficient and consequently did not understand the people of the village. He could not understand the sentiment behind a few tumbledown houses and poor-yielding farms. If there was anything valuable, such as the old carvings in Mr. Udayar’s house, they can always be removed to another place.

‘Have you any relations to whom you can go? Can’t you look for another job somewhere else?’ he asked.

‘Where can I find a job as a village priest?’ Mr. Iyengar asked in return, ‘and I am not trained for anything else. I wouldn’t do anything else in any case,’ he mused. ‘I don’t get any compensation because the government does not pay compensation to God, and I have no property of my own. But I am not worried, because God will always find a way. Anyhow, I have other things to worry about.’

‘I know you and something on your mind when you came in at this time’, said Mr. Udayar. ‘What is it?’

‘Well sir, the Ekadasi festival is to be celebrated in a few weeks’ time’, said the priest very hesitantly. ‘Last year we did not whitewash the temple. But it is in a bad state. So, I wondered whether we could do it this year.’

Mr. Udayar was also the trustee of the temple and, since the income of the temple was negligible, maintained it out of his own funds.

'Yes, you should have it repaired and whitewashed', said Mr. Udayar. 'We may not have another occasion to do it'.

'But, Mr. Udayar, it is not worthwhile doing all that now, is it?' Mr. Shenoy asked. 'Well, I mean,' he hesitated.

'I know what you mean,' Mr. Udayar replied vehemently. 'Because the village is going to be submerged along with the temple, it is not necessary to whitewash it. If we are going to be consigned to the god of the waters, we must prepare ourselves for it with dignity.'

'You people really love this place,' muttered Mr. Shenoy.

'You are right, we do.'

XVIII

Raju had a cousin working in one of the factories in the town. This cousin was a friend of the foreman who had the confidence of the manager of the factory. On the strength of this connection, Raju had been promised a job and told to report after three months. Originally, Raju had planned to take the job in the factory and leave the family behind. But now, with the threat of the dam, he did not like to leave his family; in fact, he did not like to leave at all.

But the time set by the factory foreman was approaching and Raju was not sure what he ought to do. It meant a big change from one way of life to another; from working with mother earth to working on machines; working by the clock rather than by the sun. He had heard vaguely of discipline in factories, of agitations and strikes, of trade union rivalry. While the wages were attractive, he wanted no part of the rest. When he made up his mind to go, he knew he could always come back. Sirumudi would be there to receive him. But now that Sirumudi itself would be gone, he did not want to leave, not till the very end. He was also aware that if he did not report for his new job at the specified time, he might lose it. But to leave now was like desertion. It was a peculiar psychological dilemma.

Like most villagers when they were in the throes of making a major decision, he consulted the priest who was also an astrologer. He took his horoscope to him.

'Swami, I want you to have a look at my horoscope,' he said.

The priest had just finished the evening Puja and was waiting for someone to talk to. 'Why, what is the matter?' he asked, for he knew that people consulted their horoscopes for certain specific purposes such as weddings, starting a new business or on the birth of a child.

‘I don’t know; I am worried’, Raju replied.

‘Who isn’t worried these days?’ asked the priest as he made himself comfortable leaning against the stone pillar. ‘Everyone has his own worries, but on top of that we all have a common worry’.

‘You see, I have been offered a job in a factory in town,’ Raju tried to explain.

‘Yes, I know; people have been saying how lucky you are.’

‘Well, Swami, that is just the point.’ Raju was not good at explaining anything emotional or complicated. ‘I was going to take the job and leave the family here. But now, I don’t know.’

‘You will have to move in any case after some time’.

‘That is just it. If I thought that my home would always be here, I could go away with the feeling that I could come back whenever I liked. But if the whole place is going to disappear, I don’t like to leave. It will be like cutting myself away.’

‘But Sirumudi will disappear in any case; your staying will not stop the waters from engulfing it’.

‘I know, but to leave just now seems wrong’.

The priest brought the smoky oil lamp nearer, unfolded the horoscope and peered at it for a few minutes as Raju waited patiently. He then recited a few verses and began to explain the position of the various planets.

‘You see, Saturn and Mars are meeting in the fifth house. But Jupiter is not anywhere near. If he were, things would be different. As it is, it is the location of Venus that decides the whole issue.’

‘I don’t understand all this learned talk about the planets’, said Raju humbly. ‘I would like to know what is the best for the future.’

‘I am coming to that’, said the priest. ‘Without a proper study of the planets you cannot foretell the future. As the saint says….’ Here he recited two more verses and Raju was duly impressed.

‘The conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in the fifth house is not good. It means one has to be extremely careful about new ventures whether in business or about domestic problems. Yes, it is an extremely doubtful situation. I would not advise a big change in the existing set-up.’

‘Does it mean that it is better not to get this factory job?’ Raju enquired anxiously.

'No, I would not be quite so definite about it,' the priest replied. 'You see, the location of Venus is good, especially from a financial point of view. The present conjunction of planets will continue for another eight months. Then, there will be a definite change, a big change.'

'You are quite right Swami,' Raju said eagerly. 'The job is financially good; I would get a hundred rupees a month, but it would mean separation from my family. And that financial advantage refers to the compensation I am likely to get for my house.'

'I am only a mouthpiece of the stars', the priest said loftily. 'I merely repeat what I see in the horoscope'.

With these words, he folded the old and tattered manuscript and returned it to Raju. Then, he switched his role from that of an astrologer to that of a friend.

'If the salary is good, why don't you take it and take the family with you? You can't get another job like that very easily, and you have to move your family in any case within a year and without a job to support you.'

'It has been worrying me,' Raju admitted. 'How can I leave all this when it is going to be submerged so soon? When once I go, I may never see it again.'

The priest became philosophical. 'Yes, the end will come soon', he mused, 'for all of us. We don't have to look into our horoscopes to know that'.

When he returned home, his wife asked him, 'What did the priest say?'

'He says it is not a good time to start anything new', he replied.

'I told you so', she said. 'Let us stay. We will get some compensation from the government and may be we will be able to move to the other side of the dam along with the others. There will be plenty of work they say, when once the water starts flowing. At least we will be among the people we know; I don't want to go and live in a city with lavatories all around me.'

Raju's silence meant concurrence and understanding. And the education of his bright son, about which he was so keen, was further postponed, perhaps for ever.

XIX

Meanwhile, the dam was going up steadily. The waters of the Parvathi river had been diverted. Huge machines mixed rubble and cement which was carried by tall cranes in giant buckets and poured into holes for the foundation. Periodic explosions could be heard from the neighbouring hillocks where stones were being quarried. They were chiselled into neat

rectangular blocks by skilled hands and moved by lorries to the dam site. Other skilled hands placed them in position, filled the cracks with cement mortar to give them strength and permanence. Huge iron pipes had been brought in special tractors and these pipes were now fitted at the bottom of the dam. They would carry the water from the reservoir to the turbines in the power house on the other side. The sluice gates for letting the water out had already been fabricated and mammoth cranes had been specially installed to fix them in position. Then there was the spillway for the overflow water when the dam was full. This water as well as the water through the turbines would go along the normal course of the river. The work on all these had to be carried out strictly according to a pre-arranged schedule. Any delay in the completion of one would inevitably mean a delay in all the others.

The central portion of the dam which was built of stone and concrete and which housed the power house, the sluice gates and the spillway was eight hundred feet long. Its two flanks, which were each a mile long and which linked two small hillocks, were built of soil. Day and night huge earth movers, bull-dozers and lorries brought earth and dumped it to raise the level of the two flanks. The weights of these machines pressed the soil down so that it was firm and stable. Rollers too were employed. Day after day, millions of cubic feet of earth were deposited, for, unlike the cement portion of the dam, the base of the earthen dam was very wide in order to enable it to bear the pressure of water. Turf was laid on the side opposite to the reservoir so that any seepage of water through the porous soil would not lead to erosion. The turf would hold the soil firm, would not need any watering, and at the same time, would provide a cooling appearance in an area where everything else was rocky and barren.

When it was complete, there would be a road running right across the top of the dam so that it would also act as a bridge. Another bridge across the river was also being built lower down the dam.

As the different parts of the dam slowly took shape, they presented a weird appearance against a barren and empty sky-line. While machines were used for many purposes for which they were essential, most of the jobs which could be done by manual work were done by men and women so that it would provide employment to as many people as possible. As the dam went higher and higher, one could see human beings-men and women-crawling along its precarious sides with loads of cement, mortar and other articles on their heads. The dark bamboo scaffolding stood out against the white cement wall of the dam and the people moving about were like ants crawling along a white ant hill of peculiar shape. One could even pick out the supervisors because of their sola topees, directing operations, giving instructions and ensuring that the skilled workers in charge of construction were kept supplied with the materials they needed.

XX

In the past, there had been very little contact between the workers at the dam site and the people of Sirumudi. The anger and frustration felt by the village people over the building of the dam was transferred, at least in part, to the people who were building it. Consequently, they avoided making friends with them and called them nomads who went from one job to another, and felt slightly superior. This feeling of superiority compensated for the fact that the dam workers were earning good wages, while they themselves were unemployed.

The workers on the other hand were nomads. Many of them moved from one dam to another. They had no settled homes, no neighbours with whom they were friendly and whose opinion they valued and respected. They were all strangers accidentally thrown together for a period. To them, periods of hard work and good earning were interspersed by weeks of unemployment when they did not know where their next meal was coming from or where they were going to sleep for the night. As such, they lived only in the present, not knowing and not caring what the future might bring. When they had money, they spent it without a care and when they had not, they starved happily. They were not influenced or bound by the conventions and values of a village like Sirumudi. They laughed at the village people for their habits of thrift, for their inhibitions and social restrictions which had grown over many generations, just as the village people looked down on them for their lack of moral virtues.

But as time went on, and as some young men from Sirumudi went to work at the dam site and made friends with the others, there was greater contact between them. During the agitation and the strike, of which the Big Uncle was at least the nominal leader, some of these ripened into friendships. The skilled workers living at the dam site with their families had nowhere to worship even on festival days and they were invited to Sirumudi. That was how the workers at the dam site heard about the Kanji Samiar. And when they also heard that someone was going to spend money building a temple which would be immediately submerged, they were duly impressed. They also started visiting the grave of the Kanji Samiar. On Sundays and other holidays, when there was no work at the dam, it was quite usual for the workers to visit Sirumudi, and offer worship not only at the temple but also at the grave.

To the people of Sirumudi, every occasion was an opportunity for a celebration or an observance, for getting together among themselves because, they said, they would never have another opportunity. The frequent visits by the workers gave them further encouragement to do so.

It was in this atmosphere of unity and friendship that they decided to observe the second death anniversary of the Kanji Samiar. The first one had passed almost unnoticed by anyone except Meena. But during the year, however, there had been a gradual change in

the attitude of people towards their saint. The announcement by Mr. Kuppuswamy that he was going to construct a shrine and the visit of the dam workers to the grave revived interest in him. But more than all this, there was the unconscious desire for perpetuating their name. Now that Sirumudi would be no more, the Kanji Samiar became the focal point of their interest. His name would live even if Sirumudi were no more. In his fame, they would have continuity instead of oblivion of their past. His fame would attract them to come together again and remember their lost home with nostalgia. It was not that the ignorant and largely illiterate people of Sirumudi thought of these things consciously and planned accordingly. It was their unconscious longing to preserve their past, to retain a symbol that was responsible for their new interest in their saint.

It was therefore not surprising that it was decided to observe the anniversary. It was also the day when Mr. Kuppuswamy proposed the inauguration of the construction of the shrine. It was decided to combine the two functions and observe them on a grand scale.

The day before the anniversary, a temporary structure of coconut mats was put up round the platform to provide shade. On the morning of the great day, Kuppa cleaned the floor and the surroundings. Mr. Udayar's servants brought plantain trees with fruits hanging from them and they were tied in the form of arches at the entrance to the platform. It was also decorated with flowers and long strings of mango leaves. Raju and Ramakrishnan were organizing and supervising everything while Mr. Udayar himself stood at the entrance adding dignity to the occasion. The womenfolk had gravitated to one corner, the older ones serious and the young ones giggling. By about eleven a.m. almost everyone in the village had assembled.

The priest came and recited some verses, camphor was lit and flowers and fruits and coconuts were offered first. Then the offering of the gruel began. Mr. Kuppuswamy, as the most important guest, was asked to commence the offering. He was followed by Mr. Udayar, and then the rest of the people offered one by one.

As the offering of the gruel went on, many workers and even some supervisors from the dam site arrived. Not knowing the local custom, they had not brought any gruel. But Mr. Udayar, with great presence of mind and true Udayar hospitality, ordered that some of the gruel that had been kept ready for just such an eventuality should be distributed to them so that they too could participate in the worship according to custom and without in any way feeling out of things. Needless to say, the visitors were not only grateful but truly impressed by the solemn ceremony.

After the gruel offering was over, the inauguration for the building of the shrine commenced. A small pit was dug in the ground very near the grave. Five ladies came in procession with five pots of water and the usual paraphernalia of flowers and fruits and scented sticks. Mr. Kuppuswamy, as the person responsible for the construction, placed in the pit a piece of gold and a piece of silver for prosperity and nine kinds of grain for fertility.

The ladies poured water and the pit was covered with soil and marked with a stone. That would be the spot where the temple would be constructed. They were now committed to it.

After the ceremonies were over, everyone was given lunch at Mr. Udayar's house. There was a discussion on how to construct the temple quickly and how it should be built in order that it might not be ravaged by its permanent submersion. One of the stone masons from the dam came to Mr. Kuppuswamy and offered his services.

'Sir, I came from a family of stone workers who used to build great temples in the past,' he said. 'I did not think I was going to get an opportunity to build another temple. I have not the skill of my ancestors, but I will build it for you if you give me a chance.'

'I was worried about it', said Mr. Kuppuswamy, 'but I need not have been. I should have known that God's work would not be held up'.

'And I am glad of this opportunity of a life-time,' the mason said. 'It is more rewarding than chiselling boulders into rectangular blocks day after day. I only hope I will not be a disgrace to my noble ancestors'.

Immediately they got down to planning the details of building.

XXI

Meanwhile, the news of the proposed construction of a shrine for the Kanji Samiar was creating excitement in many quarters. The engineers at the dam site, as soon as they heard about it at Mr. Udayar's house, referred the matter to the government. A committee of senior civil servants who were asked by the minister to examine the matter came to the conclusion that the construction of the temple was best ignored. The engineers were advised accordingly.

On the other hand, the news appealed to the imagination of people who heard about it. It was so novel, so unusual, that people were quite excited about it. Even those who were not religious admired the sincere and abiding faith of a people who wanted to commemorate the memory of their saint by an under-water temple, and were quite willing to abandon it when the time came. Memories of the Kanji Samiar came to life again and interest in his teachings was revived. The newspapers soon got hold of the news it became the talk of people in the towns. And the symbolism behind it, that if the temple was ever visible to the naked eye, it would mean famine, was something that appealed even to cynical intellectuals. Letters in the newspapers applauded the idea, commended the people of Sirumudi for their sacrifice and demanded that the dam should be named after Sirumudi.

When a question was asked in the legislature as to whether the government was aware of the public demand, the minister made the following statement:

'The attention of the Government has been drawn to the recent demand in the press that the new dam across the Parvathi river should be named after one of the villages which would be submerged in the reservoir. The Government have carefully considered various aspects of the situation and have come to the conclusion that the dam and the reservoir should be named "Sirumudi Sagar."

There was a mild applause at the announcement and Mr. Kandaswamy continued:

'There has also been a request from the workers at the dam site that a memorial should be raised to the Kanji Samiar, a local saint at whose grave many of the workers have been in the habit of offering worship. The Hon. Members are also aware that the people of Sirumudi are constructing such a memorial in the village which will soon be under water. The workers have represented that in their hard work during the last few years, they have been spiritually sustained by their visits to Sirumudi and as such a visible memorial would be in the fitness of things. As a secular democratic republic, it is not the policy of the Government to encourage any particular form of religion. However, a popular demand such as this cannot be totally ignored. The Government have therefore given permission to the workers and engineers on the spot to construct such a memorial on one of the hillocks abutting the dam. The cost of the construction will be borne by the people concerned. It will be a replica of one that is to be submerged, but the Government have agreed to lay the road as well as a park round the memorial which will be of benefit to the general public, as the location of the memorial commands a beautiful view of the dam, the reservoir, and the surrounding areas. The Government hopes that all controversies over this problem will now cease and the people of the area will devote their energies to the more constructive tasks that lie ahead of them.'

The statement was on the whole well received and the members praised the minister's diplomacy in pacifying the people of the area.

For the people on the spot, it was impossible not to be affected by all this. Stories about the Kanji Samiar began to spread among people, about his teachings, about his powers to grant favours and so on. Each took what suited him, according to his conception and according to his needs. Quite a few of the engineers were impressed and unofficially offered to look at the plans and ensure that the structure was sufficiently strong. Many of them visited the grave regularly and offered gruel. Some stone masons left their jobs at the dam to work on the construction of the temple and the engineers did not like to stop them.

There was now a sort of competition. It was essential that the temple should be completed before the dam. If once the reservoir was formed it would not be possible to complete it. The stone masons saw to it that the progress on the temple was maintained. Every day they would compare progress and if they were falling behind, a few more would leave the dam and came to work at the temple.

It was a simple structure of one room about fifteen feet square surmounted by a tower in the classical South Indian tradition. Throughout the day, the stone workers were busy chiselling exquisite carvings of various gods and goddesses on granite rocks which would adorn the various sides of the tower. The foundations were dug deep in order to ensure strength and stability. When cement was not obtainable, it appeared mysteriously from somewhere and when Mr. Kuppuswamy or Mr. Udayar questioned the workers about where they got it from, there were vague replies and polite evasions. But people knew that the godowns at the site were piled high with cement and if a few bags were missing no one would be the wiser. The foundations were soon laid in concrete and the workers boasted: 'This will last at least as long as the dam lasts'.

The people of Sirumudi watched the coming up of their temple with fascination. Every day, many of them would gather at the grave of their Samiar and watch the progress of the work, discussing it among them, and occasionally lend a hand with some of the manual jobs.

The construction of this temple marked the fulfilment of their hopes. Somehow, it seemed to mark the culminating point of all their endeavours during the last few years. The years of drought, the rise of the Kanji Samiar, the construction of the dam and the efforts of the Big Uncle to stop it, all these were but steps that led to this point where they would have an underwater temple for their saint. True, they would not be able to see it when once the construction was over and they would not be able to offer worship at the temple, but it would be there as an invisible reminder of the spirit of Sirumudi and the spirit would live on even after the body had disappeared under the waters of the Parvathi river.

They had now got used to the idea of vacating Sirumudi. The anxiety and the sorrow and the anger of the early days had given way to reluctant acceptance of an inevitable fact and now, that had again given place to cautious optimism. There was a sneaking pride that they were sacrificing their hearths and homes so that others might benefit, so that the nation might benefit. They had the half hearted satisfaction that perhaps they were the instruments of God's will.

As the day of compensation drew near, there were even hopes of a better life. There were now frequent discussions as to the quantum of money each was likely to get and how they were going to use it. Many of them were also applying for grant of new lands that would be brought under cultivation as a result of the dam. Mr. Udayar had arranged that his lawyer in the town would help anyone in Sirumudi to get a better compensation through a court of law and also to acquire new lands. No one would have to pay any fees for the lawyer. 'This is the last thing I can do for the people of Sirumudi', he said. 'To ensure that they get full value for whatever they give up.' And people said, 'We knew we could always depend on him to help us in times of need. But who will help us when we are all dispersed?' And they felt sorry that their life in Sirumudi was coming to an end.

But now they had not much time to ponder over the past. There were many things to be seen to and many decisions to be made. Where were they going to live? What were they going to do? Would they be able to buy land from the compensation money? If not, from whom could they borrow? They had to decide what things they were going to take with them on the day of final departure; where were they going to house their cattle? The day of departure was still a long way off, but these people, with ability to survive any catastrophe, were already planning their future. While looking back nostalgically on the temple that was going up, they were nevertheless beginning to look forward.

XXII

The minister's statement in the legislature was the green light for the workers and the engineers to go ahead with the construction of the 'duplicate' temple as the local people called it. The chief engineer in charge of the dam suggested the idea to the minister as a fitting culmination of good work and as a concession to local sentiment. He said the workers too would feel happy if their work were dedicated to something in addition to purely materialistic objectives.

'If there is a petition from the workers, the Government will give you permission,' said the minister. That was easily arranged.

The work on the new temple proceeded very fast indeed and in spite of the minister's statement that no government expenditure would be incurred, the facilities at the disposal of the authorities were made available for the construction of the temple so that it would proceed rapidly. A collection was made among the workers and engineers towards the cost.

Now the final touches were going on towards the completion of the dam itself. A decorative arch with the name 'Sirumudi Sagar' in bold letters was built at the entrance. Lawns were being laid and fountains being installed in the shadow of the dam. All the rubbish, stones and sand that had accumulated during the construction were being cleared. A park was laid around the new temple and a vantage point from where the dam and the reservoir could be viewed and photographed to advantage had also been built. Electric lights were fitted along the road at the top of the dam and the sluice gates were tested. Everything was fast nearing completion for the inauguration.

If the construction of the underwater temple gave satisfaction to the people of Sirumudi, the naming of the reservoir after their village and the building of replica of their temple on a hillock for their saint was an overwhelming victory. They were elated and told themselves and each other that wherever they might be in the future, they would always meet at the temple of the Kanji Samiar for his death anniversary. It would be the rallying point to talk about the past, about the good old times they used to have in their village. The feuds and petty quarrels they had had for generations would be forgotten, but the festivals

and the communal celebrations, the humorous incidents and, above all, the advent of the Kanji Samiar and its aftermath, their own historic struggle against the government and the final glory whereby the name of their village would continue forever—all these would be told and retold every time they met on the hillock temple once a year, to offer their gruel and to remind themselves of the greatness of their saint. They would tell of these happenings to their children and their children's children and they too would come to this temple on the hill and remember their past home. They would remember too of that other temple under the water which they could not see, but which was an eternal reminder of their faith…

But meanwhile, they had to attend to a lot of things. A date had been set by the government before which everyone had to vacate the three villages. People were packing their meagre belongings into small bundles of cloth; only a few of them owned rusty tin trunks which they had bought in times of affluence during trips to places of pilgrimage. The few pots and pans, and one or two bits of furniture from the more wealthy farmers' homes were loaded on to their bullock carts. People would tell each other, 'We will see you before we go', and when they went to see them, that house would be empty. They would look at the empty and deserted home, remember the many associations, and realise with a poignant shock that soon all this would be under water, never to be seen again. And they would be gripped by sadness.

Many people had been able to make satisfactory arrangements for their future. Mr. Iyengar, the priest, was able to secure the job as priest at the new temple of the Kanji Samiar on the hill, thanks to the influence of Mr. Udayar. He would see to it that the people of Sirumudi would always got a welcome there and would be a link between all of them. Meena and Kuppa would also be at the temple, Meena as the earthly link with the saint, and Kuppa to do the odd jobs. Raju, after a lot a hesitation, was still able to secure his job in a factory in town. Mr. Udayar of course would be living in his house in the town with his son and daughter-in-law. Ramakrishnan would go along with Mr. Udayar to the town where a job was said to be waiting for him. Mr. Udayar had not told him anything about it, but it was rumoured that he might act as a maistry in the new workshop that Mr. Udayar was interested in. Others were going to their friends and relations in the first instance, until more permanent arrangements could be made. Yes, many had been able to make satisfactory arrangements, but many others went without knowing where, without knowing what, they were going to do. Perhaps, something would turn up for them also.

As dusk fell over Sirumudi and as the last group of people were leaving a miserable pile of deserted buildings behind them, only one man wandered round the empty alleys, crying and shouting.

'It is getting dark', he cried. 'Why don't you light your lamps?' 'Where is everybody?'

It was the Big Uncle; his life had caught up with him. Years of careless living, loss of money and the final disappointment and shame, had suddenly made him an old man. His mind was also beginning to wander. But Mr. Udayar had a deep sense of family fidelity and would not allow any cousin of his to suffer want. He had already sent the Big Uncle's wife to live in one of his farms on the other side of the dam and he had left Govindarajan to persuade the Big Uncle to follow.

'Come on, uncle,' said Govindarajan. 'Everyone is leaving. We have to go now.'

The Big Uncle looked up at the temple. 'Even the house of God is in darkness. That rogue of a priest has gone and left us. Let us light a lamp at least in the temple'.

'There is no oil'.

'Find some oil then; in all these empty houses, there must be some somewhere.'

'All right', said Govindarajan with resignation and sent one of their servants to find some.

'Where is your father?' shouted the Big Uncle. 'Hobnobbing with the ministers I suppose; giving tea parties to men who have destroyed our homes.'

Oil was brought and the lamp in the temple was lit. The Big Uncle was not a religious man, but he fell at the feet of the idol. 'Help us Oh God,' he cried. 'Help us in this time of our sorrow! Help us to find new homes, new friends and a new faith.'

The few village people, who were still left, the servants of Mr. Udayar, even Govindarajan, were deeply moved. They all prostrated themselves before the idol and then silently walked away with the lamp still burning.

'The greatest tragedy, my boy', said the Big Uncle. For a moment, his mind seemed crystal clear. 'The greatest tragedy is not defeat, but failure to have the courage of your convictions. I was determined either to save Sirumudi or to drown myself in the flood waters. Now that the time has come, I have no courage.'

'You have the courage Uncle, but we won't let you,' said Govindarajan.

'No, no,' the Big Uncle cried. 'If I had the courage I would find a way. The flesh is weak, very weak.'

As they all moved out of the village, darkness fell on Sirumudi for ever.

XXIII

Everything was now ready. The day for the official opening of the dam had been fixed. The ceremony would be performed by the minister for public works, Shri Kandaswamy. The main part of the ceremony would consist of pressing a button which would let the water from the reservoir into the canals for irrigation. The sluice gates were closed and the reservoir was fast filling up. The local people wondered how such a small stream could fill such a huge reservoir before the inauguration date. But it was surprising how fast it was filling up. Slowly, the tree tops, small mounds of earth, then the villages, disappeared one by one. The top of the new temple in honour of the Kanji Samiar was the last to disappear. There was now a large expanse of water and the engineers looked at it with satisfaction.

Everything presented a clean and fresh appearance. Arches were erected along the roadways with banana trees and coconut leaves. Freshly painted placards carried the slogans: 'Long Live the Minister', 'Welcome to Our Beloved Kandaswamy', and so on. This was very different from the welcome he got when he came to lay the foundation stone. One arch said, 'Sirumudi is Eternal' and another, 'Long Live Kanji Samiar.' A special structure of bamboos and coconut mats was erected for the holding of the inaugural function. In view of the large crowd of workers and villagers expected to attend the function, loud-speakers were installed outside the enclosure also so that people could listen to all the speeches. The engineers were busy making the arrangements, issuing invitations, preparing reports and speeches and ensuring the smooth functioning of the various parts of the dam all of which would be on show.

On the inaugural day, thousands of people had gathered outside the special enclosure. They were the workers who had toiled for months in order that the dam might be completed on time. They now had the satisfaction of having completed their task. Many of them would move on after it was over, perhaps to other dam sites, perhaps to some town, in search of work. But whatever the future held, this was a moment of fulfilment, of satisfaction and they could look back on it with the feeling of a job well done. There were peasants from the neighbouring villages, eagerly awaiting the release of water that would make their parched lands fertile. To them, the dam meant a new life, a better life, and they were happy to be present on this occasion. Then there were the people who had lost their homes; they too hoped to have a better life since prosperity for one meant prosperity for all.

Half an hour before the arrival of the minister, cars began to roll in from the town bringing the important people who had been invited for the occasion. The junior engineers showed them to their seats, gave them an illustrated brochure giving photographs as well as other details about the construction of the dam. Soon the enclosure was full and additional chairs which had been kept in reserve for just such a contingency were brought in. At the appointed time, the minister arrived and was received by the chief engineer who conducted him to the specially constructed platform and the ceremony began with a prayer song by one of the famous film actresses who had been invited for the occasion.

The chief engineer garlanded the minister and welcomed everyone present. He paid glowing tributes to the ability and the sense of dedication of Mr. Kandaswamy, but for whose untiring efforts this dam might not have been built at all. The executive engineer read a report on the details of construction and the special features of the dam and requested the minister to inaugurate it. The minister, in a rather long-winded speech, detailed the various difficulties he had to overcome before this important scheme could be brought to fruition. He praised the engineers and workers and called on the agriculturists to do everything possible to increase production and ended by saying how they were now passing through a critical phase in India's development when unity and hard work were the necessary ingredients to progress. He concluded, 'Water is God's gift to mankind. Whether it is conserved, controlled and directed for prosperity and plenty or whether it is allowed to lay waste our lands, destroy our homes and flow into the sea, depends on ourselves. Only hard work and sacrifice will enable us to make use of this gift and benefit from it. You have offered both in full measure. In the past the Parvathi river has been your protector as well as your destroyer. From now on, it will be a benevolent friend ministering to your needs. I, therefore, dedicate this gift of God to you, the peasants and farmers of this country.'

With these words he pressed the button on the platform and an illuminated map of the dam came into view of the audience. The same button operated the sluice gates which opened and the water began to flow through the canals.

As thousands of people from lands parched and dry for a thousand years saw the swirling and foamy waters flow along the canals and on to their fields, they threw flowers into the water, broke coconuts and shouted with one voice, 'Long Live Kandaswamy'.

Their hearts were full and their eyes were moist as they dreamed of the wealth of their soil and how they could now utilize it. The canals were like the arteries and the water they carried was their life-blood of which they have been starved all these years.

Here was water to rejuvenate the earth; and to give life to barren lands. It would end their troubles and their hunger; it would give their land back to them again; it would give them work. Already they could feel the sweat of their brown bodies mingle with the softness of their soil as they ploughed and planted and harvested their crops in their little plots. Here was hope!

After the function was over, the minister went on a tour of the dam and after inspecting various installations, went up to the temple on the hill to offer his prayers. The people, particularly the people of Sirumudi, had all assembled there. At the entrance to the temple, Mr. Kandaswamy was received by Mr. Udayar, who had been nominated as the managing trustee.

'You see Mr. Udayar, I have also ensured that your saint should not be neglected,' the minister said in a self-satisfied fashion. 'All great men should be honoured; from whatever

walk of life they may come. After all, that is the meaning of democracy.' He was now addressing everyone present rather than talking to Mr. Udayar, as if he were addressing a public meeting. 'It is a pity that I had not the pleasure of meeting him during his life time.'

'As a matter of fact you have seen him sir', this was Venki who had thrust himself forward. 'On the day you visited Sirumudi to inspect the gruel centre there about four years ago; he was one of the people who was standing in the queue, waiting to receive his gruel.'

'Ah, but that was before he became well known,' said the minister.

'He was great even then, but we poor mortals didn't recognise him', said Venki.

As he came out of the temple after prayer and greeted the great mass of people outside with a smile and folded hands, a shout went up, 'Long Live the Minister.'

But there was an even bigger cry.

Long Live Sirumudi!

It was immediately followed by,

Kanji Samiar Is Immortal!

The minister got into his car and drove away.
