Modern Sri Lankan Stories

MODERN SRI LANKAN STORIES

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Modern Sri Lankan Stories

AN ANTHOLOGY

Edited with an introduction by
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Godfrey Gunatillake's 'The Garden' from *Sankha* I (1958) ed. Donald Abeysinghe ; Punyakante Wijenaike's 'The Third Woman' and 'The River' from *The Third Woman* (Colombo, 1963) ; Alagu Subramaniam's 'Professional Mourners' from *The Big Girl* (Mount Lavinia, Sri Lanka, 1964) ; Suvimalee Karunaratne's 'The Golden Oriole' and 'Village by the Sea' from *Bili Pooja* (Colombo : Hansa, 1973) : S.I. Francis' 'Two Rings to Start' from *New Ceylon Writing* (1973) ed. Yasmine Gooneratne ; Rosalind Mendis' 'My Son Lia' and 'The Man' from *My Son Lia and other stories* (Colombo, 1975) ; James Goonewardene's 'The Doughty Men of Purantota' from *The Awakening of Doctor Kirthi and other stories* (Colombo : Lake House Investments, 1976) ; Sita Kulatunga's 'The High Chair' from *Navasilu* II (1977) ed. Ashley Halpè ; Tilak Gunawardena's 'For Love or Money' from *New Ceylon Writing* (1979) ed. Yasmine Gooneratne ; Chitra Fernando's 'Action and Reaction' from *Three Women* (Colombo: Lake House Investments, 1983) ; and J.S Tissanayagam's 'Misunderstanding' from *Kaduwa* I (1983) ed. Quadri Ismail.

Introduction

Sri Lankan writers of fiction in English have, I dare say, excelled as authors of short stories rather than as novelists. The inability to carry through successfully at the profoundest level a full-length novel implies a limitation of their creative powers, yet I would not like to underrate the short story in English. It has established itself in modern times as a genre important in itself.

The short story is, to be sure, less demanding and also less daunting to the writer than the novel, but it requires skills and gifts peculiar to the form. It involves a greater selectiveness and concentration, yet it can be rich and significant. The writer needs greater powers of invention, capable of creating new settings and fresh characters for each story. The short story seems specially suited to, and an expression of, the hectic pace of modern life. Sri Lanka too having entered it, to put it simply and crudely, may be we have less time for novels than we had a few decades back, though there is a category of readers enamoured of blockbusters, historical or otherwise.

As any anthologist would like to do, I have selected what seems to me the best of our short fiction and I find that all the stories I chose, were in fact written after 1956. This is significant. As in many countries, the colonial period in Sri Lanka was, despite fitful flashes, generally an era of mean achievement as far as original writing in English was concerned ; it did produce the novel *The Village in the Jungle* (1913), still the finest imaginative work about the island, but that was by an Englishman, Leonard Woolf, just as the best creative work in English in the 19th century, *Forest Life in Ceylon* (1854), was by another Englishman, William Knighton. The presence of the colonial masters had a suffocating effect on the creative energies of the local inhabitants and it was only after Independence (1948) that a body of literature in English by Sri Lankans began to emerge. Actually, this had to wait till

after 1956. Sri Lanka was granted independence by Britain mainly as a consequence of the freedom struggle in India. Because this Independence was won more easily—in fact, too easily, the Sri Lankans did not forge as strong a national consciousness as the Indians. In fact, neither country has been fully successful in this regard, if we are to judge by the separatist tendencies in both countries at the present time, but Sri Lanka has been much the less successful of the two, especially given the comparative smallness of scale of its problems though these are no less acute than India's. Frantz Fanon argues that violence is necessary in the process of decolonization to unify and truly liberate the native people,[1] but I do not wish to endorse this stand, mindful of the fact that violence can be in itself an evil and what it costs in human and other terms. Even after Independence, the ruling and social elites in Sri Lanka consisted of "brown sahibs". But it did not take long for nationalist currents to surface, however extremist they might have been, and 1956 is, in several ways, a watershed in Sri Lankan history. Symbolically speaking, a national dress replaced the top hat and coat-tails, and English was displaced from its pre-eminent position as the official language and the medium of instruction in schools and universities. English had to be relegated to the status of a second language, sooner or later, despite the regrets of the English-educated classes, but it was not properly treated as such, it was neglected for two decades and even reviled. Paradoxically, it was in this context that literature in English by Sri Lankans came into prominence. Faced with the loss of, or at least a significant dimunition of, their privileges, the English-educated made an assertion of their worth *via* imaginative literature. Their response to the changes of 1956 was negative rather positive, yet it led to fruitful results in the field of creative writing.

These stories, selected primarily on artistic grounds – quality, the variety and range of literary modes, were also chosen so as to span the last three decades of Sri Lankan history, illustrating different facets of our contemporary experience and the changes undergone by our society. All the writers portray situations that prevailed at the time of writing. None of the stories have been included merely to titillate the exotic palate of the reader ; all work at levels of seriousness and, at the same time, will be found

enjoyable by readers here and abroad. Like all good art, these stories finally transcend their local situation and local significance.

Many of the stories deal with rural experience, while all the writers are urban and English-educated, whatever their early connections with the village. Characteristically, our writers in English are conscious that they are alienated from the mass of the people and local traditions by virtue of their own English affiliations. Contemplating the countryside or rural characters is, in a way, an attempt to capture truly national, authentically Sri Lankan, experiences and find roots in the soil. The writers, when successful, are able to overcome the barriers that separate them from their subject and, by means of their imagination, enter into rural experiences and rural milieux. All the chosen stories avoid the common tendency to romanticise the village. Some stories are set in the hill country, others in the low country or the South, one in Jaffna, the North. A few are placed in urban or urbanised settings.

* * * * *

Godfrey Gunatillake read English at the University of Ceylon and then joined the Ceylon Civil Service in which he held several important positions. He is now Director of the Marga Institute for Development Studies. His story 'The Garden' was written during the period in which his major interest was literature. It depicts sensitively a marital relationship in which a surface contentment masks the essential separateness of the partners. Tissa and Prema are cousins and significantly differ in age. Their good-nature and affection for each other have not been able to surmount these barriers of an arranged marriage and deepen into real love. The want of genuine togetherness nags Tissa at the back of his mind and he is forced into unmistakable recognition of it when he is in danger of being bitten by a venomous cobra in the garden. The writer's prose is sinewy and often poetic. The poetry resides not only in continuous local touches but more importantly in the overall symbolism of the Garden of Eden. The serpent, metaphorically and literally, enters Tissa's 'paradise'.

Among our writers, Punyakante Wijenaike enjoys the greatest reputation, nationally and internationally. In *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, the most prestigious journal in its field,

in 1977, Alastair Niven wrote: "In Punyakante Wijenaike Sri Lanka possesses one of the most under-estimated fiction writers currently at work in the English language . . . Mrs. Wijenaike goes on writing, compelled by an imagination of astonishing range. Her work rewards the effort discovery."[2] She has written one novel, *The Waiting Earth* (1966), one novella, *Giraya* (1971), and a collection of short stories, *The Rebel* (1979). But my own favourite and, in my opinion, still her finest work is her first collection of stories, *The Third Woman* (1963), from which I have selected two for this anthology. Mrs. Wijenaike does not appear to be deeply versed in literature or literary criticism, but she is a natural original writer. 'The Third Woman' is a powerfully suggestive story in the first-person-narrator convention. She deals with a theme of unmotivated evil; what the narrator regards as his everlasting love for his mistress is shown up by the writer's irony (operating beyond the narrator's mind) as infatuation. 'The River' acquires the dimension of a parable or allegory – on defeat that follows unreasoning resistance to change.

Alagu Subramaniam's claim to distinction is that he is a Tamil who has written fiction of merit in English about the Jaffna community, the North. He belongs to the older generations of Tamils who were not as conscious of race as the younger members (he was born in 1915 and died in 1971) and his approximately fifteen years' experience of England before he returned to Sri Lanka in 1948 contributed to his maturation, making him critical of his community yet humane a understanding. He wrote a novel *Mr. Moon* which was not published, and a volume, *Closing Time and Other Stories* (1971), but his best work is his first collection of stories, *The Big Girl* (1964), from which I have chosen 'Professional Mourners'. Here the writer contemplates the custom in Jaffna whereby the low-caste are compelled to serve as professional mourners at the funerals of high-caste. Subramaniam points up the inhumanity of the caste system and the pretence inhering in this practice.

Suvimalee Karunaratne is the author of *Bili Pooja* (*Human Sacrifice* 1973), a collection of short stories, and contributes fiction regularly to reputed local journals. 'The Golden Oriole' was chosen by Yasmine Gooneratne's journal, *New Ceylon Writing*, as the best Sri Lankan story of 1973. With an irony that is humorous

as well as sympathetic, Mrs. Karunaratne depicts the burgeoning of love in a spinster, stimulating her to step out of her accustomed character as a staid and religious teacher, and the writer's sympathy becomes dominant as she presents the pathetic end of this love. The symbolism of the golden oriole and the two brown *mynahs* (at the end of the story), interpret it as you will adds interest to the story. Mrs. Karunaratne's other story, 'Village by the Sea', is an unpretentious, down-to-earth story of adulterous desire which is seen as an aspect of the human condition.

S.I. Francis is a writer of talent who contributes to reputed local journals; he won the *New Ceylon Writing* prize for the best Sri Lankan story of 1979. 'Two Rings to Start' is a very brief but lively and interesting story that plays off traditional social attitudes against present-day realities and compromises.

Rosalind Mendis is the author *The Tragedy of a Mystery* (1928) and *Nandhimitta* (1952), and her short stories were written fairly recently and published in book form, *My Son Lia and other short stories*, in 1975. The title story, her best, captures the country-side in its totality as it impinges on urban life, with the more sensitive villagers aware of class division and class difference within and outside their society. When Lia is excited by momentary contact with the daughter of the richest man in that part of the country, he is keenly conscious of the social chasm between them and says of her : "She had the sort of patronizing kindness that thinks we are part and parcel of their surroundings, existing for their pleasure." He is a village chaftsman in love with his vocation and in the conflict between love of art and human love, it is the former that proves to be the stranger of the two. The story becomes markedly symbolic when "the pain and frustrations of his (Lia's) love found expression in the work of art he had fashioned" in the rich man's garden. The writer emphasizes the spirit of the villagers—that sturdy independence which has been traditionally associated with them. When Lia decides to leave the village at the end of the story, he is, in effect, resisting a social system that tries to oppress and humiliate the rural folk. 'The Man' celebrates that precious aspect of life, a happy marital relationship, and creates an interesting story out of perfectly ordinary situations : the momentary pains and misunderstandings amidst a steady contentment, leading to a climax, the anxieties, relief and happiness

attending the birth of the first child of the couple.

Rosalind Mendis is an unpretentious writer with a prose style that is appealing in its simplicity and directness, free of the clichés that mark much local writing. Her stories possess a fine naturalness as the flow of the experience seems to shape the form. Behind it is the writer's own humane and broad outlook on life; it has enabled her to deal in a balanced way with experiences that are important.

James Goonewardene has been accused of projecting "romantic village idylls" in his novels *A Quiet Place* (1968) and *Call of the Kirala* (1971),[3] but his collection of stories, *The Awakening of Doctor Kirthi* (1976), is marked by disillusionment. His title story meets the criticism levelled at Sri Lankan writers in English : "there is no sustained exploration of the world these writers know best -- the world of the English-educated, English-speaking class—from the inside."[4] 'The Doughty Men of Purantota', however, is more successful artistically. The story focuses mainly on Girigoris, an impotnet hunchback whose wife had eloped with a toddy tapper from a neighbouring village and who is chief lay custodian of the temple at the time of the action. He "had waited in silence all these years nursing his numerous grievances, building up his hate, waiting for the time when he would become master of the village." The time comes when a bridge is to be built on the doorstep of the village. The story becomes so intense as to intimate allegorical suggestions of how men rise to become ruthless dictators and others become their mildness slaves. Evil takes possession of the village and the word "doughty" in the title takes an ironic import. Yet there are two villagers different from the rest in important ways.

Davith Singho drifts between the village and the city, depending on the availability of work, and the villagers regard him as a loafer. But during the crisis at the end, he is shown in a fresh light, Andoris Rala, the most sensible of the villagers, says: ". . . he is wiser than us all. He has learned the art of being apart from the foolishness of other people. When he can he attempts to correct it. At other times he only laughs at it." This kind of partial commitment is one way of coping with the problems of the village, but the author places more weight on the attitudes and decisions

of Andoris Rala himself. He is totally disheartened by present trends in the village and, for the first time in James Goonewardene's fiction, a sensible villager rejects the village as Abhaya in *A Quite Place* and Vijaya in *Call of the Kirala* rejected the city.

Sita Kulatunga writes in both English and Sinhala. 'The High Chair' won the first prize in the short story competition conducted in 1977 by the English Association of Shri Lanka. It is about the daughter of the village laundress who is able to break through the barriers of the caste system to enter the university. This makes her all the more conscious of the humiliations and oppressiveness of the system which are felt keenly when, her mind and body no longer accustomed to the family occupation, she is compelled to deputize for her mother who is ill. Her self-consciousness is tempered y a sneaking sense, as in a Jane Austen heroine, that she is a heroine only to herself.

Tilak Goonawardena writes film-scripts and plays in addition to short stories. 'For Love or Money' is a quite horror story, controlled by the writer's irony as he plays off a young girl's innocence against the designs of her step-mother. The sense of horror arises from the success of the step-mother and the unawareness of the girl that she is, in fact, a victim.

Chitra Fernando is the author of a collection of stories *Three Women* (1983) from which 'Action and Reaction' is taken. Her stories are doubly important in that, while focusing on the plight of women, their significance is not limited to a single sex but hold up a mirror to sections of contemporary Sri Lankan society and ironically assess their values. In the chosen story, Dr. Fernando examines mainly the Buddhist value of generosity, which Loku Naenda claims that she exemplifies but which in reality turns out to be a public exhibition of virtue and is essentially selfish in motivation. Loku Naenda's most meritorious deed was adopting Kusuma, not as her daughter, but as her servant. Though she rescues Kusuma from the dire poverty into which she was born, she regards Kusuma as her lifelong slave. Then terrible ironies of fate occur and the atmosphere becomes sinister. The writer leaves us with a haunting doubt as to how much faireness there is in these vicissitudes of life.

Dr. Fernando read English at the University of Ceylon for the B.A. degree and subsequently earned the degrees of M. A. and Ph.D. in Linguistics. She is currently a Senior Lecturer in Linguistics at Macquarie University, Australia. She is well versed in literature and literary criticism and possesses a sophisticated and conscious sense of her craft. Her successful use of the first-person narrator in 'Action and Reaction' is the product of deliberate art. Her advanced training in Linguistics has given her a fine ear for dialogue and an ability to render Sinhalese speech in English, varying it to suit and define character.

J. S. Tissanayagam is an undergraduate and 'Misunderstanding' is his only notable contribution to letters so far. He brings us to the immediate present, dramatizing a problem that is specially urgent now, the social gulf between the English-educated and the vernacular-educated in Sri Lanka, a result of post-1956 language policies in education.

Sri Lankan fiction writers usually write in a 19th-century realistic mode, reflecting the still largely traditional character of Sri Lankan society, and they are also capable of extending it in a modern spirit, incorporating the resources of poetry, allegory and stream-of-consciousness. But the good writers have not showed signs of being influenced, or arriving independently at, the post-modern artistic modes in the West. Philip Stevick is not comprehensive but his anthology *Anti-Story* suggest the range of these recent innovations. He groups his selected stories under the following categories : 'Against Mimesis : fiction about fiction', 'Against "Reality" : the uses of fantasy', 'Against Event : the primacy of voice', 'Against Subject : fiction in search of something to be about', 'Against the Middle Range of Experience : new forms of extremity', 'Against Analysis : the phenomenal world', 'Against Meaning : forms of the absurd', and 'Against Scale : the minimal story'.[5] Western writers have become so disenchanted with, or alienated from, technological society that they have, in effect, made alienation the subject of their work. They have attempted to subvert or overturn all our received or traditional notions of what fiction is and what it is about, an expression of the desperate state of their minds. Sri Lankans do not share this condition of mind and it is a moot point whether it is desirable or

necessary to adopt or adapt Western experimental modes. But it is a fact that our writers have not exploited sufficiently less drastic modes and resources open to them. I observed how some of the stories I have selected, employ poetic means and rise to allegorical levels. These have to be explored further. Moreover, these are not exclusively Western methods and are found in Eastern literary traditions too. The point of view from which the story is told, is another area awaiting further exploration. These seem to me the points of possible growth for our fiction in English.

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D.C.R.A. GOONETILLEKE

NOTES

1. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin, 1967 ed.), pp. 26, 57, 74.
2. Alastair Niven, 'The Fiction of Punyakante Wijenaike' : *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Vol. 12., No. 1, 1977, p. 55.
3. Yasmine Gooneratne, 'New Fiction' : *New Ceylon Writing* (1979), p. 111.
4. Ashley Halpe, 'Editorial' : *Navasilu*, Vol. 1, 1976, pp. 2-3.
5. Philip Stevick (ed.), *Anti-Story : An Anthology of Experimental Fiction* (New York : The Free Press, 1971), pp. v-vii. See his Introduction.

1

The Garden

Godfrey Gunatillake

Tissa turned the damp earth with the digging fork, cautiously avoiding the young plant. He was squatting beside the bed of coleus, his sarong stretched neatly without one wrinkle over the clear rotundity of his hips. His bare back was glistening in the pale evening sun. Methodically he plucked out the weeds and stopped occasionally to loosen the earth, sieving with his fingers the large round pebbles in the soil. An earthworm crawled underneath a clod and Tissa inclined his head a little to watch it as its moist pink nudity shrank and grew in its efforts to get under the earth. He was working leisurely without strain; the whole evening was before him. In the measured movement of his hands, this placid attendance on his garden, there was a rich deliberation, as though he were consciously savouring his leisure. For this was not just gardening for him, mere occupation for his spare hours. The way he moved and worked with unhurried pleasure was like a ritual in which he found expression for the unstirred composure of his being, the windlessness within which the long hours slowly passed for him now, the days and nights came and went with their familiar comfort.

He turned round to look for the cattle-dung which Jamis, his servant, had brought. A tiny heap lay beside the bed—a few mouldy cakes and a handful of grey green powder. "Jamis !", he shouted, "is this all the manure ?" "The lazy beggar," he muttered under his breath, casually spreading the heap. A little beetle scrambled and rolled away like a bright iridiscent bead. "Coming, *Mahattaya*," the servant called back, "I am bringing more."

Tissa stood up, with his soiled hands hanging loosely, carefully held away from his sarong. He was a steady, well set man, about thirty-five years old. His broad fleshy face was variously marked with minute sears and pits, the ruin left behind by the innumerable pimples which had plagued his youth. But his eyes gave a hint of his smile, a smile which with the faintest provocation broadened into a grin, bright like a sickle moon right across his face, lightening it with a sense of humour and making him instantly likeable. His close-cropped hair was already flecked with a light grey, which accorded with the large-limbed mildness and good-humour he diffused. His eyes were a subdued brown, and when he spoke one detected a scarcely audible lisp which reinforced the impression of innocence and ineffectuality which flawed his big-boned reliability.

Across the door Tissa could see his wife. She had stopped for a while in the act of sweeping, to watch Tissa at his work. She had bathed earlier in the day, and her long black hair hung loose, in bedraggled wet strands, below her slim waist. With one foot poised lightly on the broom, and the handle held firmly under her chin, she was gazing at him half-pensive, half-amused. "Everything must be brought to the foot of the lord and master," she said teasingly. "Why don't you shake that lazy body of yours a little more and bring the manure yourself."

"Yes, won't you like to see me work, you hussy," he answered affectionately. "Do you know while you were bathing, I prepared four excellent beds ? In two months you will have a garden which will be the envy of the entire neighbourhood," he finished in his deliberate drawl.

"You wait," Prema replied, "I'll finish sweeping and come out to see you work. I am sure it will have to be redone." Jamis, a squint-eyed body of seventeen, had come into the garden with a pan, full of cattle dung and ash. His round face permanently wore a comical inquisitive expression ; the features appeared as though they had been cast in a soft and malleable material which, with a little pressure, had been flattened and blunted out of its originally sharp lines. He sat down beside the bed of coleus, pulverised a cake of dung with his fingers and mixing it with ash, attered it carefully over the bed. Tissa stood by watching him,

as he went from bed to bed lightly spreading the manure. "Let Jamis do it," he thought indolently, raising his arm to brush aside two little streams of perspiration which began to tickle his face. In his vague mood of contentment, he let his thought drift, without sequence or intention, in and out of the events in his life during the past few months. Prema had once been his little cousin, fifteen years younger than he, and now she was his wife. At the age of thirty-five he was married and had a home of his own. Who would have guessed it ? At one time he could have seen no conclusion to his own life with his mother, his brothers, and his sisters. When his father had died it had fallen to him at the age of seventeen to seek employment and earn for the family. Then, there had been the interminable relay of duties, marrying his sisters, sending his brothers to school, caring for his constantly ailing mother, redeeming the mortgage on their house, ensuring that this was done and preventing that from happening, all this. All this and much more. But of course that endless drift of days had brought for him a sense of importance, a sense of having accomplished what was needed. At that time, who would have thought, indeed, that this was the life in store for him ?

Her brother had told him that Prema had been reluctant at first, and had to be gently persuaded to marry him—"gently" Prema's brother had emphasised with a smile. When his mother had first proposed the marriage, Prema, it appeared, had received it with embarrassed astonishment. He recalled how, when they had returned home after their honeymoon, he had taxed her with her reluctance. There had been an amused twinkle in her eyes : "Why you know, I thought it would be like living with my elder brother," she replied. "In fact I cannot still refrain from calling you Tissa Aiya." Tissa and Prema's elder brother Gamini, were of the same age, and were intimate friends. "But you are such a sweet man, so affectionate, Tissa, I like you very much," she concluded hugging him close to her, without a trace of self-consciousness, as she would have embraced a person much older or younger than her. At that moment he had felt an indefinable distress, a strange tightening inside him as when in his childhood he had been on the verge of tears. He had remained silent, attending to that momentary, inaudible pain inside him, his eyes unthinkingly fixed on the bright multi-coloured dance of

moths in a little shaft of sunlight which had entered through the grill over the window. Prema had meanwhile left his arms and was looking with pleasure at her new home, the inexpensive but tasteful furniture in the sitting room, the dainty hangings with their delicate print of a creeper with large light blue flowers, which she herself had selected . . . Tissa waved the memory aside as being of little consequence.

Their house was situated on top of a little hillock, along a gravelled path. The garden was neatly enclosed with a railing of galvanized iron pipes on which Prema would lean in the evenings peering out intermittently, watching for his return from office. It was a small house tidily laid out and pleasing to the eye The windows were draped with the light blue curtains, the doors and windows newly painted in a light cream, and the walls distempered afresh. From without the entire house had the faint suggestion of an idyll Within, the house had a spruce, spacious look ; the few pieces of furniture gave it a deceptive look of spaciousness. In the sitting room there was a settee with two comfortable chairs, upholstered in a soft russet cretonne, and a centre table, on which stood an earthenware vase, a wedding gift. Their living room was furnished with two teak beds, a dressing table, and a compact wardrobe. Prema took special care to see that the vase was always fully laden with the roses and the chrysanthemums from their garden, roses not large and crimson, but the medium-sized ones, their petals lit by a faint flush, and chrysanthemums, white, with a trace of gold in their hearts. In the dining room, over the door which led to the kitchen was a large picture of the Buddha in meditation, a soft benign Buddha who smiled tenderly, with a tint of rose in his cheeks. Tissa had not yet been able to purchase a dining table, but they managed with a slightly rickety four-legged table which Prema had collected from her mother. Yes, Tissa told himself, Prema had turned it into a cosy home. It was a house which might belong to any not-very-well-to-do middle-class family in Ceylon, but his wife had imparted to it something of her own small elegant self. Everything in it had the look of what had been diminished from its original dimension, pretty and petite like an apt composition round Prema - his goodlooking wife and cousin. All its colours had a sweet convalescent shade, nowhere did the eye encounter the bright

disturbance of a living hue.

Jamis had finished manuring the beds and had left the garden. Tissa went from bed to bed, straightening a stem here, plucking a weed there, waiting impatiently till his wife joined him. His neighbour was taking his daily bath. He listened awhile to the long-drawn metallic screech of the pulley, the soft splash of water on limbs, the intermittent splutter and loud cough which followed. It went on and on, with a regular monotone. Prema came into the garden. She was now wearing her hair in a thick loosely woven plait. It was late evening, and the sun was gentle amidst the lengthening shadows. A shower earlier in the day had left behind a subdued washed sky, with smoothed-out wisps of cloud. In the west, the colour flowed like honey where the sky met the smudged margin of trees, but in the east where the light was fading, an aqueous blue paled gradually into a white translucence. There was a refreshing hint of moisture in the air. A light wind blew now and again, and the dried leaves of the jak tree which spread over the garden, fell one by one, with a soft rustle littering the beds. "This darned jak tree," Prema said, "you clean and clean, but the leaves keep on falling."

"Let me see your beds," she said turning to Tissa. Tissa proudly led her round.

"Oh ! you baby." She cried, "I didn't want you to have a bed there close to railing; the neighbours' goats put in their heads through the railing. And then a fat lot of flowers you will get."

Tissa looked crest-fallen, and then with mock distress he said "Nothing will please my mistress. What shall I do ?" he asked wringing his hands. Prema laughed. "But don't you see, dear one, that there is a very simple solution. You just have to plant a few stakes there alongside the railing."

"Oh rare, rare genius," Tissa exclaimed, "wait I'll bring the packet of seeds."

"What are you planting here ?" she asked.

"Verbenas, as you suggested."

"Wouldn't it be a sweet little garden ? Isn't it very nice the way I planned it," Prema inquired.

Tissa looked round. Even now, with the few flowers there were, it had an orderliness, a dainty consonance from colour to colour that was a delight to the eye. Beds of coleus, a rich disarray of colour, wine spilt on green, or a wild melee of cream and purple. Rose bushes in two beds, planted according to their colours—in one few flowers, large and dark red, like bright new wounds between the finely cut leaves, in the other a host of delicate pink-complexioned roses. The large white chrysanthemums, drooping in a corner, over their limp leaves, like soft spools too heavy for the stems which supported them; and against them the marigolds, with their thousand crenellated petals, not the flaming orange, but a light butter yellow which seemed to melt to the sight. On either side of the house was a long rectangular wooden trough – begonias, with a profusion of flowers which hung over the red-green frowning leaves like a pale pink mist. These and other varieties, all arranged according to their kind and colour without a discomforting hint of nature's wildness. The eye was, restful and the heart complacent in Prema's garden.

"Not bad," Tissa answered, as he turned to go into the house.

"You buffalo," Prema cried simulating anger, "are you going into the house like that, with your feet caked with mud ? I have just cleaned it and swept the floor."

"Dear, dear," Tissa answered, "I am like the beast in the beauty's parlour, am I not," and making a wry face he rubbed his feet vigorously on the rough granulated plinth . . . and wiped it clean on the door-mat before going in. When he went in he called for Prema.

"What is it, pet ?" Prema asked as she walked in. "Now I've got you," Tissa replied, slipping in between her and the door. He spread out his hands all grimed with earth and cattle dung, and with a mischievous smile on his face, made passes at her as though he intended to wipe his hands on her. Prema shrieked, dodging his hands and turning to run away, but he circled round her and brought his soiled hands within an inch of her face. And then swiftly holding out his hands so that they wouldn't soil her, he swept her into his arms, and carried her to the settee. With his legs and arms, he entwined her close to him so that she had no choice, but to lie on his body and be kissed again and again.

When he let her go, she smiled at him, half-affectionately, half-petulantly. Without being quite aware of it, she took deep pleasure, in the affection which he revealed to her in the unexpected caress, the sudden endearment which would interrupt her daily routine.

"No, I am not pleased with you, Tissa," she said wiping her face with the sleeve of her jacket. "I had washed my face and made up for the evening, and now you have dishevelled me again. See your chest, all wet with perspiration. You will have to take a body wash, you pig." She said wrinkling her nose. He smiled studying her face as she spoke. All her features were gathered up into a small oval, but every feature was delicately delineated, and when she came close, one felt that she was decidedly pretty. There was a submissive grace about her form, it resided unmistakably in her large brown eyes, the eyes of an animal which would be easily frightened. But her mouth, small and full, formed naturally into a pout, which at times revealed her as a stubborn and selfish child.

"Never mind your being dishevelled, bring me a glass of water," Tissa said. "I am very thirsty, woman."

She promptly went into the kichen and brought him a glass of water which she held out to him to drink. As he drank it slowly, he watched her. He was comfortable and happy, yes comfortable and happy, he told himself. His body, a very dark muscular body, glowed with a sense of well-being, as after a good satisfying meal, not too rich, not too delicious. He never dreamt in his bachelor days that he would be fond of a woman, as he was of this girl Prema, his wife. His cousin the small creature, who looked so lovely and vulnerable, had filled his life with a new tenderness. The extravagance of romantic love read about in books or seen in films had always bewildered him ; he had never been convinced by it. Yet his affection for this woman, without any deep perturbation of the spirit, the familiar fondness for the known thing, had grown during the last few months after his marriage into the central thing in his life. So that, in the evenings when he went marketing he would avoid buying beans or pumpkin, because Prema did not eat these. He would try to hurry home to have as much time with her as he could. He was always aware of her consciously as of one very much younger to him,

known to him all her life, very familiar and lovable. The little girl whom he had petted at the age when she would unselfconsciously prance about without clothes, had become his wife. Her acceptance of him made him very kindly towards her and deeply protective. Even in the darkness of night, in the dread extremity of physical passion, when they were revealed naked, did not a strange compassionate distraction come over him, as she clung to him with a trembling body ? Then he would caress her with a tenderness mingled with a vague undefined pity.

As he gave her the glass Tissa paused awhile to dwell on a memory which had come to him, seeing her wipe her face with the sleeve of her jacket, and now standing beside him with the empty glass. It was at Nuwara Eliya during their honeymoon. He had finished his afternoon meal. He remembered he had not drunk any water during the meal, though he had been thirsty. He always enjoyed slaking his thirst after the meal with a long uninterrupted draught. One glass had not been sufficient. He had reached for the glass beside Prema and drunk half of it. Prema had finished eating and remarked with a trace of irritation in her voice, "I am thirsty." She had tapped testily on the table for the waiter. Tissa had asked, "Why don't you drink that water till he brings you more ?" The water had been iced, and the glass was misty with moisture. She screwed up her face with mild distaste and pointed to the neat curve impressed on the moist glass; there was a faint almost imperceptible trace of grease where his lips had rested. "I find it difficult to drink out of a glass from which someone else had drunk," she said apologetically. Yes that was the first occasion he had felt that dim intangible pain very far inside him.

"Why do you have that silly far-away look," Prema asked him when she came back, after leaving the glass on the plate-rack. "What are you thinking ?"

"Oh !" he answered evasively, "I was thinking how fond I was of you."

She laughed, her voice vibrant with pleasure. "What are you doing tomorrow ?" She asked him, "I know that it is a public holiday."

"Oh what a bore! I thought it would be a nice surprise for you early tomorrow morning when I stretch and yawn and say to you casually, I am not going to office today."

"Well, don't be so upset, you can take me home for the day."

He got sorely disappointed, listening to her. He had planned to spend the entire day together with her, but she wanted to go "home" as though she lived elsewhere in some temporary lodgings and had her permanent home with her parents.

As he got up from the settee, Tissa remembered why he had come into the house. "Prema, I called you at first, to take out the packet of seeds from the wardrobe. I couldn't with my hands."

Before they went out into the garden, Prema stepped behind the door and held Tissa close to her. How warm and protective his big body seemed. She was content to have him, this neat orderly house, the affectionate security he gave her, and the newly-acquired importance as the mistress of her home. She held up her face to be kissed and brought her limbs close, very close to his. So that in that large warm body which encompassed her, she might forget . . . what? She wondered—Not something which lay in her past for there was nothing there; then forget perhaps some indefinite weight of a dream which she may have dreamed for her future? He bent down and kissed her. As he stepped out into the garden he wondered how his mother and her brothers would view their life together. He was almost shy of their tenderness. Her brothers would, of course, laugh teasingly at Prema, and his mother with the crude traditional wisdom would say, "The appetite grows with tasting." He was undeniably happy, he told himself. What was it? Like the vessel brimmed with curd and honey, curd and honey that was the likeness of their life. Hand in hand they went to the corner of the garden where the new bed had been prepared.

It was a triangular bed wedged between two sides of the railing. He broadcast the seeds and scattered earth over them. Then collecting a few sticks he thought he would plant them alongside the railing as Prema had suggested. Gingerly he stretched a leg over the bed, without trampling it and jumped to the

other side. There was little space between the railing and bed and seated awkwardly with much discomfort he completed his task.

Prema meanwhile was walking about the garden admiring their joint handiwork. It was nearly dark and the pictorial loveliness of the garden in daytime was mitigated by the indifferent sombre light. The flowers hid their colour and seemed to withdraw before the night. The plantain trees in the next garden were lovelier, as the leaves swayed from side to side in the wind the bottle-green alternating with the pale velvet of the undersides, the last light scattering and slipping with a dim mercurial glow on their broad fans. After the warm day, it was very cool, and it gave Prema much pleasure to walk about, while her husky husband in whose arms she would spend the night, worked at the railing in a slightly incongruous posture, driving in the stakes.

"I have finished," he called.

"I am sure it's not well done," she joked, from the other end of the garden.

"Are you ? Come and see," he replied.

He turned round and balanced himself precariously holding, the railing. He prepared to jump across without trampling the bed, when his eyes fell on an unfamiliar colour, a strange pattern which lay stretched on the earth, on the other side of the bed. He drew in his breath and stood transfixed with surprise and fear, for a few feet away from him lay a large viper. It had stopped moving, having perhaps observed Tissa's movements. He couldn't get across without jumping over the viper. There was no other exit. Softly with his eyes all the time on the viper, he addressed Prema, "Prema don't come too close, there is a viper here. I cannot get across ; you would have to do something for me."

He was watching the viper. It was beautiful he told himself in spite of his fear, staring at the intricate pattern of colour on his skin. The brick-red design, with its dark blotches like blood-stains, seemed to slip and shiver on his body like silk. In the moment of danger, fantastic thoughts crowded into Tissa's mind, it seemed that the viper was also a flower, grown secretly in the garden, but more beautiful than the bright struggle of colour on

the leaves of the coleus, yet unlike any flower, inaccessible, and dangerous like the nightshade.

Prema had only heard him calling her. She had not caught his words. "Yes, my dear ?" she said questioningly as she came towards him.

He warned her, "There is a viper across the bed, and I cannot get out ; don't come too close yourself."

Prema stopped sharply. A few yards in front of her, she saw the serpent. Her eyes widened in terror, and she gave a low moan. For the moment, she was only conscious of the serpent. Everything seemed to slip and coil round that slim terrifying shape. Her eyes darkened as with a mist, and she was convulsed with a fear she had not known all her life. With a stifled shriek, she ran inside the house.

Tissa closed his eyes ; he was no longer afraid. It seemed as though an immense weight which he had carried steeling himself all these years had been lifted in an indivisible second and then not relief, but the bone-destroying weariness at the futility of the effort had descended on him. He waited leaning on the rail indifferent and tired watching the viper who had not yet stirred. Then he saw Jamis coming into the garden.

"Jamis !" he said, "look at this."

"*Amme* ! *Polonga* !," he exclaimed. The incongruous mixture of alarm and nonchalance rendered him more than usually comical. He quickly reached for the mammoty which lay close to him, and from a safe distance, aimed one vicious stroke at the viper. The serpent which had been serenely and immovably patterned against the ground, turned in an instant into a slimy, wriggling mass. But Jamis had struck him neatly and precisely on the head and before long the viper was dead, laid out stiff and beautiful as ever.

Jamis was jubilant. He turned the viper over and over. "What a hefty fellow," he said, "if he had bitten you, *Mahattaya*, that would have been the end." He ran in and brought some kerosene oil. He smeared it all over the viper's body and taking it on to the road, made a little pyre with old newspapers and dried jak leaves, and coconut leaves. He placed the viper on the pyre and set fire to it. "Ha ! Ha ! he said hopping with excitement, a

strange clownish fiend, casting weird shadow on the garden as the flames spired upwards, and the dead serpent crackled in the heat.

Tissa watched the cremation for some time, and turned into the house. It was dark inside ; the lamp had not yet been lit. He walked through the house, to the rear verandah, took a basin full of water and washed himself. Then he went into the kitchen to look for Prema. Alice, the cookwoman, was bending over the hearth, peering into a pot, the bottle lamp held in one hand, high over her head, and the ladle in the other. "Nona was not in the kitchen," she informed him grumpily without turning round, when Tissa questioned her. He walked into the bedroom and found her lying on the bed with one leg crooked, and her hands crossed underneath her head, staring at the ceiling. In the dim light, her eyes were bright with an inarticulate question. She looked at him for a long time without talking. "Tomorrow we will go home for the day eh ?" she asked softly. She spoke in Sinhalese. "All right Prema," he answered in the same language. The English she spoke in their daily intercourse seemed to wrap itself lightly round her like a set of well-worm graceful clothes, but when she dropped to Sinhalese, there appeared to be a no-joking-about, matter-of-factness in their relationship, recovering the old forgotten reality of their cousin-to-cousin tones, which had little in common with this, which they had striven to make up, their new life.

Prema did not wish to talk to him of the incident in the garden. She could not understand it, or herself or anything. There with the man stretched against the rail, and the serpent which had entered her garden, something had happened which defied her understanding. How real, how decisive had been her terror she thought, clean and beyond all calculation. How could she have known that beneath her daily fondness of her man, the pretty theme of endearments which she had gathered from what she knew of romantic love, the domestic preening that made up her day, that beneath all, in the maccessible depths of her, this had lain in wait, dark and without name ? But why was it, when she lay safe in bed, everything now seemed without substance, the kind man stretched by her side, silent, the neat orderly household, the pretty garden, without the serpent ? Only the moment's terror, seemed her real self, her real world, there it lay like a dark and

heavy stone in the clear depths of her, unmoved by the flow of the daytime consciousness which was crowding back into her again.

Disconsolate in her ruin, she felt a new pity for the man beside her, who for the first time smote her with his strangeness. She reflected comfortingly, she would be restored to her own familiar self, when she went home on the morrow.

Tissa lay beside her ; for a long time he could think of nothing. Again and again, he echoed a meaningless phrase, "this was the end of his 35 years." He had had a hard life for the last 18 years after his father's death, he told himself. He had had to settle his four sisters in marriage. He had done that and at the sametime maintained his younger brother while he studied at the Medical College. He was now a senior Government clerk, and at the age of 35, when all his duties had been fulfilled, with a severe self-discipline, all his obligations performed with scrupulous devotion, then, he had married his 19-year-old cousin. And it was then when he was accustomed to the interminable stretch, when he had found pleasure in the unpurposeful daily round, that this new tenderness had settled on him, at first untroubled and reassuring, in accord with the temperate region in which his spirit resided. There had been rare moments between the leaden hours in office and the dull distractions at the home when it seemed that something else, something inexplicable had been revealed to him—lying in bed at night when the window framed the black sky with a single star, or some other time, in the morning when he paused while brushing his teeth, to watch his neighbour's dove, lively in the air high above him and hovering for a moment like a drop of milk in the immense blue bowl of the morning sky. And it seemed that these incomprehensible stirring in his heart, between the dust of office and the stale smells of home had grown into the new life with Prema. But then why had this affection become like an a reluctant awakening, this tenderness for his wife, like an astringent spice in the cherished tastelessness of his former life ? In his old life, no loneliness had troubled him, no loss of purpose had gnawed at him. He saw Prema again in his mind's eye turning into the house with a shriek and he was filled with a bitterness he could not hold. This young person lying in bed beside him, how could he describe it, she was always under him, or in him always. She was not extricated from his tender solicitude and placed outside him, apart from him

so that he could meet her. When the serpent had appeared and had at last resolved her into another outside himself, when she had run in with a shriek, then he had been annihilated and without substance for her. At the time they had stood on either side of the serpent, and the darkened flowers in their pretty garden had needed to the wind, his whole life and hers seemed revealed in the ineluctable terror of one moment, yes but not as something illumined, only like a vision of darkness, in which the eye is plunged after the bright division of lightning.

For the first time the sense of being a stranger in his world assailed Tissa. The darkness which flowed into the room reminded him that the lamps had not yet been lit. Rising from his bed he groped his way with an unsteady step, into the dining hall.

Out of the growing night, suddenly a *Koha* called, his notes cool and clear as spring water, breathlessly ascending, and then, beginning again. It startled the lonely listeners, like an immaculate dew-drop which one surprises under a blade of grass, in the dull heat of the day.

2

The Third Woman

Punyakante Wijenaike

The last rays of the sun came through the open door of the hut and fell on Diyonis Baas's rattan easy-chair. This was the best part of the day as Diyonis Baas always admitted. This moment when the sun bade farewell, its gentle warmth fell like the tender soft touch of a woman's hand upon his body. He took a deep draught from the bottle in his hand. The pure, sweet scent of the white *jasmine* flower was strong in the compound outside. He inhaled it deep into his lungs and suddenly it seemed as if his Suduhamy was there beside him. It was a peculiar sensation. The drink and the scent of the white flower blended perfectly together though there lay a difference wide as the ocean between the two. The drink coursed through his veins like fire, making his heart beat fast. The virgin scent of the little flower uplifted him and made him feel pure and good. He closed his eyes. Suduhamy must have come back from the dead to make him feel like this again.

Diyonis Baas took another sip of arrack and looked sideways at Leon Singho. Leon Singho was young, yet he looked as if he had taken his liquor more easily than the older man. Diyonis Baas shifted his still wiry body restlessly in the arm-chair. Leon Singho finished his drink and belched contentedly. To him the scent of the flower meant nothing. To him there was only the task of listening. He crossed his legs and sat waiting.

Diyonis Baas frowned and scratched his white hair, loosening it from the tight knot at the back of his head. Then he pulled at his white moustache, squinted his bright sharp eyes at the sun, and then cleared his throat with unnecessary vigour. It was demanding

a great deal of him to talk about Suduhamy but for the sake of Leon Singho he would make the sacrifice. Twenty years ago she had died and yet to talk about her was like uncovering a fresh raw wound.

"This thing called a woman must be chosen carefully by a man" admitted Diyonis Baas at last. "Like the gems in Ratnapura, one must search and search without impatience. Sometimes the stone that looks pure and shining hides a crack inside. Perhaps my Suduhamy was like that. Aiyo, when I first saw her how could I have known that she would harbour such hatred together with the love she bore in her heart ?"

Leon Singho coughed respectfully and looked away, past the door into the compound. Beyond the compound he saw the jungle dark and frightening, for Diyonis Baas's hut was the last one in the row of huts which formed the small village. Sometimes at night Leon Singho could hear the leopard's cry from his own hut which stood four doors away from here. Only a man like Diyonis Baas would live so close to the jungle, unafraid.

"But it is difficult to choose so carefully when there are so few women," grumbled Leon Singho.

Diyonis took another mouthful of the drink. It was the last in the bottle.

"That is true, and the women today are not like the women in my time. Aiyo, from where can one find another Suduhamy ? Or another Kiri Menike or Bissohamy ?"

He sighed and a sudden huskiness caught at his throat.

"No, there are no women like those three" he said in a sad voice. "And it was my good fortune to have met them. The good deeds I did in my last birth brought me those three for comfort in this birth."

His eyes softened as only the eyes of Diyonis Baas could whenever he spoke of something that touched his heart.

"My Bissohamy, now, how well I remember the first day I saw her" said Diyonis Baas. "Such a woman she was. Nobody ever filled a bodice more delightfully than she. She was the wife of the *sillara kade mudalali* who was my friend at that time. My *vadu maduve* was right opposite his *kade* where one morning she

came to sell hoppers. That was how I came to see her. A saucy-eyed buxom creature she was, though dark in skin. But at that time I had a weakness for dark skins for I had not yet met my Suduhamy and Kiri Menike.

From that moment onwards my time was pleasantly occupied in watching the tight shifting movement beneath Bissohamy's bodice. So much was I occupied that Davith Baas, who worked with me, began to complain that I was not doing my share of the work. At that time our work was in great demand and we were the only two carpenters of good repute. That village was not a small one like this one. It was a big village with a lot of new buildings coming up and a lot of people were in debt to us for the work we had done.

Soon Bissohamy began to smile at me and we got to exchange a few words whenever she finished selling the hoppers or when her husband was out of the boutique. Then one day she came to me and told me that she was willing to go away with me. For a moment I was stunned. I had not thought that it would go as far as that. However I was only too glad to have her and we ran away together to her old village, to the house where her old parents lived.

The six months that followed were among the happiest months of my life. Never before had I experienced such deep joy and fulfilment. Each night, and sometimes during the day too my Bissohamy would lie in my arms and she would tell me.

"Diyonis Aiya without you my life is nothing."

Then the six months ended and I had to get back to my work. I was a new man for I had tasted a woman and a woman like Bissohamy can change a man overnight. "I cannot go back to my husband" she told me calmly, "Life with him now will be like eating curd without the jaggery".

But our fears were without cause. Her husband greeted us as if nothing had happened and the six months had not been at all. Bissohamy returned to her hopper making in the boutique and I went back to Davith Baas who was very glad to see me. Life resumed its normal course except for this one change. At night Bissohamy came to my house and cooked the evening meal

and spent the night with me. It was good sensible arrangement, for besides getting a good tasty meal, I could not stay without my Bissohamy now. She was as necessary as food and water. Her husband approved of the new change too. For when occasionally his kade needed an extra bench or a table, I would do it f r him free of charge.

And my Bissohamy brought me luck. Even Davith Baas was astounded at the amount of work that came to us. Morning and evening our saws and our hammers were busy. My carpentry improved considerably with so much practice, and soon we were able to raise our charges to almost double the original amount.

Bissohamy and I were very happy. I looked upon her as my wife though we were not married and soon everybody in the village came to accept her as that. We quarrelled heartily as a man and a woman who mean a lot to each other always do. If she was late to cook my meal, and very often she was when the sillara kade had a lot of custom, I would shout at her impatiently and sometimes give her a good blow or two with my hand, to remind her that her duty now lay first towards me. And if I came home with the smell of drink on my lips, Bissohamy would shout and scold like a proper wife should. Yes, my Bissohamy and I were very happy. And we never thought that a change was waiting for us and so soon too.

* * *

I had a friend, a good friend of many years called Ran Hamy. It was he who had helped me to find a place and to set up a vadu maduva. It was he who had introduced me to Davith Baas. Through his kindness, I, a complete new comer, had become part of that village.

Now this man was dead. A few brief days of illness and he was gone. I was full of grief and even Bissohamy was unable to comfort me. I felt that I had not repaid Ran Hamy for the kindness he had shown me. Some day I had meant to do something for him. Something that would measure up to the depth and generosity of his own heart. But I had waited too long for the opportunity and now it would never come. I lost my appetite and could not sleep at night. I felt that I had committed a terrible crime and hampered my own chance of happiness as well. This

debt would be on my head not only in this life but in the next as well. A deep feeling of ingratitude got hold of me.

* * *

It was Davith Baas who roused me from my melancholy state. He pointed out that there was something that I could still do for Ran Hamy. It was not too late to repay his kindness.

Ran Hamy's widow, Kiri Menike, was now alone in the house with her child, a boy of eight. When the funeral was over I went to her. She was waiting in a room, pale and drawn with grief but otherwise her normal sweet and docile self.

"I was very troubled when I heard of your great sorrow," I said respectfully, taking care to keep my eyes away from her face. She stood up then, very dignified and correct in her grief, her pale milk coloured skin almost the same shade as the cloth she wore in mourning.

"He was like a brother to me. If there is anything that has to be done, tell me and I will do it," I entreated.

She raised her eyes, soft and gentle as a newborn calf's while her hand trembled and strayed towards her breast. But she said nothing.

"The house is desolate without a man. There is the boy to bring up too. Tell me if there is anything that has to be done and I will do it," I repeated. But she did not answer. She was not a woman who was made to answe . So I took the decision into my own hands and that night itself moved into Ran Hamy's house with Bissohamy.

* * *

Now I had two women and a son and a good house to live in. Kiri Menike cooked a grand meal to welcome us and the feeling of guilt, of unhappiness, left my heart. I felt I had repaid Ran Hamy for all the kindness he had shown me by taking on the responsibility of his household. A great burden was lifted from my shoulders. I was free to live my life unhampered.

* * *

If I had any worry about trouble in the house with two women, my fear was soon put to rest. Bissohamy and Kiri

Menike got on well together. Where one was all hot chilly and fire, the other remained cool and sweet as the milk rice she prepared in the morning. Life went on peacefully. Bissohamy went to work daily at the kade and left all the cooking and cleaning to Kiri Menike. As for the child, he soon became the son I never had just as Kiri Menike his mother became my other 'wife.' Neither mentioned the name of Ran Hamy even in talk after that."

* * *

Diyonis Bass paused here for a moment as if perplexed at what he was going to say next. He knitted his brows and thought heavily.

"Yes, that time was the most peaceful period in my life" he muttered rebelliously. "If my Suduhamy had not come, life would have gone on like a calm river. But I would not have been happy for I never wanted too much peace and calm. For ever I am a restless man.

* * *

Two women would have satisfied any man but I was not just any man. Bissohamy was Bissohamy and she continued to fulfil a a vital need in me and Kiri Menike was kind and gentle as I wanted her to be. Yet I was not wholly contented. The old restlessness began to trouble me again. The old restlessness which had kept me wandering from place to place before I came to that village and met my Bissohamy. Unconsciously I had begun the search for my Suduhamy even before I knew of her existence. I had begun to look for my real wife, the flower fate had meant to grow in my garden. But at that moment I held no picture of what I wanted Perhaps someone who had the qualities of both my Bissohamy as well as my Kiri Menike and yet different from either of them.

Leon Singho, I do not feel like talking about this. It is like the hushed feeling one gets inside a temple on a poya night. One feels but cannot find the words to do justice to that feeling. But tell it I must if I am to help you. And be assured that whatever pain I suffered in the end, my Suduhamy has always remained the most precious gift of Gods gave. Whatever wrong she has done has been through no fault of hers. Aiyo, how can you be bitter with

a woman like, that ? One must always make excuses, tell lies to cover up for her. Because condemning her would be to condemn myself. She and I were one being. We loved each other so completely that we could not think of ourselves as two different people. So how can one be bitter against oneself ?

* * *

About this time Kiri Menike began to ail from what she called 'stomach trouble.' She had always been a pale sickly creature and now she took to her mat and would not get up even to prepare the meals. The child did what he could to help and Bissohamy was helpless as her husband suddenly fell ill and she had to go to look after him. Kiri Menike cried and begged me to find her a woman to help in the house.

"A young woman, a girl who can lift and pound and sweep the place a little" she pleaded with those large timid eyes of hers. "I know of just such a girl too. An orphan, distantly related to me, who lives here in the village."

"But who are her guardians ? I asked in astonishment. "They might not like to give the girl to me, seeing that I am a low country man. And besides another woman in the house would only lead to trouble."

"If you speak to the girl she will come of her own accord" said Kiri Menike simply. "And she will be of no trouble for she is but sixteen years of age."

"We will see." I did not wish her to see that I would give in too easily. But I was flattered when she said that the girl would come if I spoke to her.

I knew that this would have to be a matter of stealth. If I went to the girl's guardians I would have to spend money. And what was the use in wasting money on a young orphan girl ? So little did my Suduhamy mean to me then that I was not willing to lose even a little money over her. But then how was I to know that a strange orphan girl would come to mean so much to me ?

Little by little I got everything out from Kiri Menike. Then I planned the whole plot carefully as I would plan a piece of furniture in the vadu maduva.

The girl's guardians were an old couple who had been burdened with the child after its mother died years ago. The mother had been a beautiful woman, like my Suduhamy, to whom the admiration of men was necessary as the food she ate. The father, in a fit of jealousy, had taken a knife and cut her down. Of such a beginning came my Suduhamy. Fool that I was not to have realized that what began with violence always ends with violence.

The house in which she stayed with her guardians was small and poor and ill-protected at night. Kiri Menike told me that the old couple were sound sleepers as well as being slightly deaf. My Suduhamy did not sleep with them. She had been given the little lean-to, where she cooked all the meals. It would be an easy matter to get to her in the night

So one night when the moon was bright, I set off on my bicycle for Suduhamy's hut. I had brought with me a little clay lamp with a bottle of oil and a wick to light it. My blood was racing with excitement and I was enjoying every minute of the adventure. Never have I stolen a woman this way!

When I reached the hut I dismounted and waited in the shadow of the *pila*, listening to the loud snoring of the old pair. Those two snored together and the sound was like a waterfall thundering down a hillside. I lit the lamp and softly pushed open the rickety old door which groaned and moaned as if being pushed beyond its strength. But the old couple snored on undisturbed and it was an easy matter to step past them and go into the low smoke-blackened lean-to. It was simple as that, this first meeting with my Suduhamy. I went into the lean-to and there she was. She lay on the mat sleeping like a child, her dark thick hair loose and framing her tiny round face."

Diyonis Baas stopped as if he could go on no longer. His fierce old eyes filled with tears.

"Aiyo, how shall I describe her to you? My Suduhamy cannot be described with mere words alone. Even now I cannot remember how beautiful she looked. Perhaps it was the pure innocence in her face, so clean and untouched by any emotion, or perhaps the small perfect breasts as they rose and fell as she breathed under the loose jacket. Or was it the soft rounded limbs

of this child woman that caught at my heart-strings and held them forever in bondage ?

My heart beating strangely, I leant over her and let the light from the oil lamp fall on her face.

She opened her eyes and looked straight at me without fear or any emotion. My heart flew into my mouth and the words that came out were as unsteady as a boat upon a rough sea. I had meant to broach the subject of her coming with me, gently, tactfully, but now it gushed out like a water spout.

"Do not be afraid" I said hastily. "I know your situation and I have come to take you. I shall try to look after you as kindly as I know how."

She said nothing but lay there gazing up at me with those deep black eyes of hers.

"Come, child, come" I tried to speak firmly but my voice betrayed my nervousness. "Do not be afraid. I will look after you better than those two snoring in there. I will truly be your kinsman."

Then she got up, still without a word, and put up her hair into a konde as big as her head and buttoned the little jacket that had been so delightfully undone.

I held up the lamp and she followed me meekly and still without a word, past the sleeping pair and out into the night. I placed her on the carrier of my bicycle and together we rode home. She did not utter a word on that trip and I had no need for words either. My thoughts were strong enough to hold us both together forever.

And it was from that moment onwards that life changed its steady course. At first Kiri Menike was delighted to find Suduhamy in the house. She fell on her neck and wept as if she had found a long lost daughter. And Bissohamy, after she came back from looking after her husband, did her best to welcome Suduhamy though I could see that she was not a little surprised at what I had done. As for myself I felt like a man who had reached the top of *Sri Pada* after a long and weary climb.

* * *

Many months went by and the feeling between Suduhamy and myself grew into consuming passion. I found myself thinking of her every minute of the day and though she would be there each night waiting for me, it was never enough. I tell you, Leon Singho, it was like this almost to the very end. Never did our love come down to a comfortable feeling as it had become with Bissohamy. Suduhamy was like drink in my blood. The more I drank of her the more I wanted. The thirst was never satisfied enough to become boring.

She never spoke much, Suduhamy, but all she wanted to say she said through those eyes of hers. She always remained remote and innocent and I could never find out her true feelings. Bissohamy always said that Suduhamy frightened her because she did not look human. But Bissohamy, I believe, was beginning to feel jealous. I had forbidden my Suduhamy to light the fire because the heat would burn her pure white skin and make her black. Bissohamy was angry and muttered something about how once upon a time I had prefered only what was black. But the real trouble began when she slipped on a piece of soap and hurt her leg.

Bissohamy's leg swelled up to the full roundness of a jak fruit and had to be treated with oils by the *vederala.*

"This has been done on purpose" Bissohamy's eyes glittered through the pain. "And I know the person who did it too. She must be sorry that I did not fall into the well and drown. She should have placed the soap a little closer to the well if she wanted to make sure of my death."

Kiri Menike's eyes opened wide in distress.

"Aiyo, aiyo do not speak this way. Why do you try to start trouble when we are so happy? Can we not live together peaceably?"

"Nevertheless what I say is true. Though these days people never listen to what I say, it is still the truth."

Bissohamy's eyes filled with tears and she looked away from me in hurt silence.

Suduhamy came into the room then and though her eyes smouldered as if she was hurt by what Bissohamy had said, she

did not speak a word. Instead she sat down in her silent way and began to scrape a coconut for the evening meal. I went out to the vadu maduva for women's quarrels were not for me !

But nevertheless I began to feel uneasy. If my three women began to fight my life would be terrible. What man could live in the midst of women quarrelling ? Though I had very little to do now with either Bissohamy or Kiri Menike, I did not want to lose them. Kiri Menike was still useful in the house and there was the child to whom I had grown attached. And Bissohamy was like a broken limb. Though serving no purpose she was still part of me and losing her would never be easy. Besides it was Bissohamy who had brought me luck in the beginning. And in a strange way I felt that if she went, my luck too would go with her.

I never believed that my Suduhamy would bring me trouble. Aiyo, who could she ? Such a child, so innocent and lovely. No, no, my Suduhamy could only bring joy and happiness. But I must watch out for her. See that the other two did not worry her with jealous talk. What would a tender young girl know of the feelings of older women ? She was like a fly caught in a spider's web and I must look after her.

* * *

With all this trouble in the house my mind wandered and I began to fall back in my work. Davith Baas complained that custom was getting poor because I was making too many mistakes in my work. But I no longer cared about the vadu maduva. I was too wrapt up in my Suduhamy ! And when Kiri Menike died the following week, matters between Davith Baas and myself became worse.

All I can now say is that I saw no reason then for Kiri, Menike's death. True she had been ailing for sometime but then after the coming of Suduhamy she had recovered and had even helped in the cooking and the cleaning. My poor pale Kiri Menike! One moment she was there, gentle and kind to everybody alike and then she was gone. I remember the night before she died she had complained of a pain in the stomach. So perhaps her old trouble had come back again to kill her.

My Suduhamy worked hard and did everything for the funeral of my Kiri Menike. She washed the body and dressed

it in a white saree, weeping bitterly all the while. And when Bissohamy sat like a stone and spoke no word to her, she did not seem to mind.

A month later Davith Baas and I broke up the vadu maduva and he left for another village. I still remember the words he left me with because they sounded so strange then in my ears.

"Look after Bissohamy" he said. "It is not easy to find women like her."

I did not understand what he meant. Why should I look after Bissohamy who was quite capable of looking after herself ? Besides she was not ill or anything like that. Then I thought.

"Had Bissohamy anything to do with Davith Baas ?"

If they had been meeting in secret I would surely kill her. I am a jealous man and would never share any of my women with another man. True Bissohamy had a husband but then having a husband for whom she cared nothing was one thing, and meeting a lover in secret was quite a different matter. For a day or two I was blinded with range. I took my bicycle and rode furiously up and down the road, looking like a madman. Then my temper cooled and reason returned. Bissohamy was not a woman to do anything in secret. If she had gone to Davith Baas she would have walked out on me first before doing so. She would have told me the truth.

Nevertheless I could not wholly bury the ugly suspicion. And when three months later, she too, died of a stomach pain like Kiri Menike's, my suspicious mind blinded me again to the truth.

After I had burried my Bissohamy life was never the same as I believed she had taken all my luck with her. Soon there was hardly anything to eat in the house and no money to buy food. Suduhamy began to complain for the first time since she came to my house.

"The child cries with hunger and I can do nothing. 'Aiyo, even at my old guardians' house there was more to eat than here."

"I will get rice do not fear, my menike" I consoled her. "Everybody in the village owes Diyonis Baas a little something and we will manage till I start work again."

* * *

But she was never the same after that. She ill-treated the poor child till I took him away and gave him to a friend of mine to keep for a while. After the child went away it was a little better. Suduhamy complained less but instead she took to deep fits of silent brooding when she would retire to a corner and sit for hours staring into space. From this trance she would wake up occasionally to accuse me of not caring for her any more. This was not true and I gave proof of this at night when I took her into my arms. But still she would accuse me of neglecting her.

Then one night she confessed that she was with child. I do not know what other men feel when their women conceive but as for me it was the greatest happiness I had yet enjoyed. My Suduhamy, my most precious of all jewels, was carrying my child and I was dazed with the mere thought of it. At last our love was bearing fruit.

I waited on her hand and foot. Never once did I permit her to pound the rice nor sweep the compound. The other women in the village laughed and told me it was good for Suduhamy to pound the rice.

"It will make it easier for her to bear the child." they insisted.

But I was stubborn. Suduhamy sat in the house and waited like a queen while I even cooked all our meals. I told her that we must now legalize our marriage so that she would become my true wife. This is the proof of my fondness for her, Leon Singho. To no other woman have I offered the position of my true wife.

I tried to set up a little vadu maduva near the house. With the coming of the child I would have to start work again. But my mind was constantly hovering over Suduhamy and I could not think of other things. I cleared the space for a vadu maduva but did nothing further. The mere thought of work was a burden I wished to put off for a little while longer.

Thus absorbed in each other and the coming child, my Suduhamy and I were pathetically unware of the storm brewing

in the village against us. Suduhamy rarely stepped out of the house now and though I went out for an occasional chew of betel or to borrow some rice, I swear to this day that I never saw any black looks or muttered threats among the men who stood in knots here and there on the road while I went by.

Therefore it came like a lightning bolt out of the sky to hit me. One day I was out in the jungle searching for a special kind of yam that my Suduhamy had got a craving to eat. It was not easy to find this yam, for it grew on a creeper and there are many creepers growing on trees in the jungle. Then I saw a handful of men coming towards me and the leader among them was Appuhamy, the sillara kade mudalali, Bissohamy's husband. I greeted him pleasantly.

"*Ayubowan*, I am looking for a yam for my Suduhamy." I said.

Appuhamy neither smiled nor answered back in greeting. His face turned grave and he kept looking at me as if he was seeing me for the first time.

"What do you want, Aiya ?" I asked quickly. Suddenly I felt there was something wrong here.

"We want to talk with you," he said shortly.

"About what ?" I asked in surprise, "And if its talk you want I am here waiting. Though I warn you I cannot waste too much time because I must find this yam for my Suduhamy. You know how it is with women in that condition."

At the very mention of my Suduhamy a change came over the men. They began to mutter and there were sullen looks passed from one to another.

"We wish to talk with you" Appuhamy repeated loudly. "And we do not want to sit and listen to your talk about that low creature you call your wife!"

I sprang up with a hoarse cry and went for his throat like a maddened dog. His throat came into my hands easily and I squeezed with all my might. There was a red haze in front of my eyes and a roaring sound in my ears. My foot slipped and I fell to the ground, dragging his weight onto me.

I felt hands separating us and then I was dragged to my feet and held in an iron grip. Appuhamy's face, filled with hate, towered before me for he was a big man.

"You low-country dog!" he screamed contemptuously "You come into our village and not content with taking our women from us, you must kill them too! Aiyo, aiyo my poor Bissohamy! What she must have endured at your hands! And in the end to have died at that woman's hands!"

The blood pounded in my ears. I gazed back at Appuhamy, a long smouldering steady gaze.

"Careful of those words you utter, Aiya. I am not a man to be insulted and pushed aside easily. And what is this talk about killing Bissohamy ?" I asked slowly.

But before he could speak another man thrust his words between us.

"We say that your precious Suduhamy killed Bissohamy and Kiri Menike. Your Suduhamy, who is cruel and underhand as a devil. She poisoned the other two women. How else could both have died so suddenly and with severe pain in the stomach too ?"

"Lies, all lies and may the Gods strike you dead for it!" I yelled wildly. "Yes, let the lightening strike you dead for uttering such lies! My Suduhamy cannot even poison an ant. She who is kind and gentle and timid like the deer that roams in the jungle."

"She is not timid and gentle like the deer. She is cunning and deep like *Kuveni* the she-devil," reported Appuhamy. "I can cry now when I think of how my poor Bissohamy used to complain about her. But you never listened to Bissohamy did you ? After taking all that she had to offer you only listened to that foul creature you shamelessly call your wife. Aiyo, it is useless to to speak to ears that are deaf to a devil's faults! It is folly to think so highly of any woman. It is asking for trouble."

"My Suduhamy cannot kill" I kept on repeating stubbornly.

"This has become a matter for the police. If you do not talk, we will go to the police."

"Aiyo, how can a child like Suduhamy kill ? Do not speak of my Suduhamy this way I beg you. She is a good girl and

people are jealous of her. That is why they say such things about her."

But they went on saying that she had killed. And suddenly I was afraid for my Suduhamy's life. I kept her away from all this talk yet she must have known for she stopped going down even to the well to get water.

Then one night, that last night of our lives together, only I did not know it then, my Suduhamy came to me and looking down with tear in her eyes, she said.

"Everybody is angry with me. Even you, I can feel the change in you too. I am but a poor motherless girl and it is better that I end my life and the child's tonight."

I could not speak for my throat felt too full.

"Why should I have harmed those two who did nothing to me? You were my life and I lived only for you. I never even spoke much to those two." She said in an unhappy voice.

I took her then into my arms and cradled her to sleep. I still could find no words to comfort her. But I think she was comforted by my arms close around her, for she soon fell asleep.

But I could not sleep for a long time. I lay there on the mat with my eyes wide open and staring at the thatched roof, my mouth dry with fear. As far as I could see there seemed no solution unless I took my Suduhamy and moved into another village. But it was too late to make plans for escape. For even as I lay there in fear and misery, sleep stole over me like a thief and took away my Suduhamy. When I woke up in the morning my Suduhamy was dead.

She had hanged herself from the tree in our compound and her body was cold to my embrace. When the men came to take her to the police station only I was there, sitting like a statue beneath the free from which my Suduhamy hung."

* * *

Leon Singho looked respectfully at the little old man who had lived through so much. If Leon Singho lived even half of it he would consider his life well spent.

Diyonis Baas's tale was finished and now he lay spent and weary as if he had finished a long and painful task. His eyes were

closed but on his face was a look of satisfaction, of peace. It was as if he had achieved successfully, what he had set out to achieve.

He stirred and sighed deeply. Then opened his eyes and looked at Leon Singho.

"Talking about my Suduhamy has eased the pain I had here," he said and patted his chest.

"Yes, it was like bringing out all the poison that was inside. Now I am cleansed and free."

"Did they find out the truth in the end, Aiya ? Did Suduhamy kill Bissohamy and Kiri Menike ?" asked Leon Singho.

Diyonis Baas winced and the pain returned to his eyes again.

"Do not speak of this again, I beg of you. It only confuses me again and brings back the pain of remembering Suduhamy. Who can know the strange ways of women ? And especially of a woman like my Suduhamy ? I had to run from that village myself because the police came and said that it was I who had killed Kiri Menike. I had also killed Bissohamy and my Suduhamy when I had tired of them each in turn. They said that I had done this thing and then very cleverly had made it look like my Suduhamy had done it in a fit of jealous rage. They had proof, they said, proof that I had killed all three myself.

Perhaps it would be better to take the blame on myself and spare my Suduhamy. I will do anything for her. I do not like to think of her as being jealous or mad even though she would sit for hours just silently brooding. Perhaps women, when they carry children in their womb, become strangely jealous and suspicious of other women. I had thought my Suduhamy to be a rare and precious jewel. Perhaps I was mistaken.

My Suduhamy could never willingly commit a bad deed. She killed because of her love for me. She loved me so deeply that she could not bear to see the other two come between us. The police ralahamy said that I had purposely fallen asleep so that Suduhamy would kill herself. Knowing that she had wanted to die that night I should have kept awake, he said.

I tell you, Leon Singho, now that you know of my love for her, do you think I would have let my Suduhamy die ? Aiyo, my Suduhamy! Among all the women that came after her, never did I find a woman like that again!"

3

The River

Punyakante Wijenaike

If you were to climb the very highest of the hills and look down you would see the river easily, far, far away at the very bottom of the valley. Twisting and turning among the trees, at first you will mistake it for a road or a cart-track or even just an empty stretch of brown earth. You will never guess its depth nor its strength because it looks wide and shallow, so calm and powerful, like the valley itself. On a fine day you may even see little brown specks here and there and wonder what they could be. These are the boats that sail on the river when it is calm and quiet. But alas, not often is the river calm and quiet. Though one cannot believe it this is evident in the silence that lies over the valley and in the broken crushed walls of what once used to be a proud and prosperous village. But of course you will not see this side of the river from that height. To see it in its proper light, to look beneath its flat smooth deceiving face, one has to climb down into the valley.

And to get down to the river is not easy either. First there is the jungle, dark and misty, where lurks the hungry leopard ever in search of meat. Then there are the slimy rocks, their smooth black surfaces hiding death. And under the thorny undergrowth wait snakes and leeches ever ready for the warm comfort of a human foot But battle through these difficulties and the reward seems good. Gradually the jungle loses its hold on the hill-slope and finally gives way altogether to the rich low land bordering the river. Here nature deceives your eye, closing it to the dangers within the river. Very quickly, very cleverly has she repaired the damage of the last flood. Once more the stately coconut tree bears fruit, and its neighbour, the buxom jak fruit tree, is heavily

loaded. The scent of a ripe mango, the thick rich grass, beckon man and fill him with a false promise of security. But man cannot be deceived for long. The valley is empty of all life except for one solitary hut which stands undaunted and unafraid in spite of the truth. This is the home of Lansina Nona.

* * *

When the river overran the village for the second time the villagers decided to move on to a safer place. They left behind then their shattered homes and ruined crops, their unrecovered dead. All that were left alive went except for Lansina Nona. She alone refused to be defeated by the river. The valley is too rich to be deserted, she said. It was her home. It had been so ever since the day she was born. She would allow no river to drive her away. She would live alone, if necessary, and prove that there yet remained ways and means of outwitting the old devil.

* * *

When the rice was destroyed she lived on the few coconuts that were left on the trees and on a wild yam or two that she dug up from the hillside. When the water subsided, she took her hoe and walked tirelessly up and down the hill searching for a bit of land that would be safe from the river. Finally she found it behind a rock-cave, very near the jungle ; but the land was more or less flat there and she only had to break up the mud-clotted soil and then level and smooth it down with a rake. Then she brought out the seeds she had hoarded and saved, and scattered them over the land. She would have to wait a long while yet before the taste of rice was once again in her mouth, but this she did not mind. She did not mind how long she waited as long as she proved that life still went on in spite of the river.

Behind the rice, a little higher on the slope, she planted a bed of vegetables. Bottle gourd, a few sweet potatoes, a handful of chilli plants. Then she brought sticks and branches from the edge of the jungle and built a low fence round the whole plot.

When the boats went by on the river carrying men through the valley to the other side, Lansina Nona squatted on the bank and watched them go. Sometimes the men, curious to see this lone woman in the wilderness, drew their boats close to the land and spoke to her. There was something cheery and indefatigable

in her round plump face. They had never seen such a woman before. Her eyes were the same colour as smoke from a wood-fire and her skin was light in colour. It was not the golden fairness of the hill country women but a strange pale colour like milk which had been treated with water. She told them that her father had been a white man who had passed through the village long ago. That was why her mother had named her Lansina Nona, meaning half-white.

From the men she learned bits of gossip about what went on in the outside world and in return she entertained them with stories of her own making. Once she even got them to bring her a goat so that she could give them milk when they were thirsty. But never once did she touch on the hardship she endured and of the ever-present danger hiding beneath the river. One by one the men kept on trying to persuade her to come with them.

"Now what is the use of staying here alone ? Come with us, *Akke*, and we will find you a good place to live in. Round that hill now, there is a good village and the people are friendly. There the river runs too low for it to rise up and flood the land and the soil too is good and fertile." But she remained stubborn.

"Here I was born and here I will die when the time comes" she said. "But when I die it will not be through drowning. Of illness, of old age, who knows ? We have to die some day. May be the leopard that is said to live up in the jungle will come down and kill me. What is the use of running here and there Aiya ? Besides I am not afraid of the river. I will not let it drive me away from here."

"But it is dangerous and foolish to shut one's eyes to the river. Alone, what chance will you have against it ?"

Lansina Nona smiled.

"Do not worry, Aiya, the river cannot hurt me. I have grown wise and cunning with the years. See this time the rice is planted where the river cannot go. And when my hut falls I will climb to that cave up there on the hill and live. There are ways, Aiya, there are ways of living if one wants to, in spite of the river."

* * *

A month later the rains started. Lansina Nona awoke to the pattering of it on her roof. She went to the door and looked at the river. It lay still except for the movement of the rain beating down on it. Lansina Nona felt glad that the rains had come early, in time to water her rice. It stood six inches high now and each morning she would climb up and look at it proudly. Yes, let it rain, till the rice was well-watered and after that let it stop. She scanned the sky carefully. The clouds were light, the rain would not last very long. She went inside and as there was nothing else to do, she took her black *bana potha* and sat down to read. This was the only book she had read in her life, other than her old school books. Its pages were worn out and sometimes torn and she knew practically every word by heart, but still she read it. Not because she was interested or because she was religious minded but simply out of habit and partly because she could never sit still without doing something.

Though by nature she was never one of those women who spend their life worshipping at some shrine or other, still she was scrupulous and methodical about her daily devotions. The habit had been ingrained in her ever since she stood as a toddler at her mother's knees. And old Bo-tree which had withstood the flood, served as the worshipping place. A small box she nailed to its trunk and inside this she placed a small broken headless statue of the Buddha. Across it she strung a bit of coloured cloth like a curtain and an oil lamp, always lit, was placed beside the statue. There was no incense to light and no flowers to offer but the headless image did not seem to mind. She had found it lying half-buried in the mud near the river.

But the rain did not cease as she had anticipated. It kept on and soon the river began to rise again, little by little. Rarely did a boat go by now and when it did the boat man would shout out urgently :

"Come, Akke, come. Aiyo, what foolishness is this ? See the river is rising. Everyday it is rising."

But she only smiled and waved them on.

"Do not fear, Aiya, do not fear. Do I not know the river like the palm of my hand ?"

One morning when she opened the door of her hut she found the water moving around like a thief trying to find a way in. Then she took the goat and whatever she could carry, and went up the hill to the cave. Half-way up she stopped and looked down. The water had entered the hut. Now she could not go back even if she wanted to. But she had everything she wanted in her hands, so there was no need to go back. Her mat, her cooking pot, a lamp and the book.

Before the rice could spoil from too much rain, she took her hoe which she had kept hidden in the cave and cut small neat grooves round the sides of the field and let some of the water run out. Earlier she had stored in a supply of coconuts and vegetables. Now she lived on these and laughed at the river.

"So you thought you will get me this time did you?" she shouted out merrily. "Well, see if you can rise even as high as that tree over there before you make me worry."

As if resenting her arrogance, overnight the river turned angry. The water lashed with fury against the trees breaking them in two and Lansina Nona's hut was uprooted from its foundation and torn to pieces. The rain increased its strength and the wind howled dismally round the valley. At last even Lansina Nona had to admit the strength of her enemy. Like a king it rode, carrying everything in its power and leaving no mercy on anything that opposed it. From her high perch she saw the dead bodies of dogs and cattle rush by.

"By staying on I have saved my life," thought Lansina Nona. "This time the river has gone beyond the valley and destroyed other villages. Aiyo, aiyo, how foolish it is to run away. By running they have not escaped."

* * *

But at last the rain ceased. Lansina Nona had thought she would never see the sun again but when she awoke that day there it was as big and powerful as ever. And it was wondrous how the sun could change everything. The bedraggled trees lifted up their heads with hope and the birds came out to sing and dry their dampness. Even the destruction did not seem so heavy under the sun. But the river did not leave the land easily. It clung on with a relentless unyielding hold and its face smooth, and still

again, gave no sign of the evil undercurrent beneath. An evil so great that it carried disease and death at the same time as it quietly sucked the good earth and drank the life blood of the land.

Lansina Nona looked about her sadly. It would take many months before the land recovered again from its loss. Her shrine box was broken and the little headless image had gone back to the river. But she herself was alive and whole and the rice safe on the hill-side. This at least she had proved. The river had been unable to reach her.

But two days later her store of food was finished and there was nothing to eat in the cave. The day before she had noticed some wild berries growing higher up on the hill near the jungle. She looked about for a long stick to the end of which she tied her rake. Armed with this she ventured up the steep climb to gather them. The higher she went, the bigger the fruit and soon she found herself entering the jungle.

"Cut down the jungle and many can live here safe from the river," she thought.

Then she discovered the rock, big and strong, rising out from the side of the hill. It struck out many feet away from the hill and was broad and flat and easy to walk on. On it there was nothing but a few windblown tufts of grass growing here and there and as she walked across she could feel the rock heating up under the sun.

But from the end of the rock the drop down to the valley was terrifying. Never had Lansina Nona seen anything like it before. She felt dizzy and faint and stepped back hurriedly. Why, from here the whole valley could be taken in at one glance ! And also the whole terrifying scene of destruction. The valley was nothing but a sheet of water carrying upon it the stillness of death. No life of any sort except for a few hawks that circled round and round screaming hungrily. Here on the rock she felt that out of the whole world she was the only person left alive.

She felt dazed. Never had she imagined that the river held such vast power to destroy. Then her heart began to beat with thankfulness that she had been saved and also with a strange new sense of power. Yes, she alone had been left alive to prove her courage and wisdom. Now they would all listen to her

when she told them to come back again to the valley. To come back to a new life here on the hill.

"Up here it is quite safe" she would say. "And from this rock here one can sit and watch the whole land below getting flooded without even wetting one's foot. And there is nobody here to fight and say that the jungle belongs to him. All this rich land waiting for the one with the most courage to come and take it."

Then suddenly she became aware that she had made a mistake in believing that the jungle was empty. She became aware of the presence of another there, just behind the rock, under the trees. A shadow moved, a leaf rustled.

"It is a bird or a monkey," she said loudly. "Though it is too windy up here for any creature so small."

Then a yellow head peered above the rock, followed rapidly by a yellow form streaking across the rock. Brought face to face, the woman and the leopard halted confusedly within a few paces of each other. Then slowly the leopard retreated a few steps and stopped. Lansina Nona's mouth dropped open and she began to pant, softly at first, then louder and louder till the panting became the only sound in her ears. The leopard glared balefully at her, then took a hesitant step forward. Lansina Nona's eyes protruded out of her head and rolled hither and thither like loose pebbles. She was unaware of her body moving slowly backwards. To the leopard's one step, she took two, though she did not know it. On and on the two moved across the surface of the rock and then Lansina Nona felt her foot touch nothing but the empty air. Her body jerked backwards and with a twist she fell off into thin air. She was conscious of the wind roaring in her ears and then she saw the river come rushing up to greet her. Closer and closer came the river, its face smooth and smiling in triumph. Then at last her mouth opened and gave a scream so piercing in its agony that it echoed round and round the valley long after she was gone. And some say that to this day it can still be heard, if one cares to listen whenever the river floods that ill-fated valley.

4

Professional Mourners

Alagu Subramaniam

My grandmother died late at night on a Saturday while my sister, brother and I were fast asleep. We were wakened in the morning by the cries from grandmother's house and the sound of drums. We dressed hurriedly and ran to her place. A large gathering was there, and the space between the boundary fence and the outer verandah was lined with people. We pushed our way through the crowd to the centre of the hut in search of our mother. We were feeling afraid because it was the first funeral we had attended.

We had hardly entered grandmother's house when we heard the shouts of the "Master of Ceremonies", who was in charge of all arrangements on such occasions. He was our uncle, a teacher in a small school and a trifle mad. He always spoke rapidly and loudly. And when he was angry he would shout at the top of his voice until the whole village heard him. This morning he was furious because the professional mourners had not yet arrived. "I'll go and fetch them myself," he said, and stamped out of the house. I left my brother and sister, and ran after him, as I was anxious to see the mourners about whom I had heard many stories.

We walked through sandly lanes and narrow winding foot-paths. There were no dwelling houses about and no noise, though I thought I heard the hissing of snakes under the bushes and the howling of jackals in the distance. "The snakes won't bite you; don't be afraid," my uncle re-assured me.

Presently we arrived at a row of huts near the seashore. By the beach stood fishermen, some mending their nets, assisted by their wives, others on the point of putting their catamarans to sea.

"Stop, stop, you stupid rascals," cried my uncle as he ran up to them. "Don't you know that my aunt's funeral is to take place today ? You low-minded fellows ! You should be there instead of on the seashore."

"We didn't know about it," they said, as they left there fishing nets and catamarans. "We shall be there soon." They clapsed their hands and bent down.

Admonishing them again, my uncle walked on in search of the mourners. "That is where these wretched women live," he said, pointing to a few huts even smaller than the ones we had left behind.

He stopped outside and called to the inmates. Two women, dressed in coarse saris which did not come over their shoulders or heads, came out. They were bangles from their wrists to their elbows, and anklets that jingled as they came forward. He shouted at them angrily : "I sent word to you that my aunt's funeral will take place today. Why haven't you come all this time ?"

"We were getting ready to come, master : please pardon us for being late," said one of them.

"Where are the other mourners ?" growled the Master of Ceremonies.

"There are only two of them here at the moment, sir, two sisters. We don't know where the rest are, but even these two cannot come as their mother died this morning, and they will have to attend the funeral."

"Nonsense ! Where do these wretches live ?" he demanded.

"Not far from here, sir."

"Lead me there !"

The two women led the way and we followed them. They stopped outside a hut and yelled for the two sisters who came out, tying the upper part of their saris which had slipped down over their pointed breasts.

They stopped suddenly, stared for a moment, and then prostrated themselves before the Master saying, "Please excuse us today, Sir. Our mother died this morning and we are too much overcome with grief to come and cry at the funeral of outsiders."

"Impudence !" cried the Master. "Two mourners are not enough for my aunt's funeral. Remember who she is."

"Please excuse them," said the mourner who acted as the spokesman. "It is not fair, as they will have to shed tears of genuine sorrow on the loss of their mother instead of pretending at your place."

I noticed that the lips of my kinsman were trembling and his eyes were dilated. The woman who had spoken looked down. I shook my head in sympathy. The Master's anger was now diverted to me, rushing like water through fresh sandbanks.

"Don't be a silly fool," he scolded. "What do you know of these things ? Your father's lawyer friends are expected. His Honour the Supreme Court Judge and the Police Magistrate are coming, and what will they think about us if we don't have enough mourners ?"

The sisters, still on bended knees, begged to be excused. "We didn't mean to be rude, sir," said one of them, "but please let us go this time. On the next occasion when there is another funeral at your place we will come and howl unit our throats give way!"

"Insolence !" shouted my uncle. "So you are wishing for another death in my house. Probably you desire mine, you miserable creatures ! I'll have you flogged by the magistrate for such impudence." And getting hold of their saris he dragged them along the ground for some distance.

"Please remove your hand; we are coming," they wailed.

The Master of Ceremonies released them and strode forward leaving the four mourners and myself to bring up the rear.

On reaching grandmother's house the women threw their hands in the air, unfastened their hair, and began to cry. They joined other women relatives and friends, who sat crying in groups of two's and three's with their heads resting on each other's necks. The professional mourners sat down a short distance away from the others and, throwing their hands in the air, now beating their heads, now their breasts, began to wail and moan. They spoke as they cried, using various expressions in praise of grandmother. In the course of their professional duty they heard some of the

genuine weepers whispering that grandmother might have been taken away from us long ago, but the great god Siva had spared her till cousin Thampoo, her favourite grandson, returned from Malaya. This gave them a new slogan. The rose from the carpet, ruffled their hair, crossed their arms, beat their shoulders and cried :

"Your grandson has come, wake up, my beloved !
Your grandson has come, wake up, my darling !"

Meanwhile, the Master of Ceremonies had boasted of his great deed to his friends who, contrary to his expectations, were horrified at his cruelty. They protested against the inhuman act of the Master, who was forced to apologise to the two mourners. Many of the guests, too, offered their condolences to the sisters, and my father, after promising to compensate them adequately, told them to go home.

Now that the Master of Ceremonies had been reprimanded, the women preferred to wait till the entire ceremony was over, declaring that they might as well stay a little longer and give the full benefit of their services.

The Master, on the other hand, since an action of his had been severely criticised, tried to make up for it by undertaking extra work and engaged himself more busily in his duties than before. He scolded the drummers for slacking, ridiculed them because they could not even drown the voices of the professional mourners, and exhorted them to beat faster and louder. Then he carried bags full of rice, packets of incense and other ceremonial necessities to the bedside of the corpse. By this time he was tired and panting. The effort, following on the walk to fetch the mourners, had exhausted him. Suddenly he fainted and fell flat on the ground. Some of the visitors shrieked, while others ran to his help, carried him to a corner, washed his face with water, and fanned him. In few moments he recovered, apologised, and said he would get up soon. His friends assured him that there were others to help in the arrangements and asked him to rest for some time.

The two sisters among the mourners, whose voices had till now lacked their usual intensity, rose and rent the air with their shrill cries, quite unconcerned about the fate of the Master of

Ceremonies. The four mourners now worked in unison, their bodies swaying like reeds in the wind, and lamented in chorus :

"The poor will miss you, oh, you charitable one !
Who is going to feed us on festival days ?
Your grandson has come, wake up, my beloved !
Your grandson has come, wake up my darling !"

After awhile their lamentations waned, but there was a fresh outburst when the priest arrived. This was followed by a lull to enable him to perform the religious ceremony.

During the ceremony the priest became curious about the repeated mention of "grandson" and, being told the story, he called Thampoo to grandmother's bedside to burn some incense and offer prayers. Thampoo, who had maintained an abnormal composure throughout the day, burst into tears just after he had said the prayers.

"You had been waiting for me for many years," he cried. "What fate was it that kept me away ? And when I came at last, you lay unconscious on the bed and I was not even able to speak to you."

The mourners took up the theme and wailed :

"Why do you remain silent, mother of a great lawyer ?
Answer for the sake of your loved ones !
Open those eyes that are shaped like a fish !
Like those of Minakshi, famed goddess of Madura !
Your grandson has come, wake up, my beloved !
Your grandson has come, wake up, my darling !"

5

The Golden Oriole

Suvimalee Karunaratne

When Miss Vitharne walked into the classroom that morning, like the other mornings during that month, it was apparent to all that something strange and wonderful had happened in her life. It was in the way she carried herself—as if she had been elevated suddenly to an unique position of dignity. She seemed afire too, like a small sun bestowing a scintillating radiance around and about her.

"I want you to know" she told the girls in a low authoritative voice so different from the shrill tone she normally used ". . . . that love is a very special magical sort of thing. I wish each and every one of you may experience it one day." Having made this enigmatic statement she beamed on them like one who had been favoured by a particularly bountiful goddess and was magnanimously invoking the same good fortune on them. She was more than content to see the young upturned faces register surprise and when a few giggled and exchanged covert remarks behind handkerchiefs, she beamed still more. Miss Vitharne obviously was above such petty inconsequentials that day. She turned and busied herself with writing complex and compound sentences on the black board for analysis.

That the girls showed surprise at Miss Vitharne's remark was not a wonder for it was not the type of remark one would expect her to make. Everyone knew Miss Vitharne to be studious and timorous, motivated to a great extent by religious impulses. It was well known that she spent her free time poring over Buddhist scriptures, participating in temple rituals and going on pilgrimages with her mother. She had even taken part in one or two Buddhist

symposiums on radio and these had been major occasions in her life.

The class began to copy the sentences in their exercise books and to silently work them out. Having finished writing, Miss Vitharne went up to the window and for a short space of time lost herself freely and sensuously in the verdent greenery of flapping banana leaves, coconut palms and the Hybiscus hedge. A bird swooped down from a shady Tamarind tree, spreading out brilliant yellow wings. It flew low over the grass and then up and away into the sky. Miss Vitharne watched fascinated. It was not every day one saw a golden Oriole - which the Sinhalese called a 'Yellow robe-thief'. With such splendidly hued wings it must certainly be a bird of good omen, she thought, for yellow was an auspicious colour. It was the colour of gold, of ripe grain, of sunshine. It was also the colour of the robes worn by Buddhist monks; but that was rather odd, she pondered. Why had such a stoically celibate clergy chosen yellow for their robes ? Yellow had so many connotations of fertility, of ripeness, of material fulfilment. Perhaps that was why the hermit monks who shunned society and meditated in the solitude of forests preferred robs of browner russet hue . . . . .

"Miss Vitharne," a gentle voice nudged the rushing stream of her thoughts but she did not hear it. "Miss Vitharne", the voice called louder, cutting through her conscious, startling her.

"Yes, what is it, Ranjini ?" she recognized the young typist from the school office standing by her.

"Ther's a telephone call for you."

"Thank you."

Miss Vitharne glided blithely out of the room not unlike the golden Oriole that had taken wings in to the sky a little while ago. She felt her spirits soar exhileratingly. No doubt that would be aunt Beatrice calling her again. She must really put a stop to these constant summons on the 'phone. Not that Miss Vitharne was irritated by them, but aunt Beatrice must not be made to feel that she was at her beck and call any time of the day, especially during her lessons. True Aunt Beatrice had made a match for her but she must not, on the strength of that, take

advantage of her. Yes, she must put a stop to these phone calls once and for all.

About a month ago aunt Beatrice had actually brought Miss Vitharne a proposal of marriage. It had caused a pleasant excitement in her but her mother had viewed it with singular disinterest and even suspicion. Of course aunt Beatrice himself was quite above any kind of suspicion. The worst anyone could say of her was that she was a confirmed busybody. That was one thing aunt Beatrice believed in staunchly – being a busybody in the interest of other people's welfare. Especially in making matches for her innumerable nieces and nephews. The field offered her ample scope for her energetic talents.

Her mother's suspicious were based on her experience of masculine temperament.

"Does he know Rupa's age ?" her mother had inquired of aunt Beatrice, bluntly. Miss Vitharne had flinched. Delicacy was not one of her mother's strong points.

Aunt Beatrice looked a little baffled. "What for telling Rupa's age ? I tell you, child, all that is not so important. He is not looking for somebody very pretty or young or anything like that. It seems his wife died about a year ago. She must have been about Rupa's age. What he wants now is a nice good girl who will look after him and do everything nicely in the home."

"Does he know that there is no dowry ?"

"Don't worry about all that, child. After all, Rupa has got a B.A. degree no ? That is quite enough for him. He is a very simple good man."

"And children ?"

"He has got several already, so he won't be wanting any more."

Her mother frowned. "Rupa has been quite content to live as she has been living," she said shortly. "She is always busy with her school work and her religious activities."

"But surely, are you trying to tell me that all these things are better than getting married ?"

"The point is Rupa is quite happy as she is. Everything depends on one's attitude and Rupa seems to find happy fulfilment in the things she does."

Miss Vitharne had been surprised at her mother's words and her absolute disinterest in the proposal. She darted a quick look of angry resentment at her. Why did her mother take it upon herself to decide matters – especially matters that affected her life so profoundly ? Surely she was assuming the role of fate in herl life.

"You don't mind, no, if I ask Rupa herself ?" aunt Beatrice asked almost as if she were able to read Miss Vitharne's thoughts.

For a moment she experienced a mixed sensation of confusion and embarrassment. How could she openly exhibit a liking for the proposal ? It would not become her mature years. So she cleared her throat nervously and said primly, "I am quite happy as I am as mother just told you. The question of marriage has never bothered me all these years."

"Then you don't want me to pursue this matter further ?"

There was a pause during which time Miss Vitharne's heart sank a little.

"There is no point in pursuing things that are not destined to take place." Her mother said after a short pause. "One should accept one's karma– fate – as it comes."

Miss Vitharne was again irritated by her mother's decisive tone of voice. How was she so sure that she was not destined to marry ? True she was not a young girl any more but then neither was the man who was been proposed a budding youth himself.

Perhaps aunt Beatrice had felt instinctively how she felt. That was probably why she had telephoned her at school on the following day. Miss Vitharne did not have a telephone in their dingy little row house in the outskirts of the city, and her gratitude knew no bounds when aunt Beatrice telephoned.

"Rupa, now without getting angry, tell me child, do you like this things or no ?" aunt Beatrice asked. "He says he would like very much to meet you. Shall I bring him to your place ?"

These words had caused an excited flurry in the region of her heart but she had only said, "I really don't know what mother will say."

"Never mind what she will say," aunt Beatrice said impatiently. "The trouble with your mother is that she is too proud."

So that evening itself aunt Beatrice had brought him to their home. Miss Vitharne had expected to see an older looking man but all the same he looked kind Throughout the visit he kept casting glances in her direction which made her ears burn. After some time she felt herself welcoming these glances which had the effect of diffusing her whole being with a warm tingling sensation which she had thought not possible for her to feel any more. Once when he looked at her she boldly lifted up her eye lids and even fluttered their lashes a little. But this she regretted immediately, sensing the mild astonishment it caused. His eyes rested on her face inquiringly and it became difficult for her to hide her distress.

Her mother was far from pleased by the visit but Miss Vitharne was too full of pulsating hopes and dizzy exhilaration to feel her displeasure. The next day aunt Beatrice—how truly kind and considerate she was—'phoned and gave the good news. He was keen, it seemed, and had expressed a wish to visit her again. Naturally she agreed happily and so it was that he began to visit her every evening like a prayer. Each day Miss Vitharne became gayer and bolder. Her hair which had been accustomed to tie in a severe knot at the back of her head gave way to a loose informal plait and sometimes even remained unbound, brazening luxuriant tresses to his admiring gaze. Her body felt charged with a new motivation. She could almost feel the surge of sap.

"See how one's karma works", her mother remarked one day. "Just think how long you had to wait to meet the correct man." It was her mother's first words of encouragement—her unofficial blessings. Miss Vitharne who was combing out her hair in front of the mirror thought to herself that she might well have missed her chance on account of her mother but at that moment her eyes took in her reflection and it fairly knocked the breath and also the resentment out of her. She could but marvel at her own transformation—her eyes looking luminously bright and her skin which had been rather dry and showing signs of coarse maturity now giving an appearance of delicate softness. It was as if the burgeoning happiness within her, like a water lily opening out in the morning sunshine, was reflecting itself in her face. "What a brittle thing our personality is," she contemplated in a brief moment of self-knowledge 'dependent on so many external

and internal factors, we change from moment to moment. They say matter remains static only for seventeen thought moments'. But strangely enough this fleeting insight didn't bring with it any equanimity. Rather, she felt holier for having thought it. Soon she was sallying forth to school like a boat with sails unfurled and billowing ecstatically.

At school they had begun to notice the curious change in her too. In the staff room they were quick to catch the meanings hinted at by her oblique remarks.

"One has to experience love to know what it is," she announced stretching herself out lazily on a chair with a half-smile on her lips.

"Ahah !" they laughed, "So our friend here has found herself someone at last."

"Who is the lucky man ?" another cried.

"What lucky man ?" she wanted to know, pretending to frown.

"Congratulations, you dark horse, when is the wedding ?"

"I really don't know what you all are taking about," she said showing a becoming embarrassment and escaping from the barrage of questions she herself had brought down about her ears. But amidst all this teasing hilarity she was aware of a few resentful glances. Well they would be even more resentful when they see the ring. The day before he had asking her what kind of ring she would like to wear. If they only knew from what a well-to-do-family he was and what a responsible government post he held—how jealous they would be ! It was difficult for her to hold in all this elation. All she could do was to make oblique remarks and look as enigmatic as she could.

So now as she hurried out of class and walked across the bit of garden space towards the office block, she was conscious of all eyes following her. She wondered what aunt Beatrice had to say. Most probably it was something not very important. She had been threatening to invite them all to her house for a party in their honour. May be she wanted to fix on the date. Well anyway she must put a stop to these interruptions, once and for all.

Miss Vitharne ran up the few steps to the office, scattered her radiant smiles among the office girls and took up the receiver with aplomb.

"Hello, yes ?"

"Rupa, aunt Beatrice speaking here . . . ."

"Yes aunt Beatrice, do say what you have to say quickly. I was right in the middle of a class. The principal dosen't like our work interrupted every now and again, you know."

A short pause followed this somewhat crisply delivered speech. The silence almost crackled.

"I'm very sorry, child. I really don't know how to tell you what I have to tell you . . . ."

Miss Vitharne experienced a sharp sensation of alarm. Aunt Beatrice's tone conveyed something drastically wrong.

"He . . . . he says. . . . it seems he can't make up his mind . . . . just yet. You see . . . . hello Rupa ? Are you there ?"

Miss Vitharne drew in her breath heavily and managed to make a stifled noise in her throat. The whole world seemed to have stopped dead. A roar of rushing blood seemed to crash and pound about her ears.

"You know . . . . the thing is he can't get over his wife's death it seems. Poor man, I feel sorry for him also. Some people are very temperamental you know."

The silence yawned between them across the wire. She felt it attempting to probe her mind.

"I'm very sorry about it," aunt Beatrice ventured, "but Rupa you mustn't go and let this upset you now."

"Its alright" Miss Vitharne said mechanically, resisting the urge to slam down the receiver.

"What's to be done child! These things happen. As your mother said – what a wise person she is – one cannot force karma to make things happen that are not destined to happen. You must take these ups and downs as they come. I am truly sorry it turned out this way. Wish you all the luck in the world."

Miss Vitharne forced out a polite 'thank you' and dropped the receiver. She began to walk back slowly, her legs dragging.

She strove to control her facial muscles and resolved to remain poised and calm however difficult the feat. Two veins swelled on either side of her neck with the effort. She re-entered the class room and resumed her stance in front of the window. The trees and bushes were a green blur among which her eyes darted hither and thither like angry gnats. She could not feel herself a part of it. The world around her could draw no sympathetic response from her.

The stark blue sky was empty now into which the golden oriole had disappeared but a movement nearer her obtruded on her line of vision. Two brown Mynahs with yellow beaks and yellow legs were busily pecking at the ground. Miss Vitharne watched them going through the motions of their companionable endeavour to ferret out food. Suddenly tears sprang into her eyes. The pulsing, quivering, pregnant life outside impinging on her senses was too much for her and she began to cry.

6

Village By The Sea

Suvimalee Karunaratne

Years ago when I was a little girl I was often taken to the village to visit Grandmother and Uncle. It was a small village, a haven of a place one might think, secluded within thick foliage, fanned by broad-leaved Jak trees and the breeze from the sea.

Uncle was a studious man, and a school teacher. In the evenings he read a great deal, but drank a great deal too. A high domed forehead, angular cheekbones and a nose like a pole gave him a look of intellectual strength.

We were seated in the back verandah when Haramanis Singho's young wife, Iso, climbed over the stile and came up the path. I saw Uncle watch her over his newspaper. She faltered by the steps.

"May I draw some water from your well ?" she asked.

"Why, what is wrong with the water in your well ?" Uncle inquired.

"The water in our well has been poisoned."

"What ?" Uncle was surprised.

"It's not a lie" she said regarding Uncle steadily. "Haramanis has many enemies in the village."

"All right, then, get your water," Uncle said, dismissing her with an impatient wave of his hand. But all the while, as she drew up the water and poured it into her pot, Uncle kept staring at her. She wore a checked cloth of a faded brick colour. It matched her skin, which had a coral tint to it ; Like the flesh of pomegranate seeds, I thought.

Every morning after that, Iso came for water, and Uncle would happen to be in the verandah. He would watch her superciliously.

"What is Haramanis doing about the water in the well ?" he asked once.

"Nothing" she replied "He's too busy—drinking toddy and fighting with his kind."

"Tell me. . . ." Uncle was amused, "does he drink all the toddy he taps up on the tree!"

Iso didn't see anything funny in that. She lifted her hand skyward.

"Only the gods know" she complained, "What does he care if we at home go hungry ?"

The next time she came, Uncle put it to her. "Have you a little time to spare . . . . to help the lady ?" He gestured with his head towards the interior of the house indicating Grandmother who was too feeble to get out of bed. But I knew Pody Hami attended on Grandmother, and Podi Hami was a strong, hard working woman.

"But there is already one there, helping the Lady, is there not ?" Iso asked after a short pause.

"Padi Hami is getting old. She is too well," Uncle said. I hadn't known Podi Hami was ill.

"I have a child in arms, sir," Iso faltered.

"Surely that is no problem. Bring the child with you when you come to work."

I wondered what Grandmother would have to say about Iso coming to help her. She said nothing at first, but Podi Hami had plenty to say.

"I don't know what the young master is doing, filling the house with young wenches. In my opinion, it's high time the young master got married."

Grandmother sat up on her bed, and looked out through the small window which was barred with vertical poles and one horizontal bar.

"Is it not high time that a marriage was arranged, lady ?" Podi Hami persisted.

Grandmother drew in her lips over her toothless gums and her childlike face became puckered in thought. She grunted.

"You know very well, Podi Hami, that I did my best to arrange a match. How many times did I try ? The young master is yery strong willed, he must always have his way."

She looked out the window, at the having sea. The waves gnashed white foam-teeth against the shore and spread saliva-like froth over the beach.

"That is Samsara . . . . ocean of desire . . . . ," she muttered "Endless cycle of birth and rebirth. . . .," and then waving a hand in its direction she asked, "Can you stop all that ?"

Iso started coming regularly to work at the house. Uncle walked up and down the verandah restlessly. Sometimes he sat on his armchair with his evey half closed, a sharp line drawn between his brows. He became gruff and impatient and he drank even more.

Iso was a small-boned woman with small features and wide spaced eyes. She had a chilled look, like a pale Hybiscus that one sees in the early morning. I often saw Podi Hami's eyes narrow angrily at Iso.

"Woman who was brought here to wash chatty pots, get back into the kitchen!" she rasped, confronting Iso.

"You mind your business and I'll mind mine." I heard Iso reply coldly, "Are you the lady of the house to give me orders ?"

"Your man should cut you into pieces," Podi Hami whispered venomously, staring into Iso's eyes.

"That is his business," and she stalked away.

Later, I heard Podi Hami grumbling to Grandmother about Iso. Grandmother merely looked out of her small barred window at the sea. Podi Hami grumbled on.

"Do you not know what a vile, wicked place this is, Lady ?" Grandmother didn't seem to hear her. "There in the jungle you will find Podineris getting a terrible charm worked - against his

enemies. Magilin Nona repeats potent curses at the shrine of a wicked god to harm the woman who took her man." She bent down and whispered loudly in Grandmother's ears, "Haramanis Singho has bad, hot blood in his veins—don't say I didn't tell you !"

"Its the same bad blood in all our veins," Grandmother muttered, her eyes fixed on the shore. "Look at those coconut trees, they lean like drunkards."

I looked at the knotted, anguished trees, spreading their milling palm fronds to the wind in panic. Their trunks were stained pink with the lashing of laterite soil against them, but I have often seen them blood red when the sun sets over the hot, salt sea.

"It's a wonder they do not fall," Grandmother whispered to herself. "They will fall when they're felled," Podi Hami said curtly.

Our pet monkey was tied to a Kohomba tree by the woodshed. One morning as I ran to the back of the house to see her I was brought to a startled halt. By the woodshed was Iso, chopping wood. Beside her was Uncle in a sarong, his bronze body bared to the sun.

"Give me the axe. Chopping wood is not the work of a woman such as you !" His voice carried to where I stood.

Iso's laugh had a metallic ring. "All my life I have chopped wood !"

"Never mind, give me the axe," and he bent down and seized her arm. Iso tried to wrest her hand from Uncle's grip.

"Go away from here, sir, if someone should see us like this."

Uncle took the axe in one hand and with the other arm encircled Iso's waist and pulled her towards him. I stood very still. With a snarl and a growl something hurtled through the hedge. Haramanis Singho had been hiding behind the bushes. As he charged like a maddened bull, I saw a knife held in his upraised hand. I must have screamed, for Uncle turned in time to face the attack. He swung wildly at Haramanis with the axe. A yell choked in Haramanis' throat as he fell to the ground. I felt the earth shake beneath my feet; it was as if a tree had fallen. His fingers clawed the soil convulsively as he gasped horribly.

Uncle stood over him and watched in silence. Iso clasped her hands over her mouth as though to stifle a scream. Haramanis lay still. Blood oozed from the red gash girdling his leathery trunk. A peculiar tree—smell seemed to rise from his body, mixed with liquor and sweat.

Uncle picked up the knife that had fallen to the ground and studied it for a moment, thoughtfully. Then he walked quickly up to the woodshed, and stuck the handle of the knife about a foot above the hinge of the door, on a level with his chest. He beckoned Iso with a commanding, urgent gesture to pull the door close. I saw the blade stick out, wedged in the door. Uncle leant his back against the steel of the razor and pressed hard. His eyes screwed up in pain as he pressed harder still, and the cheeks and muscles of his face quivered as the drops fell off his forehead on to his neck and chest The next thing I saw was Iso falling in a faint.

With the blood gushing from his wound, Uncle picked up Iso and struggled into the house. When Podi Hami saw him and the blood and Iso in a faint, she started to wring her hands.

"Witness ye gods ! Witness ye gods !" she began to wail.

"Stop that and give her some water," Uncle said. From a coir rope that was slung across the back verandah Uncle pulled a towel down, stuffed it against his wound, and got me to strap it in place with another cloth. Then he walked along to the police station which was not far off. He might have been taking a stroll, only at the police station he collapsed.

The case was tried in the courts and Uncle was sentenced to a term of years in prison. When Grandmother heard the news she didn't bring down the roof with weeping, as Podi Hami did. Very objectively, she looked out at the sea.

I still seem to hear her voice in the whispering palms. "Samsara . . . . sea of desire . . . . who can stop it ?"

7

Two Rings To Start

S. I. Francis

One ring to stop and two rings to start.

But in no bus does it happen. People ring the bell as if it were a carillon, and the bus staggers and stalls, and starts all over again. People stood in long queues in the heat of the sun, and sometimes in a drizzle, and the conductor punched out the tickets mechanically before he let them in. It was a covenience, no doubt.

Six doves rose up from the roundabout when the beautiful school teacher who got off at the 13th milepost came along, and fluttered in the morning sun to alight on the bakery roof top. The shadow of the *mara* tree fell oblong across the road, and touched the first step to the post office. It was 7 a.m.

Two rings to start.

The bus jogged along merrily.

. . .but what detail ! And exactness ? Of course. Consider 'six doves', only six doves and not flew but 'rose', and not any roof top but the bakery roof top, and the shadow oblong across the road on the first, not on the second or nothing but the first and no more step of the post office . . . Back in school Jones might yet be teaching his students the appreciation of literature.

The thought of school now completely filled his mind, and made Ruwan nostalgic for his *alma mater*. It was in such a morning as this, bright and refreshing, that he had walked whistling like a lark along the corridor and before he knew what, old Rossa, the discipline master, had given him three cuts on his buttocks just to make it felt that whistling was prohibited in school.

Then there was good old Santo, the history master who loved laughter in his lessons. Laugh, you mutt ! Laugh ! Pilimatalawa leaned on an unsteady reed, and made a somersault into the river much to the amusement of the river fish . . . Ha ! Ha ! And the Portuguese, led by some Sinhalese geese . . . Ha ! Ha ! Ho ! Ho ! Before long he had become the monitor of the class.

One ring to stop.

Oh yes, he had forgotten. The school marm was getting off. She was pretty indeed. She wore a red coat to protect her from the cold morning breeze, and at an obtuse angle from her in the *hamuduruwo* seat sat a youngman talking to his friend about Dilip Kumar and the films. He used to now and then furtively glance back at her, and when she got off the glass on the shutter would frost with his sighs.

Life was where one found it.

Two rings to start.

When he went home to his village end of the month, the fifty rupee note in his trouser pocket almost burned a hole. Yes, he still wore trousers, trousers meant wearing shoes.

The Tanamalwila bus dropped him in his village at nightfall, and the driver waved him farewell. He had learned to enjoy the easy cameraderie of the *hoi polloi*. He stood on the road and watched the tail lights running away into the darkness. He could not but admire the driver who was taking the bus across the country through the whole night. Bus drivers were just great, and and glamorous too. People respected them, if not respect at least placed a certain amount of trust in them when they boarded the buses.

He ran down the dark lane to his home. Dogs barked at the sound of his footfall. He was happy, happy because now he had a job and for the first time in his life he was taking his mother a fifty rupee note of his own earning. How her eyes would light up !

The old woman's eyes in the lamplight, glistened from a furrowed face. She looked at the money and then at the boy, lovingly. Now before her stood her little boy, the justification of her whole life, yet no longer a boy but a man, a little *mahataya* in his trousers and leather shoes. Now the village would come to

her. How great he looked, and how much more so when he would stand beside the Ralahamy's daughter in the *walauwa.*

'Now, son, about your marriage, many people have come inquiring about you, but all what I prefer for you is a woman of good qualities from a good caste family.' The old woman giggled, a happy laughter.

The night was the silence of death and the darkness of sleep. Unlike the town, there was neither the noise of the traffic nor the lurid light of the street lamps through the window. Now, having come home, seen his mother and heard her talk as she gave him dinner, he felt the world a mighty emptiness. He did not know that a Kachcheri clerk could fetch a *walauwa* girl. True, the old man Karunaratne down the road too had started life with only a 7th Standard education as a Kachcheri clerk and risen up to retire as the O.A. There was the big house in the village that he had put up as an epitaph to his career. But that was in the old days.

Mother thought that he, with the Senior School Certificate framed and hung up in her room, should have better prospects. How little she knew. Why, now there was even an union of S.S.C. unemployed. Perhaps he himself had got it all mixed up, and lost his sense of proportion. The village was a nuisance. He had lost the joy of home-coming. He wanted to run away from its stagnant puddle of life.

Out in the town, at the bus stand, it was lovely; little boys crying the morning news, the sweep-ticket sellers, the beautiful school missy disturbing the pigeons in the roundabout, having tea and cigarettes in the Tamil boutique with his comrades, the throb of life, the act of living.

Oh no, he couldn't tell mother. How could he have told her that he had got a job as a bus conductor ? He had written to her that he was now a clerk in the Kachcheri.

8

My Son Lia

Rosalind Mendis

The bundle of fresh green grass was scattered among the hay. My son Lia was looking down ruefully at the damage done. His little brothers were the culprits.

"Knock their heads together", the mother said behind him.

He looked up. "Boys will be boys, mother", he said.

"As you were once, my son. Yes!" the mother replied.

He looked at her and laughed. a happy free laugh. The mother smiled. There was a world of meaning in the word "yes" when she uttered it. "Dear mother," he thought, turning away, and beginning to clear the mess "I have given her more heartaches than all her other children put together".

When she walked back to the house, the mother met the younger children, the two culprits. For a moment she stopped, helplessly looking about her. The two fellows were engaged in a tussle between themselves. The younger, aged seven was holding his own with the elder, who was two years his senior. Tufts of hair falling over his face, his lower garment dropping off, he went at his brother, hammering the other's face with his little fists. Time and again they rolled on the ground, over each other, covered with grit and mud. Again and again they rose to their feet and glared at each other with bated breath. Then they rushed at each other once more, the younger with an angry sob, and the other grim and silent. A little girl of three years, watching them, sent forth shriek after shriek of terror.

The mother rushed forward finally and seperated them. "You little devils!" she snapped angrily. "You were born to worry my

life out." She smacked them heartily. Glaring at the younger one, she said. "Look your cloth!"

He hastily picked up the fallen cloth and wrapped himself with it. With an effort the mother repressed a smile. "Be off with you both", she commanded. "Get down to the well and wash yourselves!" They raced down the hill eagerly, their quarrel already forgotten as was usual with children.

She turned suddenly and her gaze fell on her son Lia who was standing by with an amused smile.

She frowned, "Yes it's fun for you." she said.

He felt guilty. He hastened to comfort her, "I know it is hard for you, mother," he said softly.

The mother's heart filled with unshed tears. He was the best of her brood. She could not help loving him more than the others. But she would not admit this even to herself, She was happy in her home and family in spite of all her care and worries. The children were the joy of her life. Peace she had not. What with quarrels and squables, the anxiety caused by various ailments of the children, the dread of seeing them hungry when they grain grew short, all were part and parcel of her life. How utterly different marriage turned out to be from what she had thought of it. She had dreamed that it was all joy. As a mother of a growing family she found she had more cares than joys. Yet she was happy. There were moments when her heart was full. If she had to choose again she knew she would rather choose her life as it was now to anything else.

Married at sixteen to a man of her parents' choice, she lived her life among the high hills, in a tiny hamlet at the end of the town, just outside it. The natural surroundings were lovely and picturesque, the people simple, pleasant and relaxed, always smiling. There were bare-bodied children running about, women on the road carrying their little ones astride their hips. Evidently fond of their children, having much time for them, the women looked relaxed, nice, informal and friendly.

She the mother of eight children, with another on the way, was one among many such women. Her five boys and three girls the eldest-aged seventeen, the youngest one year old, kept her

busy from morning till she went to sleep. The eldest was a girl, a great help to the mother in the house-hold tasks. Another girl aged twelve was yet going to school with three of the boys. Her eldest son Lia, with the younger ones when they were free, helped the father to plough the fields, tend the cattle and cultivate vegetables.

While still young, Lia left school. The teacher had found it difficult to manage him. He was often caned at school for playing truant. Then for days he would hide in the woods for fear of his father, creeping home under the darkening shadows of the night to be fed by his anxious mother when his father was asleep. He would spend his nights sleeping under shady groves or under hay stacks in the fields. Suddenly he would come home, having given enough time for his father's anger to cool, whereas the latter would pretend that he had never been missed. Sometimes there were complaints from angry neighbours. Time and again they found their yams uprooted and vegetable patch damaged, the ripe mango picked, the guava and the tender king-coconut just ready to be plucked, taken away. Lia sometimes managed to escape the wrath of the offended neighbours with his winning manner. The village mothers were up against him, however, for his endless fights with their children. Hardly a day passed without a mother coming up the path leading a child either with a black eye or a bleeding nose. Severe was the punishment then meted out to Lia in the presence of the offended mother.

Little Lia's grandmother would fiercely intervene on these occasions to defend him. She was a beautiful old woman with the beauty appropriate to old age and when she smiled, her hundred wrinkles smiled with her. She passed most of her time with the grandchildren whom she loved, especially Lia, who resembled her dead husband. She would rush into the midst of everybody and pull the boy away, muttering imprecations on her daughter. She would then pounce on the neighbour and scold her, "Shame on you !" she would cry, "To nurse anger on a little mite."

His mother would always regret it after beating him. Her resentment would later in the day rise up against her neighbour for making her punish her boy on a mere complaint. At such

times she would often find Lia in a corner with a forlorn look, sucking his thumb, his little body curled up. She longed to gather him to her heart and to comfort him. But she would deny herself, fearing his baby mind would sense her weakness. There were times that he had looked at her hurt, surprised that the only being who could understand him had gone over to the enemy's side. Then she wondered whether he was not, after all, justified in his action though he had not defended himself. She knew that he always fought his own battles. He rarely asked anyone else to fight for him. Many were the times he had come home bruised and bleeding, his clothes torn, and when questioned he would take the blame upon himself and never accuse anybody else. Once, he had to be taken to the nearest hospital to stop a wound which was bleeding profusely. After repeated threats the only explanation he gave was that he had obtained it in a fair fight.

At an early age he showed signs of maturity. He who lived close to nature had come to learn of life, of sex and love precociously. Roaming about the woods and the jungle he saw life all around him. Seeing nature at her loveliest with the bees and flowers, birds and animals, his little mind grasped and understood how life was continued. He suffered at his own thoughts for they made him restless, and strange and conflicting were the emotions they aroused. They made him want to run away from home. But for his deep attachment to his mother he would have run away. He always hesitated when he thought of her. She was the most wonderful being in his little world. His love for her made her in his mind's eye the height and breath of the globe he moved in. Often in the darkness of the night woken up by frightful dreams, he would creep to his mother's side. There he would instantly fall asleep under her comforting arm and to the sound of her reassuring voice.

They were a happy and healthy family, nurtured in the mountain air, with joys and sorrows, heartaches and pleasant surprises. The mother was a slight little woman, gay and relaxed while she worked. The father was as hardy as the mountain tree fond of his family and fond of his home-brewed pot of toddy. He was never idle. When the graia was sown, there was the yam the sweet potato, the jak and the breadfruit to be tended, in case

the grain went short. Their daily needs were provided for, nothing more. Their real wealth consisted in the deep unselfish love that often existed in big families. Each shared and shared alike by way of food and clothes, and joys and sorrows. They amused themselves with games and toys of their own making.

The boy Lia enjoyed most his own company, carving funny little figures of wood and modelling animals of clay. At times he was seen in an evening seated on a rock playing the flute, filling the mountain air with its low, haunting music. The aerie, fluttering tones moved deeply the heart and soul of man with a magic seductive in its appeal. Often he would look over the valley, preoccupied with his own thoughts.

Fantastic and wonderful was the view down below on the plains. Men and women could be seen at work in the fields, preparing the ground for the next harvest. Some could be seen carrying heavy sacks of tender tea leaf on their heads, walking up and down the rugged hillsides. Far away the road wound its way alongside the hill.

"Life is hard for animals," the boy thought, as he watched the bullock-carts going down the hill. He was amazed at the heavy loads the animals carried and the care and precision with which they walked down the hill where human feet could easily slip. He saw men and women looking like little dwarfs far down below, on the road. The cars and the buses winding their way down looked like children's toys. Lia could also see, now and again, a village far in the distance on top of the hillside, built in conformity with the landscape and one with it. The paths to it consisted mostly of steps, uneven and broken in many places often crossed by tiny streamlets which ran down the hill in conformity with the slope. When the darkness gathered and fell over the valley, only lights could be seen, fire-fly specks glimmering among the scattered hills and slopes.

When night fell, Lia would hurry back home, fearing his mother would be anxious. His father would scowl at him and the mother would quietly set about making ready the night meal with the help of her eldest daughter. Then in their different corners the children would sit and eat in a wonderfully quiet manner, utterly unlike their boisterous behaviour outside the

house. The children would eat through to the last grain. The quickness with which Lia finished his food made his mother anxious and she would hastily separate a part of her own share to give it to him.

"No, Mother," he would protest, "I have had enough." He always felt uneasy eating her share.

"Nonsense," the mother would reply, "I am full, I cannot eat more."

Then an amused smile would cross the father's face. The meal over, he was seated under the porch, a cup of hot tea beside him. "The dear woman," he would say to himself and smile again. "Yes, she is a good mother, a good wife. She is able and thrifty too." He poured out the tea on to the saucer and blew on it. Each mouthful called forth a series of loud smacks to express appreciation.

The work over, 'Lia's mother was never too tired to tell a story. She would settle herself on the mat with a chew of betel, her legs outstretched. The children scrambled round, each trying to get nearest to her. Varied were the expressions that flittered across their eager little faces while they listened with rapt attention to her tales of fairies and demons, and to her accounts of the oft-repeated but always-new folk lore of the funny little Court jester who lived long ago. Lia would sit apart from the others and listen to his mother with a look of wonder in his eyes. She, meeting his great big eyes with her own, would return his look fondly. The father, laying on his wooden cot and watching the group, was astonished to find his children quietened by the magic lull of stories. His heart softened as he looked at his wife who was one with the children as though a child herself. The eldest girl, washing and clearing up, while listening to her mother, would dream of the day when she would leave her parents roof and have a home of her own.

The mother's younger sister was a constant visitor to their home. She lived in the same neighbourhood just across the fields. On an evening she would drop by with a bunch of herbs freshly plucked for her old mother and home-made sweets for her little nieces and nephews. The two sisters were great friends with only an eleven months' difference of age between

them. They would chat away to one another, while drinking hot plain tea in their saucers, munching at the same time little bits of jaggery. The mother nods and listens, looking charming as she eats for she had no teeth. The children eating their sweets, laugh and giggle.

"You look sweet, granny !" Lia would say with a teasing laugh.

"Go away, boy!" she would say gruffly, driving him away.

The children usually hovered round, listening to the elders as they talked, as children would do in the village.

"Go on, go and play!" the mother would say, when her sister lowered her voice to whisper the latest scandal in the neighbourhood.

The children would then obediently disperse in different directions, except for the littlest crawling at the mothers's feet.

Life went on thus with its little changes in the village homestead. Liapola, now a boy of seventeen, was getting more difficult to handle. He had outgrown parental authority. His mother held him only with her tenderness. He was to be found absent from the house during the greater part of the day. Once, without forewarning he did not turn up for the mid-day meal. The mother, anxious and worried, left her work and looked over the hills, shading her eyes.

The father who had returned from work looked furious. He was standing in the yard holding on to his mamotty. The climb up the hill under the burning sun caused him to breathe hard and sweat ran down his bare body. "Don't give him anything to eat," he commanded angrily, and strode into the house.

The mother suppressed her sorrow. When her sister dropped in, she burst out into tears. "You have spoilt the boy," the sister chided. "You love him too much. Be careful for you will get hurt one day."

The mother looked at her youngest child, who cradled in her arms, was giving suck to her breast. "Love never leads to hurt, my sister," she replied softly, "especially a mothers' love for it gives and gives and asks for little."

The younger sister looked away unable to say anything.

Meanwhile Lia was roaming the woods. He climbed through curious groups of mountains looking like monstrous ant hills. In search of water he suddenly came upon a broad stream thick with green vegetation on its bank. The place was beautiful with large patches of cultivation and naked brownish-white hills around. He noticed the earth and his eye brightened. This was what he had been searching for a long while. He knelt down and felt the earth, his fingers running through its creamy softness. It would provide good clay for his modelling.

Happy in his find, he turned towards home tired, but feeling content. His body was paining slightly all over but as he walked back slowly with his hatchet over his shoulder, he drank in deeply with his eyes the intensively moving landscapes of long, lovely stretches of field, of the vast sky, always so close, and then he raised his face upwards, thankful for his life, thankful to the One above, who with a kind eye looked over everything. A real happiness filled him. A peace and freedom overflowed into his soul with the thoughts of a new life before him.

On his way back he met a few of the village people. They walked leisurely and looked neighbourly. They wanted to know from what village he had come. They seemed anxious to help him. He felt grateful. His path ran across a field and every now and then he climbed over a style. The weather was very hot but occasional breezes cooled the air. The country continued to be beautiful for miles, the clouds against the low hills seeming to be blue in colour. The air was clean and refreshing from the neighbouring hills. The view before him was now bare and wide with a greater vastness stretching far into the landscape, dotted all over with patches of cultivation. The food seemed to be plentiful, he thought. He dreamed of the day when he would come here to settle down with the woman of his choice. "Never an arranged match, no never !" he said to himself violently.

When he reached home, he noticed his father seated on the porch with a neighbour. He quietly skirted the house and walked in through the back yard. He heard his fathers' voice. He stopped. "My boys are an asset," his father was telling his friend, who had dropped in for a chat and a drink of toddy. "They are a

great help in the fields, except Liapola." He always gave his sons full name when he was annoyed. He shook his head, "He puzzles me," he repeated.

His wife hearing what was said came out of the kitchen.

"You *would* say that," she complained, staring at him angrily, "why do you pick on the boy ?"

"Come now," the father replied, "Don't get huffed. You know too that he is a good-for-nothing, your son."

Her eyes flashed, and for a moment she could not speak; "Yes, go on ! Your own flesh and blood too !" she snapped out finally.

"There, now !" the man interrupted, putting an end to the scene. "Keep a hold on your tongue ! Let's have a little rice if it's ready."

The wife muttered under her breath and went on indoors to work off her anger.

Her son came behind her quietly. His arms stole round her shoulders and he pressed his face against hers. "There, now, Mother, don't worry. Father doesn't mean it."

She softened in spite of herself and wondered that the boy had not resented the harsh words. She was proud of him whatever the father may say. They were all good, her children, all of them.

The mother noticed that such scenes affected Lia a great deal though he tried to hide this from others. For days afterwards he would work without a word, a pensive look in his eyes. He would make a greater effort to help his father, to ease his burden of bringing up his little brothers and sisters.

One week later the father came in, a worried look on his face. "The birds and rabbits destroy the fields," he said despondently. "They are eating up all the paddy !"

Lia heard this. The next day the father found in the field the most fantastic scare-crow that ever stood on a paddy field. His heart softened towards his son. He thought he now need not come so often to the little shack to keep vigil. He can rest his aching bones.

Liapola in his free time busied himself with modelling figures and animals with the clay which he walked miles to fetch. He would make little mud soldiers with swords in hand and black bare-bodied men, resembling the Veddah, with bow and arrow. He would assemble these figures and look at them for hours, moving them about in a world of make-believe.

His baby sister often worried him for toys. Once he modelled a rabbit seated quaintly on its hind legs. It looked almost alive, a living breathing thing and the child was scared. The mother, seeing it, was amazed. "You could make money," she said, "If you take them to town."

Thereafter he would walk miles and miles to get the right kind of clay for his work. No hardship counted. Nothing less than the finest quality satisfied him. He would take his wares once a week to town where they were rapidly sold. Once when he was coming back home he suddenly came upon a particular kind of clay across the breath of jungle which lay between the town and his land. He found it on a soft spot where the Nelum bloomed. Beyond the stretch of clay, surrounded by a wall, rose the imposing building of the richest man of that part of the country. He was supposed to be of noble descent and he lived aloof from all with his wife, family and private household. A train of servants could be seen attending to the immense garden surrounding the house. Liapola was sorting the clay from a pool of water when he heard a rustle behind the wall. He listened ! He heard the clear sound of someone falling and impatient "Uoo" . . .

Lia cleaned his hands on the thick green turf with a mind to stand up and look. He held on to the branch of the guava tree the other branches of which fell over the wall and climbed to the top. A young girl, small and slim, dressed in bright yellow, absolutely alive, sat looking ruefully at a ripe guava fruit. He supposed that she was the daughter of the house. He had already seen her often from a distance in the garden. She looked very young, a little more than a child.. It was evident that she had tried but failed to pluck the fruit. She looked up and then down at her bruised palms, pink in colour. Her hair had fallen over her face.

A twinkle appeared in Lia's eye. He almost began teasing her, as was his wont with the village damsels, when he suddenly remembered who she was. He dared not. She would take it as an insult. He gave a discreet cough instead. She turned round startled. He gave her a winning smile, "Allow me," he said, and, lowering the branch carefully, he plucked the rich, yellow fruit. "Catch !" he said as he looked down at her.

She looked up and her eyes held him. In their depths her simple soul met his with shy wonder.

"Mind," he said softly and he dropped the fruit dexterously into her hands. Then he turned and swung himself down.

He walked home taking a longer way back, his heart on fire. He was hardly aware of the lovely walk through the woods. A hundred little wild flowers in pink, white and blue sprouted along the ground. He stooped suddenly and picked up a tiny blue one. Her eyes, he thought, were the colour of this wild blue. His hand closed on it. He walked on, keeping to a narrow track along which a few people occasionally strayed. He crossed the little stream where a woman was seen washing clothes and a little child wading in the water. He splashed some water on his face and hands. The tiny blue flower, now withered, dropped from his palm and was seen floated down. He climbed up the hill deep in thought. It was getting dark.

He found the family gathered in the porch and he heard the sound of excited voices. His brother from town had come home. They all sat and talked. This brother was quite different from the rest of the family. He had left the home for the town very early to live and work with an aged uncle who ran a little shop. His brothers and sisters were fascinated by the voluble flow of coversation from the man in town. Liapola greeted his brother, his junior by an year, pleased to see him. He sat apart, however, listening, while the little ones crowded round his brother. His father looked proud and happy. Lia smiled to himself, an amused smile. His brother knew how to please the father. Though he often forgot to send money home, he never failed in his visits to bring home the bottle of arrack which his father loved. And he also brought little gifts for his mother and the little ones. "Yes, he is clever, he knows how to please the family," Lia thought, a

little jealousy. He saw his mother getting the meal ready. He wondered why she was rather quiet. He looked at her. She was still young and slim with a strong cheerful face. At the moment her face was clouded as she listened to her son from town. She looked anxious and reprimanded him once with a stony stare. He talked too much and was condescending in his manner. His ways greatly lowered her regard for the town. After a time her face relaxed. After all he had come home to see them. She relented towards him. "Children come and eat now," she said, "Then we will talk."

Days passed. Liapola found his life had changed since a pair of eyes had looked into his. That glance had changed his whole world. It followed him wherever he went. He found it in the fields, in the woods where he roamed, and in the pools into which he plunged and swam. He found that the feeling he had towards the girl was quite unlike the love he had for his mother. He could measure his love for his mother, but this, it filled his entire being and seemed to have no beginning and no end. Awake at night he mused upon this love. He went about cheerfully. His heart sang. His mother would often hear him whistling. "Life is good, Mother,' he would say, "It's such fun looking forward to the future."

The mother looked at him. What had changed him ? she wondered. He looked bright and happy. May be not for long, she thought to herself. "I don't understand you, my son," she said.

Now a day passed but he walked towards the spot where he first saw the girl hoping to see her again. He had seen her once passing by in the car while he waited for the bus to take him to town. It was thirteen days now since he had seen her, if he left out the day, a fortnight ago, when he saw her in his dreams. When she had come to him in his dreams, she looked so remote, and seemed from another world. He felt sad. The poverty of the dream left him empty. Weeks and months passed. He became restless; he was short and abrupt in speech at home. Often he snapped at the younger children. His work in the fields suffered. The mother saw the change in him.

It was a rather warm day. She was seated on the door-step. "Yes, the time has come," she sighed. "He should marry," she said to herself. Her infant, a month old, was sleeping peacefully

on the mat beside her. The children were playing in the yard. One of the elder boys was milking the cow. And the girl was hoeing the sweet potatoes for the night meal. She felt a little sad, thinking of the eldest who had married and left home last year She missed her daughter, though the younger had left school and replaced her in the household. She saw her son Lia walking up the path after work in the field. He looked tired, she thought. His eyes brightened when he saw his mother seated, with the infant beside her. He looked down at his brother. "He looks cute." he said softly. He tickled the little toe of the baby. The child woke up crying for his mother.

The mother scolded the elder boy for waking up the little one and hushed him to sleep. She bared her brest, giving suck to the child. She had none of the inhabitions of the town women. It was something she did almost every day. Her children, she nursed them all at her breast. She was so rich and full in the abundance of milk that often she had fed a neighbouring child in need. She looked down at the baby now as though he were the first-born.

Lia looked at them simply. His face softened. An idea crossed his mind. I will model them. "Mother and the little one," he said softly He felt happy after a long time.

The months rolled by and Liapola had almost forgotten the chance meeting. He had heard that the girl had left the village for a distant town to pursue higher studies. He too left the village to be an apprentice under an old man whom he had heard was a master of the plastic arts. Very soon he learnt the time-honoured tricks of art and colour. Under his deft and skillful hands came into being the most beautiful forms, figures of exquisite design, animals of different kinds and shapes. What came out of his hands appealed to the soul, awakening the hidden goodness in man. A few years later, his fame spread far and wide. Lovers of art would come from distant parts of the land to purchase his work.

One day coming up the hill he saw his grandmother climbing up above him. At every step she halted to take her breath. He hastened forward and helped her along.

Her face brightened. "You are a good boy ! Here, eat some of this", she said, handing him a few home-made sweets which she had brought with her. He smiled. His heart warmed. She looked so soft and charming, he thought. She had a natural beauty that most old women in the town do not have, for trying to look young, they succeed in looking ghastly.

The little ones crowded round the grandmother as she came up. They were all happy to see her. They knew that she had something nice for them.

Lia was standing as though rooted to the ground, his gaze at the central figure who was seated on a chair outside the porch. He could not believe his eyes. She, of all people, here ! He had almost forgotten her. Why had she to return into his life ?

She was being graciously entertained by his mother. There was the brass-stand—polished for the occasion—in which leaves of betel and arecanut were neatly arranged. Her rose-bud lips looked brighter with the red betel juice. Close at hand an old woman was in attendance, chatting to the children, but her eyes returning now and again to her young mistress. Lia's glance went back to the girl. He sensed the gulf between them. She was as far from him as the moon that shone in the sky. For a maddening moment he wanted to run away. But they had seen him. He straightened himself and went to meet her. His hands smoothed out his clothes and put back his ruffled hair.

She had come with an offer from her father, he learnt. They had heard about his sculpture. The father wanted him to instal a fountain in the garden. Something original she said. Would he take the order ? she wanted to know.

He went hot and cold inside. His mother saw his hesitation. She hastened to anticipate him. He knew then that his fate was sealed. He felt as though he was a puppet moved about in the village play. "You are not going to refuse ?" the mother said anxiously, "It is an honour, my son. Your name is made."

He looked at her and smiled, "Yes, it is !" he said. He continued to look at her and there was something tender and humorous in his look. "Yes, it is an honour ! I accept."

The mother was solely puzzled at his tone. She brushed it aside and was only too glad that he had agreed.

Liapola turned to the girl, "I will be there in the morning," he said shortly.

The mother frowned. What was wrong with him ? He should learn how to talk to his betters. "The young lady wants to see your work," she hastily said, giving him a warning look.

They followed him to the little shack where he worked. The place was cramped up with a hundred various objects. Carvings in wood, animals of different kinds and shapes, delicately modelled figures made of baked mud, open-mouthed masks, all dabbed with fantastic colours, crowded the shed.

The girl hesitated on the threshold. The quiet, uncompromising figure of the man standing by her damped her spirits. The mother urged her to enter.

"There is nothing of special value," the man said bluntly.

"But this," the girl said softly. Her hand reached out and lifted up the figure of the mother seated with the child at her breast. Her fingers travelled caressingly over the soft dimpled face of the child. She had never seen anything so beautiful before. She clasped it tightly, "Can I keep this ?" she asked eagerly.

He stiffened slightly. For some unknown reason he had always refused to sell this work of his.

Her face fell. Supposing he refused out of sheer cussedness. He looked so grim, his figure snake-like in grace with broad shoulders. His eyes seemed to reach her from a far distance and he was quite unlike the boy with the dancing eyes she faintly remembered.

He quietly wrapped the fingure of "Mother and the little one" with a handful of straw and handed it to the girl. He refused to accept the money when she wanted to pay him. His dark arresting eyes looked into hers for a second, "I will be there in the morning," he repeated. He stepped aside to let her pass.

The mother turned to him when she had gone. "What's wrong with you, son ? Why were you rude to the lady ?"

"Rude, Mother? I hardly talked!" He looked at her and smiled, a twisted smile, "I know my place, you know," he said.

For a moment the mother felt as though her son was a stranger. "You sound bitter, lad! You shouldn't be. They were born to that state."

"Yes," he agreed sullenly, "what have we, the down-trodden in common with their kind ?"

"She was kind, though," the mother said in defence.

"Yes!" he said curtly, "She had the sort of patronizing kindness that thinks we are part and parcel of their surroundings existing for their pleasure."

"Lad," the mother said worried, "Don't let malice eat into your heart. This is our lot, sinners that we are. If we accept it, then life is easy."

He kept silent. He knew that if he followed his mother's advice life would be simple. Yet hate grew within him with the supression of his sense of equality. Being forced to submit outwardly, bitter resentment threw deep roots within.

The mother lingered. She was looking at his silent face, and her heart stirred, "you are doing well, now. You should not care, son!" She said softly.

"Should not care! Sometimes I think it is the only thing I care about," he turned away abruptly.

For months he was working on the fountain. The master of the house walking past took no notice of the silent figure at work. The connection the former had with the people of the village was vague and remote. They were a part of the environment in which he lived, not living breathing beings who existed like himself. The master thought he was being kind and considerate, when he condescended to notice someone who worked for him. He was delighted at the sculpture and full of praise. The ornament was surely worthy to grace his gardens! "I will pay you handsomely, yes!" he said graciously. Lia rose to his feet, stood back and stared. He wiped his brow with the back of his mind.

The master looked at him, a word of annoyance rose to his lips but he checked himself and walked off. "The fellow sadly

lacks manners," he muttered to himself. "May be he is annoyed that I interrupted him."

The work went on steadily. It was a magnificient figure of an animal with large mouth opened, teeth bared and regal head on strong shoulders thrown back, while from his deep throat gushed forth the swirling waters of the spout. At the first glance, the figure looked repulsive in its grotesque posture. The eye was then attracted by its very repulsiveness till it was held, betwitched by something appealing in the intensity of the eyes. The eyes of the animal held the beholder and awakened the unknown depths of his soul. Man, woman or child found it difficult to break away from the expressive glance. One felt an awe before this work of art. He seemed, however, one who was born to give something new to the world.

The work was almost complete. Liapola was giving the finishing touches to it. Nobody was about the place. At his own request he was left alone to work at will. Also, his quiet silent manner kept people away. He gazed at the work before him. The pain and frustration of his love had found expression in the work of art he had fashioned. He had found a joy unknown to him working on it. His hand moved quietly over the work. He was so absorbed that he failed to hear the sound of a foot-step behind him.

"It's my dream come true," a voice said softly.

He stood still, so still that he too looked like a carved figure. A few seconds passed. He raised his head quietly and looked around. He said nothing. He marvelled at her exquisite loveliness so unlike the sunburnt beauty of village maids. Her cheeks glowed and had the colour of mauve-pink pomegranate. He had no words. He turned back to his work again.

"Don't be sad," she whispered. "That is timeless !" softly her fingers went over the throat of the animal. She was standing so close that she almost touched him. She smelt of the orchid that bloomed on the full moon night. He moved away uneasily. Suddenly he felt a touch on his hand. He trembled violently. "You shouldn't !" he begged, "Someone will see." His eyes strayed.

"Let them see," she replied. She felt as though she could violate all laws.

A woman approached them, the woman who had nursed her since she was a baby. Years of service made her bold with her young mistress.

"It's getting dark," she warned.

The girl flushed angrily. "Leave me alone, Tikiri," she snapped, "I want some nelum flowers. He is going to pick them for me."

"You are a spoilt girl, that's what you are !" the old woman turned away muttering to herself.

The girl burst into a ringing laugh, a joyous young laugh. "Poor Tikiri, she is like a clucking hen."

Lia's face lit up with an amused smile. There was something appealing in his irregular features with its short nose. The break in the tension made them both come back to normal.

"You told her a lie," he said, her eyes twinkling.

"No !" she said, "You are getting them for me," she walked off, expecting him to follow her.

The male in him resented her cool superiority. He deliberately took a long time to come. He thought he would finish the work for the day first. She was quietly waiting for him at the little gate leading to the pond.

"You are angry again," she said, her eyes dancing with mischief. He suddenly felt shy. "She is cute," he thought to himself, ill at ease.

Before he could help her, she had stepped over the stile and was going down to the pond. She slipped once and nearly fell. He followed her. He gathered a handful of pink and blue flowers and handed them to her. They walked back together; he was quite, she alive and gay. It was getting dark.

"I will help you over," he said, standing by the stile.

She shook her head and held out the flowers to him.

"Your hands," he said, holding her hands, palms upwards in his, his eyes widening, "They are soft and tender like the pink lotus !" He quietly dropped them.

She turned around quickly and tried to climb up but her clothes got caught. She stumbled and knocked against a hay stack. He stretched out his strong young arms and they both rolled over. Laughingly he held her and pressed her against him. She trembled in his clasp, hiding her face against his chest. Slowly he raised himself and she with him, shaking the straw off their clothes. The flowers lay scattered and crushed.

"They are no good," he said and turned away.

While walking back, they both avoided looking at each other. What was he doing here with her, he thought helplessly. It was madness ! Her delicate hands alone spoke of her high station. An unbroken chain of past history separated them. Could it be broken ? No, it was time less as the river that flowed.

She glanced sideways. He was wrapped up in his usual impenetrable silence. It chilled her newly-awakened soul. He paused in the shadow of the guava tree, at the entrance to the little gate. Before she turned away; she looked at him and smiled, but there was no answering smile. One the deep set eyes looked back at her from their unfathomable depths. A sudden gust of wind blew. She felt she had left her childhood behind near the pond among the lotus flowers !

When he reached home, Liapola found his sister in the back compound pounding rice for the morning hoppers. Tears were streaming down her face.

"Why, lass ! What's wrong ?" he asked, concerned.

"Nothing," she said, hastily wiping her tears, and hanging down her head.

He went in, brushing aside his little brother in the doorway. He found his mother stirring a pot of curry on the fire.

"Seela is crying. Why ?" he asked "She is surely too big to be beaten, mother !"

The mother turned round. She looked at him, and then looked around as though to make sure that nobody was listening, "Yes, son, she is too big-the hussy ! She is three months on the way."

"What ?' he cried agast.

The mother raised her hand, "Shoo" . . . she warned him.

"Who is the man ?" he asked anxiously, lowering his voice.

"Who else but that rascal, your cousin ?" she retorted, "the smell of mother's milk is not dried in his mouth and he is hunting after wenches – the brat !"

Liapola wondered whether his mother was really angry. Were her words a kind of ruse in fact to hide her real feelings ? Perhaps she was glad that one by one her daughters were off her hands.

The girl had precipitated matters by her foolishness, it was true, but his mother would see that no scandal spread. She knew how to handle such matters discreetly.

How simple and easy it was for his sister and her lad, Lia thought. Unlike for the well-to-do families of the village, the marriage tie of the poor was as simple as the life they led. Now that the girl was pregnant, the man had only to be persuaded to take her to his home. And the marriage would be established for good when the child was born. Lia sighed. How simple his life would have been if things were different.

Days after their last meeting, he would often stand in the shadows of the night, a lone figure, his arms crossed, gazing at the fountain. He watched the gurgling waters spreading over the rocks like mist before dawn.

A vision of her would rise before him and he would almost hear the softly uttered words, "My dream has come true." He thought of the last hour he had spent with her. He had never tried to seek her since then.

Years passed Liapola was standing on a jagged edge of a rock gazing into the distant spaces. He suddenly felt that he was alone on the face of the earth. He felt awed. He mind went blank for a moment. He looked vacantly into the depths below him. His mother's voice calling him brought him sharply back to himself. He walked back slowly looking at the sunset, aglow with a radiance of russet brown. It was good to be alive. He thought of the days when he had almost realised his dream. He had touched the beautiful, the divine in life ! Now it was a living memory deprived of its pain. Only the fragrance lingered ! He

was glad. But for that dream, life would be meaningless. He could now face the world for it had a new meaning. He should marry, he thought, and have children of his own. He walked on. Yes, life was good !

Liapola was at the cross-roads after a day's work in his fields, waiting for his brother to join him. A car came up and stopped on the side of the road opposite the few steps leading to the shop above the road. He looked into the car. Her eyes were on him. His own travelled slowly over her, distantly. He was queerly comforted by the pallor of her face and the intense look of her limpid eyes. She was the same. Her body was bruised but not her soul. He came back to himself with a start when a voice called out, "Hey, fellow !" He stood frozen, with folded arms, simply staring at the occupant seated next to her.

"Is the fellow deaf ?" the man asked. He turned to his wife and again to the silent figure by the road. "Insolence ! He should know his manners !" His face flushed in anger. "I ought to teach him to respect his betters." He was amazed at the effrontery of the man trying to rise above his level. He considered it highly insulting.

"Don't be silly," the wife said rather sharply. "You cannot treat them like cattle now. Those days are past !"

He stared at her and fell into a sullen silence. She summoned a salesman and gave an order for a list of articles. She looked at her husband, he was of the leisured class ! She suddenly felt the meanness of his feeling towards the other. What sort of a person would he be, she wondered, if by an unseen stroke of ill-luck, he was deprived of all his wealth ? Would he be equal to the mud-spattered figure standing calmly by the road ? No, she thought, his smug complacency, his sense of superiority, would all crumble into dust, leaving him frightened before life.

During the days that followed, Liapola made certain transactions. He withdrew his savings which by now were considerable. He made an investment for his mother to keep her safely from want in old age. Then, a week later, he left the village.

9

The Man

Rosalind Mendis

She sighted him from a distance. He was ploughing the field, the sole figure in the landscape, wading in a sea of mud and water, driving the buffaloes. His voice rose and fell in a sing-song tone, urging the animals as though to ease their labour. As she came up, he turned from his task. His bare body shone with spots of mud. A worn-out brown pair of shorts hanging loosely round the waist, was soaked. The mid-day sun shone on his tanned face. When he turned to her not a trace of fatigue, however, showed in his face. His eyes rested on her comely figure for a moment, then came a softened smile in the way of greeting. There was no word of thanks for the meal which she had cooked and prepared and walked a mile to bring him. The gratitude was in his look, the smile, and she understood. Guiding the buffaloes to a patch of green for grazing, he walked towards a well within the field near the side entrance. He washed his body clean with the fresh clear water. He could not have enough from its abundant springs which flowed over the rocks, forming tiny streamlets. Knowing that his wife was waiting, he hurriedly wrapped himself with his towel, barely sufficient to go round his waist. Carrying a bucket of water he walked towards the spot where she was patiently waiting him with the meal. His sturdy body and his sinewy limbs gleamed in the sunlight with a fragrant freshness, while drops of water hung on his hair. She felt strangely shy meeting his look although an year had passed since she married him. She busied herself laying out the food. He smiled. He knew why she was suddenly so busy.

"You shouldn't", he said, his fingers caressing her dimpled chin. "Ah, it smells good !" He eyed the food appreciatively,

Then a line appeared on his brow, "As usual, the best pieces of the wild boar for me", he said.

The remark went unheeded. She handed him the plate of rice, neatly dished out with two curries and a 'mallum' of green herbs. Sitting cross-legged, he began to eat. He first tasted the piece of salted fried fish, a delicacy which she often served him with the rice, knowing that he liked it best. He carefully sorted out the little bits of leaves, and the other odds and ends which went into the flavouring of a curry. Except for an occasional raising of the eye and an approving nod, he hardly answered her conversational tit-bits of the day. As he finished his meal, she saw that the choicest peace of meat was left untouched on the plate.

"That's the best piece and you have left it !" she complained.

"I have had enough", he said shortly.

She kept silent as was her wont when he was abrupt with her. She knew he had purposely left it for her but yet she was grieved. She was concerned with giving him the best. He, on the other hand, hated the thought that she denied herself for him. Especially in the matter of food, he can never make her see his point of view. It was an obsession with her. She would leave him the choicest portions and sometimes go without anything herself. His insides turned up at the thought, especially as her delicate health and the seed which was born out of his love and hers needed all her attention.

Their marriage had not been arranged by parents as was the custom of the village. His whole self had gone out to her when he first met her at a village fair. Since that day peace had returned to his soul only when he had wooed and wed her. Looking upon her silent face he now felt sorry for his rude behaviour, but he had not been able to help it. She quietly picked up the scattered vessels and tied them up in a bundle. Rising to her feet, she turned towards the foot-path.

"I am going", she said.

He let her leave with an unhappy look. He made no explanations.

"Mind the ridges", he cried, feeling nervous about the newly-made ridges. She might have a toss.

"They are slippery", he shouted. But she did not seem to hear him. He turned away and returned to his work with a heavy heart.

She walked on, a lump rising to her throat. Tears silently trickled down her face. She had no cause to be sad, she knew that. She really had no cause. She was being foolish. He had shown his displeasure only because he loved her so well. Yet she cried more heartily the more she thought of it.

"It may be that I am not well," she said to herself. "Why do I now alway cry ? Yes, I am not well", she repeated angrily. She felt sorry that she had been churlish. "And he will be angry", she thought. She walked on with slow dragging steps. Her eyes caught sight of a thick clump of herbs. It trailed in wild abandon down the steep slope of the hill by the wayside. She gathered a bunch for the night meal. This pleased her. It was a favourite dish of her husband. She quickened her footsteps. There was much to do before the day was over.

Evening fell. The sun set. Twilight bathed in glory the hill-top. She saw the birds flying back to their little homes. The kettle was singing on the fire-for may be a little too long. She would have to put a fresh kettle on to make the tea. He was getting late. She waited anxiously for him with a beating heart. She could not rest till she had made her peace with him. She could strained her ears to catch the sound of voices which were reaching her through the solitude of the hills. A minute later she saw her husband and a friend, a distant relative. She turned inside to the house. A few moments later, there were voices in the yard. And she heard her husband say.

"Come in, come in for a little 'bitter'." He used the popular word which referred to tea.

"No, my friend", the other replied. "Not today. I have an urgent errand to keep."

She heard her husband laugh amusedly. "You sly fellow ! We know what that is. Mind you don't burn your hands !"

"Don't you preach", the other mocked. "We know who has been burnt. It's the talk of the town." He ducked his head to avoid a blow aimed by the other and ran down the hill,

The man came in, dropping a bundle of fire-wood by the hearth. He saw his wife washing a cup. Looking at her sideways, he quietly left the kitchen. He was tired and out of spirits. He went into the room, the only room in the house. He laid himself down on the wooden couch. His body felt cool at the touch of the soft straw mat. A few minutes later she came in. The room was almost dark, a mango branch that fell across the window, shutting out the light. She brought the cup of tea to him and placed it on the little stool by his side.

He stretched out an arm and pulled her to him. He held her close.

"My lass !" he said.

She hid her face on his bare breast for a moment, then swiftly rose to her feet. "It's late", she said "I must get the meal ready."

His shy wife, he thought, seeing her leave the room. He sipped his tea or, as it was called his "bitter". He fell to dreaming, his arms crossed behind his head, his whole body relaxed after the day's hard work. He felt at peace with all nature. This was the hour, the hour of the day which he eagerly waited for, to reflect and to dream. There was hardly a sound except for the drone of an insect and the usual whispers of the approaching night. The mountain air blew in through the rustling leaves. A bird was whistling to its mate in the distance. Life was good. He was singularly lucky, he thought. He had his own house, his fields, his crops, his cattle and above all, his woman. His friends envied him. They would come for his advice. Often he would recite a verse to explain an intricate problem. He was held in esteem and respected by the whole village for his common sense and sound judgement. They call him a man with a "lucky hand ', Whatever he put his hand to, prospered : things yielded to his touch overnight. He had built his own house, the land a gift from his maternal grandfather. Unlike others he had not brought his wife to live in his parent's home. He had given her a home of her own. He was glad he had done so. His parents were rather hurt because he was the only son and the custom of the village was for the son to bring his bride home under the 'old roof'. It had turned out well for all though. His parents were now pleased

and content enough to come over once in a while – just across the stream—to see their son and his wife, whom they had learned to love.

"Yes, what more can a man want ?" he asked himself.

Was it because he was cut away from the busy world, from all its distractions, and lived at the heart of nature, that he felt like this ? he wondered. He felt that there was the same deep beauty and grandeur of nature itself in the love he bore towards his wife. He had known no other love but this one. Hidden elements of his soul awakened when he came to know that she was with child. As he continued to dream, he wondered why some people treat the question of a child so lightly and that some dare to destroy it. He knew that even the most callous, respect an expectant mother. Can a man dream of a more beautiful picture than one born of their love ? He felt an awe at the glory of creation. For a moment he was motionless at the thought of the mystery of the whole scheme of things. Man takes it for granted that the world has always existed. Suddenly it was borne out on him that somewhere there must be a Source greater than the whole scheme of things. He could not give a reason, he only felt that man was like a drop in the ocean, immersed in the immensity of creation, unable to comprehend it all. He began to wonder whether his first-born would be a man-child. Yes, that would be in the right order of things.

"The rice ready", his wife said from the doorway.

It was full moon. In the tropics the moon gives her best to man whereas in the cold sky its influence is largely unfelt. The moon was moving gracefully in the sky radiating her brilliance across the whole landscape, guiding a stream of people who were clad in white and were moving from different directions along the steep paths to the high road. The temple drums beat the air. His wife appeared on the door-way, giving the finishing touches to the folds at her waist. She took every precaution to secure the door. She was not sure of the look. She turned and hurried towards the man as he called out that they were late.

"I had to make sure", she said by way of explanation. He was amused. "How like a woman", he said. He let her go on ahead, following her closely. He was indifferent to the usual

custom of the village, that of the woman invariably following the man. Balanced daintly on her palm was a basket of jasmin flowers and in the other hand she held freshly gathered sprigs of arecanut blooms through which a lace handkerchief – a present from her husband – waved in the air. She was justly proud of the handkerchief and treasured it, using it only on rare occasions. Before long they were joined by groups of men, women and children, almost all relatives of some sort or other. The man quietly fell behind the crowd to talk to a friend of his. The usual hustle and bustle of a moving crowd was absent. As the occasion deserved they talked in subdued tones, making way for each other as they winded their way up the hill towards the temple. The most abandoned person in the village could be seen on the road. The entire village was deserted with the exception of a very few really helpless people. Such was the favour of the religious spirit in the village that even the old and the feeble would stagger up the hill on crutches.

On the way back home the man and his wife took the path along his paddy fields. He never lost a chance of visiting them. His eyes lit up with pleasure as he viewed the thick growth of green, waving in the moonlight. Unlike the last season the grain was not washed away by heavy showers but was evenly scattered over the fields. Day after day he was there to see the green turning a golden brown before his very eyes. He hovered round it as a mother would over her babe. Next to his wife he loved his rice fields. His heart felt warm towards his friends and neighbours who had assisted him to till the fields. This reminded him that he will have to leave the house early in the morning to help his uncle with the harvest. It was a good custom, he thought, that each farmer counted on the other to harvest his fields, thus promoting a spirit of comradeship and goodwill. Man, woman and child alike took part in the harvest. They all looked forward to getting their share of the new grain. He wondered whether his field would be ready for reaping before the great day – the coming of his first-born. May be next year he would be here with his little son by his side. Standing there, lost in thought, he seemed to forget that it was close upon midnight and that she may be tired. He turned abruptly as a soft sigh reached his ears. She smiled wanly. The moon shed her light brightly. For the first

time he noticed the extra roundness of her waist. A glow of tenderness filled his being. The look on his face made her suddenly self-conscious of her approaching motherhood. She turned as though to hide herself from him.

"Come", he said softly. "You are tired", he helped her up the hill towards their home.

From now on he was more considerate towards her. He would not allow her to draw water from the well and climb up the hill with the heavy pot. He asked a girl in the village to fill the pots. He helped her in little things to lighten her heavy work, in spite of her protests. It was the talk of the village. The people had found a new amusement to brighten their lives. By the running stream, and at the well and on the door steps they would exchange glances and nudges whenever the man and his wife were sighted. The damsels of the village overlooked by their men, were jealous of her. Only the vey old had a tender eye for the couple. The man noticed nothing, or even if he did, he simply ignored it. But nothing escaped his wife. She was painfully aware of the nudgings and the glances of the other women and she hated them for it.

"It's jealousy !" she would tell her husband, "That's what it is. The she-cats !".

He looked at her surprised. She looked like a she-cat herself, he thought and smiled.

"But what they think is true", he said, with an amused chuckle.

"Oh, you !" she turned and walked away.

He laughed openly at her anger, then fell into a serious mood. It did not surprise him that a person sometimes drew the worst from his fellow beings and some times the best. "It's the way you treat them. It's often the same with plants," he soliloquised, "You tend them, you treat them kindly, you attend to them unceasingly, and sometimes you get in return full measure and over. It's the same I guess with man. You have to give your best."

She was seated on a low bench weaving, her fingers deftly handling the soft strands of straw. She was happy in her thoughts

and her home. The cool evening air blew over the hills. Hardly a sound disturbed her. Yes, she was happy here, here in this remote little village of the hill country among the fields and the jungle, far from the bustle and noise of the towns. The mooing of the cow was heard and her thoughts went out to her husband. How hard he worked! He tilled his fields, tended his cattle, cultivated his vegetables, his fruits, and yet was ever cheerful. She rose up. Her eyes dwelt on the mat she had woven with its traditional, intricate design. She was pleased to think that it would fetch the amount she needed for the coming event without having to ask her husband for the extra money. She turned her head as she heard a soft football. She smiled a welcome as she saw her little brother standing before her.

"You have been a stranger to us, boy", she chided. It was a happy break from the monotony of the day. She raised up his chin fondly. "Come, sit down. I'll get you something to eat."

She gave him some curd and honey which had been left over from the mid-day meal. She asked how her father was getting on, why he has been scarce in her house. "Both you and father have forgotten me", she complained.

"He is always drunk", the boy said contemptuously. "He is never sober. It's toddy that he lives on!"

"Guard your tongue!", the sister warned. "It's not your job to judge. That woman drives him to it," she excused.

"Serves him right!" the boy said viciously, walking away to avoid his sister's stern look.

She was silent as she saw her husband coming up. He saw the boy. He hailed him from a distance. "Hoi, youngster!" he called out. The boy gave him a shy smile in return.

"Yes," said his wife, "he has forgotten his sister."

The man leant his mammoty against the pillar. "No, he has not!" he said. "You can see for yourself'.

The load lifted from the boy's heart. There was a bond of understanding between the two. He had first been bitterly jealous of the man. The man had sensed it. He understood young ones. Time would heal, he thought and waited.

The boy had resented him, had hated him for taking away the one person he loved since his mother's death. She was the only one who cared for him, who dared to defend him from the wrath of his father's second wife. And the father, he was not the same since he brought home that stranger. It was horrible to think it all happened only three months after his mother died. He hated to recall it. The stranger in his mother's place ! He wished he had run away from home. "Yes, he would one day," he thought savagely.

"Why, what's wrong ?" she asked, looking at his disturbed face.

"Nothing", he brushed passed her.

The man and his wife exchanged glances. "Boys will be boys", he said, "Leave him alone," he advised her, going in.

She shrugged. Before she turned, she saw the little fellow in the garden aiming a stone at a green mango out of reach. She smiled. "Boys wiil be boys," she repeated.

A while later the man stepped out with the gun on his shoulder.

"Like to come with me ?" he asked the boy.

"Ah, yes!" his eyes brightened as he beheld the gun. One day he will own one himself, he thought.

"We won't be long", the man called out to his wife. She saw them off without a word. He knew that she was not too pleased. She disliked the sport. But she never voiced her displeasure knowing that he liked it. He did not kill for killing's sake. But man had to survive. "Man first," he thought, "in the order of things."

He confessed to himself that he completely forgets, in the excitement of the hunt, the teachings at his mothers' knee to cherish all living things. On clear moonlight nights he was often seen hunting wild boar and wild hare. He was always careful to bring home the animal, skinned. He respected his wife's feelings, and her squeamishness to handle the raw fresh meat. He would cut it up and prepare it. She would only help him to get it cooked.

Now, as the two walked down the hill, they presented an amusing picture, the man in his prime and vigour moving lightly down the rough, rock-strewn paths with long, easy strides, and the boy, a tiny tot beside him, running to keep pace with him. As he walked along, the boy amused himself as a boy would in the jungle. Looking about, he pulled off a little tree, peeling off the twigs and leaves, using it now to beat the thick bushes to clear the way. Now and again he stopped to tease the monkeys that jumped from tree to tree, while munching the wild berry and the guava himself. He seemed to know the secrets of the jungle. He was forever alert to the leeches that infested the thickly covered grass. And he would stop at the rustle of the dry leaves, fearing the ever-dreaded "Polonga", the python. It was quite late when they returned back home with their spoils. The man carried a skinned wild hare, walking behind the boy. Wrapped in a large yam leaf the boy carried a bee-hive which they had raided in the jungle. He was happily sucking a comb of the sticky honey which trickled down his fingers. A bundle of sour, sweet olives was slung over his shoulders. In spite of the man's protests he had crept through the thick, thorny bushes of the jungle to climb the huge gnarled tree.

"They are for Sister," he said coming back with scratched skin and smarting cheeks. "She loves them, especially the sour ones". The Man rumpled the boy's head and smiled, "Come along." he said.

It was one month later. The man walked down the hill to the shop at the junction. Except on rare occasions he did not leave the house now in the evenings. When he did he hurried back home knowing that of late his wife was scared to be alone.

The man sat down quietly on the low wooden bench outside the porch. He glanced around in the hope of borrowing the papers to read the current news. No one seem to have them. The men were standing in groups talking to each other. He then saw a man enter the shop with a newspaper tucked under his arm and he caught his eye. The new-comer hesitated—a fraction of a second—then handed him the paper. He expressed his thanks with a grateful smile and began to read.

The usual crowd gathered by the shop. It was the meeting-place of the men-folk. The shop served them as a club after the day's work was done. As though by instinct one by one strolled in till hardly a man was left in his home. The excuse was always that something or other was needed at home. They lingered for a chew of betel, a greeting, a chat. Then the conversation turned to topics such as the crops, or the fields which should be got ready before the heavy rains set in, and now to the destructive pole-cats that attacked the patch of manioc and the sweet potato, and finally on to the politics of the day. The entered the wise man. All settle down. To his own surprise he, the wise one, holds the attention of the crowd. To expound his views he fortifies himself with a continuous chew of beetle, pausing for a moment (he considered this very effective) to emit the red betel juice, while with his bare foot a layer of sand is deftly strewn over the red splash. At this stage, the conversation takes a sharp turn and the wise man is forgotten. "Do you know that devil elephant" a rumour-monger interrupts, "nearly killed its mahout?"

"No?" they all chorus is one breath, their mouths open in consternation, with the betel cud showing between a red stream.

"I told the fool of a mahout to be careful," the wise one inserts, but no one pays attention.

"Well what happened," they all asked eager to know the details. The salesman inside the shop strained his ear, the hot cup of tea suspended in the air. The original speaker paused for his reply, completely conscious of the thrall in which he held his audience.

"You see," he said, "It was awful ! the mahout had run for his life and finally managed to save himself by climbing the jak tree close by." He added, "And of course, it was hours before the brute was overpowered." "Now he is as docile as a kitten," he ended.

The evening shadows were falling ; one by one the men suddenly remembered that a certain article had to be purchased. They got to their feet and made their purchases. A commotion was now heard, a man staggered in, brushing aside everybody.

"All of you, listen to me", he shouted. He held to a post, reeking with the smell of toddy.

"The Headman, the Headman," some one shouted.

"Shoo" . . . they all warned.

From the distance the headman was seen coming along the road, his umbrella tucked under his arm and a cigar in his mouth.

The drunken man, ignoring the warning. "The Headman", he cried with a volley of oaths, "I tell you" . . .

The man laid aside the papers and stood up. He stepped forward and quietly took the other by the shoulders, and led him out before the whole thing turned into a free-for-all. The drunkard was in a fighting spirit and the patience of the man was worn out before he finally got him home. He was sorely tempted to duck him into the running stream over which they had to cross. It was with an effort that he controlled himself. When he hurried back to his wife it was pitch dark.

She in her lonely hut was getting restless. He had never been late before. She was anxious. Time and again she came to the doorway and peered out into the darkness of the night. She dreaded the darkness outside. Yet the least sound brought her out. Finally she thought she saw a light in the distance. Then it disappeared. She strained her eyes to pierce the darkness. The light appeared again. For a brief moment she glimpsed a figure. She recognised her husband. The light came on and went out with the swing of the torch, made of dried coconut leaves twisted into a yard's length. Now and then he stopped to below at the light to keep it alive. A few minutes later, he stepped into the porch.

"You shouldn't be out in the dark," he said. He put out the light and threw it away. "Let's go inside."

"What happened?" she asked.

"Nothing", he replied.

She looked at him surprised. The freshly washed clothes that he had got into before he left the house were rather soiled and he smelt faintly of toddy.

He looked down at her. A humorous smile crossed his lips. Now for the first time he began to see the humour of a situation which he had detested.

"Well", he asked, "Can't I have more than a drop now and again with my friends?"

"How could you?" she cried. "I was all alone. I almost died of fright." Tears welled up in her eyes.

He went up to her and held her face.

"You should know me better," he said softly. "I had to take a druken man home."

She flushed. Yes, she was always imagining things about him. Yet she felt annoyed that she had been made to look a fool.

"You will have your fun, I suppose", she said, walking off, huffed, into the kitchen. He followed her in for his hot rice and curry.

One day, weeks later, without going directly home, he turned down a side path that led to the kittul palm. He had to tend the new flower that had just opened. The old one was going dry. He hoped the new flower would yield a bounteous flow of sap. His wife could then have a little extra money. He only used a part of the sap, turning it into the wholesome drink, toddy was ; when moderately taken, keeping him fit for the day, also providing him with something to serve his friends when they dropped in for an evening's chat. The rest of the liquid was boiled down to a golden honey or formed into solid globes of jaggery, first to be used for home-made sweets, the remainder being sold, the proceeds of which went for his wife's own needs.

"The former flower went dry too quickly", he said to himself. "May be I was careless". "May be", he ruminated, and knocking against the jagged edge of a rock, he slipped down the loose sandy soil. With a sudden twist of his body he stopped himself holding to a rubber tree at hand.

"Hoi"! Somebody called out warningly from the bottom of the hill. He looked down and smiled.

"It was a narrow shave," he thought.

The old man who had called out was his uncle. He was standing on a narrow path driving home his buffalo from the fields.

"You youngsters," he cried, shaking his head despairingly.

The young man went down the hill. "Let me uncle," he interrupted, "I'll get him across the stream."

Muttering inaudibly under his breath, the old man followed his nephew.

It was almost dark when the man turned back towards home. He quickened his step, thinking of his wife. She shouldn't be left alone. She was heavy with child. Of late he had noticed that she was restless and slow of step. When he reached home, all was quiet. He missed his wife's greeting. Very often she would be somewhere about the entrance to greet him with a smile. He hurried in. He came upon her inside the room, holding on to a chair, her body bent in two. At his entry she glanced up, her face screwed up with an unseen pain, large tears rolling down her cheeks.

"What is it?" he asked anxiously. She sought his eyes with dumb fear but no words came.

"Has the time come? No, no, it can't be", he cried. He suddenly felt frightened now that it had come, what he had been waiting for.

She straightened herself and smiled bravely to reassure him.

"It's over now," she said.

He was amazed at her sudden change. He had heard that labour pains come on and go off suddenly. His hand reached out to wipe the two tear drops that hung on her cheeks. "Don't be afraid, you will be alright," he looked at her hungrily, "Yes, you will be alright", he repeated. "I'll fetch you the mid-wife."

"No, no," she cried, a scared look in her eyes. She clutched at him. "Don't leave me!"

"Don't be afraid," he said again. "I'll be back soon." He hastened towards the door. A moan reached his ears, he rushed back. She was doubled up in the chair. He looked at her helplessly.

"She looked up at him. The midwife", she whispered.

"He rushed out once more. "I'll send mother on to you," he called out.

He was loathe to leave her alone but it could not be helped. He cursed himself. He should have known better, he should have

in time asked his mother to come to be with her. When he got back with the mid-wife, his mother had already arrived. Her casual tonnes fell on his ears and that relieved him. Yes, now that she was here, all will be well he thought.

His mother came out, cool and calm, and greeted the mid-wife as though what was happening was an everyday occurrence. "Come in", she said cheerfully, "So you were at home. My daughter-in-law is lucky."

"Yes", the mid-wife replied. "Five minutes later and he would have missed me. We met another caller coming for me, just outside the gate." She walked in busily.

"How is she ?" she asked.

"She is getting on well," the mother replied, "But she is too scared. It's not good."

"It's her first," her son mumbled in defence behind her.

"We know that," the mother said looking at him with an amused smile.

He flushed. His mother always treated him as though he were a baby on her knee. He went out and sat upon the wooden bench. He wanted to collect his thoughts which were in a tangle. He was aching to go and see his wife but he held back. His mother would object, so would the mid-wife. It was the rigid custom of the village, the man discreetly out of the way while his woman was in labour. He should be there only to get the medicine prepared when the time came.

"No," he swore himself. "I have promised her I would be there". Why should she bear her pain alone ? He should be with her. He was determined. Suppose she died in her pain? There were two women he had heard who had died recently. His heart stopped. He got up. Nobody could stop him. He had already kept one promise he had made to her. She had begged him to keep off the village women when her time came. He had told his mother not to bring anybody but to go alone to her. He now wanted to go to her, to keep his word as he had promised her. Then he dropped back on to the seat again. "No, no," he cried. He raised his eyes as though seeking help from One above.

The cry went out from the depths of his being as the cry of a child to its mother. Suddenly the night was torn by a shriek. In an instant he was in her room.

"No, you shouldn't be here," he heard his mother's voice say. He felt aghast at the scene that met his eyes. His wife was laid out on a mat on the floor, her body hardly covered, the mid-wife seated cross-legged before her. At his abrupt entrance, her helpless eyes sought his with dumb appeal.

"What the devil, why is she on the floor?" he demanded of the mid-wife.

She looked up as though to ignore the question, but thought better of it when she caught his eye.

"You should know why," she mumbled. "And you should know that your place is not here," she added sharply.

He ignored her last remark. "Put her back to bed", he commanded. "Put her back to bed, I tell you!"

"Son, you are mad," the mother intervened. "Don't shout, you upset the girl."

With an effort he forced back his feelings. He looked down at his wife. A lump rose to his throat. In his helplessness to ease her pain he groaned. She looked like a dumb animal unable to help herself. On an impulse he bent down and gathered her in his arms and laid her on the bed. She looked relaxed already. She gave him a faint smile. He was glad he came. Let them say what they like. He moistened her perched lips with a drop of bee's honey. He swept back the strainds of hair that fell across her face, "You will be alright," he said softly. He turned, "Leave her alone," he ordered women. "Let her bide her time. Don't rush her," he warned.

He caught his mother's eye, going out. She came up to him. "For heaven's sake, mother!" he uttered, "Don't let that woman harass her."

She nodded. "I am glad you spoke to her," she said warmly. "She wouldn't listen. She was trying to show off her skill."

He was surprised. Yes, he had been just in time, he thought. He went out and sat again in the dark. How long he waited the

could not say. Once, his mother brought him something to eat. He shook, his head. He was not hungry. His mother forced him, however, to drink something hot and he felt better. Now and again low moans reached his ears, and then he would go in and ask his mother how she was.

"She is getting on alright," his mother said. "Don't worry, don't you worry, son."

It was always the same question and the same answer. He had heard that it was only a matter of minutes for some women. But for his wife the hours dragged on. When will it be over? Time seemed to stand still. Time had never been a problem to him before. For the first time he realized what time meant. Now he understood why it meant so much to some people with their various problems. One had to experience to understand. He knew now that it was foolish to talk where one did not understand.

The mid-wife came out. He stood up. She looked at him. Her face broke into a smile and a satisfied look. He felt relieved that she bore no grudge.

"Yes, she is getting on well. She is a brave girl. "Don't worry, lad. Don't worry."

He thought he would go mad if he heard that again. She sat down on the low stool and pulled out her pouch of betel. She added a pod of cardamon to the chew to get a better flavour. How casual she was, he thought. Had she no feelings, he wondered. He thought she should be inside the house, not there. He felt on edge. They heard an urgent call and the mid-wife hastened in. He stood just outside the door in case he was needed.

The moans sounded louder than they were in the hush of night. He dropped down on to the seat at the door. He covered his ears and tried to shut out the sounds. He felt like running out into the darkness but held himself back. Then suddenly the moans stopped. He caught his breath. He sensed an awful fear and wished she would moan again. It at least meant she was alive and breathing. He got up. He wanted to rush into the room. Suddenly a sharp howl rent the air. He sat down again. The time dragged on. Now her laboured breaths came in great gasps. He could not bear it any longer. He went out. Once again an unspoken prayer went up from the depths of him. He scarcely thought

of the child. His mind could only grasp the fact of her and her terrible agony. He was completely one with her in her pain.

In the far distance he saw a dim light. He wondered vaguely who it could be. It was almost dawn. Close by, a cock crowded. The light glowed more brightly and a figure came into view. He recognized his father. He was happier to see him.

"How is she ?" the old man asked.

"She is getting on well," he replied.

The same question, the same answer. He felt fagged. They walked back to the house.

His mother appeared in the door way. "Be ready with the medicine", she cried quickly and turned back.

It was strange. His father's presence helped to calm his frayed nerves. He no longer felt as though he was on the edge of a precipice. The old man quietly helped him in his preparation of the concoction which has to be in readiness. Suddenly a scream rent the morning air, then again silence. "Quick"! the mother cried, "the medicine".

He handed it to her. He felt strangely quiet. He sat down on the same low stool at the door. He felt as though he had reached journey's end after a long, long run. It escaped him that he was sitting on the only seat available while his father was standing by.

A loud squeal now broke the silence. It continued, determined to be heard, determined to assert its authority as the one and sole power of the household. The man smiled. He stepped out to the garden, already taking second place in the home.

"It's a boy !" he heard his mother say from the doorway.

He entered the house some hours later after attending to the various jobs in hand. There were voices in the kitchen. All was quiet where his wife lay. The perfume of incense pervaded the room, the tell-tale sign of the birth of a babe. He walked in softly. She was lying on her side, the babe craddled against her breast. There was a look on her face though she was holding heaven in her arms. It was as it should be, he thought. Had she not given her best to the world, the most sublime that a woman could, by giving to it a wee bit of humanity, something that may

hold in its hands the destiny of the world ? For the first time she did not hear his steps. He bent forward. She looked up. There was wonder in her eyes.

"He is just like you", she said fondly. She turned the tiny bundle. They both gazed at their son.

"Yes", he said softly, squatting on his heels, and feeling the dimpled little limbs. "A sturdy fellow! He will plough the fields."

The Man was lying on a mat under a mango tree. Its large overhanging branches fell in the form of an umbrella. The noon-day sun was unusually hot for the season and he was out in the open under the shade, the wind from the hills playing over his bare body. Close to him his little son was crawling around, trying to get his hands on the playful little squirrel that ran about. Both he and his wife and their child were back home after a visit to their respective parents. They had gone to pay their respects for the New Year. It was almost a luxury for him to lie about and laze. He had a passion for reading and was absorbed in reading a book of verse. Such occasions were few and far between. Sometimes he would read late into the night under a dim bottle lamp. Since of late he had given it up because the light in the room disturbed the child. He read and re-read the wealth of passages that appealed to him. He raised himself and his voice rang out in the evening air with the hunting melodies of the popular folk songs. The boy raised his head startled, and looked at his father with his mouth wide open. He crawled back and tried to get at the book. The man laid it aside. "Tomorrow", he thought, "he would have to start work again".

It would be at ten forty-five according to the auspicious hour and minute. And at nine in the morning, the kitchen fires had to be lit to cook the first meal. Not that he had much faith in all this, but his wife was anxious to conform to the conventions of the New Year. She took part also in all the fun and gaiety of the season. She enjoyed it as most women do. Days before, she was busy pounding rice for flour, getting ready the honey for the preparation of home-made sweets of various kinds, the most valued among them being the *Assmae* which resembled the honey comb. These preparations were carried out in almost every house in the land. There was a spirit of good will and "togetherness" in the whole village.

They had gone to see the parents, taking the traditional gifts of a basket of rice and curry, and home-made sweets with an offering of a handful of betel leaves. The black rattan basket which had been stored away was taken out for the occasion. It was washed and dried, and then lined with a layer of plantain leaf. He had helped her to pack the rice and curries, each curry wrapped up separately in plantain leaf to keep in it's flavour, and neatly arranged on either side of the basket.

"Yes, it was good to get the blessings of the parents kneeling at their feet. He felt happy coming back home, got a general feeling of content and of peace towards all mankind. He looked forward to another New Year with fresh hopes.

Suddenly, like all children do, the child stopped playing and howled. The man sat up. The mother came running out. "Why, my little one", she crooned over him. She hushed him on her lap, sitting down.

"What happened ?" she asked turning towards her husband.

The man laid himself down again. "Nothing", he said, "May be, he is sleepy. May be he is playing up, the little rascal".

The mother smiled. The baby now was happily cooing in her arms.

They saw a visitor coming up the path, one of her cousins. A slight shadow crossed the man's face. According to rumour the man coming had been in love with his wife.. Deep down, the the savage in him felt fierce pangs of jealousy. Did his woman once belong to another ? It was better not to know, he thought. Now she is his and she loves him. That's all that mattered. After all the fellow is married and the speaks of him quite casually. He has nothing to fear. Yes this visit made him uneasy. He brushed aside the thought. He is probably paying the customary visit for the New Year. He should not lack common curtesy when welcoming a visitor to the house. Both husband and wife hailed him from a distance. There was the same generous hospitality that pervailed in each and every house during the joyous season.

The wife talked to him with an easy flow of words, at times teasing him. There was an exchange of smart retorts between the two. She wanted to know how he managed to sell illicit toddy.

"Who spreads these wild rumours'? he in turn wanted to know.

"There, calm down", she said coolly. "Only be careful the headman doesn't hear."

He controlled his ruffled feelings. She was just the same. Marriage hadn't tamed her. He felt that she had the same condescending manner towards him. He turned towards her husband "It's time you kept her in her place," he said.

"I have," the man said quietly, with an amused look at his wife.

The visitor looked at her. He suddenly fell silent. He was amazed to see the look in the woman's face when she turned to her husband. Here was what he was searching for, what he had never been blessed with. Here was what he would miss all his life. He got up to his feet.

"Well, I'll be going, it's late." He looked down at them and smiled, especially at her. "May you both be happy in the New Year." He was not quite steady on his feet. "I guess I have had a bit too much ", he said, giving a hollow laugh as he turned and went down the hill.

Husband and wife looked at each other. The man walked down with the visitor till the end of the path as a mark of respect.

"He must have drunk before he came," the man said as he came back. "I did not give him much."

The wife agreed. She felt sorry for her cousin. "You know, it's true, he is having an affair," she whispered.

"The devil he is ! Is he not satisfied with his woman ?" the man asked simply.

All his doubts and fears disappeared. He looked at her, a look that made her flush. She gave him a coy, shy smile and turned away making a pretense of looking after the child. His eyes followed her. She was after a bath, her hair down to her knees, a black cascade of rippling waves. She was more beautiful more desireable in her motherhood than ever before. It was beyond him to go after another, he thought. [illegible] world lay here before him, she and the child. In the happy years yet to

come she will bear his children, a dozen, perhaps more. They will be the happiest of families! He had enough and over to feed all the young ones that came. His virile strength coped ably with whatever task he undertook. His crops never failed, his cattle, his vegetables, the bread fruit and the jak, the fruits and the wild honey, all that went into the forming of sturdy limbs and bones. His whole being relaxed with a sense of well being. His thoughts went back again to his wife. Years after, would she change ? Would she be worn out with family cares ? No, he asserted, she would always be his lass, the beautiful maiden at the village fair. His eyes fluttered sleepily. The warble of a magpie rang out through the falling shadows.

10

The Doughty Men of Purantota

James Goonewardene

The people of Purantota were not pleased about the bridge they were going to build, as it was on the doorstep of their village. It was to come up barely a quarter of a mile away from the *kada-mandiya*. The encroachment was going to bring an end to their independence. They did not know how, but the idea had been put into their heads, by someone—they did not know who – and it had begun to worry them. The surveyors had come with their instruments several weeks earlier. They were followed by others who stood officiously on the bank of the river and held conferences. The movement of vehicles came almost on their heels. They brought men and building materials, and they continued to flow up and down, for awhile afterwards Then came the drum beaters announcing to the villagers that they were needed to help to build the bridge. The villagers watched it all from a distance as suspiciously as a herd of deer that scattered at the approach of an animal they feared.

Eventually, as they regained their confidence, they ventured to emerge from their hiding, and registered as labourers, woodcutters and builders. For a week then they worked on the bridge-site as hired hands. They cut down the trees, pushed over the boulders and turned up the soil. Then stage by stage they advanced, clearing the way for the bridge. There was all this work to do, and they were doing it, without really knowing why. Certainly, the money they offered at the bridge-site was good. They took away one type of freedom and gave them another – gave them money freedom. They suddenly found they could buy things they couldn't afford before. It was exciting—this new freedom. But this was all for a short time.

One hot morning they dropped their axes and took off to the shelter of the trees still left standing. These trees were part of an old jungle they had known for a longer time than they could remember. The jungle and its trees had been part of the village history. As boys they had played among the trees on their way to school, or had sat in their shade, waiting for the ferry boat to come across the river. They knew the river; knew its moods and both loved and feared it. These trees and the river they had always thought of as being part of their village inheritance. They had to protect them, and also their right and access to them. They had to keep them safe for themselves and their children.

There was only the thud of a single axe now. Someone was still chopping a tree down to the left. On the right the axes had been silenced. Then the last axe stopped echoing. Andoris Rala turned his head to look round him. There was just himself now, alone by the *kumbuk* tree. Brampi, his friend too had left him. He too had gone to take shelter. Andoris Rala began to move away then, slowly, as if he had a great distance to go, and there was all the time in which to do it. There were suddenly many things to think about, but there was no time to do it in. There was only the seeing now, and there was the doing. The men were seated there, squatting on the grass like men come to do trade at the Poya fair, chewing betel, smoking beedi and gossiping.

Girigoris was the one he feared, the one whose thinking was kept hidden like a dagger in a sheath. He alone had this puckered face as if there was a night in his brain in to which light was never admitted. The others had un-puckered open faces in which no mystery had yet been written. Armanis, the brick-maker, Arnolis, the cow-herd, Ekmon, the blacksmith's assistant, and a couple of others, and finally Davith Singho, the loafer, and of course, Girigoris. Davith Singho was seated with his back against a tree, smoking a beedi as if all this was part of a routine—work, sleep, rest, and then work again, with a little pleasure thrown in for good measure, or just loafing, may be when there was nothing else to do.

'If we stop to pant with every stroke of the axe, when will we finish this job?' asked Andoris Rala. 'There's still an hour before the mid-day break.'

'Even a bull stops work when it's tired, don't you know ?' replied Davith Singho.

'The man who works the least gets tired the quickest,' said Andoris Rala.

'Huh, such foolish talk. You would think, hearing him talk, that we sit on our behinds and play with ourselves,' snapped back Davith Singho.

Davith Singho, a young man of about thirty, everyone knew was notoriously lazy. He had drifted away from the village. From time to time he would work in the dock, in the city. When he was out of work he would drift back.

'That, no doubt you learned in the city,' retorted Andoris Rala. 'You sit so long in one place it is a wonder the grass doesn't grow between your toes. You should know what you do with yourself in that time.

The men laughed.

'What else can he do as a part-time labourer other than to sit on his behind and play with himself ?' said Sarnelis.

'That's what comes from looking for easy money,' said another.

Davith Singho drew out his beedi and spat noisily.

'I left the mud so that you buffaloes can wallow in it.'

'You leave the mud to us and go playing with yourself in the city,' said Sarnelis, 'the trade they taught you out there.'

'Buffaloes will always be buffaloes. So buffalo talk is all you'll hear from this bunch. Sometime I'll tell you about the city.' Davith Singho rose to his feet, kicked a mug lying in his path and stalked off. They let him go.

'We do wrong to tease him,' said Andoris Rala, feeling mortified suddenly. 'It was my mistake. When times are not propitious even the *labu* fruit is bitter'.

Girigoris cleared his throat pointedly, and continued to prepare his chew of betel. 'These, indeed, are unpropitious times but not for the reasons Andoris Rala gives,' he said.

'For what reasons then are they unpropitious ?'

'For reasons that only the gods know,' replied Girigoris.

'Sometimes people speaking in their own tongues say it is the voice of the gods.

'It has to be an unpropitious time that strangers should climb over our stiles as if the whole village was now a public highway'.

'Mhm, mhm, *attha, attha*' grunted Heen Banda, Girigoris's friend, affirmatively.

'This bridge when it is comes up will be the thing that will destroy us,' said Girigoris, encouraged by Heen Banda's support. 'It will be the point of the knife held at our throats.'

'How will this be so ?' asked Arnolis.

'Because then there will no longer be a village here. The bridge will belong to no one. So will the village be no one's.'

The men were suddenly starting at Girigoris.

'How will it belong to no one ? We will cross the bridge like anyone else, and faster than the ferry boat'.

Girigoris smiled - a man of unusual appearance he had his head placed directly on his shoulders as if a neck had never been necessary. It was thrust forward in a way that was not unlike that of an anthropoid. He even walked with a slouch.

'Is that all you can think about ? Can't you see that the bridge will stand out there like an evil spirit whom no one can tame ? The buses and other man-made machines will be constantly over it. We will be the dirt on the road-side. New fangled things will creep into the village. Strangers will order us about.'

The others rose and drew nearer, the better to hear the debate.

'That's right, what our brother says is true.' said Heen Banda 'It will belong to the buses and lorries. We will be the rubbish on the wayside.'

'This is foolish talk. To say we cannot tame it is foolish talk,' said Arnolis. 'If a man builds he can destroy what he builds.'

'Look, my friend, to destroy is not to tame a thing. To destroy is to finish it. To tame is to control it. Look how we

control our paddy. We irrigate the land. We watch the first leaf sprout. We transplant it. Then we harvest it. A bridge, what is it but a thing of stone and steel- a thing without life. It will push us out of the way. Like the *Ahikuntakayo* we will bundle up our things and depart. Other machines will follow the bridge. Those who remain here will be like machines. Look at Davith Singho. He is no longer one of us. He has became a bit of rubbish come from the docks.'

Davith Singho, who had just come back from his stroll, sprang into life hearing himself spoken of thus.

'You pack of earth despoilers, what makes you talk of me all the time. Do you now invite me to rape your mothers to prove I am of the same breed as you wretches ?'

'Come, come now,' admonished Brampi. 'We quarrel here like bazaar curs. To trouble our heads about things not taken place yet is like the man who prepares to bathe while he is still seven leagues from the river. We villagers have one great virtue. We are talkers. We talk till the earth splits apart.'

'This is wisely said,' said Arnolis. 'We, indeed, do nothing but talk. We are like the *kirala*. The foolish bird lies on its back and sticks its feet up for fear the sky will drop on his nest.'

Some weeks later Girigoris awoke one morning feeling an ache in his back. He was grateful it was not a day of work at the bridge-site. Since he commenced work here he had come to fear the return of the ache in his back. After his wife had left him he had occupied himself with helping the ageing monk in the conduct of the affairs of the temple. This had kept him busy; also his mind free from worry. The scandal created by the elopement of his wife with a toddy tapper from a village several miles away was still fresh in the minds of the people. He was still trying to live that down, but as chief lay custodian of the temple he had recently acquired a sense of security and a feeling of importance. The temple would be the means by which, in the end, he would wreak venegeance on his fate. Ill luck had dogged his steps. Even his birth had been a misfortune, they said. He was told that his birth had so drained his mother of energy that for several weeks people didn't know if she would survive it. The temple was where one usually found him. When he was not in the temple he was

accustomed to stay in his hut on the outskirts of the village. He stayed here like a recluse, nursing his grievances. One reached this hut by a devious footpath which wound round some abandoned land, and across a scrub jungle. As the chief dayakaya of the temple he was kept busy. He had to organise the monk's *dana*, collect funds to pay the drummer, have an occasional pinkama and attend to a variety of other details. The *devale*, however, was the chief of his concerns. However, hard-pressed the villagers were they had to find the means to ward off misfortune that the astrologers predicted, and misfortune was not so rare an occurrence. There was a rumour that devale offerings found their way into Girigoris's pockets. No one had been able to prove this, but it was common knowledge that this was so, but what did it matter they thought if indeed, he interceded with the gods on their behalf and there were results.

Girigoris thus awoke this morning feeling this ache in his back. He felt miserable. He hadn't the desire even to go among the bushes to evacuate his bowels. It was lucky, he thought, that it should come on a poya day. He had, recently, come to fear this ache in his back. The thought of getting up now to set out to Heen Banda's, depressed him, but it had to be done. He had to be fit enough to go to work. So he dragged himself out of bed and went slowly through the scrub jungle, and along the winding footpath. Heen Banda wasn't at home. He had gone to the pond for a bath, his wife told him.

'I shall then wait for him,' said Girigoris. He lowered himself painfully on the couch in the verandah. Podi Menike withdrew into the house and reappeared with the betel tray.

'A chew of betel—if you wish.'

She placed the tray on a stool and withdrew to stand in the door-away.

'Good,' said Girigoris.' A chew of betel will, perhaps, do me good. I have not eaten a thing this morning.'

'Apoi Mahatthaya . . . why so?'

'It's this ache in my back . . .'

'Apoi, not to eat in the morning . . . it is harmful. I shall get you something else then . . . a cup of tea, may be ?

'Not a thing, not a thing. It is good to punish this old body of mine. We soften ourselves with too much comfort. It is good to starve the body sometimes.'

'My husband will blame me later for letting you starve. Let me get you some food.'

'Podi Menike, do you know me as a man who weakens about a thing like food. I chastise my body when it is necessary.'

'Don't I know about it. Heen Banda talks of nothing but of your great strength of will.'

'Mhn!' grunted Girigoris. 'I don't deny that.'

He was pleased his reputation had spread. He lifted his eyes to take a better look at her. She was slighty built and flat chested, and her arm skinny. He suddenly felt bitter and angry. Only the flat chested ones will flatter me he thought. The round, full blooded ones will not give me even a glance. I am of little use to them. At the critical moment it always fails me, the wretched, ineffective bit of appendage. The ache suddenly returned, and he groaned. When he became aware of his deformities the ache was always bad.

'Mhn, where's this husband of yours ? He takes so long over his bath. May be he'll be there all day.'

'Apoi, no Mahathaya, he must be already on his way. An hour has passed since he left for his bath.

'He'd better come soon. This ache gets worse every minute.' He took another look at Podi Menike. Some of these women are unfaithful to their men. I wonder if she will be unfaithful to Heen Banda if the situation arises. Poldi Menike smiled under his scrutiny. Then she looked up and saw her husband come along the path.

'There, he comes now,' she said.

'Mhn!' murmured Heen Banda. 'What fetches you to my door so early ?' He paused a moment, a bucket in his hand and a towel slung over his arm. Girigoris merely glanced up at his friend; a man of few words, he avoided the usual pleasantries. Heen Banda scrutinized his friend's face.

'Not well, I see. . . .your back as usual. Give me a moment while I put these things away.'

He returned a moment later and sat Girigoris down and began his examination, asking him about his present condition, and how had he felt the previous day. He was actually, rather pleased that Girigoris, the village cynic should come to him for treatment. Girigoris did not really have faith in Heen Banda's remedies, but having no other to go to, and his ailment not being serious he had come along now to have a shot at the old *vedarala's* medicine.

'*Vathey*,' intoned Heen Banda gravely. 'This is the old *vathey*. He'll have to try the old *kasaya* once more. It worked on the earlier occasion. It must do so again.'

'Mhn !' grunted Girigoris, 'will it make me fit to go to work tomorrow ?"

'To the bridge-site, oh yes. You will be completely well by morning.'

'Mhn,' moaned Girigoris.

After the remedy had been prescribed the two men relaxed awhile. Heen Banda picked up a chew of betel. When he had chewed it for several moments he squirted a jet of red coloured betel juice through carefully shaped lips.

'Is this true you plan to have a special pooja at the devale ?' 'Yes, this is true,' said Girigoris. 'We can't leave things to chance. The *devathavos* cared for the village in the past. We must care for them in return or they will withdraw their favour. The deities are like human beings. They get annoyed. Strangers have started to tramp over places that were sacred to them. It is no wonder that they now turn their faces against the village.'

'There is true. We forget what the ancients have so faithfully done to protect the village. We neglect these old practices.'

'I have heard that Andoris Rala has things to say about this *pooja*. Why should he be so concerned now ? People have always offered *pooja* to the deities.'

'I have not heard that he opposes this.'

'Ah, he does not oppose it publicly, but he opposes it all the same. I do not like the way Andoris Rala goes after all these outsiders who tramp about here. We must not, however, worry ourselves over-much about him. He is not really one of this

village. He's a man from the south who has been settled here barely ten years. I believe I can count on your assistance, Heen Banda, if we ever need it.'

'You can count on me. It must not be said that I failed the village in its need.'

'I knew I could count on you, Heen Banda. We must see who else is a friend of the village. Well, I must go now. Ananda Joti Hamuduruwo may wonder why I do not turn up this morning. Tell him, if you meet him that I have not been well. May be, if I feel better I shall go there later in the day. I shall bring you something for the *kasaya*.'

'Don't concern yourself about such trivial things. You may offer a pandura on my behalf at the devale, if you wish.'

'That I shall certainly do. It's an evil man who says he does not need his gods.'

'He certainly is.'

Girigoris brooded on what had to be done. Andoris Rala being put in charge of the labour pool at the bridge-site had been a setback for him. As a *dayakaya* of the temple the leadership in such matters should have been his. Andoris Rala would always be the great obstruction to his ambitions. Already he had become too big for his shoes. He must be checked, but how ?

When Girigoris set his mind on some project he had the persistence and clinging quality of a limpet on a rock. He realized he needed help from outside the village. So he went looking for astrologers, weather prophets, dynamiters and others capable of helping him in his plans. The meeting was called one *poya* morning. They were to meet at Heen Banda's and everyone who had been asked had already arrived that morning, barring Girigoris. The verandah being too narrow for the men stools were placed in the yard, just outside the verandah. The betel tray had been passed round twice already and Girigoris had not still arrived. They chewed their betel and smoked their cigars and waited. Finally he came. He took the vacant chair and surveyed the rustic assembly like a General would inspect his troops.

'Mhn, I see everyone's here. Mhn, that's good,' he said.

He waved aside the betel tray.

'But this is not enough. We must get the others. We must get everyone to join us. This is a matter that should concern everyone in the village. If anyone can come here and do as he pleases, build bridges, pull down the trees, cut roadways on grounds that have been sacred to the people of this village, there is no knowing how far they will go.' Girigoris paused. He had to tread cautiously. Andoris Rala was still popular in the village. Whatever he did had to be done with circumspection. Certainly, he had to be discredited, if not now, at least later, but until then he had to proceed warily. He cast his eyes round at the assembled men. They were of different moulds and characters, but they had one thing in common. They believed in the independence of their village, and whatever happened the village had to be protected from outside interference.

'I do not believe,' he continued, that there is anyone here who would like to see our village become a *palu kanatte* in which any stranger could come and plant his manioc and feed his cattle in. We have no other place to go to in any case, but more than that our father preserved it for us, and it is our duty to preserve it for our children. I have no children of my own. I consider all children as mine. If a time comes when we the older ones cannot hold up our heads in dignity, what will become of our children? But remember, there are those who think differently from us. Not everyone is anxious to preserve the traditions of this village. There are people here like Davith Singho who will exchange the village for a bottle of *kasippu*, but I must say this for Davith Singho that when he lost interest in the village he left it. He has come back but only for a short time. He will leave it again. I am sure of that. If there are others like him it is only right that they too leave the village, leave it to us to protect it. We don't interfere with the affairs of other villages. It is what we expect of them, that they don't interfere with ours.'

'Yes, quite right,' echoed Heen Banda, 'If they don't care for the village that nourishes them it is right that they too go from it.'

'That's what I say,' said Girigoris. 'The village is ours. If it is necessary to destroy the bridge to preserve our independence we must do so.'

The men glanced at each other uneasily.

'It is this we must talk about now,' went on Girigoris. 'We must discover if we who have gathered here are ready to destroy the bridge if such a thing becomes necessary.'

The men glanced at each other again.

'But we all work there and help to build this bridge,' protested Arnolis. 'I cannot understand why we should then want to destroy it.'

'Ah, this true, I work on it myself, but to preserve our independence I am ready to destroy it. It is what we all must be prepare to do.'

'I agree that we must do everything possible to protect our village and its traditions, but we must seek to do it without restoring to violence,' said Arnolis.

Girigoris turned his eyes, slowly, on Arnolis, as if he were a wayward child who could not understand simple things.

'I do not say we must necessarily do this, but the readiness to do this is the test of how strongly we feel for our village. I think, my friend here does not understand what we are trying to do here. *Ahimsa* and *Maithri* do not mean we must look on while our homes and children are swallowed up by the devil. The gods themselves have been pushed to anger. The rains on the hills have commenced earlier than they are accustomed to. This surely is a sign that the gods are moved to anger. The river has risen, and as surely as I stand here, it will rise further. I have talked with people who know. They are certain that a great calamity is about to befall the village from such rain and floods we have no seen before. It will be the rains and the floods that will destroy the bridge. We might prevent such disaster by making peace with the gods, or surely these things will come to pass, and for our neglect we will be destroyed as well. Mark my words the floods will flow over the fields, wash away the crop and hurl down the structures they have laid in the river. Will not this be a sign from the gods? What greater sign do you need?''

'But why will the gods be angry that strangers come to build a bridge here?'' asked Arnolis. 'Surely bridges will come and roads expand.'

'Mhn, Arnolis asks many questions. When will there be an end to his questions ? For my part I know the people have turned their minds away from things they have always paid heed to. When did the people here last perform a *pinkama* at the temple ? The coffers of the devale are empty. Is this not a sign that the evil spirits have taken hold of the minds of the people ? Our hearts have been turned away from the gods. We have planned to perform a cleansing ceremony at the *devale* premises. I do not believe anyone is opposed to this. Those of us who still care for this village will partake of this ceremony. What more we must do will depend on what the gods want of us.'

Girigoris showed a capacity for rhetoric and speech making that no one present there had suspected. They were silenced before it and had no counter arguments to offer.'

'I see by your silence that you feel yourselves that the situation needs a drastic remedy.'

Girigoris had waited in silence all these years nursing his numerous grievances, building up his hate, waiting for the time when he would become master of the village. With this meeting he had brought into motion something that no one could now stop. They continued to work on the bridge in the meanwhile. They worked with greater speed now that there was this threat of rain and floods. They were driving piles into the river bed. The previous week they had driven in the neighbouring set of piles. They then started to dredge and while they dredged they had their first real rain storm. It started as a vast, black cloud that began to shift slowly over the sky. The birds left their perches on the trees. Somewhere in a nearby field a cow started to low.

'It comes so quickly, this storm,' said Armanis.

'I've left some bricks to dry. They'll be ruined,' said another.

When the rains came it came as a great roar mingled with flashes of lightning. The only sound one heard then was a hiss, a continuous sloshing hiss as the greyish white sheet of rain rushed down absorbing and uniting the whole of the landscape, and as the cloud rolled on, spreading on and outwards it darkened the sky and the entire scene sank into the gloom that the cloud had brought with it. The men had found temporary shelter under the

trees where they cowered and huddled together. A short time before the break for the midday meal the rain began to ease up. Patches of brightness appeared in the sky, and the clouds dispersed.

A month later they held the *pooja*. It began late one night with only Girigoris, Heen Banda and his closest friends attending it. They sat round like mutes, their faces lit up like newly painted masks. The *kattadiya* danced quietly fixed in a single spot, shuffling his feet and swaying his body. With a sudden lurch he would move forward and with the flick of his wrist he would fling a powdery substance into the torch. The scene would explode in a glow of red brilliance and fiery yellows while the fire in the torch leapt violently into the air. The two drummers, fixed in their knee bent, bow-legged stance beat their drums, producing a drone now, a throb then. Suddenly, the kattadiya would swing into a whirl. He would spin round and round in a shifting axis. Everything would be exploding now, the drumming, the flashes of light, the leaping of the flames, and slowly as the dancer became united in will with the drummer, those seated on the mats were knit into this intangible village will. They would soon be like owls on jungle trees while their shadows flitted nervously in elongated patterns behind them.

At the appointed time Girigoris took the tray of offerings and stood before the wooden altar, and throwing incense into a brazier he enveloped himself in a cloud of smoke. The roll of the drums was louder now. He felt himself caught in the net of sound and smoke and drawn into its flux, and in that moment the iron entered his soul. The taut faces of his friends had grown more intense suddenly. They had been shedding their identities slowly and merging into a group, a tradition bound village group. They were bound together by their fears and turned into a pliable instrument of destruction. Soon they would become so mindless that they would have no separate wills, or the capacity to critically analyse any of their actions. For brief moments yet, certain doubts and fears erupted into their minds, but having given their will to do this thing they could not encourage doubts. They had to snuff these as ruthlessly as they would do their deed. When the last of them had stood before the altar and made his vow a man approached Girigoris and touched him on the shoulder.

'Come,' said the man, 'He's here now.'

Girigoris followed this man, a man not seen in the village before. He was away a short while. One only heard voices in the dark. Then he returned. He went out again, followed by Heen Banda, Seetin, Armanis and the others, and they trooped out into the darkness.

'The young man will meet us with the dynamite later tonight. Till then we shall have to be on our own,' said Girigoris as they went threading their way through the thicket in the darkness.

'What if the floods will not come as we expect ?' asked the nervous voice.

'That's a risk we must take.'

Arnolis alone of the neutral villagers knew of what was to take place. He sat in his hut brooding about it. He was unhappy. At last, unable to stand it any longer he rose, thinking he would go and inform Andoris Rala. It was the least he could do. He had not gone far before he met Davith Singho. He was moving through the dark in a kind of unnatural haste. So strange for Davith Singho to be hurrying, he thought. 'At this time of the night, whither do you go, Davith Singho ?" he asked.

I' am returning from Andoris Rala's,' replied Davith Singho.

'It is to Andoris Rala's that I go myself,' said Arnolis.

'Why do you go to Andoris Rala's ?'

'It is about Girigoris and his friends that I go to tell him about.'

'He already knows it. It is that I want to tell him about. They were heading in the direction of the river more than an hour ago.'

'It is well that he has been told about this. I can then return home.'

'You should be with Andoris Rala rather than at home, shouldn't you Arnolis ?'

'What then do you do yourself, Davith Singho ?'

'I have not abadoned Andoris Rala. There are things I do and don't do. One does not go beating drums about it. These are things about which even a cawardly dog stiffens his back.'

'I am no coward, Davith Singho, but how can I or anyone get mixed up in these things about which no one knows which is right and which is wrong ?'

'We already are mixed up in these things. There is no escape for those who run at a time like this. Such things as this grow so big that nothing escapes them.'

It is strange, most amazingly strange, thought Arnolis as he went his way.

In the meanwhile, two miles away, by the river, Girigoris and his men were alone in the dark, and they, by themselves had to do their most uncommon deed. The stranger who had met Girigoris earlier was gone. He had done whatever he had to do and was gone. The others had to complete the task. They crouched there in the dark in two distinct groups. Girigoris waddled down there in his no-neck slouch to the group further on. Bent on their strange task they had, in some curious fashion shed their human character. He went from one group to the other, stage managing the undertaking.

'Has Seetin gone ?' asked Girigoris.

'He must be there already,' said a voice. 'He went more than twenty minutes ago. He'll have no trouble fetching him out. We told him clearly what he had to do. The bait he'll offer will be strong enough to fetch him out.'

'Fools,' muttered Girigoris. 'To think it is enough to offer a white cockerel to the gods as if that alone was enough. A human sacrifice is always better.'

'You do not intend to kill him, do you ?' asked a voice in the dark. 'We must think of everything. We must do what the gods want us. If it is a *billa* the gods want we can't refuse him, can we ?' It will be so convenient - a river so turbulent as this, who can say how a man got into it,' Girigoris chuckled at his own joke.

Andoris Rala had risen earlier than the others to come to the river. He looked tired from the restless night they had spent. He stood on the bank. The platform on which the crane had rested had collapsed. The crane itself had tumbled forward, burying itself in the river leaving a section of it rearing up in the sky. It was lying there like a wounded elephant that had crashed onto its

knees leaving its giant buttocks and hind legs up in the air. The four cylinders in the centre of the river had an unhappy lean, like men struck by paralysis. The dynamite had done their job only partially. Andoris Rala scowled at the river and pursed his lips. The floods coming on the top of what has happened in the night would seem like acts of some crazy and irresponsible god. He shuddered to think of the horrible way Arnolis must have died. His thoughts went to other things now. There were many things he had to do before he left the village. Brampi was right after all He had said this was a madness. It was a madness, a horrible madness that had come to the village. He stood there watching the turbulence of the river. It rushed on, waiting for nothing. It was just as well that the floods should come now. It would, perhaps, be the process by which the village might be cleansed of the madness.

Andoris Rala suddenly found Brampi standing by him. Andoris Rala turned and gave him a cold, distant smile and looked away.

'I have heard what happened,' said Brampi.

Andoris Rala said nothing. He just stared at the river.

'I was wrong not to have come last night.'

Still Andoris Rala said nothing. He stared into the distance, and then he began to speak. He was addressing no one in particular.

'Its funny about the river,' said Andoris Rala. 'Ten years back the floods would not have come. Now every third or fifth year the floods come like the malarial fever used to come. Up on the hills they cut down the forest trees and throw the soil into the river. What else can the river do but overflow ? In the meanwhile the gods are the convenient *kathkarayo* who carry the burden of our ignorance.'

Brampi did not know what to say. Andoris Rala turned to look at him and then asked.

'Have you seen Davith Singho this morning ?"

'No, I have not.'

'Doesn't he seem wiser than us all Brampi ? We all stood here and threw stones at him.'

Brampi stayed silent.

'Don't you think so, Brampi ?"

'No, I don't. It is just cunning he has learned in the dock-yard.'

Andoris Rala smiled.

'This is what we all thought. I still say he is wiser than us all. He has learned the art of being apart from the foolishness of other people. When he can he attempts to correct it. At other times he only laughs at it.'

Andoris Rala grew silent once more while the events of the night began to crowd in on his mind. He looked up at the sky. It had begun to darken again. The clouds banked up in great masses, steel grey clouds spinning and wheeling round.

'The strange and ill-fated bridge,' said Andoris Rala.

Brampi, standing beside him, looked at Andoris Rala's gaunt, tired face. I had changed in an incredible fashion. It was not any longer the face of the man he used to know. It looked tired and old ; wrinkles he had never seen before had suddenly appeared on the sun-burnt face, but his eyes had this fierce glint in them like in the face of a man who wanted to go on the rampage. He felt himself a stranger beside him. It was as if a barrier had come between them too. Andoris Rala continued to stand there, saying nothing, just staring. Then he suddenly walked away as if he did not know that he had been there by him.

It was almost three in the morning when the river burst its banks ; the water surging and boiling and destroying everything in its path. Later the villagers climbed to the top of the hill to have a better look at the devastation. Only the trees could now be seen, standing gaunt and silhuoetted against the vast, glistening sheet of water. Andoris Rala had come with his wife to look at this. After a time he turned to his wife.

'Come, let us be gone from here. There's nothing we can do here.'

'Your field is under water and your paddy all drowned—don't you care about them ?' asked the wife.

'Yes, I care about them. There is nothing I can do about them now.'

He was silent again as the two of them made their way carefully through the undergrowth – wet and dark and damp and cold. Their huts, and where they lived, at least, were safe from the floods destruction.

'I care about my paddy. Nearly half year's labour gone, he said as if the thought had returned to him. 'Yet this is not as bad when thought of against what else has happened here. We can once more grow these four acres of paddy, but when and how can we resurrect this village again to its old, decent and independent way of life. There was a time when evil could not rear its head as freely as it will now do. It's why I must go.'

As they went on they ran into Davith Singho. They stopped and felt awkward for a moment. They were still trying to understand each other. They had been suspicious of each other for a long time, and it would be sometime more before they could meet each other without their past fears, but in their different ways they had established a bond.

'Is it very bad – the flood ?' asked Davith Singho when he found speech again.

'Very bad. Man's mismanagement is sometimes called god's curse – *Deiyange Saarpey* they call it but they never call it *yakkungey dosai*. The devil is always free of blame of such things. What do you hope to do after this, Davith Singho ?'

'I do not know. May be I'll go back to the docks.'

Davith Singho did not know what more to say. But he asked, after a slightly painful pause.

'And what do you do, Andoris Rala, yourself ?'

I'll wander on and pitch my tent of leaves like the *ahikunta-kayo* in a new place – the gypsies, the wanderers of the earth. I'll seek some place where the wind blows freely through the leaves.'

A week later, after the floods had receded the villagers returned to the deserted bridge-site. In the lead was Girigoris, leading his men back to the scene of their crime. They came and gathered a short distance away from the river bank. They no

longer looked like a harmless, farming peasantry. They had reduced themselves to the mental level of the next man and the man next to him and so on untill they had acquired a peculiar uniform quality. It was the only way they could function as a pack. They stood there now looking at their handiwork. Girigoris raised his hand suddenly and held it out in the direction of the river. He still looked short and deformed and curiously like an anthropoid that had reared itself on its hind legs to charge at something, but there was this milignancy one felt now.

'Look,' he said, 'we didn't do it properly.'

His voice had a curious authority now. He had destroyed what more superior men had put up. It gave him this new sense of power. He was to lead the pack now. There was in his eyes, as he looked at the men, a strange, never before seen intensity, as if in the mad rush of water, he saw the fulfilment of his destiny.

'We thought the flood would finish it,' said Heen Banda, didn't we Seetin ?'

'A thing is always better when done to a finish. Remember that Heen Banda'.

'We can't have slip-shod work in this village anymore. We must discipline everyone.'

Heen Banda heard a confidence and self-assurance that he had not observed in Girigoris earlier. He felt a slight coil of fear stir in his belly. He did not know it as fear. He did not know what it was, only, he felt somewhere in the recesses of his mind that it would be good for him to agree with Girigoris hereafter. The rain began to come on them suddenly, first as a drizzle then as a light rain. Girigoris turned suddenly and moved away as fast as his short legs would carry him. The others turned too and started to move infected by Girigoris' action. They had submerged their individual wishes in the group wish. When the leader turned they followed his example and turned themselves. They had become a pack. They began then to go at a trot, all moving together, a compact and tight little group.

11

The High Chair

Sita Kulatunga

The sun was blazing down on her. The spine ached as the hot sun drained her energy. Now it must be well past noon she thought. When she was at home and used to help with this work every day it didn't tire her half so much. Now the bones had got lazy. 'You are spoilt', she told herself. She bent down to pick up another sarong which was particularly dirty. Whose sarong could it be, she mused. Now, having lost touch with the work she couldn't trace the clothes to their owners. Her mother, of course would say which was Saimon Mudulali's and which was Peter Appuhamy's and which was Iskole Mahattaya's. To Prema they were all the same, equally disgusting.

After all, my people have done this for generations, she thought. Washing clothes – 'redi nändas', 'hēne māmas' they were called, why 'māma' and 'nända she wondered. What did it really mean ? She remembered something she had read in some book or the other about the mildness of Sri Lanka's caste system. But just now with the sun a menacing white hot ball overhead, her clothes drenched, hands smarting from soap suds, she couldn't account for the 'māma' and 'nända', the 'uncle' and 'aunt' mildness of it.

This was Prema's first vacation from the 'varsity. This morning she came to the stream with the washing against mother's repeated protests. Mother herself was too ill to do any work, least of all to wash a mountain of dirty clothes. She had a racking cough and had a low fever for a couple of days. Prema was adamant that she would do the washing today if it were to be done

at all. She beat the dirty sarong on the stone with added vehemence and forced vigour. The respective beat of the cloth against the stone seemed to mock her. There's nobody to see you, our heroine– none except a few village urchins to whom it does not matter who washes what.

Prema picked up another dirty bedsheet. Nausea and disgust welled up in her. The sun seemed to beat down with greater ruthlessness making her dizzy head swim with exhaustion. Every pore of her body seemed to burn and break into sweat. She sat down for a moment trying to gulp down the disgust. She might as well have stayed at home and let her father do the whole thing. Prema felt that she led a dual life; just at this moment the undergraduate was alien, the campus, the halls of residence, walks, passages, libraries and even the very waters of those streams at Peradeniya were a far cry from the reality of the dhoby bundle. Even the sun itself—above and reflected below in its shimmering harshness at her wet feet, was different.

'Redi Nända's daughter—yes, the laundry woman's daughter too has passed her University entrance.' Or perhaps they would have referred to her as 'Radā Kella'. She knew that the really great did not bother about respect from others. Did it matter to Einstein whethe one offered him a seat or not ? Or did it matter to Leonard da Vinci if he were born out of wedlock ? Or closer home, to the Minister of State or the renowned physician, how little did caste matter. There were so many who with the backing of money or education had broken the bonds of caste and migrated to the towns many a generation back.

'Yet I am not one of them,' she thought. If I could do something great, achieve something, hit the headlines. With what ? she wondered—not with a paltry degree with no prospect of employment. Something really great, so that people would look up to her. Yet she knew in a remote corner of her mind that even this much was something. But would it suffice to lift her out of this mire of servility ?

'What rubbish,' she chided herself—the soap and water worn hands, the chafed nails of her father—the sinewy, work-roughened hands of her mother hunched by carrying the dhoby bundle day after day, were the reality. Worse than all this was that inescapable air of servility of which the bent back was a symbol. Dignity

of labour! Prema thought. In the first place your name Prema is not your name. It was Pransina, what on earth did it mean? She wondered.

Even at the loud bellowing socialist's house her mother or father was not offered a chair, only a low stool. Condescension, low stools, even kindness and charity, they were all equally disgusting, stinking like the dirt on the soiled dirty clothes. She could remember in tormenting detail how time and again she used to go to the village houses with her mother with the washed clothes to bring back yet another bundle of dirty clothes. Some of the big houses didn't have more than one stool, so she had either to stand around or sit on a little kitchen stool. Often she did not sit. She hung around her mother; staring at the furniture which seemed so grand.

In the village school if she wore anything new the girls always thought it belonged to somebody else, that it was one of the frocks given to wash. They thought dhoby children always wore other peoples clothes. True, sometimes their people did wear other peoples' clothes. But she herself never did, even as a child, however threadbare her own clothes were.

Prema knew what the village must have said when she passed her university entrance exam at the first sitting. It was at the same sitting that the village council Chairman's son passed too. The credit of his passing, she knew was dampened by her success in the eyes of the village. The progressive democratic society which admitted all children to the same school, allowed them the same opportunities at least as far as poverty allowed. So much better off than the American black of only the other day, she thought, trying to be very objective. But it was not gratefully that her mind hosted these sheds of thought. The thousand humiliations, and subtle cruelties came crowding on her. Some of the teachers had tried to make it appear that being of the dhoby caste was the most substantial impediment to arriving at a correct answer to a sum. The primary school was so much worse than the big school in the small town. As a very young child she was not able to understand the little pricks, the not-sitting-next, the not-holding-that-girl's-hand spirit of her classmates. It was only later that those could harass her even in retrospect. The quality of it all.

A lifetime of it should have hardened her and made her as tough and sturdy and thick skinned as the 'Kumbuk' tree nearby. No, she was still as soft an l vulnerable and sensitive as a rain-sodden 'niyara' by the paddy field which heaved and sucked your feet in when you walked along its grass-covered wetness, with the added weight of the dhoby bundle.

This morning she thought of all this as she had the lurking fear that she would have to take a few washed clothes to the V. C. Chairman's house. Surely her mother was not well enough, her brother would never go anywhere with a bundle. She knew that Thilak's shirts too were there. She was certain that it was one of those shirts he was wearing when she first met him on the campus. As they had not gone to the same school and he had studied in Colombo he didn't know her well. When a friend of Thilak's was about to introduce him to her and paused to ask, 'By the way, aren't the two of you from the same village ?'—how she wished she were dead. She could remember herself stammering, 'Yes, from the same area.' He probably placed her only when she said, 'On the other side of the village beyond the paddy fields'. So that he would know at once who she was, 'beyond that tea kiosk', she continued breathlessly to stop him asking any more questions. She could have worshipped him for his quick rejoinder, 'Oh, yes, I know, our families have known each other for years, though we are strangers.' How natural he made it sound. She knew that he had been sensitive enough to pick up the pleading message in her eyes. But when he continued, 'Even a fortnight ago when I was home for the weekened her mother came visiting,' she felt he was teasing. It was as if the two of them were sharing a sly private joke, as if they had joined forces to deceive the others. For what would be the visit of her mother but to bring the bundle of clean, well-pressed clothes; the picture of her mother weighed down by the bundle on her head walking through the paddy fields and coconut groves fell into focus in her mind's eye.

It was late when she came home, exhausted from washing, bending her back over dirty clothes for so long. Mother was still running a temperature and coughing—a dry racking cough. The peculiar smell of dirty clothes assailed her nostrils as she entered that part of the little house. Now it was so much better than when she was a kid. Then it was only a little cadjan shed—now

that people had started paying in cash, they had been able to put up two rooms where they could sleep. The days when people paid in kind (a measure of rice from here and a couple of coconuts from there) were coming to an end. Even so, what little did money buy now ? Soap was so expensive and so was starch—and even the coconut shells to be burnt in the heavy black iron meant money now. Would the damp stale smell of dirty clothes never leave her ?

In the evening she found herself on the way to Thilak's despite all her mother's protests. She had a bitter argument with her mother who insisted on going herself in spite of her fever. 'Why, what's wrong with me that I can't go ?' challenged Prema. 'If they must have the clothes today, I'll go.' 'It's not that you can't go but that you educated girls should not go,' was how her mother argued. Eventually Prema managed to send her mother back to bed before setting out on her errand.

She wore the most unobtrusive skirt and blouse she could find. By then the defiant attitude of the morning had left her. The smouldering fire of the early hours was now a dull ache. She planned to enter the V. C. Chairman's house through the back door, leave the clothes with the servant and vanish. Would they insist on giving the dirty clothes to her ? How could she refuse if they collected the dirty clothes. 5 shirts, 4 sarees, 6 pillow cases, so many pairs of trousers, with the lady of the house taking them down in an old exercise book while the dhoby counted them out aloud. Perhaps some of them will be Thilak's.

She felt her legs shiver and a cramping hot shaft of pain in her abdomen. Was it fear, shame or what ? How could she achieve anything great if this little ordeal loomed before her in such massive proportions. As she entered the Jayasuriya compound, her legs seemed to falter. As if in a daze she rushed through the gate with the bundle (wrapped not in a cloth but in newspaper). Still warm in their newly pressed cleanliness. When she entered the kitchen quarters, Lucihamy the servant, looked surprised. Yet she who knew who was who rose to the occasion and took her to some sort of store room cum second dining room. There was a table surrounded by a few chairs. She put the bundle on the table and stood there waiting. Lucihamy in no time found a small

school-room chair and set it in a corner away from the high ordinary chairs.

Prema stood still, waiting, debating, wondering 'do I sit or don't I ?' When she heard footsteps just beyond the curtained door, she stood rooted to the ground paying it woudn't be Thilak. Her heart beat against the ribs as if it were trying to break loose and burst through. And her throat was parched in a cracked—earthy dryness. It was Thilak, just as my cursed and foul luck would have it, she thougnt in a panic. In that one brief moment which was an eternity it was as if years of tainted servitude, low stools, cracked cups kept apart for the visiting dhoby, were one and all crowding on her, pressing on her brain, smothering her. Even to sit she couldn't find the chair which was so low, so abysmally law.

Prema', Thilak seemed to breathe out his suppressed surprise in those syllables. Ignoring the bundle on the table he said 'Take a seat, here, do sit down,' as if he too was pleading. He drew out a tall high-backed chair from near the table. Prema came up to the table. She stood holding the high back of the chair, running her fingers over its carved edge.

12

For Love or Money

Tilak Gunawardena

Sundari was six years old when her Aunt Biddy disappeared.

Aunt Biddy was one of Sundari's earliest memories, clearer, dearer even than the frail outline of her own mother, the fragile, talented person everyone talked about with hushed voices and pitying glances at the poor child, motherless at five, who had disappeared (the first to do so in Sundari's experience, soon to be so fraught with these puzzling events, each foreshadowing and recalling the others) in a thick, heavy atmosphere of disinfectant and hospital sheets, angular features stretched in a grimace Sundari now knew (having seen it repeated oddly in the mirror when the nail-scissors turned in her hand and gashed it) to have been pain. Aunt Biddy flowed into the vacant space, filling it with her loud, comforting presence, arranging the outings to parks and the children's cinema and the promenade by the sea that succeeded each other until the antiseptic memory gave way to a series of other impressions; impressions of a large house with many corridors and dogs who lay wheezily in its corners, of an old man (her grandfather) with a bristly chin and cheeks who was to be kissed and curtsied to each morning, of the busy civil servant, her father, who left the house each morning before Sundari got up and returned nearly always too late to say much more than a 'How's my girl today ? Happy ?'

Happy. Aunt Biddy and Sundari were happy, she knew, in the long tropical evenings when the cane armchairs were carried out into the veranda and they sat among the scents of Grandfather's climbing roses and his shortening cigar, with the fireflies

like stars in the *araliya* tree. Father and Aunt Biddy would begin the pleasant ritual that always followed dinner, the talk of what was happening seventytwo miles away in Moratuwa, where all their friends and relatives were, where they had played together as children. Aunt Biddy was not a real Aunt, Sundari knew, not a member of the family like Aunt Catherine, her mother's gaunt and unfriendly sister, or the plump, comfortable Aunts and Uncles, her father's brothers and sisters, who populated the big, untidy, rambling old house in Moratuwa where they all seemed to live cuddling together like a flock of cooing pigeons. Sundari loved Moratuwa, and Aunt Biddy often jumped into the train with her in the days after her mother's death, and before she had grown tired of watching the sea appear and disappear through the lines and lines of coconut palms and counting the catamaran sails on the blue horizon, there they were on the Moratuwa station platform. The buggy would be waiting for them, and after that the heaven of the great, bushy garden to explore all over again, the loving peck of one Aunt and Uncle after another, the picking of young coconuts fallen on the grass, and the shivering chill of sparkling well-water on her skin, while Aunt Biddy sat in the veranda and talked with any available Uncle or Aunt of what was happening in Colombo, and how successful Michael was being in the Ministry.

'It's the best thing for them both,' Aunt Biddy was saying once as Sundari, climbing the veranda steps with a skirt-full of antigonon buds, sat down to thread them together. 'Better than glooming away, the way he was doing just after Santhi's death. Not much time for the child, of course, but that can come later. For the present, I'm there.'

And she was there, untidy, brisk, delightful. 'Yes,' returned Aunt Prue, sewing away at a basketful of cotton checked dusters, 'what Michael would do without you I don't know, Bridget. That is what I am always saying. Though no relative of ours, you are more to us all than another sister would have been. Michael is lucky to have an old friend like you to be with Sundari.'

But Aunt Biddy had another life, a life apart from Sundari and her father. One day Sundari was introduced to that life, the big city hospital where Aunt Biddy was a nursing Sister, and the smell of disinfectant revived old memories - oddly, horrible no

longer, for they were connected now with Aunt Biddy, with her comfortable presence and not with absence and loss. Sundari liked the hospital, she liked to watch Aunt Biddy chivvying the junior nurses about, she liked the flowers in the vases and the charts on the beds.

'Don't get married, Aunt Biddy,' Sundari said once.

'Get married, dear ? Who would marry old ugly me ?' Aunt Biddy was busy counting bandages, but had time to sound amused.

'You might marry a doctor like old Doctor Kunam. You might marry Father. I wouldn't mind if you married Father. That would be lovely. But don't marry Doctor Kunam. Then you'll have to come and live with him in the hospital for always.'

'Nonsense.' Aunt Biddy was at her briskest. 'I'm not getting married. And you don't have to get married to live with people you love for always. I'm not married to your Father, but I'm going to live with you for always and always.'

And yet Aunt Biddy disappeared. In spite of her faithful promise to Sundari she vanished, never to be seen again, except in the distance at Church, at the far end of a large, crowded room when Sundari's Aunt Catherine got married, and once, much later on, when Sundari was at boarding school. Nothing of her remained except some picture books of nursery rhymes that she had given Sundari, and those disappeared too, one day, to be replaced by new ones with 'To dearest Sundari from your loving Aunt Helen' in neat, graceful handwriting on the inside cover.

Aunt Helen was the passion of Sundari's life. She longed to grow up to be like her, tall and willowy, moving in a cloud of fragrance, rustling in silk saris and soft laces. Aunt Helen's petticoats were edged with broad, fine lace, quite unlike Aunt Biddy's tough, poplin garments. She had long black hair that she wore a dozen different ways, she played the piano beautifully, and Father worshipped her just as much as Sundari did. After they married, on a grey wet day against which Aunt Helen's white and gold wedding sari shone like a lily, there didn't seem to be much time any more for quiet conversations on the veranda among the creepers and the roses. Father and Aunt Helen would be in their own room, with the door shut and the curtains drawn. 'Never

mind,' Aunt Biddy would say, 'we'll read a story, shall we, Sundari ?' But she did mind. There was old Grandfather, smoking quietly, his thoughts a hundred years away, and nobody but each other to talk to. And although in the morning they were there again, Father and Aunt Helen, smiling and gay, it was not the same.

Aunt Helen got in charmingly with Aunt Biddy. 'The silly old dear,' Sundari heard her say once to Father. 'I don't know where we'd be without her.'

'Hardly old, Helen,' her Father had replied. 'She's five years youger than I am.'

'Yes, but *you're* old, aren't you, Mike ? An old, old man of nearly fifty, what I'm going to do with you I don't know. And so spoilt ! You've been petted and and pampered by adoring old Biddy for so long, you can't do a thing for yourself. But lucky me, having her around all the time makes running this old house so easy . . .'

The delicious meals old Banda cooked were ordered by Aunt Biddy as they always had been, even when Sundari's mother had been alive. They were meals cooked in the southern way, carrying the provincial flavour Sundari loved, for Banda had come with Michael to Colombo from Moratuwa, where he had been first trained in the old Moratuwa house by Michael's mother.

'It would be nice to have a chance *some* times,' Aunt Helen would smile teasingly'. But I can't cook a thing myself, and it's such a comfort to have Biddy here. Do you know she worships you, Mike ? The funny old thing. And some of pampering comes my way too, so I can't complain.' And she would laugh her childish, delightful laugh and play with her step-daughter's hair. 'We're all spoilt, aren't we, Sundari ? Daddy, and you, and even me.'

Aunt Helen and Aunt Biddy would have many long, confidential talks together, and Aunt Biddy would tell Aunt Helen how Father liked things done. Sometimes they talked of Shanthi, and her life with Michael, of which Aunt Biddy had been a spectator too. From one of these conversations Sundari learned that she was herself to be, one day, 'heiress.'

'At twenty one,' Aunt Biddy told Aunt Helen and her mother, who had come to live in the Colombo house with them, 'that's the age Shanthi intended it all to go to her. But till then, everything is in Michael's hands.'

Aunt Helen's mother was very interested. 'I've never heard of anyone so generous and trusting,' she said. 'But Shanthi would have been glad to know Sundari has a step-mother like Helen, so fond of the child.'

'She always longed for a brilliant daughter, you know,' said Aunt Biddy, 'not a son. A daughter who would have all the talent she could never use, who would be famous as a writer, an artist, something out of the common run. That's why Sundari's education is all taken care of, everything's in order for her to go to Ashcombe School when she's old enough.'

An heiress! What would she do with all her money when she was twenty one? Would she be artistic and brilliant? Would she perhaps be beautiful? At seven Sundari was none of these things, just two big eyes in a thin face, and a talent for hiding in corners that had at first amused Aunt Helen, and at last irritated her. By that time Aunt Biddy had also ceased to comfort and amuse. Her influence in domestic matters had collided with that of Aunt Helen's mother; and when at least, irritated beyond endurance, Aunt Helen had finally told Michael that she could bear the quarrels no longer, Sundari's fondness for dark corners increased. Aunt Biddy's hurt, sorrowful disappearance did not affect Sundari too much, however; there was all the excitement of starting school at Ashcombe, her mother's old school, the new uniforms Aunt Helen was getting beautifully tailored for her, the stacks of initialled underclothes.

'But why send her to the boarding school?' the Moratuwa Aunts and Uncles twittered, in reproachful letters to Sundari's father. 'Shanthi wouldn't have liked it.'

'Helen is expecting a baby in April,' he replied, 'and with Biddy no longer here, how can Helen manage Sundari as well?'

'Besides, what Shanthi's wishes have to do with it I can't make out,' Aunt Helen would say from the sofa, where she lay embroidering blue scalloped edges on a small muslin baby shirt.

'She wanted Ashcombe for Sundari, didn't she ? Well, that's where you're going, aren't you, darling ? Really, Mike, your family makes me tired. We can't make a decision of our own without having to explain it to a host of people who have no concern in the matter at all. You'd think they'd have some consideration for *me*.'

The Christmas before Sundari went to Ashcombe, she paid a visit to Moratuwa. She was sent there with her ayah, since Michael and Helen were forced to remain in Colombo, busy with Christmas festivities. But Helen met her at the station on her return, the back seat of the car filled with generously wrapped presents for Sundari, a doll, a teddy-bear, a tea set of real china. 'And did you have a lovely time, precious ? she asked.

'Now, now, be careful,' said Aunt Helen's mother warningly, as Sundari flung herself at her beloved and hugged her. 'The baby.'

'The baby ?' Sundari looked hard at Aunt Helen's rounded waistline. 'Is the baby there ?'

'Yes he's he's here. See ? Feel him.'

Scrabble, scrabble, *kick*. 'Does it hurt ?' Wondrous Aunt Helen, making a baby out of magic.

'No, just uncomfortable.' The old lady raised her eyebrows but said nothing. 'Well, tell us all about it. What have you get there ?'

Sundari showed her new picture books.

'What's all this ?' said old Aunt. '*Cinderella* ? And *The Babes in the Wood* ? A very nice book to give a child whose mother is dead, it'll frighten her out of her wits.'

The book was replaced by another, and that January the Moratuwa house, complete with Uncles and Aunts, disappeared. They were, it seemed a Bad Influence. But Sudari hardly had time to miss her visits to them, because her life adapted itself so quickly to the boarding school routine of early rising bell, Chapel, breakfast, bath, lessons, interval, lessons again, rest-period, tea, homework, supervised games, dinner, Chapel, bed. The pattern was varied at weekends by regular letter-writing sessions (Sundari

wrote every Saturday to Father and Aunt Helen), and occasional visits from relations. One day Aunt Biddy came to see her. Sundari was pleased, but slightly embarrassed by the tears in her visitor's eyes. And she was asked questions the answers to which she didn't know. How was Michael ? Was he working as well as always ? Did he miss Aunt Biddy ? Did Sundari miss Aunt Biddy ? Did Sundari love her still ? Was the baby expected soon ? Did Father and Aunt Helen want a boy or a girl ? Sundari wanted a brother. The other girls talking to their visitors were looking curiously at Aunt Biddy. Sundari wished she would go away. She went.

In April, when Sundari went home for the holidays, the new baby had arrived. He was very small. She was allowed to hold the bath powder and the big powder puff while he was being given his bath, a ritual presided over by old Aunt, who was an expert in such things. Two shining enamel jugs stood ready, one containing hot water, the very hottest, one containing cold. Three bath towels were drapped over a chair, three of fine mull embroidered with ducks and tiny fiash were folded beside them. The soap sat in its blue dish, the eau-de-cologne and Johnson's Baby Oil stood on a small white table at a side. Aunt Helen was not allowed by old Aunt to take any part in the ritual herself. But Sundari was, and what a delight it was to puff the powder over her little brother's soft golden skin, taking the very greatest care not to let it go up his nose or into his eyes and to admire him as he lay dressed in one of his innumerable embroidered shirts afterwards. She loved him dearly.

'How affectionate she is,' old Aunt commented once, with what sounded like surprise. 'No, Sundari, you can't hold him. See, even his mother doesn't hold him while he is having his bath. Not until he's older and bigger.'

Sundari would hang over the baby's cot, gazing at the tiny turned up nose and the lashes lying long and black on his fat cheek.

'I hope she won't do him any harm,' the old lady said once to her daughter. 'You shouldn't leave scissors and sharp instruments lying about. You never know.'

One day Sundari hugged her baby brother so hard that she woke him up, and he screamed. Old Aunt came rushing into the

room. 'You little wretch, what have you done ?' she shouted at Sundari.

'Hush, Mother, what's happened ?' Michael had come in.

'Goodness only knows what's happened.'

Old Aunt snatched baby up from his blue pillows and examined him closely, apparently for a puncture. He yelled with fright. 'I was out of the nursery for a minute, *one* minute, and this is what she does.'

'What did you do, Sundari ?' Father usually called her *duwa*, daughter. Sundari's heart sank at this formality. She came out of the corner into which she had instinctively retreated, and stood before him.

'Nothing.'

'What do you mean, nothing ? Why is he screaming ?'

'I don't know.'

'I don't like giving orders in your house, Michael but if you know what's good for your son you won't let that child near him. This is all Helen's fault, letting her help with his bath, and heaven knows what else. What I say is, can I keep an eye on her all the time ?'

And the baby disappeared from that day, from Sundari's immediate presence to the end of whatever room she happened to be in. When Sundari went back to boarding school at the end of the April holidays her brother was not brought to see her, but she was often visited by Aunt Helen, who unfailingly brought her the very latest news of him. He was laughing now, he was so good with his bottle, he was sleeping soundly, he was beginning to crawl, he was standing, he had walked, he said 'Mama' and 'Dada'. Aunt Helen took a great interest in Sundari's progress at school. 'A quiet child,' the Principal had noted in her term report. 'Tends to keep to herself too much for her own good. Likes reading, and is good at composition. Needs encouragement.' Aunt Helen provided plenty of encouragement.

'Your mother wanted you to do well at school,' she often said. 'We're so glad that you like your studies. Here are some more books I chose for you this week.'

'Didn't Father send anything ?

'No, dear, he didn't have the time. But he asked me to give you his love.'

On one occasion, Aunt Helen asked, 'Has anyone been to see you ?'

Sundari managed somehow to forget Aunt Biddy's visit.

'Never mind. Daddy's coming next week-end, to take you out. I thought you would like to go to a ballet.'

But when Saturday came, the outing with her father was cancelled by telephone. The baby was ill, and neither Father nor Aunt Helen could leave him. Sundari began to keep a diary in imitation of one of the heroines in a book Aunt Helen had given her. It was something to do, though there wasn't much to say.

Sundari's brother grew older. He was a placid little boy, sunny-tempered and smiling, and the darling of the household. Aunt Helen was pregnant again.

'Well, you should think about it now,' Sundari once heard her say during one of her brief visits home. 'You're not getting any younger, you know.' There was a new shade in her sweet voice, not quite the teasing playfulness of earlier times. 'We have one son now, perhaps we will soon have another. What's going to happen to these children ?'

'Don't cry, Helen.' Old Aunt was in the room too, then. 'You see, Michael ? Heaven knows I don't wish to interfere in your affairs, but if anything were to happen to you tomorrow, what is to happen to your children ? Sundari is all right, she is, after all, an heiress. . . '

Again that word. But the magic had disappeared from it, it was surrounded now by thoughts of darkness and death.

'Yes, she'll be rolling in money, simply rolling, all that inherited wealth. And what will Helen's children have ? Nothing. Nothing.'

Nothing ? But of course Sundari was going to share it all with Anil, all. How could she be an heiress, and be vain and proud like the wicked princess in a fairy story ? Could she her

brothers beg in the streets ? Let them wait till she was twenty one, they would find out how generous she could be.

'Think of what the boy will feel,' Aunt Helen sobbed on. 'Anil's a boy, after all, think of what he will feel, at the difference between them.' Sundari's heart melted with pity for Aunt Helen.

'But what more can I do ?' Sundari's father asked. 'I only hold the property in trust for her.'

'It's all Shanthi's fault,' old Aunt said. 'She obviously didn' trust you, Michael. If only she had left all her property direct to you, instead of the small part she did leave, you could have divided it equally among all your children, instead of this unfair business of making one an heiress and the rest paupers.'

'Think of Anil's education,' said Helen. 'Surely you want to see him go to Cambridge as you did ? Why should he have a second-rate education here ?'

'Yes, it's plain to see he doesn't care what happens to you or to your children. It's only Shanthi who matters, and her precious daughter. I don't believe in interfering in other people's affairs, Michael, but I think it would be only fair to Helen and the children if you were to start investing the money you earn now, and begin running this house and your family concerns on the income from Sundari's estates. Your doing that wouldn't affect *her* interests – she's inheriting the property when she is twenty one, isn't she ? That's only fifteen years from now. You should do what you can for your boys while you have the property still in your hands.'

Sundari did not hear her father's reply. But she would not have understood it if she had, for income and investments meant nothing to her. She was not encouraged to handle money, or spend it. Her pocket-money was saved in a money-box, and drawn on for the purchase of birthday presents and Christmas presents for Anil, Aunt Helen and Father. She decided she would save up even more carefully than before : it would be her own contribution to help Anil go to Cambridge. Well, until she became twenty one, that is, and could place her inherited riches at his service and Aunt Helens.'

That Christmas Sundari received a Christmas card. 'From your Auntie Biddy, with love and kisses ' it said, and there were

half a dozen X's scattered among the holly berries and the candles. Old Aunt tore it into small pieces, put them in an envelope, and sent it to Aunt Biddy's home in Moratuwa.

'Mad, *aney*,' said the Moratuwa Aunts and Uncles to one another, on hearing of this oddity. 'Absolutely mad. What Michael has done to himself and his daughter by taking that vicious old woman into his house, I don't know. Helen's no different. They're mad about money, they'll drive him till he drops.' Sundari pretended she didn't hear.

Since a new younger brother was expected to arrive on Christmas Eve, and Sundari herself was judged now to be old enough to escape the direct effects of Moratuwa's bad influences, she was on a Christmas visit to her southern relations, who fluttered round her excitedly.

'My, how the child has grown. That's a pretty dress, Sundari --did Aunt Helen make it for you ?'

'No, she bought it for me,' Sundari said. Aunt Helen can't sew, but she buys lots of nice things for me.'

The Aunts exchanged glances.

'Yes, there must be lots of money to spend now,' said Aunt Prue. 'Is it true your father has given up carrying out repairs on The Retreat ?'

The Retreat was a beautiful old house in Kandy, the property of Shanthi, which Michael and Helen had visited often in the early days of their marriage and which Helen, with her wonderful taste, had had elaborate plans for renovating.

'I don't know,' Sundari said truthfully. 'We haven't been there at all this year.'

'What did I tell you ?' Aunt Eliza inquired triumphantly of Aunt Prue. 'Do you think she will put money into maintaining Shanthi's property ? All this child will get one day will be a broken-down, leaking old house in an overgrown garden, and the tea estate all gone to seed.'

'It was a lovely house once,' said Aunt Prue wistfully, looking up from her sewing. 'Do you remember the house parties Shanthi's mother used to have there ? She was a great one for

entertaining. How often we were invited up there as girls—breakfast on the veranda with that view over the Lake, and the beautiful garden.'

'Well, there won't be much left of it if Michael doesn't put his foot down,' said Uncle Arthur. 'An old house like that goes down very fast if it isn't properly maintained.'

'I don't think they are neglecting Mother's property,' Sundari said uncomfortably. 'It's only that things are so expensive these days, Aunt Helen says.'

'But not too expensive to be doing the grand on the income from your poor mother's estates,' replied sharp Aunt Prue. 'And I hear that all the ebony and calamander furniture from The Retreat has been taken to Colombo to be resorted. Is it all going to be put back into The Retreat, where it belongs ? I don't think so. Furniture like that is worth a fortune today. When Sundari gets that house there won't be a stick of good furniture in it, mark my words.'

'I don't like going to Moratuwa very much,' Sundari told Aunt Helen when she returned to Colombo in January.

'Why, angel ? Aren't they nice to you any more ?'

Sundari hesitated. They're nice to me, but they keep going on and on about Daddy and you.'

'What do you mean—'going on ?'

'They say you're not letting Daddy look after my property.'

Aunt Helen's beautiful eyes opened wide. '*Your* property, Sundari ?'

Sundari blushed. 'I mean, Mother's property. 'I don't feel comfortable going there any more.'

The disappearance of Moratuwa and her Southern Province relations from Sundari's life a second time was immediate, and this time final. She was relieved, too, that all talk of money and money matters ceased from that time on, in her presence.

'Financial matters are for men to work out,' as Aunt Helen said, reclining on the calamander couch, playing with the new baby. 'When you grow up, treasure, you and Anil *Aiya* and

Daddy can puzzle your heads over all those silly money matters. Sundari *akka* and Mummy have more important things to do, haven't we ? She kissed him. The baby gurgled delightedly and clapped his hands at Sundari who clapped back.

'Really, Sundari, he loves you so much, I'm getting quite jealous.'

Sundari spent a lot of time now with her brothers. She had, as Helen said, a wonderful way with children, and what else was she to do, anyway ? She didn't have many friends. As each school vacation began, the boarders at Ashcombe scattered to tea estates in the hills and Government Bungalows in the out-stations. The few 'day-scholars' who lived within visiting distance did not belong to families that Aunt Helen and Father considered suitable for Sundari to know. When, after weaks of pleading, one of them was invited to spend a day with her, the child was clearly uncomfortable and never came again, in spite of the treat of Banda's special chocolate cake, and the film to which Michael took the two girls after tea. Still, it was an event, and was recorded in Sundari's diary, with a red circle around the date. A little play she wrote in English class that the form successfully produced at the end of one term earned praise again duly recorded and circled. Another red circle decked the date on which Sundari took part in a school debate with three much older girls, their opponents being the star debating team of St. Alban's College, the exclusive boys' private school that Ashcombe regarded as its brother-institution. Not that she had done well herself, the stammer that had begun to plague her returned in the first few seconds of her prepared speech. But it had vanished once the speech began to get under way, and in the end it was considered (even by the lordly St. Alban's young men) that the debate had been fairly matched, and a success. At a very demure tea party afterwards, strictly chaperoned by the Principal and by Sundari's English teacher, she had been spoken to for the first time in her life by a youth who was not a cousin or related to her by marriage.

'Your parents do not wish you to take part in debates or in the school plays in future,' the Principal informed Sundari at an interview later that week.

'But why ? They didn't tell me anything about it ?'

'It's not really your business to ask why, when your parents have made a special rule about something for your own good. I must say I approve. Taking part in plays, acting parts on the stage, debating—these are not really activities in which a girl from a family such as your own should be taking part. I agreed with your parents that your teacher, Miss Muller, is making a mistake. After all, it's not as if you are going to become some kind of *professional* person !'

Sundari's disappointment over the ban was soothed quite a bit by Aunt Helen's suggestion that she take up Domestic Science as a subject. Also, in view of the fact that she was outgrowing every garment she possessed, Sundari was taken by Aunt Helen's mother to buy herself material for some new dresses. Old Aunt had good taste, she chose exclusively pastel shades for Sundari, and at the dress-maker's afterwards, insisted on choosing patterns of which the skirts were a decent length. The dress-maker, whom they interviewed in an inner room of the establishment, out of earshot of a platoon of meek-looking young women seated sewing and embroidering on a row of benches in the veranda, thought the colours were most suitable, 'just right for her age', but ventured to suggest that skirts were being worn rather shorter that year. There was no appeal, however from Aunt's decision. 'This is the right length for *you*,' Sundari was told, when she mentioned that her friends at school were wearing their skirts rather short. 'Short skirts are all very well for girls with names like Crusz and Kelaart' – Sundari's two closest friends at school had turned out to be, to old Aunt's disgust, from emancipated Burgher families and not from conservative Sinhala ones like her own. 'It isn't as if your legs are very nice, either, it's better to hide them as much as possible.'

Old Aunt and Sundari had tea afterwards at the very special, grown-up restaurant at which Aunt Helen and her mother invariably refreshed themselves during their frequent shopping expeditions. Sundari ordered cream cakes and an ice cream milk shake, and sat waiting for them to appear. She looked up, to see old Aunt's eyes suddenly narrow in disgust.

'What do you think you are doing, you little slut ?'

Slut ? *Slut* ? Sundari knew the word. She had read it in *Joseph Andrews* (recommended to her that term by Miss Muller).

'Put your knees together, and keep your eyes on the table. Wait until your Father and your Aunt Helen hear about this.'

The cream cakes tasted like dust in Sundari's mouth. They rode home in silence. When they got there, Sundari learned that she had been ogling a middle-aged gentleman a' a neighbouring table.

'Looking round at him, with her bare thighs all exposed—disgusting!' Old Aunt bore Anil away before his tender ears could be corrupted by hearing of such behav'our. Sundari felt glances connecting over her head. She did not look up.

'I didn't do anything like that. I never even knew he was there.'

'Then why was he start'ng at you ?' asked Aunt Helen. 'Nobody would *stars* unless you practically invited him to do so.'

'I think it's a good thing you are giving up debates and play-acting,' her father said at last. 'These things seem to excite you too much. You are sent to school to study, not to show yourself in this way. We are all very disappointed, Sundari. I thought you were a good girl.'

So the ban on extra-curricular activities was part of the discipline of becoming a good girl. Sundari's diary grew no more red circles. She became instead more circumspect, even a little wary. The entry for that day carried no mention of the incident at the restaurant. Instead, the space was occupied by a description of her beautiful new clothes, and of old Aunt's kindness in taking her shopping for them. As she had half-expected, a few days after her next school vacation had begun and Sundari was back at home with her diary and her books, old Aunt's attitude to her grew more relaxed. She even grew genial.

When Sundari was nearly sixteen, and her brothers ten and nine years old, Anil was taken on a 'tour' of Europe by his grandmother. This was disguised as a pilgrimage to Lourdes, since the country wos going through a period of austerity, and only genuine pilgrims to shrines overseas were allowed visas. Old Aunt was, of course, a genuine pilgrim. Though not, admittedly of the Roman Catholic faith, she was a regular church-goer, and moreover believed very sincerely that an ingrowing toenail that had been

giving her agonizing pain had relieved through the personal intercession of the Virgin Mary. It was now necessary that thanks should be personally rendered to the holy Virgin at Lourdes itself, and since a visit to Britain was perfectly possible on the return journey, Aunt Helen began drawing up lists of essential items, unobtainable in austerity-bound Sri Lanka, that her mother could purchase at Selfridge's and Harrod's.

Michael suggested that Sundari go too, but the old could not, she said, take on such a responsibility. Besides, as it had been decided that Sundari was not going to sit for the University Entrance examinations at seventeen ('Everyone knows that the University is full of riff-raff, it's a sink of iniquity,' old Aunt said), it was most important that she should study for, and pass, the G. C. E. examinations next year. In any case, a growing girl should be under the eye of her parents, not wandering round the world. And money was, after all, limited. An overseas passage cost a lot of money, as Michael must well know. It was only right and fitting that Anil should have a chance of visiting Cambridge, his father's University, and the College at which he would himself be one day an undergraduate.

'I hope you don't mind too much, darling,' Aunt Helen said anxiously to Sundari. 'You see, Daddy and I can't afford just now to pay for a jaunt like this, and Mother says it's her money after all, and she'd like to spend it on her own grand-child. Daddy and I are paying nothing towards the trip, it's entirely Mother's idea.'

'Of course I don't mind, Aunt Helen,' Sundari said. 'It wouldn't be much fun anyway without you and Daddy. I'll wait till we can all go together.'

Aunt Helen was pleased. 'This child is becoming such a help around the house,' she told Michael one day, 'that I'm selfishly glad she didn't decide to accompany Mother. 'That cake she made yesterday was really delicious.'

Sundari blushed with pride.

'Some man some day will be a very lucky husband,' smiled. Aunt Catherine, who was visiting at the time. Sundari thought the day was turning out quite beautiful.

'Oh, I don't know. Marriage isn't the right tning fo everyone,' said Aunt Helen, 'though you and I, Kate, find it suits us. Sundari might be happier unmar.ied tnan tied to someone who has his eyes on her money.'

Aunt Catherine's smile disappeared.

'After all,' Aunt Helen went on, 'Sundari will always have her brothers to look after her. I always think that's one of the finest things about our culture, the affection and loyalty members of a family feel for one another, don't you ?'

'Sundari is a credit to you both, Helen,' returned Aunt Catherine. 'And we're all very proud of her. I hear she's doing very well at school, and that her English teacher thinks she will do well at University.'

'University ?' Aunt Helen laughed her light, pretty laugh. 'Shanthi would never have liked that. To expose her daughter to the risk of meeting all sorts of people from goodness knows where ! That sort of thing is all right for the boys, but we want something better for our only daughter.'

'Would you like to go to University, Sundari ?' asked Michael.

Sundari's eyes met Aunt Helen's. 'No Daddy, I'd rather stay at home,' she said. 'I'm happy here.'

About this time a wave of excitement began to gather on the outer edges of Sundari's existence, grew larger and larger, and finally broke into her life. Aunt Helen's younger sister Pauline came to stay.

'She is not pretty, like Aunt Helen,' wrote Sundari in her diary, 'but she's great fun. And Uncle Colin is so nice. It must be wonderful to be in love like that. Their friends are a bit odd, new people Daddy and Aunt Helen don't know at all, people interested in music, painting and writing. The house seems full of life, different somehow, since they came to stay with us.'

When Anil and his grandmother returned from their travels, old Aunt was very disapproving of what she called the 'turmoil' in Michael's house, and fearful of its effect on Sundari.

'Helen must be mad to let Pauline have so much influence over that child,' she said one day to Michael. 'Whenever I see her, she's hanging on every word they say.'

'Something is wrong,' said the diary. 'Why doesn't old Aunt like Aunt Pauline and Uncle Colin? Has she done something shameful too? Did someone stare at her in a tea-shop? I don't care. She's clever and amusing. It's exciting to be with her and with Uncle Colin, just to listen to them. I wish they would stay here always.'

'Pauline wasn't a good daughter, not like your Aunt Helen,' old Aunt told Sundari one day. 'Don't listen so much to what she says, it's all rubbish What's important is to be good and sensible, and think always of others, as your Aunt Helen does. Look at all she's doing for you—classes in this, lessons in that, taking you with her here, there and everywhere. Anyone would think she didn't have any other children. I hope you appreciate her, Sundari.'

Sundari did appreciate Aunt Helen, she loved her, the diary said. But Pauline was that most exciting of all things to Sundari, a writer.

'I took out some of my old Eng. Comp. stories and two poems, and asked Aunt Pauline to read them,' said the diary. 'She said she liked the poems, but thought the stories were *really* good. She suggested ways she said might, if I cared to try them out, make them even better. I shall work on them tonight, after dinner. Perhaps I may become a writer one day, a great novelist. Miss Muller said I shouldn't have given up the idea of going to University, but perhaps that won't matter after all. I'm going to show Aunt Pauline the play I wrote last year.'

But that week Aunt Pauline and Uncle Colin disappeared. The stories were re-written, but there was no one to read them. The poems were put away once again.

'I don't know why they went away,' said the diary. 'People I love never stay near me, perhaps I'm too bad and wicked to deserve anything good to happen to me. It's no good hoping to be a writer when you're the kind of hopeless person I am, Aunt Helen says writers of great literature are all fine characters too. I would like to marry for love, it would be so romantic, especially if it turned out happily, as it has for Aunt Pauline. But it wouldn't turn out like that for me, everything goes wrong for me. I'm not

even pretty—who'd fall in love with me ? Besides, old Aunt says, as I'm to be an heiress it will be my money that a man will be interested in. I'm lucky I have Aunt Helen to advise me. She is so kind, she's even forgiven me for being an heiress. She stands up for me against old Aunt, she reads my new stories, she suggested today that I take up flower-arrangement.

'I *couldn't* un away, as old Aunt says Aunt Pauline did, and marry for love, it would be wrong, it would be wicked. Besides, it would never turn out right for me. I'll never be pretty and lovable like Aunt Helen, but perhaps I might grow to be like her, inside. She loves and cares for me, even when Daddy is angry with me, I don't think I'll ever get married, but if I do it'll be to someone Aunt Helen chooses for me.

'Then I'll be safe. Anyone Aunt Helen chooses for me is sure to be all right.'

13

Action and Reaction

Chitra Fernando

In my family, every one regarded my father's elder sister as a very good and generous woman. I thought so too; in those days I had great respect for the opinion of my elders. Father said, "Now try to be like Loku Naenda, Mahinda. She's an example to us all." Mother said, "Loku Naenda has more *shradda* tha all of us." Loku Naenda never killed anything, not even a mosquito. And once, I saw her saving some ants that had fallen into a basin of water; even the most insignificant creature benefited from Loku Naenda's attentions. Loku Naenda never stole; she had a large house and garden, a lot of jewellery and a small coconut property in Matara. She had everything she wanted. She never lied. She often said she never did and of course, we all believed her. Loku Naenda's conduct was always irreproachable. She was a broad woman, a bit on the short side and very dark; her nose and lips were thick, her skin coarse. She had a large mole on the tip of her nose and another with a hair in it on her chin. At the back of her head was a very small *konde*. Unless they were her relations Loku Naenda kept all men at a safe distance; and they kept Loku Naenda at an equally safe distance. She had never married. As for drinking or smoking—even the thought of her doing either of these things made me want to laugh.

Once Punchi Naenda caught Siripala and me sharing a cigarette in the back garden and the first thing she said was "How disappointed Loku Naenda will be, Mahinda. You're only fifteen, but you're already doing all these bad things !" Then she told Father about it. Father said, "I will not have smoking, I

will not have drinking in this house." And then, he told Loku Naenda about it. Loku Naenda looked at me in silence. She said, "Mahinda, there's no need for me to tell you anything. Why should I say anything. Your own *karma* will deal with you. Smoke as much as you like. When you get lung cancer, you'll know all about it. This gratification of the senses brings only disease, death and *sansara*. Don't say I didn't warn you !"

Punchi Naenda, who was listening, nodded vigorously and said, "I hope you've taken all this in, Mahinda. No need to look the other way ! We're advising you for your own good."

I often wished they were less concerned with my own good but I could say nothing. So I continued to look the other way.

Punchi Naenda was also unmarried and so had no household of her own. But though she was always singing Loku Naenda's praises, she had a strange preference for living in our house. At the time of the cigarette smoking incident, she was always talking about yet another instance of Loku Naenda's generosity and compassion. Loku Naenda's good deeds were uncountable so every one was quite certain that at the very least she could be sure of a place in the Tusitha heaven. But this instance of Loku Naenda's generosity was not an almsgiving; it was not a special *puja* : it was not donating a loudspeaker to the temple for the relay of the daily *bana* preaching so that all the Payagala townsfolk could not but benefit from the loudness of Loku Naenda's piety. This was a meritorious deed which was much better. Loku Naenda was going to adopt a little girl from Matara ! Not, of course, as a daughter. No one expected even Loku Naenda to go to such lengths. It was unthinkable that a toddy tapper's child could be Loku Naenda's 'daughter' and, therefore, our relative. Loku Naenda has too much consideration, too much commonsense for that. She was a very practical woman. Kusuma was to come to her house as a servant.

Nangi and I were at Loku Naenda's house the morning she arrived. Kusuma, her father said, was twelve but she looked about nine. She was small and skinny and her huge dark eyes half-filled her little face. Lice crawled in her curly black hair. There was a sore on her knee. In the village she had lived in a hut, one of eight children half-starved, beaten and bullied. In

Loku Naenda's spacious house, there was the comfort of good food, good clothes and a suitable wage deposited in a post office saving's account. As Mother said, what more could any sane servant expect ! It was, we all felt, the perfect sum total of a servant's happiness.

Father said : "That girl must have done a lot of merit in her past lives. Just imagine ! After living like an animal in that hut to come to a house like Akka's !"

"Must be like heaven to her !" was Mother's contribution.

"She's not bad looking, and with all the good food she'll be eating she she'll soon fill out. I hope she's not going to be greedy and steal. That must be firmly stopped. Right from the start." Punchi Naenda did her best to see that every one observed the second precept.

"Don't worry. Akka knows how to deal with stealing. She gives her servants so much ! For them to misbehave is just raw wickedness, nothing else. As she always says so rightly, 'No one can escape the *karmic* law', father said firmly.

A week later, Loku Naenda came to our house with Kusuma. Already, we noticed an improvement in her appearance. Her hair was clean and lice-free. When she had arrived, she had been wearing a badly sewn shabby frock. Now she wore a close-fitting white cotton blouse and a pretty flowered red-and-white cloth. Every one complimented Loku Naenda on her good work. She looked very satisfied.

"I know how to treat my servants. That's why they never leave my house. Salpi has been with me for fifteen years now." This was perfectly true. Loku Naenda did treat her servants well. They enjoyed a fair bit of comfort in her house. The full effect to Laku Naenda's generosity to Kusuma appeared in about three months time. In that time she seemed to have grown taller, fairer and certainly very much fuller. Loku Naenda often said there was nothing wrong with her appetite. "She eats as much as Salpi, and doesn't she love sweets !"

Punchi Naenda said, "Now don't spoil her. I hope she won't steal. Have you caught her at it ever ?"

"No She's a bit greedy but I give her plenty to eat. So she really has no need to steal."

"If she steals, will you beat her, Loku Naenda ?" asked Nangi with interest.

"No, Mela. I don't beat any one. You know that. I'll know what to do. I always follow the *karmic* law—it's my constant guide."

I was sometimes puzzled by Loku Naenda's way of talking about 'the *karmic* law.' Of course we all knew about *karma.* I remembered very well what the monk in the temple used to say : everybody had to take the consequences of his actions in one way or another. If you wanted too many things your desires would make you linger in *sansara*; you would be a prisoner of your desires. That's what the monk said. But I wasn't sure that I understood. Because Loku Naenda, who was so wise, seemed to want a lot in return for whatever she did. But in those days I didn't bother too much about such things. I had so many more important things to think about like how to dodge Pali classes, or ways and means of smoking without being caught and lectured to.

Loku Naenda was pleased with Kusuma. She was intelligent and learnt quickly. She soon learnt to be neat and clean. She was very helpful in the house. She dusted the furniture—all Loku Naenda's carved ebony chairs and couches in the sitting room. She cleaned all the brass trays, lamps and vases. She was very good at fetching and carrying. Loku Naenda wondered whether she should teach Kusuma to read and write. She thought about it a bit. Then she told us that to teach Kusuma how to crochet would be far more useful. Lace table mats were in great demand and fetched a very good price. Loku Naenda was a very practical woman.

After Kusuma's arrival, Nangi began to visit Laku Naenda almost every day. Kusuma knew very little. So Nangi began to feel very wise, though she knew very little herself. I was, of course, the really wise one among the younger lot. In those days, we all thought ourselves very wise. But every one acknowledged Loku Naenda to be the wisest. This was her own opinion as well—naturally.

It seemed to me that Nangi liked showing off a bit. She would sit with Kusuma on the verandah steps and tell her all about the wonders of the world. Had Kusuma ever been to

Colombo ? No. Then she wouldn't ever have been in a lift, would she ? No. Had she ever been on an escalator ? No. Kusuma's ignorance was so satisfying to Nangi ! Had she ever been to the Zoo ? No. What a Zoo ? Nangi was in her element. She told Kusuma all about the Zoo; the tigers, the lions, the bears the giraffes, the kangaroos, the zebras, the red-backed baboon, the elephants. Kusuma had seen an elephant ! Oh ! Nangi was quite disappointed. Where had Kusuma seen an elephant ? Dragging logs on the road. That wasn't so bad. The Zoo elephants didn't do anything as silly and foolish as dragging logs. They balanced on little stools or skipped round the arena. And then all the people laughed and clapped. Kusuma longed to go to Colombo to see all those marvels. She asked Nangi a thousand and one questions. Nangi brought her picture books. Kusuma had never held a book in her hands before. She turned over the pages carefully. Nangi lent her the books for a few days. She couldn't read, of course, but she loved looking at the pictures. Then Loku Naenda ordered Nangi to take the books away. Kusuma looked at the pictures too often. That very afternoon she was looking at pictures when she should have been polishing the brass. Of course, Loku Naenda didn't mind Nangi talking to Kusuma. But she must not spoil her. So Nangi took the books away. But Kusuma talked and talked about the animals at the Zoo.

"The cat is like the tiger," said Kusuma. "It's a little tiger," and she cuddled the household cat.

"Yes," I said, "the cat is a kind of tiger." And I told her all about cats and tigers and leopards. She listened to me with her great black eyes wide open. She had a great longing for information, for knowledge in those days.

The New year drew closer. We were going to spend the New Year in Colombo with Punchi Amma and all our cousins. Nangi asked, "Can we take Kusuma too ?"

Mother looked surprised. It was such a—such a new idea ! She didn't know what to say.

"She's never been to Colombo. She's never been in a lift. She's never been on an escalator. And she's never seen a lion

or a tiger or a giraffe or a zebra or a kangaroo or a . . ." Nangi had to stop for breath.

"Loku Naenda. . . . . Loku Naenda . . . . . ." began Mother.

"I'll ask her," said Nangi.

I decided Nangi was a lot wiser than I had thought her. We went to Loku Naenda's the next day. Nangi carried a dish in her hand.

"What's that ?" I asked.

'Um. . . . . nothing," said Nangi.

"Nothing ! Let me see, let me see." I lifted the cover of the dish and saw the *varaka* inside. I laughed. I understood all.

"There's nothing to laugh about," Nangi said a bit huffily.

"Ah, Mala, what's that ?" Loku Naenda eyed the dish with great interest.

"We had a lot of *varaka* at home. And I said you liked *varaka*. So Amma sent it."

Loku Naenda smiled. She loved getting presents. Nangi said tomorrow she would bring her some mangosteens. Tomorrow Banda would come from Kalutara and he always brought mangosteens at this time of the year. As we were leaving Nangi said, "We're going to Colombo for the New Year. Can Kusuma come too ? Please, please Loku Naenda, please let her come. I always feel so dull at Punchi Amma's. Everyone's bigger than me and they don't play with me. Please Loku Naenda."

Nangi's pleading, almost tearful face, the *varaka* of today, the mangosteens of tomorrow ! How could Loku Naenda refuse ? She did not refuse. So it was settled. Kusuma would go to Colombo with us. Nangi raced to the back of the house. Kusuma was sweeping the garden.

"You're coming with us to Colombo ! You're coming with us !" Nangi jumped up and down. She was made with joy.

Kusuma stood where she was, quite still.

"You're coming to Colombo ! To Colombo !"

Kusuma started. Then all at once she understood. She smiled. A little dimple appeared for a moment. I had never seen that

dimple before ; I never saw it again. Her teeth were very small like little gleaming grains of polished rice. And all the stars in the sky tumbled right into her great black eyes.

We were to go to Colombo the following week. The day before we left, Nangi and I went over to Loku Nanda's with the two bottles of honey that she had wanted. We were to leave for Colombo by the *Ruhunu Kumari* the next morning. As we stepped on to the verandah, we could hear Loku Naenda's angry voice from inside.

"Aren't you thoroughly ashamed girl ? You eat a mountain of rice every day. Yet you steal ! Greedy, disgusting, filthy girl ! Chi ! Chi !"

Salpi said something but we couldn't hear her very clearly. Thoroughly curious now, we went into the pantry, where all the noise was. The moment Loku Naenda saw us she said angrily, "Kusuma is not going to Colombo. She's not going. Don't I give her enough to eat ? Do you know what she's been doing ? Quietly eating my *kavun* ! They were here in this air-tight tin. I caught her stealing - caught her red handed !"

It was true. Kusuma was clutching a *kavun* in her hand. She stared at the door.

"Half the *kavuns* have been eaten ! She's been stuffing herself these last two-three days. The greedy thing ! Mala, you've been spoiling her with all this talk of Colombo—all these lions and zebras. She's getting quite disobedient. No Colombo for her, no new cloth and jacket. I give and give and give and this is my reward. This creature steals my *kavun* ! Now what shall I do ?"

"You can make some more, Loku Naenda," said Nangi timidly. "Look, we've brought you some really fine honey." She held out the bottles eagerly.

Loku Naenda ignored the bottles. "Make some more ! Oh ! it's easy for you to talk ! Will you make them for me ? This fine young lady hopes to go to Colombo. And I'm to sweat over a fire making more *kavuns* to replace those she's gobbled up ! Oh, no ! The *karmic* law is my constant guide. No Colombo,

no zebras and kangaroos for this creature here. She'll stay behind and help to make more *kavuns* !"

Kusuma didn't look up, didn't utter a word. The *kavun* held tight in her clenched fist crumbled and the bits fell on the floor. Nangi and I left quietly a few minutes later. We could still hear Loku Naenda shouting at Kusuma. Tears of disappointment were streaming down Nangi's cheeks : yet Kusuma hadn't shed even a single tear.

We saw her in the garden the next morning as we walked past Loku Naenda's house to the railway station. Nangi tried to speak to her but she ran inside. Mother said, "Now Mala, leave her alone. You'll only make Loku Naenda angrier. It was very wrong of her to steal. She has to be punished."

"Loku Naenda's always talking about giving but she's not going to give Kusuma even a New Year present. And Kusuma isn't going to get any *kavun* or *kokis* or *aluva* ! Loku Naenda is very unkind !"

"Enough, Mala, enough. You talk far too much ! Kusuma has stolen. She has to be punished. I agree completely with Loku Naenda," said Father severely.

Nangi pouted. She was glum all the way to Colombo. But when we arrived at Punchi Amma's, we found that our cousin Leela had come down from Kandy and then Nangi forgot all about Kusuma.

After the *kavun* incident Loku Naenda kept Kusuma very busy. She was always cleaning, polishing, sweeping or crocheting. There was little time for play.

In the months that followed I too began to be increasingly busy. At the end of year, I sat for my first public examination and passed with two distinctions and several credits. After that, I went to live with Punchi Amma in Colombo and went to school there. I was in Payagala only for the holidays. The world, I realized, was a very big place. And the world of ideas was even bigger. I passed my University entrance examination and went to live in Kandy. I read a lot, I held forth to my friends, argued with my teachers. The world in those days was a very exciting place. I was right at its centre and a very important person.

I still spent my holidays in Payagala—that small dull town! I remember that last long vacation in my final year at University very well, Loku Naenda was just the same—still full of *shradda*, still busy collecting meritorious acts. But there was now about her an air of relaxation! The air of some one who could rest a bit after a hard life of meritorious toil and labour. Loku Naenda knew that she was still a long way from *nibbana* but she was in no special hurry to get there. She had no objection to remaining in *sansara* for a couple of eons or so, and she was determined to spend those eons as comfortably as possible. She had always been a very practical woman.

A week before my vacation ended we were all invited to a big *pirith* and *dāne* at her house. Loku Naenda's *piriths* and *dānes* were always a great success. Everyone enjoyed themselves. For at least two days before, the house was full of people, bustle, talk, laughter, the smell of food. There was friendliness and good humour everywhere. This *pirith* and *dāne* was to be a really grand affair. Twenty-five monks had been invited. Kusuma, who was very artistic, was helping with the decoration of the *pirith mandappe*. I watched her as she worked. She was at this time about nineteen-tall, slender, fair-skinned. Her hair was tied back in a big *konde*. Her face was fuller, rounder but her eyes were as huge and as black as ever. She moved quickly, lightly. And then all at once I realized that Kusuma was a very beautiful woman. So I looked at her often. So did Loku Naenda, but for very different reasons. During a *pirith-dāne* there was a lot of young men around. Loku Naenda took her responsibilities very seriously. Seeing that everyone behaved in the proper way was the most serious of these responsibilities. Kusuma, in particular, was a special responsibility.

Kusuma wasn't even in the least bit frivolous. Salpi was quite old now, and Kusuma was beginning to have an increasingly important place in Loku Naenda's household. She valued that importance very much. She moved gracefully but efficiently from kitchen to verandah supervising, organizing, advising. One young man in particular was very willing to obey her instructions and orders. He always managed to find work where she was likely to be. If Kusuma was in the kitchen, he was there too, eager to cut, chop, sift or pound. If she was in the sitting room, now cleared

for the *pirith manadappe*, there he was eager to hammer in nails, paste paper, move tables and chairs. Kusuma spoke to him very briskly, sometimes even severely. There was never the slightest softness in her voice or face. But once I saw her look around as if searching for some one. She looked anxious. Then she spotted him among all the other young men and smiled, a quick, tiny smile. Loku Naenda did not see that smile, but I did. I asked Nangi who he was. "Ah, that's Piyadasa. He works in Martin Mudalali's *kade*." I looked at him again. He was tall and fair skinned and had a kind face. I liked him.

On the night of the *pirith*, the twenty-five monks arrived in all their yellow-robed splendour, and took their places in the pure white *pirith manadappe*. Its walls were made of cutwork paper ; its canopy a dazzling white cloth. If the monks, who were seated inside the *manadappe* looked up, they would have seen that the canopy had little bunches of young coconut leaves hanging from it at intervals. They had been placed there by Kusuma.

We sat around the *manadappe* on mats and listened to the monks chanting *pirith*. I looked around me and noticed Piyadasa seated behind Kusuma. They were right at the back of the room. Loku Naenda, who was the chief *dayaka* and the donor of everything, sat by herself on a special little mat right in front. She held her clasped hands high, almost at forehead level. She was the picture of perfect *shradda* and we all admire her greatly.

After the *maha piritha*, I went off to bed. Loku Naenda sat listening to the chanting all night, I was told. This was nothing less than we expected. Yet she was the most energetic of us all the next morning. After the morning meal the chief monk preached a short sermon. I still remember that sermon very well. It was on *dānapāramitā*, the perfection of giving. We had heard lots of Jataka stories on the perfection of giving before : The story of Vessantara, of Shri Sanghabo and of course the story of the little self-sacrificing hare whose image Sakra placed high up in the bright moon for all to see. These stories we all knew. But not the story the chief monk told us that morning ; this was new to us.

"*Pinvethuni*," he began, "of the ten perfections one perfection is better than another. All these ten equal perfections reside in the *Tathagatha*. Brighter than a thousand suns are the perfections of

the *Tathagatha.* Bearing in mind then that all the perfections of the *Tathagatha* shine equal in their splendour, today I shall discourse on the perfection of giving. The perfection of giving shows itself in one key way : it shows itself in generosity. Giving of alms is generosity. And those who seek the Supreme Goal must ceaselessly practise such generosity. Our *pinvath* Payagala Hamine and all you others who have participated in this ceremony have shown your devotion to the Doctrine by your liberality and by your presence here. Yet hard is the way to Enlightenment. Listen to this :

"Once the Bodisathva was born a king, Manicuda by name. He was compassionate, generous, a giver and donor of all things. Being so, Manicuda wished to perform the great sacrifice, *Nirargada.* Various heretics, brahamins mendicants, beggars, princes gathered for the great sacrifice. The Bodisathva, Manicuda addressed the assembly : 'Sirs, I wish to perform the great sacrifice, *Nirangada,* at which no doors are closed, no living being killed. Accept with minds full of sympathy these sacrificial gifts.' And gifts were given to all those who came to suit their desires. Then on the twentieth day at sunrise, Sakra, the lord of the gods, wishing to test the Bodisathva, took the form of a terrible demon and arose suddenly from the great sacrificial fire. He cried out, 'Fortunate and compassionate lord, deliver me who suffer severe pain by a quick gift of food.'

"Fear not, fear not, dear one, here is as much food as you desire."

"It is not this kind of food I eat, great king, but the flesh and blood of the newly killed.'

"The kind of food you eat, dear one, cannot be had without injury to others. I abstain from killing. Therefore, eat my flesh and drink my blood to your content. Today, giving away my flesh and blood, I shall place my foot on the head of *Mara.* Thus will I delight the whole world that yearns for liberation.'

"As the Bodhisatva spoke, the whole earth trembled like a boat in the ocean. The gods, the *asuras,* and the *gandharvas* in the sky, hearing of that wondeerful gift were spellbound.

"Taking a knife, the Bodhisatva opened a vein in his brow. The demon drank, quenching his thirst. The Bodhisatva filled with

delight, next cut off his flesh and gave it to the demon to eat. And he thought, 'My wealth has been fruitful, my flesh, my blood, my life has been fruitful.'

"As they read his thoughts, the gods assembled in the air cried out aloud with joy. Sakra assumed his own form saying, 'Great king, I am Sakra. What do you wish to gain by this deed, by this most strenuous effort ?'

"The Bodhisatva replied, 'Kausika, by this gift I do not wish to be a Sakra, a *Mara* or a Brahma or gain sovereignty over the universe or birth in the heavens. But by this deed may I attain perfect enlightenment to release the unreleased, to console the unconsoled, to liberate the unliberated. This is my wish.'

"This *Pinvethuni* is *dānapāramitā*, the perfection of giving."

This monk stopped. The sermon was over. For a moment we were all silent. Then people stirred, joints cracked, and Loku Naenda with hands clasped high above her head cried out in a voice trembling with *shradda*. "*Sadhu*! *Sadhu*! *Sadhu*!" All who were there took us the cry. The monks bowed their heads and gazed steadfastly at their fans. After giving the people his blessing, the chief monk, followed by the others, left.

Loku Naenda, her face beaming, came up to Mother and Punch Naenda.

"This is the most successful *pirith* and *dāne* I've ever given-everything went off beautifully ! Did you notice how Mrs. Welikala was eyeing the *pirith mandappe* ? It's ten times nicer than hers!"

Punchi Naenda laughed. "She asked me who had made it and where we had got all that white paper from. I muttered some thing but didn't tell."

Both Naendas laughed gleefully, almost like little girls.

Two days later, when I arrived home after a sea-bath, I found Loku Naenda, Punchi Naenda, Mother and Nangi all seated on the verandah, talking. It seemed a very serious conversation. Loku Naenda looked agitated, angry.

"Kusuma wants to marry Piyadasa !" Nangi burst out when she saw me.

"Good idea !"

Loku Naenda stared at me as if I had suddenly turned into a serpent. "Kusuma marry Piyadasa ! she exploded.

"What's wrong with that ?" I really couldn' t see what all the fuss was about.

"That's what I thought too," said Nangi boldly. Nangi had just got engaged to our second cousin, Nihal, and felt that every one should be encouraged to marry as quickly as possible.

We both looked at Loku Naenda. In spite of being a final year at the University, I felt a bit afraid. Loku Naenda's chest heaved, her lips trembled, her eyes seemed to shoot sparks of fire.

"The selfishness—the ingratitude of—of evreybody. After all I've—after all I've done. . . . . ."

Punchi Naenda said, "You people—you young people these days don't think of anything serious. Only your own selfish desires matter. Do you ever think of your duty ?" She spoke very severely.

"*Tanha, tanha, tanha,* they're all filled with *tanha.* When I think of what I've done for that girl ! She was like wild animal, when she came to me. Covered with sores and lice ! I cleaned her, fed her, clothed her, civilized her. . . . . Piyadasa came to me and said he wanted to marry her. . . . . said she was willing, I couldn't believe it. . . . . to do this thing behind my back !"

Loku Naenda's chest began to heave again.

I said, "Now, Loku Naenda, don't be angry with me, but they haven't done anything behind your back. Piyadasa came and asked you, didn't he ? They haven't run away or anything. As Freud says. . . . . ."

"Mahinda, what do you know about these things ! After you went to that University, your head is stuffed full of useless foreign ideas. Who is this Freud, ah ? Who is this Marx you're now always trying to talk about ? What do these foreigners know about our ancient Sinhala culture ? I've given Kusuma so much ! I've been like a mother to her. Is it too much to ask for a little gratitude in return !"

"It's her duty to say with Loku Naenda. Loku Naenda didn't bring her up for nothing" said Mother.

"But she says Piyadasa and she will live close to Loku Naenda. She says she'll continue to work for Loku Naenda," argued Nangi.

"I know what those promises are worth !" Loku Naenda sounded very sour.

"Will Kusuma have to live with Loku Naenda forever then ?" asked Nangi.

"Why not ?" snapped Punchi Naenda. "Much better for her to stay with Loku Naenda than going off with that Piyadasa and having ten children !"

"I'm not selfish. I'll arrange a marriage for Kusuma to the right person at the right time. But she can't marry Piyadasa." Loku Naenda was very firm about that.

"Arrange a marriage for her ! No wonder she's so selfish. You've spoilt her thoroughly, Akka," said Punchi Naenda.

"I'm going to ask Martin Mudalali to send Piyadasa away to his brother's shop in Galle. I've done a lot for Martin Mudalali. That man has a lot of respect for me."

"What if Kusuma runs away ?" I asked.

"She'll never do that," said Nangi. "She's very loyal to Loku Naenda."

"Loyal ! Fine Loyalty !" snapped Loku Naenda.

Kusuma did not run away. She continued to live in Loku Naenda's household exactly as before. After a few months, Loku Naenda forgot all about the Piyadasa incident. He eventually married a girl in Galle and, as far as we knew, never even visited Payagala again. Kusuma, of course, never married. I never heard Loku Naenda talk about arranging a marriage for her again. But she gave over the running of the house entirely to Kusuma. This left her free to study the Abidhamma. It was Kusuma who arranged for the sale of all garden produce like coconuts and yams. It was Kusuma who bought all the necessities for the household. It was Kusuma who organized all the *pirith* ceremonies and the *dānes*. She became almost as keen as Loku Naenda in the performance of such duties. They seemed to give her an ever increasing pleasure. She talked

a lot about how the accumulation of merit would give a person a better life in the future. She often said that she must have been very wicked in a past life and was determined to be better in this her present one. Loku Naenda was very pleased with her. Punchi Naenda began to be almost jealous.

I was in Payagala for a few weeks before leaving to study further at London University. "Mahinda," said Punchi Naenda, "I think Loku Naenda gives Kusuma too much to do in the house. That woman is more the mistress of the house than Loku Naenda herself. You should listen to her talking ! I don't like the way she talks to *me* ! She's turned into a very bossy woman. But Loku Naenda listens to everything she says and does everything the way she wants it done. It don't like it.

It was true that Kusuma occupied a very special place in Loku Naenda's household. It was true that she spoke to us all as if she were our equal. There was nothing menial about Kusuma. But I didn't see why she should be menial. And I told Punchi Naenda so.

"You understand nothing, Mahinda, in spite of all your book learning," said Punchi Naenda. She sounded a bit annoyed. But since this is what everybody at home had always been telling me for a long time, I took no notice. I just smiled as I now always did, when they talked to me like that.

It was three years before I returned again to Sri Lanka. When I went to Payagala, I went as usual to Loku Naenda's. Loku Naenda had streaks of grey in her hair. She stooped a little and two of her front teeth were missing. She wore glasses and spent a lot of time reading the *suttas*. It was only Kusuma who was really busy : preparing *dāne* for the monks in the temple, crocheting table mats, making pillow lace, arranging for the sale of the garden produce, making new vegetable beds at the back. Salpi was dead. Kusuma was in the sole charge of Loku Naenda's household now.

"Kusuma must be making a lot of money from the sale of her table mats and pillow lace. What does she do with it ?" I said in the course of conversation.

"She is saving it to buy a brass lamp for the temple. One of those big tall ones. She's a good girl doesn't spend her money on clothes and powder like other young women. Her one aim in life is to do meritorious acts."

"Because she wants to be born a rich woman in her next life?" I asked smiling.

"What's wrong with that ? We all want to better ourselves."

I couldn't argue with that. Loku Naenda had always been a very practical sort of woman.

I went to England again for post-doctoral study three years later. When I returned for a visit after two years overseas I found Loku Naenda older, greyer. She took me to the temple and showed me the magnificent brass lamp Kusuma had donated the year before. She herself had just bought half an acre of land adjoining the temple grounds. She planned to build a new *bana* hall there, when she had enough money. The *vihare*, the shrine room and the wall around the temple were a dazzling white. Kusuma had paid for the whitewashing this time. Loku Naenda had wanted to contribute something towards it but Kusuma had refused very firmly. The merit from this act had to be hers and hers alone ; she did not want to share it with anyone.

It was a long time before I returned home again on another visit. Many things had happened during my absence. Loku Naenda had had a stroke which paralysed both her legs. She now used a wheel chair. After Punchi Naenda's death of a heart attack. Mother had sold our house and gone to live with Nangi in Kandy. Nangi urged me to go and see Loku Naenda, who still lived in Payagala. "Kusuma looks after her very well—Loku Naenda is so lucky to have her—but she's very lonely. I haven't been to Payagala for over a year. I'm tied to the house with all these children."

"Yes, yes, go, Mahinda," said Mother." "I went to see her last year when I was in Colombo, but you know how difficult travelling in these days. The trains are jam packed, the buses are jam packed. And I'm too old to knock about now. Go, Mahinda, she'll be so happy to see you. She's very fond of you."

Loku Naenda's house was still the same. The garden looked flourishing. The coconut trees were loaded with nuts, the mango

trees with fruit. The orchids just beside the verandah were all blooming. Loku Naenda was in her wheelchair on the verandah. She saw me, tried to speak but couldn't. Her face quivered. I went up to her and took her hand. She held it tightly. Her hair was completely white, the skin of her neck and arms hung down in loose folds. In the years I'd been away she had shrunk into an old, old woman.

"I thought I'd never see you again, *putha*," she said at last. Her voice was all quavery. "When did you return ?"

"About three weeks ago. Payagala is exactly the same." We talked for a bit. I gave her news of Mother and Nangi. Suddenly, I remembered the *bana* hall she had once talked about years before. "Is it finished now ?" I asked.

"Yes," she said quietly. She looked down at her hands. I felt something was wrong.

"Aren't you happy about it, Loku Naenda ?"

"Yes, yes, I am, Mahinda. It's a great consolation to me to have built the hall before I die. Kusuma-Kusuma is building a new shrine-room."

"Kusuma building a shrine-room ! Kusuma ! But where does she get the money from ?" I asked quite thunderstruck.

"She gets some money from the sale of her table mats and pillow lace. Then there's the coconut money."

"But Loku Naenda the coconuts belong to you ?"

"I asked her to use—to use the money," said Loku Naenda uncomfortably.

We were silent. I looked around. I could see into the sitting room from where I was. It seemed strangely bare. Something was missing. Suddenly it came to me—Loku Naenda's antique ebony furniture !

"What has happened to your ebony furniture ?"

Loku Naenda looked even more uncomfortable. "I asked Kusuma to sell it – to sell it for—for the shrine room."

"But Loku Naenda, that—that furniture—you loved that furniture ! You said you'd never sell it." In fact, she had always

said that the furniture was for me because it had belonged to my grandfather. I wondered whether she remembered. I looked at her. She was twisting her hands nervously. "Kusuma has been like a daughter to me. She does everything for me."

"Where is Kusuma ?"

"She's at the temple. She goes every day to see how the building is going on. Don't say anything—don't scold her, Mahinda. She's like my daughter. Her one desire in life is to build that shrine room."

"But at your expense ! Did you really want to sell that furniture ?"

Loku Naenda began to weep. "That furniture was my father's. I wanted you to have it."

I had never seen Loku Naenda weep before. Great rivers of tears streamed down her shrunken cheeks. I noticed she wasn't wearing her ruby earrings. I didn't need to task what had happened to them. I supposed all Loku Naenda's jewellery would be gradually sold to pay for the shrine-room and other meritorious acts.

"I don't want the furniture. I live in a tiny two-roomed flat in London, the size of your sitting room. What could I do with ebony furniture there ?"

"I don't want to cling to my possessions. But that ebony furniture was my father's. I didn't want to sell it."

"Never mind, never mind, Loku Naenda Building a shrine room is a very good thing, a very meritorious act." It seemed strange to be talking like that. But I couldn't really console Loku Naenda, though she stopped weeping.

It was almost lunch time when Kusuma returned from the temple. She was not at all pleased to see me. I could see that. She was now a middle-aged woman—broad, strong, determined, hard. Lunch was served almost immediately. I wheeled Loku Naenda's chair to the dining table. Loku Naenda had loved good food in the old days. I looked at the rice, the *pol* sambol and the bit of dried fish on the table. Kusuma stared at me defiantly, as if daring me to criticise. I was silent. Loku Naenda said, "If

only I'd known you were coming *putha* ! I'd somehow have got some seer fish and prawns for you. You used to like them so much !"

"Now, I like dried fish better than anything else," I said giving her a bright, false smile.

It was a very silent meal. I wondered whether I should tell Mother and Nangi about Loku Naenda's situation. But what good would it do ? It was impossible for Loku Naenda to live in Kandy. There was no room for her in Nangi's house. And who would look after her ? I just could not see Kusuma living in Nangi's household.

As Kusuma was clearing away the dishes and plates I said, "So Kusuma, I hear you're building a shrine room. It must be a very expensive business."

Loku Naenda looked at me pleadingly, fearfully.

Kusuma glared at me. "I have found the money for it. It's a very meritorious deed. No one should interfere with such a good thing."

"When will it be completed ?"

"The building will be completed in about a month's time. But I need more money for the image and the wall-paintings inside. My name will be inscribed outside because I am the donor," she said smiling, proudly, for the first time. "Would you like to donate something, Mahinda *mahataya* ?" she asked.

I was surprised. Loku Naenda looked at me appealingly. I pulled out my purse and gave her fifty rupees. She took it eagerly and put the notes into her purse.

I wheeled Loku Naenda back to the verandah. "Tell me about London *putha*. Is it a big city ? England must be a very advanced country, no ? Who cooks for you ?"

She laughed when I told her that I cooked for myself "Fine meals you must be cooking ! No wonder you look so thin. So why don't you get yourself a wife ? Then she can cook for you."

I ignored these suggestions and got up saying I had to leave. Her face changed. "Aney, *putha*, what's the hurry ? Stay the night, stay the night.

I said I couldn't. I had to be in Colombo for a lecture at the University that evening. And I'd promised Mother to be in Kandy the next day.

Loku Naenda gave a little sigh. "When shall I see you again, *putha* ? Next time you come, I'll be dead."

"Don't talk like that ! Next time I see you, you'll be on your feet and running this house yourself." But neither of us believed in that extravagant lie even for a second.

She tried to smile, then said, "No, I'll die in this wheel-chair. It's my *karma*. But I'm very lucky to have Kusuma—she's like my own daughter. It's my *karma*," she repeated.

I said goodbye. She clung to my hand and kissed it. "Come and see me again before you leave, *putha*. *Tun sarane Pihitai* !" And she said once again, "It's my *karma*." A common place, almost meaningless phrase mouthed by so many. And yet, as I looked back for one last wave, there seemed to be a truth in it—a truth reflected in that heavy, sullen woman standing in the doorway and in the other, feebly waving a loose-skinned hand.

14

Misunderstanding

J.S. Tissanayagam

Bandula was waiting at the bus-stand after his lecture to go home. The day was bright and cool. The sky was pale blue overhead, with a dense mass of white clouds with grey undersides forming on the horizon, partially hiding the grey hills. Behind him lay the river, a muddy yellow, spattered with glistening silver ripples.

Bandula was in his second year at the university, and proud of where he was. He was not well off; but he managed to make ends somehow; he shared a room with two others and stinted on superfluous expenses, and sometimes even on meals. Still he found university life tolerably happy, and had very little to complain about.

It was chilly at the bus-stand and no one to talk to ! Feeling bored, he stretched his hands and yawned. It was then that he saw her coming.

Sherine was in The English Medium. One always said The English Medium, and not the English medium at the university. She was one of the few, the happy few who had the privile_e of being in it, where you were at once envied and hated by the other students. She herself did not attach much importance to that. After all what was in it ? She was proficient in English, which enabled her to follow lectures in that language. Others proficient in other languages followed them in the languages they knew. That was all. But there was pride deep within her. It was bred from the attention she got from the other students. She was conscious that, after all, everybody could not be exclusive

Sherine always ran the last few yards down the slope out of the university gates. She always felt like a prisoner escaping past

the last outpost into freedom when she did that. The canteen was near the gate and there was generally a crowd of students chatting around there. As she walked down now everybody stopped their talk and stared at her. Some of the boys whispered among themselves, and others laughed uproariously—to attract attention to themselves. The girls, of course, merely gave her a hostile glance. Sherine looked steadily at the ground. She hated people scrutinising her like that. It made her feel nervous and embarrassed. A few weeks ago, when the ragging was or her body used to stiffen with fear when she heard boys making oatcalls or hissing behind her. But at least that time was past and its aching fears were now no more. But still her nervousness and diffidence lingered. Hearing the whispering now, she thought to herself how silly these boys were. What was so special about her ? But then a wave of pride swept over her; she was in the English medium —an object to be idolized by the boys and envied by the girls.

Bandula saw her coming and instinctively smoothed down his well-oiled hair and pulled up his collar. He looked at her with the corner of his eye, and, assuming a non-chalant expression, started kicking the grass by the wayside and stared across the river. But he did not see the flowing river or the banks mantled with little yellow flowers on the other side. Instead he saw the image of the girl reflected on the dark waters. She was above the average height, broad—almost fat; but she did not move with the slow, indolent movement of fat people; her steps were firm and her strides elegant. Her hair was cut short and her nose and mouth small. She wore large, 'mod' wire-rimmed glasses which gave a strange light to her big, beautiful eyes. She had an air of calmness and restraint about her; but with it, there seemed a touch of haughtiness and independence of spirit. The duality fascinated Bandula. Altogether, she looked a young, self-possessed mother, rather than an eighteen year old university student.

The girl arrived at the bus-stand, and after giving him an uninterested look, stared at the direction from which the bus would come. He had always wanted to rub shoulders with the girls of The English Medium; but there had always been constraints. His greatest fear was that he could not manage perfect English. He could speak in Sinhala easily, but, after all, it was not like using *Kaduwa* was it ? He could manage expressing himself

in English with some difficulty, but felt very awkward when diong so. Should he speak to her ? After all, she was only a fresher, he a senior. Perhaps through respect for one in the second year she might not cut him dead. Bandula was not habitually shy; but these were extraordinary circumstances—addressing a girl in English. At last he drew a deep breath—it was now or never—and screwing up his courage, asked in a muffled voice, somewhat louder than needed, "Bus service—bad no ?"

Sherine started at that; a sudden loud barritone from so close. His accent was coarse, like one unused to speaking English. Sherine was confused at first, but answered, "I don't know. I've only been here a little while."

"Uh ?" asked Bandula. She spoke very fast and he found it hard to follow.

She glanced at him briefly, and Bandula thought that though she was not strictly beautiful, she had a charming air about her.

"I said I've been waiting only a very short time."

"Yes, yes," said Bandula, and grinned.

There was a pause. He walked about trying to think of another topic of conversation.

Then, he asked, "What subjects are you doing?"

At this, Sherine turned, the sun glinting on her specs as she did so. She found him staring seriously at her, as if doing a task that required immense concentration. The way he spoke was peculiar too. It was too fast—the words gushed out of his mouth as if he was delivering a prepared speech. He was tall, and thin, and clean-shaven, which was almost an exception at the university. Seeing her look at him, smiled. He had rather uneven teeth, slightly yellowed through excessive smoking. But to Sherine his mouth seemed to overflaw with large, filthy teeth; his pink gums seemed to provide a sharp contras to their dirty yellow. Sherine turned away in disgust, replied, "English, Classics, Politics."

To Bandula her tone seemed flat and lacking warmth. He had done nothing to her, then why was she reacting this way?

But Sherine was rather a timid girl and her nervousness rose. Why was this boy asking her these questions? She had escaped

being ragged, and heaved a sigh of relief after the Freshers' Night was over. She looked at him apprehensively. He looked mild, and harmless,—a nice guy, she thought to herself. But then she remembered his filthy, discoloured teeth. It showed he lacked polish. That little something separated him from her. But still for all that he seemed sincere – quite a contrast to some of her batchmates in the English medium, from Royal or St. Thomas, who thought no end of themselves.

Bandula was now at his wits' end. How could he make this girl talk? His friend Lalith had told him that the only way was by ragging the girls. But Bandula knew that Lalith had a complex. He came from a family that was rich. His father, who had originally been a boutique-keeper, had made money in the timber-business and even owned a small car now. Lalith had money, and was easily the best dressed in their batch; but he lacked one accomplishment that would have permitted him to hob-nob with the elite—his English was very poor. He had come to the university glad of the opportunity to learn English but his natural waywardness had done nothing to improve his knowledge. So now he posed as a staunch nationalist, hating the English-speaking classes bitterly, and trying to humiliate them in whatever way possible.

But Bandula was different. He came from a home with a pious Buddhist backgrouhd, and that, with his naturally mild temperament made him dislike harming other people. He had been one of the few who had not ragged the freshers that year. Of course, he too had a desire to climb up the social ladder; but unlike Lalith, with him it did not amount to an obsession.

But the immediate problem was to think of a new topic of conversation, something where a dialogue of some length was possible. Bandula racked his brains. Suddenly, he had it !

"Lunch—you go home ?"

It took Sherine a few seconds to grasp that. She replied, "Yes," feeling her heart begin to thump again.

"I eat in canteen," he stated, "Food very bad, but what to do —no ?" He spoke jerkily, declaring rather than saying his words. It was as if he had no control over his vocal cords. He continued, "They must make canteen private. Then good."

For the first time, Sherine's curiosity overcame her fear. "What do you mean, private ?"

"Private owning," said Bandula gesticulating vigorously with his hands; he was delighted that the girl was taking some interest in what he was saying. Sherine, on the other hand, noticed that when he spoke his face assumed an expression of almost painful intensity.

Actually, Bandula ate his lunch at canteen always, and he liked the food too; but he knew that most Colombo-folk went to restaurants and night-clubs regularly—like in all the films he had seen. This girl must be used to big hotels too. So he thought he would sound impressive if he could show that he was also familiar with top class private hotels. He hoped fervently though, that the girl would not repeat to somebody that he advocated private enterprise; he knew it could affect his position in the Party.

"Er . . . I suppose so," said Sherine, trying to sound non-committal. But her anxiety increased. Why was he asking about the canteen ? Was he trying to make her say something that he could relay to the other seniors which would provoke anger and opposition ? Oh God, she taught in despair, only if the wretched bus would come ! She looked around. They were the only people at the stand. At least, if the other girls would come it would be all right. A few minutes passed. Then, suddenly, she sensed him moving closer to her. What was he up to . . . ?

But Bandula's sharp ears had caught the sound of the approaching bus and he was only walking up to stop it. His heart was full of misgiving. Why should she not talk ? Why was she so cold and withdrawn ? Was it because he was not nice-looking ? Surely that could not be ?

When the bus arrived, Sherine gasped in relief. As she got in, she saw the boy cough loudly and spit out. Then he got in too.

In the bus, Bandula tried one final, desperate attempt at conversation. "I will buy your ticket ?" he inquired, rather hesitantly—afraid of taking liberties. But he had seen in films, boys buying girls their tickets, after having spoken to them only a few minutes. Surely this girl must be used to it ?

Sherine was shocked and confused. But she brightened, remembering that she travelled by season-ticket.

"I've a season. Thank you," she answered in a clear, firm voice. She opened the exercise book in which she usually carried her season but found it was not there. Mildly surprised, she searched the next, and her pockets too, but it was missing. In consternation she remembered that it had been between the pages of a book that she had lent a friend that day. Well, she had to buy her ticket with the money she had, that was all. Then, in alarm, she remembered the boy who had offered to buy her ticket. What would he think? He would think her a liar and despise her. Cautiously, she looked around—there he was, well forward, with his back to her, digging into his pockets. In relief, she positioned herself in front of the conductor so that he would not see her buying the ticket. But the conductor did not have change; he gave her the ticket but said that he would hand over the balance money later. Sherine sat down.

The tension she had been under for the last few minutes began to relax. She thought about him in a calmer frame of mind. His English was definitely very poor. She had also noticed certain detestable manners, like spitting on the road—and who knows, she thought, he might even be blowing his nose and wiping his fingers on eaves. Those qualities she simply hated. He had no polish; that was evident. Then she remembered his smile, frank and guileless, with sincerity, his eyes shining in spite of his hideous teeth. Then it suddenly flashed on her that he was a human being too. Only, he had been raised in different circumstances from hers. That was all that divided them. The next time, she thought, she would go and speak to him, or at least smile at him without her silly earlier prejudices. But she did not realise that the flash of insight she had had into his humanity was a fleeting thing and that the conventions of society and the prejudices of class that had always conditioned her would return and blacken and stunt her mind.

Bandula waited for the conductor to come for him to buy his ticket. A few minutes passed and he looked back to see where he was. He saw the conductor give a few coins to someone. Casually, he glanced at the recepient—it was the girl. For a few

seconds he found nothing extraordinary about that. Then suddenly it exploded in his mind that she would be only getting a balance if she had paid her fare. For a moment his mind went blank—then bitter rage replaced it. He was generally a calm, even tempered young man ; but now his placid face was dark with anger, and the thin nervous hands that held his books trembled. For even habitual mildness can be ruffled when one is slighted by a woman. It was ultimately his pride and self-importance that mattered to him most. After all, he was someone ; and like most men he was acutely sensitive to criticism by women. He felt that the girl had insulted him. And a taunt from a woman is many times worse than any humiliation a man could inflict. Bandula did not love this woman, or desire her in any way ; he had only wanted to measure his own worth by her standards. It was his ego that suffered.

The dirty bitch, he thought bitterly ; just because he did not come from Colombo, did not go out dancing, or speak *kaduwa*, she despised him and would not talk to him. It was not only she, but all those dirty bitches. This was their superiority. But what irked him most was that he would have to put up with their snobbishness and the airs they gave themselves. He was not one to indulge in self-pity. And as he pondered darkly, he decided that he could not let things be like that. He had to make her his equal. And he knew he could cut her down to size only through one means—by ragging her. That was the only way—to rag them till they carried for mercy. But the ragging season had been over weeks before. And the thought that now he would not get his revenge infuriated him still more. How right Lalith had been, he thought now, how absolutely right.

He bought his ticket and sat down. He sat opposite Sherine. The aisle divided them. It seemed now an unfordable gulf.

Glossary

abidhamma—Buddhist metaphysics.

ahikuntakayo—a nomadic group, with a tribal organization and their own dialect which is not akin to Sinhala. They make money by displaying tamed monkeys, by snake charming and palmistry.

ahimsa—harmlessness.

akka—elder sister.

aluva—native sweetmeat.

aney—alas.

araliya—frangipani, temple flower.

bana—sermon by a Buddhist monk.

Bodisathva—One preparing for Buddhahood.

Brahma—Creator.

dana—alms-giving.

deeiyange saarpey—god's curse.

dhoby—washer-man or washer-woman.

duwa—daughter.

hamuduruwo seat—seat at the front of the bus which is reserved for members of the clergy, Buddhist monks, being expressly forbidden to share a seat with a woman, are accommodated in this way by the Sri Lanka Transport Board.

kaduwa—sword, an expressive term used for the English language by the Sinhalese-educated (a sword can both dominate and cut down).

karma—the doctrine that good consequences will ollow good thoughts and actions and vice versa in this or future existences.

kasaya - herbal medicinal decoction.

kavun—Sinhala sweetmeats made of rice flour and honey.

koha—Indian cuckoo.

kokis—Sinhala version of Dutch *kockjes* (cookies), crisp sweetmeats.

mahathaya—gentleman.

maha piritha—*Pirith* is the incantation of Pali stanzas as a blessing and protection. *Maha piritha* refers to the three major *sutras* recited at the commencement.

maithri—loving-kindness.

Mara—Death.

mynah—grackle, a coffee brown bird.

O.A.—Office Assistant.

pinvath—given to doing good deeds.

pinvethuni—'you who are given to doing good deeds': the term conventionally employed by Buddhist monks to address listeners at a *bana*-preaching (sermon).

pirith—the incantation of Pali stanzas (*sutras*) as a blessing and protection.

pirith mandappe—a small ceremonial pavilion often octagonal, constructed with a wooden frame and ornate cut-work of white paper set within the house to accommodate the Buddhist monks for the duration of *pirith*.

pooja, puja—an offering usually of flowers, food or incense at a Buddhist or Hindu temple.

putha—son.

redi nanda—washer-woman.

Sadhu !—Hail !

Sakra - King of the Gods.

samsara, sansara—the cycle of rebirth and existence, where all things have their arising, being and passing away.

shradda—fervent piety.

tanha – greed, craving.

Tathagatha—The Buddha.

Tun sarane pihitai—a blessing : literally—May the Three Refuges aid you ! Traditionally the Buddhist seeks sanctuary in the Buddha, the Doctrine and the Clergy.

varaka – the harder variety of ripe jak-fruit.

vathey—literally 'wind' (flatulence) but more frequently applied to rheumatism.

V.C.—Village Council.

vederala – native physician, following the *ayurveda* system and relying mainly on herbal remedies.

walauwa – manor house.

yakkungey dosai – mental aberrations, fevers or other diseases caused by the belief of having seen a devil, often cured by exorcism.

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