

# THE TWINS

and Some Other Tales  
From Sri Lanka



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Stanley Amunugama

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from  
Sri Lanka**

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# The Twins And Some Other Tales from Sri Lanka

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Stanley Amunugama

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## FORSWORD

"The TWINS and Some Other Tales from Sri Lanka" is the first published collection of the author and comprises a series of interesting sketches and episodes drawn from Sumanthirani's extensive knowledge of the life of the Kandyan nobility in and around the provincial town of Matla. Having been college-mates at Madia in our early childhood in the 1940's, these sketches brought into my own mind nostalgic feelings of the now dying (or almost dead) "provincial culture" in which most of us had been nurtured.

## DEDICATION

*For my teacher and friend,  
the late A.J. Wijesinghe, M.A. Dip. Ed.*

*and for the members of my family,  
my wife, Seela,  
my sons, Asoka, Annurudha, and Atula. •  
my son-in-law, Upali,  
my daughters, Anoma and Araliya,  
my daughter-in-law, Pavithra,  
my grandson, Shamil,  
my granddaughters, Shamilka and Dimali.*

*20th July, 2000.*

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my grandson, Shanil,

my granddaughters, Shanika and Dinithi.

20th July, 2000.

From Editor

## FOREWORD

“The TWINS and Some Other Tales from Sri Lanka” is the first published collection of the author and comprises a series of interesting sketches and episodes drawn from Stanley Amunugama’s intimate knowledge of the life of the Kandyan peasantry in and around the provincial town of Matale. Having been college - mates at Matale in our early childhood in the 1940’s, these sketches brought into my own mind nostalgic feelings of the now dying (or almost dead) “pristine rural culture” in which both of us had been nurtured.

It is in fact Amunugama’s intimate knowledge of (and deep love and concern for) the rural peasantry and their ways of life that emerges as the great strength of his writings, and gives that tone of authenticity and genuine life to his characters and their behaviour. As the author himself has noted with an admirable sense of modesty and humility, many of the episodes fail to measure up to the stringent critical and artistic standards of the modern short story as an art form. Nevertheless what Amunugama has clearly demonstrated through this collection as a whole is that he has at his command in substantial measure the raw material needed for future creative achievements in fiction, provided that he avoids dependence on coincidence and sensational incident and concentrates more on the artistic form of his short stories. Needless to say, this should be achieved, without sacrificing the fidelity to the truth of his own knowledge and experience of the rural peasantry and their culture which is now fast fading away.

I wish Stanley Amunugama success in his future endeavours in the field of creative writing in English.

Sarathchandra Wickramasuriya  
(Retired Professor in English, University of Peradeniya)

75A, Angunawala,  
Peradeniya.  
20th July 2000.

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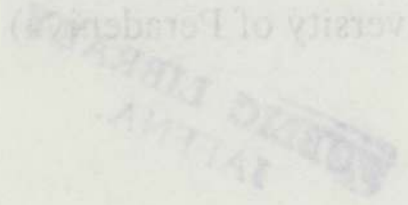
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## PREFACE

This is a thin selection from my work. All items listed in the contents, are brief, running into a few pages. They consist of short stories, episodes, and impressions, and as such I would not like to call this a book of short stories, some of them do not conform to the conventional form expected of short stories.

Most of them spring from a dying pristine rural culture, a heritage inter-woven into a mosaic of aboriginal folk-lore, superstitious beliefs and practices, stratified with Buddhistic and Hindu traditions. In some of these writings, you will find a certain rhythmic cadence, making them stylized, blurring the fine line between prose and verse, this I presume is a result of an endeavour to preserve and unify the meaning and the mood. I cannot help it. It is idiosyncratic. I find myself analogous to an artist trying to paint pictures to convey an oblique inner meaning. Please you must forgive me, if I am obscure, or sound pretentious. To write meaningfully on pristine themes in the English language has been a demanding task. How far I have been successful is for you kind reader to judge.

This is a book of fiction, for the purpose of classification, but as all fiction is built on some truth, it is axiomatic that this book contains a great element of truth. For instance I was a witness to the incident of the possessed at Inniebendiruppa (the name of the Hamlet has been altered. The son of Jamis, is a true character type of a rural yokel, and so are the other types mentioned in the stories. I am concerned with the life-style and beliefs of these people. Among these I have interpolated a few other stories, for the sake of variety. The Master Chip of the old block is one such.

**Stanley Amunugama**



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank most sincerely Mrs. Chandra Wijesinghe, for the initial typing of the script, and my sister Mrs. Visaka Amerasinghe, her daughter Piyali and my daughter-in-law Pavithra for retyping those articles selected by me to be included in this book. I extend my thanks to Mr. R.B. Ekanayake (retired Deputy Director Education Eng.) and my sons Dr. Annurudha Amunugama (MBBS) and Dr. Athula Amunugama (MBBS) for proof reading at different stages. I thank my daughter Dr. Araliya Amunugama (BDS) for drawing the picture of the twins on the cover and my son-in-law Upali Dissanayake and his wife Dr. Anoma Amunugama (BVS) for technically helping me in designing the cover. I thank my son Col. Asoka Amunugama (SLLI) for co-ordinating and assisting me at all levels, and my wife Seela as a quiet source of inspiration. It is with a deep sense of gratitude that I thank the Professor Emeritus of English of the University of Peradeniya. Dr. Sarathchandra Wickramasuriya B.A. (Hons.) PhD. (Sri Lanka) M.A. (Distinction) Ph.D. (London) for writing the foreword and for his goodwill and wishes. I am grateful to the National Library and Documentation Services Board for granting assistance and to its Chairman Mr. Henry Sameranayake for advice given at a workshop. I thank Mr. Cyril Ekanayake, Chairman of Sarvodaya Vishva Lekha press for the enthusiasm and co-operation extended to me.

**Author**

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## THE TWINS

"What have you done now? It must have been you Sumitra, with your good for nothing friends, drinking in the cattle shed and making all that noise in the night which kept him awake and annoyed him. Or it must have been you," she said, pointing a fat sausage finger at her husband." You hardly spoke to him. You acted high and mighty and treated him like dirt. He should take offence. He has left, gone like the wind, without even folding the mat slept on. Such things have never happened in this house before, and he, my own son-in-law, my only daughter's husband. Is he not one of us now? How could you do this to him?"

"Do what?" asked Sumitra her son, assuming a nonchalant attitude.

"Sumitra, you rascal, you are no son of mine and mind you, don't call me mother after this."

The little woman was provoked and was burning inside like a firebrand. She flung out her sagging fat arms and stamped her short fat legs, all because her son-in-law had paid them a sudden visit and disappeared without telling a soul.

"I didn't do anything to offend your wonderful son-in-law," said her son." I even asked him to join us in the shed. I told him that the palm toddy was what I tap and the stuff was matured as it fell into the pot hanging on the branch of the tree, unlike the stuff these scoundrels make in pots in their yards, with sugar and yeast and God knows what else. I assured him that it was the purest stuff, and it was the truth, and do you know what your worthy son-in-law told me? He told me that he does not drink piss. Can you believe it? This same man, who used to bellow for a drink like a thirsty bull the moment he steps through the doorway. He now says, like a stuck up woman, I do not drink piss. I should have kicked the son of a bitch out then and there but one does not do such things in one's own household. Does



one?" He asked rhetorically.

"You are lying you rascal," said his mother. "You are making it all up to blacken him. Tissa would never say a thing like that."

"It must have been your cooking then, that made him run away." said Pedris her husband, building up the trace of a thin laugh.

"Now what's wrong with my cooking?" She countered fiercely, freezing up his laugh.

"If you want to know," he said his thin face averted and looking out of the window, speaking in a clear, matter of fact voice, "the curries you cook are tasteless and flat, not even good enough for starving beggars, and there are always stones in the rice."

"Stones?" She brought out in a low growl.

"Stones." He said and added dryly. "Those which may have fallen out of your wedding ring."

"There is nothing wrong with my cooking, it's your taste that has gone down the drain, like everything else you old skinflint, and you will always find stones in your rice, because you are a sinner and in some previous birth, have stoned the holy saints."

"That's enough the two of you, I want to get some sleep."

"Sleep will you, in broad daylight." She cried. "You will come to no good, remember I told you this Sumitra, your drinking and keeping up in the night. I know what you all are up to, thieving, with those polecat friends of yours, coconuts and arecanuts, and last night it was cardamom. Sumitra I will tell you for the last time, If ever you bring the stolen stuff here again, as God is my witness, I will inform the village headman, and he will know what to do with the likes of you. Thieving in the night and sleeping during the day, you are no son of mine and your father and his father before him, never thieved although your father, no doubt, is as great a scoundrel as you are." She



said.

"Calm down, calm down mother. People who observe the precepts of the Buddha should not resort to such wild and violent talk."

"Shall we visit them and find out what is wrong?" suggested Pedris in a compromise.

"I shall not go, I don't want to lick his back," said Sumitra.

"You don't have to come if you don't want to, your father and I shall go." She gave Pedris a look of condescension. Her mood improved like magic. She loved to go places.

"I will give you the bus fare then." Volunteered her son.

"I won't touch your dirty money."

"I know how you will find the money then, for the journey. Like the last time you will pawn your gold earstuds, and then keep on nagging and complaining all the time that you have no money to redeem them with, and then I will have to redeem them with my dirty money, of course, because I would want peace of mind here."

"I never asked you to redeem them, did I?"

"Oh no you never did but your manner pushed me on to it."

She did not press the point, but warming up to the suggestion of paying a visit to her daughter's asked Pedris,

"When shall we go? I could bake some oil cakes for the little ones, you will not grudge me some treacle Sumithra?"

"No," said Sumithra ambiguously, and Pedris said,

"Let me see, today is Saturday, we cannot go on Sunday, Sunday is a bad day for travelling." He went up to the almanac hanging on the wall, peering into it short-sightedly he added,

"Monday is out, so is Tuesday and we should not travel on Wednesday. Because death is in the north on Wednesday, and we

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are to travel north." Suddenly Sumithra guffawed, they ignored him, for they knew that he did not believe in such things.

"But Thursday is a good day, It's even an auspicious day," he concluded.

"We shall go on Thursday then," she approved.

On Thursday they travelled in a soft Japanese bus, a Toyota. The bus ran smoothly, speeding up the rubberized carpet highway. The road went straight ahead to the central plain in the North. They sat side by side, crouching and nodding in comfortable padded high backed seats. She held on to the pillow case stuffed with the gifts of pepper, cardamom, areca and of course the oil cakes. The journey in the bus was without mishaps and uneventful. She did not even throw up, or feel out of sorts. They got down at the turn off without a hitch. Thursday had proved a good day for travelling.

He wore a white close fitting cotton tunic, which was so long that it ended a little below the knees. He looked elongated in it. His long neck looked longer as the tunic was what you would call an open-necked one, without a collar. His face was small, oily and tanned. He looked lean but tough. Under his long tunic he wore a white sarong to match, with a green border at the edge.

She was short, fat and fair, with greying hair. She wore ancient silver bangles with intricate cut designs in them. They fitted her fat wrists like handcuffs; around her short, fat neck above the fleshy fold, she wore a chain of dark coral beads, in the centre of which was an ancient traditional pendant of swans, with their necks inter-locked, their wings were studded with bits of red, white and blue stones. She was dressed in a white lace jacket, with puffed up sleeves and a sari of the palest blue, almost colourless like clear water in a surface spring pool. They walked selfconsciously in their rubber slippers, stepping carefully yet clumsily, because they were barefoot peasants and not quite used to wearing slippers, wearing them only on rare occa-



sions.

He walked in front and she came up close behind him, balancing the pillow case on her head. They walked up the jungle pathway leading to the village where their daughter lived. The path was cool and shaded by forest trees. The recent seasonal torrential rains had washed the path clean of mud and slime, leaving a surface of fine pebble. The air they breathed was clean and pungent, with a diffused leafy scent. They felt invigorated and wonderfully alive. They came up to the village tank, their hearts beating and their eyes shining with excitement.

Gaunt leafless trees, like charcoal etchings, stood water logged and brooding at the fringes where the tank had swelled and captured them. In the shallows around the submerged roots, wild stunted leguminosae grew. These shuddered when the fat tank fish moved among their tender stems. Large pink flowers of the Genus *Nelumbo* stood out in clusters on green carpets of floating lily pads, the white water lily which grew a flower furled up like the horn of a beast, grew wild in profusion to form a floral border at the shallow edge of the tank opposite which, across the extreme width of the water stood the stone and wooden sluice, through which the arrested and tamed water flowed placidly in a shallow canal to irrigate the rice paddies at the bottom of the low land. A cloud of water birds rose up from the tank and dipped skimming in a long straight line fishing in formation. The vibrant and insistent voices of men driving the yoked grey oxen ploughing mighty furrows with their heavy wooden ploughs came to them. In a thinning forest grove, beside the tank, seven mud-walled cottages of the little hamlet in which lived their son-in-law Tissa, their daughter Kusuma and their grandchildren, the twins, nestled.

"The tank is full, they will want for nothing this time." observed Pedris.

"Thank god, the rains have come in good time, they can work all the fields this time, they will have enough to eat, and store



away," she said.

There was a stockade fence of rough hardwood staves built around their daughter's house. The entrance to which was shaped in a U turn with close fitting fence posts, with three posts going across at the mouth to keep out mostly straying cattle. They moved the cross poles, got in, and put the poles back in place.

The thatch on the roof was new, the floor had been dunged. It was smooth and unbroken. A reed mat was spread out in the little niche of an open verandah. The two little twins, naked and brown, sat with their, sturdy limbs stretched out balancing two white tin plates on them, eating cassava yams.

The roof sloped steeply, so as to make the water run down the thatch easily, and it came down so low in front, that Pedris had to bend in two like a hook to get in. His wife, although she was short, had to take the pillow case in the hands and charge in with her head lowered like a fat heifer.

The children were taken unawares, but they did not flinch. They called out almost in unison,

"Ma somebody has come," and went on eating.

"It's just not somebody, it's your own grandpa and own grandma, come to see you," they said sitting down on the mat beside them.

"Ma, our own grandpa and grandma have come to see us." The twins said.

This brought Kusuma rushing from the kitchen, there was a quizzical look in her eyes as if to say, why this sudden visit? she greeted her parents, kneeling down at their feet in turn and then she told the twins,

"Come on, greet your grandparents."

The twins stretched out on the floor, naked and unsteady and worshipped them.



"May the gods bless you, and the triple gem be with you." The grandparents said. The twins stayed in the same posture until Kusuma told them to get up!

"It's time you put some clothes on them." Observed grandma.

"Tissa says that they are too little for that. Tissa started wearing clothes only when he had to go to school, even now sometimes..." she stopped suddenly, confused at what she may have disclosed unwittingly.

"What?" said her mother amazed. Kusuma turned red all over. Pedris brought out the ghost of a laugh.

"You have grown wild living in the jungle." She said mildly, and then untying the mouth of the pillow case brought out the oil cakes and gave two each to the twins.

"One for each hand," she said. "Too much oil cake isn't good for them."

She then gave the pillow case, putting in the oil cakes and tying it up, to Kusuma.

"Where is Tissa?" asked Pedris

"Tissa is busy these days, the whole of last week he was busy trapping the tank fish, and curing them, drying and stacking them and now he is busy ploughing the fields."

"It must have been the work here which made him come away without even telling us the other day," ventured Pedris.

"When was that?" asked Kusuma amazed.

"Friday last," said her mother.

"How could that be? Tissa has never been out of home for the last six months."

"He did come there last Friday, late in the evening, and had come away in the night. We found him gone in the morning."



Kusuma was intrigued, then her face cleared and she burst out laughing

"So between the two of them, they have foxed you too. It's a trick they play. It's not Tissa who has visited you, it's his twin Priyantha."

"Twin Priyantha? We never knew there was a twin," said her mother.

"No, " said Pedris, " we never heard of such."

"There was though, Tissa and Priyantha, were twins like our boys, the only thing was they were kept apart and grew up separately."

"Why? How was that?" They wanted to know. So that Kusuma explained at length.

"They were identical twins, when their father went to the astrologer to get him to cast their horoscopes, the astrologer had told him that if they were kept together either the parents would die, or one of them would be killed within seven days. So they gave him away to an aunt of his mother. who lived in a smaller hamlet in the north. After a year or so all contact with these people was lost. When Tissa's father went in search of them he found the tank bund busted and their dwelling houses falling apart. There was nobody to be found. Tissa's father then turned back to bring the sad news, it so happened that Priyantha and his foster father and a few surviving inhabitants of the village had fled to escape the curse of the shivering sickness, which made them go mad and die like flies."

"It is called Japanese encephalitis." Pedris said knowingly. Kusuma continued with the story.

"Priyantha's foster mother had died in the epidemic. Priyantha and his foster father started a new life on the outskirts of a big village. There was a school there and Priyantha went to school, as time went on Priyantha grew up to become a strong young man, and his foster father became old and sick. When the



old man was in his death throes, he had told Priyantha about his antecedents. After the old man's death, Priyantha rushed here to look for his people. Tissa was overjoyed and so were his father and mother. His mother wouldn't leave his side, and would trail behind him as if afraid of losing him. Since then Tissa and Priyantha have been playing tricks on people impersonating each other, like the visit there."

"Indeed," said Pedris.

"I knew that they had been up to something, Saturday last, Priyantha came here in the evening. They were laughing so much I thought that they would bring down the roof," Kusuma said.

"So that was why he acted so, strangely," said her mother, laughing and clapping her hands.

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## THEY WERE GOING HOME FOR THE NEW YEAR FESTIVAL

In a riot, flooding the steep banks the yellow-gold wild sunflowers stood, offering their faces to be kissed, by the sun coming over the hill. Their leaves were pale green, just green, dark green, and black green, where the shadows of the clouds fell thick. The meandering Macadam roadway, following almost the contours of the hill, and curving sharply downwards, at the bends, was a broken loose aggregate of rubble at the corners, so that, the public transport system was put off, for this two kilometer stretch.

Janis and his grandson Luvinis were walking down the hill. The spirits of the old man rose, as the gentle mountain breeze blew in his face and brought the leafy, heady fragrance of the steaming sunflower to him. He became talkative, euphoric and riotous so that his grandson Luvinis became alarmed and suspected the old man to have somehow taken at least six coconut shells full of the brew, early in the morning, when he had gone to wash in the stream. His step became precariously jaunty for an old man.

"But tell me grandpa, did you spend our hard earned money again on drink?" Luvinis pleaded.

"No my boy, it's in the pocket of the short I am wearing under the sarong. My dear boy, how could you think of such a thing, how could we go home for the New Year empty handed?"

They were going for the New Year festival. There were so many obligations to be met. They had to take new clothes for them all, and a good stock of provisions, a few bottles of arrack for the men, and most of all, they should go as early as possible to re-thatch the roof, paint the walls and take the big drum down from the beam, treat it's skin for tautness, tone it by warming it up in the sun or under a twig fire gently, for the women to sit around it and slap up the ditties in unison.



"Grandpa, Where did you get the money to drink?"

"I haven't taken a drop."

"Then how is it that you are smelling like a tavern?"

"It's the smell of the mud from the fields."

"The fields are far down at the very bottom."

"The wind carries the smell, can't you see?"

"Oh yes! I can see, but shall I keep the money?"

"No you shall not. It's safe here and besides, nobody would suspect or know anything about the under short I am wearing."

Although the old man was tipsy, the drink had sharpened his wits and made him more cunning, thought Luvinis.

The old man sang ancient songs in fragments, mixing the rhymes in a regular out of tune, and by and by they came to the bottom of the hill to a main road, and crossed over to a little eating house to wait for a bus to continue their journey home and to the festival.

They sat on a long bench outside, under the shade of a flamboyant tree, with Janis smoking a fat black cigar, and while they were seated thus, two identical men came into the eating house. They brought half a loaf of bread, selecting it with great care. They were dark squat men, bald and bullet headed, with black wiry hair, like coiled springs, showing at the "V" necks of the identical white banians they wore.

"They must be twins," whispered the grandson.

"Brothers probably, these must be the descendants of the slaves brought by our victorious kings in the past,"

"You must be joking."

"I am not, King Gajabahu brought many prisoners of war from Chola and settled them in these parts, and that is why they look so different from us," explained Janis in a whisper.



And then they heard the dark men tell the keeper of the eating house,

"We are looking for work hands to take a crop in before the rains, and the New Year festival. We will pay good wages."

No sooner had Janis heard this, he shot up from the bench and going up to them in a huff asked,

"What is the nature of your work and what wages will you pay?"

The men looked dubiously at him, for he was a frail old man, smelling of toddy and black cigars, yet something in his manner told them that this was a man to be reckoned with, a man hardened with age, strong like a hard-wooded tree.

"It would take a day or two, at the most, for two able bodied men."

"We will take it on, if the terms are agreeable to us," said Janis, "and what is the extent of the crop," he added.

"Four pelas," they said.

"Yes, and what will you pay us?"

"Two hundred to reap, we will gather the crop in."

The old man bit and spat out the end of the black cigar feigning disgust.

"Let us go my boy, this is chicken feed," he said, addressing his grandson, without even looking at the men.

"Come, come, tell us how much you want," the dark men said, taken in by his bluff.

"Three hundred at least, with food and lodging, and half down on the first day." Janis said flatly.

After much haggling, they agreed to pay two hundred and fifty with food and lodging, and to pay a hundred on the first day.



"Don't worry my boy, a delay of a day or two will not matter in the least," said Janis to his grandson.

They went with the dark men to bring the crop in. They set about it as soon as they went there. They were good workers. By noon, when they stopped for the meal brought to them, to the fields in a box, and served out on banana leaves by a fair fat woman, looking strong and ruddy; they had finished reaping over half of the field. Janis was not at all satisfied with the meal, and so he said to the fat woman,

"This will not do, we are not vegetarians, we must have at least some dried fish."

"We were not prepared, we will try to do better at the next meal."

The night meal was the same. They had no time to go to the bazaar they said and Janis was furious, but was reconciled when they paid the promised hundred. This was how it was done. After the night meal Janis and Luvinis were solemnly summoned to the front room. In the room, fastened to the floor, was a large ebony box, like a trunk. The dark men opened it with an ancient extra large key. It was like the key of an old temple door, and from the inside of this box, they brought out a smaller box, the surface of which was reinforced with porcupine quills in slanting pattern and silver bands. They opened the box. It was stacked with notes of a very high denomination, which made the eyes of Janis to pop out of their sockets. Then they pressed a secret panel, and opened a concealed drawer that spun open, out of which they were paid. They were given two mats to sleep on, and they slept in the open verandah, adjoining the room where the money box was. One of the dark squat men went to sleep in this room. The other went into the house with the fair fat woman. Janis unfurling the mat on the floor, and lying down, lowered his voice and told his grandson,

"These people are misers, hoarding their money in the box and they are vain, they want to show us how rich they are and

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did you notice that they are keeping a wife in common to save money."

"How do you know that?"

"Why, she addresses them in the same manner, tomorrow the other will sleep with her I bet."

"They do not seem to be immoral though," said Luvinis to his grandpa.

"Of course not, it has been a tradition in these parts, but it's dying now."

Luvinis was aware of grandpa's voice chanting a verse throughout the night. He heard the hushed sounds in a sort of restless trance. He knew that grandpa was chanting to cast a spell to put them to sleep. In the morning he asked his grandpa what on earth he had been up to.

"You will see my boy. This time we will celebrate the New Year like kings," he said, his eyes lighting up like flames.

"For god's sake tell me, are you planning to rob their money?"

"You wait my boy and see."

"I will warn them if you are trying to do that."

"What, will you go against your own blood?"

"You should be ashamed of yourself, do you not know that retribution will come?"

"Shut up you fool," said Janis.

On the next day the harvesting was done, but it was too late for them to leave and so they decided to stay the night over and leave at cock's crow in the morning. They were given dried fish with their meal that night. The woman however, had no curries left, she ate rice with a sprinkling of salt. Their accounts were squared before they went to sleep and as Janis had prophesied, the man who had slept in the front room the day before, went



casually to sleep inside with the fat woman.

Before going to sleep, Janis sprinkled some sand and water around the house.

"What are you doing grandpa?" asked Luvinis.

"Shut up and go to sleep," Janis said curtly.

He shut up and went to sleep like a log for Janis had cast a spell. In the early hours of the morning Janis put him up. Luvinis was still drowsy and got up in a dream.

"Let us go quickly before it is light."

"Should we not tell them?"

"We will not disturb them, we will leave even without folding our mats," said Janis.

When they came to the eating house, a plank door was open and the smell of fresh hoppers being made, came out of it. They went in leaving the pillow case in which their meagre belongings were, on the bench. The keeper came out of the kitchen to the counter with a rag, and began to dust it.

"Is there a bus to Matale now?" Janis asked him.

"Yes, in about half an hour's time," the keeper answered, impressively consulting a big round wrist watch.

"Is it regular?"

"Very. It's the mail bus, it will not fail."

"Are these hoppers fresh?" asked Janis, pointing to the plate of hoppers in the showcase, and without waiting for an answer, he asked what curries, there were to eat the hoppers with.

"No curries, but we have bananas. If you like we can make egg hoppers."

"Six egg hoppers," ordered Janis astounding Luvinis with his extravagance, "And while you are at it I shall wash myself," Continued Janis.



When the keeper went into the kitchen to make the egg hoppers, Janis went in with him.

The keeper came out after a while with the egg hoppers in a plate. Janis was a long time in coming so that Luvinis became anxious. When he did come, Luvinis knew at once that he had been at the old game again. The strong lethal fumes of pot arrack now available in every nook and corner, brewed in illicit makeshift pocket distilleries; was coming out of his reddened eyes.

"The bus must be around the corner," reminded Luvinis.

"So what? If we miss it we shall take the next. There is no hurry my boy."

Janis then however gobbled up the egg hoppers and paid up the bill. They caught the bus after all, and got seats in the last row. Janis slept all the way to Matale, making strange wheezing noises. When they got off at the little town of Matale, it was past noon and the old man seemed depressed.

"Let us go to the market first and buy the groceries," Janis suggested. Luvinis knew that in almost every market stall, at the back was a bootlegger selling hooch; and when they came out of the market Janis was in high spirits.

"Let us have a decent meal, I cannot remember the day I ate a piece of beef."

They went to a Muslim hotel, and there they ate all kinds of rich food, Janis paid up without batting an eyelid.

In the town they went into to a sort of modern pretentious clothier to buy cloth for the New Year. This was the type of shop that has ready-made frocks and things on hangers, and sophisticated sales girls talking softly and convincingly to the customers at the counters. When Janis walked in with Luvinis tagging behind him awkwardly, they took note of them for they were not, the usual type of customer.



"What is it you want sir,?" The sales girl asked him. The manner of address stopped Janis in his tracks. He looked hard at the girl to see whether a joke was being played on him.

"I want the best you have," said Janis.

That's how it all began. Janis bought the most expensive cloth for them all. Clothes for his old woman, for his son and daughter, for his daughter-in-law, his son-in-law and for his favourite grandson Luvinis. When the bill was drawn up, Luvinis observed that it amounted to nearly half their earnings and thinking of what they had already spent, feared that they may not be able to foot the bill.

At the counter Janis nonchalantly pulled out a wad of notes, and peeling one out handed it over the counter. The man at the counter looked at it closely and shook his head.

"We cannot take this, this is obsolete currency."

"What? It's good money, it has the water-mark, the number and all that." Janis said aggressively.

"Yes, but did you not know that the Central Bank decided to change its old notes.

They gave a deadline date, the old notes were to be handed over at the kachcheries and new notes were given in exchange."

It took a longish time for Janis to grasp the situation. He was flushed in the face with the drink and the reversal of his fortune. Janis then raised his sarong. The women in the shop were aghast and looked away fearing the worst. But when they saw the faded short trouser that he was wearing underneath, and saw his hand go into its pocket and pull out the crumpled notes, and the loose coins, they were reassured. Janis managed to meet the bill, just tiding over.

Janis came out of the shop quietly enough with Luvinis carrying the parcel of cloth in one hand, and holding on to the pillow case slung over his shoulder with the other, following



behind, when Janis suddenly burst into uproarious laughter.

"What is it now grandpa?" asked Luvinis.

"Why, to think I took such pains to cast a spell to rob a heap of dud notes. I took only one bundle though feeling sorry for them."

"Retribution," said Luvinis.

"Damn the retribution, I am thinking of those dumb fools hoarding their money in a strong box with secret panels and tough ancient locks and sharing one fat woman.

He held his sides and laughed until the tears came into his eyes, and soon, Luvinis was infected with it, and they went laughing all the way. These men of my village, the ancient historic village of Meegastenne. These men are the life blood and the pith of its declining culture. I heard of their singular fortunes when they came flat broke to apply for a loan to tide over the New Year festival expenses. I know that this loan will never be paid back but which they know that I shall not refuse to grant.



## A MASTER CHIP OF THE OLD BLOCK

Ekanayake, my friend, was building a house in a marsh. It had been a rice field once. He had drained off the water filled it up with earth and pebble, and was building it, as he told me, on a floating foundation. I didn't know what it meant then, and still don't know. I was building a little cottage on a camel hump of a highland, the bottom of which was hard rock, buried in the marsh. We were both retired civil servants going on our sixties, old men of a sort, and so when cement was out of stock, as it usually was, and when building operations were held up, we sat in the shade underneath a spreading jam tree and yarned. This is one of the tales he told me then.

Jemma came from a long line of pickpockets. He was quick witted, sharp eyed, and a devil may care young man with fine supple hands, delicate and flexible with long tapering fingers, like the hands of some great pianist or painter. When he was after a quarry, the light in his eyes was sharp and penetrating, like sunlight passing through a magnifying glass, at other times the look in his eyes was innocent, like that of a child's and his manner was so nonchalant and disarming that so many people were misled and taken unawares. This no doubt contributed towards the success of his trade.

Now Jemma as a young man, came in contact with a young woman. She had been caught in the act of shop lifting. She had been trapped not because she was a novice, or because she lacked practice, it was because she had not known that the shop had installed sophisticated equipment to watch its clientele on a secret screen. She had been watched, caught and upbraided, and the things she had secreted in her bag, had been ignominiously taken out and exposed.

As fate would have it, Jemma who had been loitering about the place, showed up and interceded and preached, they say, such a sermon on the frailty of human beings, and the cruel forces that drive even angels to such deeds, through dire need



and no fault of their own, that the management in sympathy agreed to set her scot free, for this once, they also say that the eyes of the wax models clothed in the fashionable ensemble at the window of the shop, was moist and wet after Jemma's sermon. Such was the force of his oration. The woman of course agreed to go straight after this, as she had done on two previous occasions. The last time in a court of law. But this time she really meant it with a difference, for she went straight into the arms of Jemma and married him off.

Her antecedents were even more spectacular in notoriety than Jemma's were. She had famous tricksters and gangsters in her line of descent who would have put even people like Mellow Dick and Al capone in the shade. And her mother, her grandmother, and a long line of great grandmothers, had been famous courtesans. It was a known fact that even cabinet ministers, and top ranking executives had, close liaison with her mother.

Jemma and Priya, for that was the name she went by, were meant for each other, there was no doubt about it. They were a roaring success, so much so that their deeds became legendary. It was said that Priya had robbed the gold dentures of an old gentleman who had become fresh with her in a crowded bus.

" That will teach the lecherous old cad a lesson," she said, telling about it to Jemma, and they laughed and laughed in the night.

Although they were rich, they did not live in a respectable neighbourhood because it would cramp their style. They lived in a slum, and the slum dwellers took them for granted, but they were always apprehensive and careful. When Jemma's grandfather, a centenarian, died, it was observed that the people who came there to pay their last respects to the dead, acted in a strange manner. The men would from time to time check on their wristwatches, and the women feel, checking to make sure that the jewellery they wore was still there. For the man in the coffin had been, one of the greatest artists in the trade, and even,



though he was dead, they still felt uneasy. Some nine months after his death, Priya brought forth Jemma junior. Then they all said,

"He is the reincarnation of the old man."

The events connected with the conception and the birth were singular and seemed to portend the birth of a man of destiny. Priya who had always had an aversion for milk, for she had never been a milk sop and had gone for plain tea in the morning, and black arrack on the rocks in the evening, suddenly developed a craving for milk, and milk prepared in a special way. The milk had to be boiled in a golden vessel with a golden chain immersed in it. This of course was no problem because they had so much of gold. The problem was milk. She drank gallons of it, like a German drinking beer in a competition. This craving was of great significance. It was like the craving for blood of the great queen who begot a warrior king. There were other things as well. His birth was broadcast over the skies, coinciding with the appearance of a comet.

The birth pains had been sudden, and the delivery double quick. Jemma had to rush to the midwife who was malingering, and virtually drag her out. She had come reluctantly, only after he had threatened to report her to the Health authorities and knife her. She did the work hurriedly and set off quickly, feigning that she had to attend to another urgent case, although it was still dark.

Jemma junior was placed in an expensive cot which had been stolen, altered and painted afresh to make identification impossible. Jemma looking at the child with interest, observed that it's left fist was tightly clenched. He tried to open it out, but the child shrieked so violently, with its face choleric and flushing into a purple-red furious inflated blob, that he gave it up for the moment, and went to the astrologer to get the little fellow's horoscope cast.

The astrologer was impressed by the chart,

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"He is born at a time when kings are born, there is a great future for him, "

Jemma, thinking of the clenched fist, asked the astrologer,

"Do you see any physical deformity"?

"On the contrary, I see great physical beauty and perfection." Then Jemma told him about the clenched fist.

"It could not be a deformity," said the astrologer puzzled, "Perhaps I should see it."

Jemma took the astrologer home, feeling apologetic and awkward about his habitat, but the astrologer put him at his ease, reminding him that great men are sometimes born in humble surroundings. The astrologer bent over the cot and tried to feel the clenched fist, the sleeping child opened an eye, and perhaps realizing as to what they were about, quickly hid his hand.

"Are you left handed?" the astrologer wanted to know."

Of course we are all left handed, my father and even his father before him, Jemma explained.

"I think I know what it is," said the astrologer, like Alexander discovering the secret of the horse, " can you get me a gold chain?" he asked. Jemma gave him a box full of gold chains to select from. The astrologer selected a long gold chain, and gangled it over the cot. Jemma junior opened an eye, observed its movement, and didn't do a thing.

"Don't look at him," whispered the astrologer, " Look at the wall like me."

They all looked away. Suddenly Jemma junior made a grasp at the chain, and out of his clenched fist, rolled out the midwife's ring.



## THE LAST VISIT

Jamis came on the twenty first of April. He should have come on the thirteenth, for that was the day prescribed for such visits, in the almanac, when the sun transits from the house of Pisces to that of Aries in the Zodiac. He should have come before the Old Year ended and the New Year began.

"I could not come although I wanted to, the wheeze got the better of me and laid me down," he explained standing outside the broad verandah on the long steps. The steps were rutted, and patches of grass sprouted forcefully in the crevices.

"Jamis," I said, "bring the bench in and sit here in the verandah. There are nests of fierce red ants on the steps, and vicious black ones along the edges, don't stand there."

I had kept a bench out, under the shade of the mango tree, and sat there sweating in the April heat because the sun was at equinox, fierce and biting like the red and black ants. Jamis brought the bench in, and placed it against a stout rounded pillar and sat there wheezing and fighting for breath. I had endeavoured with the passage of time, and the changing values to make them sit in the chairs. They desisted as if it was something sacrilegious. The more I pressed them, the more vehemently they protested, and so I had come to leave them alone.

"You need not have come, your condition being so," I said.

"I have always come, and I shall continue to come each New Year as long as I have breath in me. I know that only a few of them come here now. Is that not so?" He asked bending forward and talking with some difficulty.

"Yes, there are just a handful of them now, Kaluwa, Nandina, Sitiya, Kira, Sethuwa, and among the women Suranganie, all of them the remnants of the last generation, from the generation of my father. Their children do not come here. I don't even know them," I said.



" When your father the lord was alive, and when he was seated in the very chair that you are seated in now, he filled out the armchair. He was big-made and had great strength in him. He was upright and kind. We were childhood playmates, your father and I. We were like brothers.

We climbed the hills, roamed over the fields, swam in the river, and played all games together. Although your father was the son of a government official, in charge of a large division, and an aristocrat, and I the son of a lowly peasant. How much love and understanding there was then. There is only hatred and suspicion here now, how can we account for it?" He asked.

" The times have changed, the people do not depend on us, and we don't have to depend on them. We are not rich landowners any more, our lands have gone fragmented or sold out, and I as you know, have just this rambling old house and a few fields to get by, why should the people need me now? There are no obligations or bonds both ways now."

" When your father was alive all the village folk flocked here, on the day before the New Year. There was feasting and merry-making here then, and your father was magnanimous. He gave gifts of new cloth to the elders, and to the children crackers, in little packets. There were pictures of rosy Chinese children pasted on them. I remember the crackers in bright colours, mostly red and green. They were different to the vulgar ones we have today."

" It's the new age," I said, " the demand is high, and we are in a hurry to get things done, we have no time to do things properly, but of course the ones we make, though rough in appearance, are loud and light well enough."

As time goes on, I thought we will evolve a new culture, and even in little things strive for a better finish. Then Jamis said, with a nostalgic sheen in his eyes,

" I remember the round elevated tray, in which betel leaves were kept out here, and the spittoon, all in brass, with such intri-



cate beautiful designs. Nobody can do things like that now, and even in the kitchen, the wooden seat of the coconut scraper, and the plate on which the kitchen spoons were hung, had carving of such great delicacy and workmanship, which is not seen today."

" We don't have the time for that kind of thing anymore, " I remarked gently, and then said,

" Shall I get you some tea, or would you like something stronger?"

" Yes if you have it, what you gave me last New Year, from the funny shaped bottle."

I had given him Grant's whisky, which my son had brought for me, and he knew of it.

" I have even something better to give you. It's a well-seasoned drink, seasoned for over ten years, in Halmilla vats. It's made here, you will like it."

" Did your son come home for the New Year? "

" Yes, like you, a little late, you know it's difficult for them to get leave in the army."

" I have not seen him for a long time, is he still in the North?"

" Yes they keep him there, where the fighting is, because he is in a fighter unit," I explained.

" May the gods protect him then," said Jamis, looking up and raising his hands to heaven, and then with conviction he said,

" No harm will come upon him, you, your father, and all those before him, have been good and generous."

I brought out the bottle, it was almost half full. I handed over a glass.

" Pour out and drink, it is strong, if you want I can get something to shandy it with," I said.

"That's not necessary," he said, and took a stiff drink neat,



looking up and pouring it right into the gullet. He made a face, tightening it up momentarily into a knot, and then relaxed. Almost immediately his condition seemed to improve, the wheeze abated. He was not fighting for breath anymore. He spoke in a smooth voice like chocolate melting in the pocket. I poured a little into my tin cup, and drank up to keep him company, not that I wanted a drink.

" You know Jamis, your son would not know my son, as we know each other," I observed with regret.

" It is sad indeed, this rift," he said.

" Yes, " I agreed, " everybody is engrossed in their affairs, they move in different planes. They are so busy, rushing here, rushing there, just brushing past each other."

" Well, I must be on my way, " he said abruptly, getting up from the bench. I poured the last drink into his glass.

" Drink up," I said, handing the glass to him, and going into my room I fished out the last hundred rupee note of my pension money, which I had hidden under the clothes, in the wall cupboard.

When I came out he was standing beside the bench, the empty glass was on the bench. I pressed the money into his shirt pocket.

" Please take it. It's a little gift."

He left, having blessed and thanked me. After he had gone, I found that he had left his pair of rubber slippers under the mango tree. It was an old wasted pair, repaired with rope. He had forgotten to wear them. I carried them, and put them in my room, hoping that he would call for them. He never called for them, because where he had gone shortly afterwards, they did not need slippers. I knew that at the end of this year, and the beginning of the next, there would be one less to visit me.



## A GARAGE JOB

I didn't like the way he accelerated, bending over the open bonnet and pulling the rod to the maximum. The little engine wailed in protest.

"I can see the leak in the exhaust." I told him hurriedly, because I wanted him to lay off playing with the accelerator. I loved the old car and treated her gently, like a lady. He left off, the engine ran smoothly enough but, because of the leak at the mouth of exhaust, it roared, when it should have purred. I switched off the engine. He tightened the clasp at the mouth, screwing up the bolt nuts.

"Start." He said.

I switched on the engine. He accelerated mercilessly. It still leaked. I switched off.

"It's no use, tightening up." I said.

He didn't heed me, instead he shouted out to a mechanic helper, a boy apprentice, calling for the number ten box spanner and the piece of iron piping. The apprentice took a long time tracing the spanner.

"What have you done with it, you good for nothing dogs? You must have sold it for drink, you scoundrels." accused Kemadasa, the proprietary owner of the garage. They found the box spanner set, under a lorry that was being repaired. The mechanic had left it there, and gone out for a cup of tea.

"Let the bastard come, I will teach him to slip out for tea at odd times, why should we have an interval, a break then? If every son of a bitch working here can go for tea and to shit, whenever he wants to, leaving valuable tools lying about like his grandmother's property?"

Then lowering his voice, he told me confidentially,

"Sir, you have got to shout at them, to get things done. If I



relax nobody works here."

"Do they rob the tools, like you said?" I asked.

"Oh! no, They wouldn't dare." He said smiling mischievously.

This time he put the box spanner into the bolt nut, and inserting the piece of iron piping into the spanner handle, began heave it, using all the strength of his strong shoulders and hefty arms. There was a sound like the cracking of a whip, the whole collar, together with the bolts collapsed and came apart. My temper flared up. I would have bashed his head. I didn't dare to speak. He didn't seem to notice.

"Good god!" He exclaimed, " It's all rusted, look at it's mouth, the edge is gone." He made out as if the fault was entirely the condition of the car, and that he was blameless. Perhaps there was some truth in what he said I thought, calming down.

"We can, if you want to, wrap up the edge with some asbaster thread and put in new bolts and nuts and tighten up, but it would be a temporary job. It won't last.

"I want it to last." I said.

"Then we will do a good job of it." Said Kemadasa, wiping his dirty hands on his old stained sarong." I will fix up Sirisena to handle it." He concluded. He called out to Sirisena. A thin bent man, of indeterminate age crept out of a doorless van, holding on to his hips, as he came forward he straightened up with difficulty. This was Sirisena, the welder and the tinker.

"What are you doing?" Kemadasa asked.

"I am working on the van."

"Still, from yesterday morning, are you hatching eggs?"

"I began work last morning but,"

"But, fell asleep." Kemadasa completed the answer for him,

"No." said Sirisena furious, " There was no damn oxygen."



"Yes?"

"They brought the oxygen, late in the night."

"Well, you can stop the work over there for a while, and attend to his exhaust."

They peeped into the engine and examined the mouth of the exhaust, they decided to saw it off, and turn out a new mouth piece, and weld it to the pipe, and then fix it properly with new bolts and nuts at the clasp buckle.

"You can get Podilamaya to help you" Kemadasa told Sirisena.

Podilamaya, turned out to be a hulking brute, he looked mentally deficient, with a pronounced Mongoloid appearance. Having entrusted the work to them Kemadasa went to attend to some other areas of work.

"We have to take the car over the pit, to pull out the exhaust." Said Sirisena.

"Give me the Ke Ke Key." Brought out Podilamaya, stammering and stretching out his hand.

"I will drive it there." I said getting into the car, and drove it carefully over to the pit. I didn't like them to drive because they left dirty oil and grease stains, especially on the seats. They got into the pit and started pulling out the exhaust. They were a long time at it. Kemasada came back,

"Where are they?" He asked me.

"They are both in the pit, pulling out the exhaust." I said.

He went over to the pit, peeped in and said,

"What the damn hell are you doing there, sawing at the canvas traps."

"The nuts are all rusted, and they are stuck, and so we are sawing the straps"



"You dumb fools, you could have unscrewed the nuts on the floor-board from above and pulled it off, now the damage is done, the canvas straps may be too short now."

"No" said Sirisena, " We have taken off only about half an inch, it wouldn't matter, the exhaust was hanging too low anyway."

They brought the exhaust to the surface, Kemadasa gave Sirisena further instructions.

"How long will it take?" I asked. They had taken nearly an hour to pull it out.

"We will try to finish it as soon as we can, say in about an hour or two" Kemadasa said.

"Three hours." Sirisena said contradicting him.

"Three hours." echoed the Mongol.

"You can go and come back at about four, we will have it ready then" Kemadasa said.

"You can go and come back at about..." The Mongol began, lost the trend and stopped abruptly.

"No," I said " I have nothing to do, I will hang around, I like to see how it is done." I did not want to leave the car in the garage and go away, because I knew what some of these garage chaps did in the absence of the owner. They would substitute some wasted part, for a new one, and when you came again, they would point out that it was wasted and needed replacement. They would then sell you the very same part they had stolen from you. They would loosen some crucial nut, and bring about a number of defects forcing you to bring the car again and again for repairs. I suspect that they did something to my delco once causing havoc to my engine, and the timing chain. I never went to that garage again and thus on principle I stayed with the car when repairs were done.

Sirisena went to the junk heap in the corner of a shed, to look



for a suitable piece of metal piping to make the new mouth edge of the exhaust with. The Mongol stayed back hitting at the exhaust with an iron rod, and seemed amused by the sound it made. I told him to stop. He stopped, looking steadily at me, and then kept on looking at me, until I felt uneasy. Sirisena came back smiling,

"I found the very piece of metal I need for the job." He said. They laid the exhaust flat on the ground, and as the Mongol held it down, Sirisena etched an outline of it on the floor, with a piece of flint, then having made some mark on the surface of the exhaust sawed off a portion of it and set about making the new mouth edge.

The heating, the shaping of the new piece of metal at the forge, the welding, the fixing of an inner cone, and the placing of the new finished part alongside the etched outline and finally welding it, before it was fitted up took time. I had to buy new bolts and nuts for the hold, and new screws for the canvas straps, and finally when everything was completed, I switched on the engine and accelerated. The engine roared furiously, the leak was much worse than what it had been before. Kemadasa came rushing in like a mad bull, and taking one look at it said,

"Pull it out, you damn son of a whore, don't you see that the inner cone is far too large?"

This time they did not pull out the whole exhaust, they sawed off a piece of it about a foot long, and removing the nuts and bolts at the mouth took it off. I didn't see as to why they could not have done this earlier, instead of pulling out the whole exhaust. This time Kemadasa went to the junk heap and came back with a piece of metal piping. I noticed that it's circumference was much less than that of the one, which Sirisena had selected earlier,

"Take the inner cone out and make one out of this and fix it." Kemadasa instructed, and turning to me he said,

"As things are going on here, I think very soon I will have to

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teach these bastards even to shit and wash their backs."

Sirisena finally got the job done. It was getting dark. I said a secret prayer and started the engine and accelerated. The engine purred softly. When I closed the bonnet, I could hardly hear it, I could feel its soft smooth vibration. I asked Kemadasa how much he wanted for the job.

"Give me six hundred," He said, "I cannot charge you more, even though it's a dead loss to me. Because of this fumbling fool, we had to do the things twice over."

I paid up, and he continued,

"I will have to take it out of Sirisena's pay, my profits are low. I can't afford losses."

When I was driving out of the garage, I saw Sirisena near the gate. I called out to him, he came rushing up to the car holding his hips.

"Why, is it leaking again?" He asked, his tired face showing strain and consternation.

"No," I said, and pulling out my purse I gave him the grandest tip. I had ever given any mechanic. "You may give a little of it to Podilamaya as well." I drove off, I saw his face light up in gratitude. I did not go far, first there was a slight drumming sound, then as I picked up speed, it began to beat like a tom tom. The shortened canvas had hauled the exhaust up, and with the vibration, it was knocking on the body, at the bottom of the car.



## A DAUGHTER OF THE TAPPER'S CLAN

"She is here somewhere," I said, "it's that I can't find her."

"Does she want jaggery or treacle?"

"Jaggery yes, to drink black coffee with, especially these days, in the night, when it's raining and the wind blowing like the devil outside, and shaking the doors and windows, trying to get in."

"Yes, coffee and jaggery is best when it's raining and cold, it warms the blood, it's like velvet in the stomach," agreed the little old woman, balancing the pots on her head, and standing at ease. She placed the palms of her fleshy hands on the wide bottom of the earthen pot, on which was balanced a smaller pot, its bottom sealing and making a lid for the larger pot. Then pushing her hands up she levered the pots, raising them, and then with a quick deft movement of the head, tossed off the ring of straw which crowned her head on which she had balanced the pots. The ring fell at her feet on the wide steps, she adjusted it to position with her toes, and gently placing the pots on it, sat beside them, stretching her legs wide with the cloth she was wearing shooting up to her knees and showing a pair of legs with bulging calves and one, the left one, with knotted varicose veins. They were incongruent legs for a little old woman, they were the legs of a hardened man.

I went into the house and then outside it, the back way, calling out to my woman. She was nowhere to be found. This was nothing unusual now. She had a way of disappearing and appearing. She might go to the bazaar, to a neighbour's house or to the garden, to work there. She never told where she went, and I didn't care to ask her. I knew that she would always turn up. I searched for her now because it was she who managed the house and the money, and I wanted her so much to buy the jaggery.



I came back to the woman sitting on the steps. She was trying to extract a thorn wedged in her big toe with a safety pin she had taken out of the front of her jacket. In the wide open V of the jacket was a flabby mass of flesh.

"Look," I said, " she has been picking coffee the last few days, the coffee is ripe and reddening, we can't get labour, and I can't help her with my hands shaking and spilling all the pods. So she does it herself. She must be out there, I will look for her there if you can wait."

I can't stay long, there is still a lot of stuff to be sold, and with this thorn in the foot I can't go fast. I must get it out, and get my daughter to clean it properly, or it might go septic and what happened to Ukku might happen to me."

"What happened to Ukku?"

"She didn't take care, the foot went bad, they cut it off. She hobbles about now with the aid of a stick."

"To be on the safe side, get it burnt with oil," I said, I told her how it was done. The technique was simple but very effective. You soak a cloth wick in coconut oil. Light one end and let the burning oil drip into the wound. It hurts, the dripping drops of oil are flames that burn, you got to grit your teeth and endure.

"Yes," she said " to be on the safe side, even if it hurts."

"It's better than hobbling about with a stick," I said.

It's not worth living that way."

She made ready as if to go, getting up. Although she was old, she was firm and trim standing up. She had the figure of a girl, and a straight poise attained perhaps, by balancing the pots on her head and walking long distances up and down the hills and dales, and the great plain where she went selling her home made golden treacle of palm sap and jaggery.

"How much is the jaggery?" I asked, thinking of the pain in the night, the wind and the cold, and how wonderful and com-



forting it would be to drink thick, black home ground coffee, biting into bits of jaggery molasses, sitting beside a slate of red scintillating charcoal embers to warm my rheumatic feet and hands from time to time.

The jaggery was in the smaller pot. It's mouth was covered with a sheet of polythene and tied up with a bit of string. The bigger pot contained the treacle.

"It's sixty a kilo."

"I don't have that much money, couldn't you give me, say, a twenty rupees worth?"

"I don't know how I could do that?" she said, grappling with the problem, her brows furrowing and her face shrivelling, looking like that of a rodent.

"My daughter does the price fixing and packing, I sell them at the marked price and give her the money and what is left over, at the end of the day."

"And what do you get out of it?" I asked, to keep the conversation going.

"Why, she feeds me and looks after me, isn't that enough?"

And how long can you go on?"

As long as it goes," she said.

She undid the string of the pot, and uncovering it, dug out the cone shaped jaggery placed under dry banana leaves from the bottom of the pot. They were cone shaped, made in the cast of coconut shells, tied two together to make a ball, and wrapped up in dry brown strips of banana leaves. On these strips, in some dark natural stain, was listed crudely, the weight and the price of each. There were a few single ones, they were half size, a little more or less than 500 grams.

"There is one here for twenty-seven rupees," she said, holding one out.



"One moment please," I said rushing into my room to look in the tin, where I kept my money. I was relieved to find two twenty rupee notes, and not one as I had doubted. I hurried back to her.

"I will take it," I said. I undid a small part of the leaf covering it, and pinching off a small piece tasted it. It was decidedly adulterated with cane sugar. They all did it now. It was almost impossible to get pure palm sap jaggery anywhere. When I made mention of it she said,

"We make and trade in the best jaggery and treacle, ask anybody, they will tell you."

I didn't contradict her, instead I asked her whether she knew the story of her ancestor who had supplied the king and his palace with jaggery. I called him her ancestor, because she was a hereditary daughter of the ancient clan of jaggery makers and tappers' of palm trees. She hadn't heard it, I told it to her, padding it up a little.

"In days of yore, a grand and glorious monarch, ruled our land. Among other things he was a gourmet, and indulged in good eating. He was pleased and intrigued with the high quality and taste of the jaggery supplied to the castle. He therefore sent a messenger to fetch the man who made the jaggery for his court, and in the presence of his councillors, his chief queen and seven favourite queens from his harem, and the famous jester Andare of his court; asked him to tell them as to how he made such good jaggery. The councillors, the queens, the court jester, and even the hangers on in the court, were served with the jaggery. The king himself ate profusely with utmost relish. They all agreed with the king that the jaggery was excellent. "Tell us the secret, tell us how it is done," clamoured the queens, "You have permission to speak," said the king addressing the jaggery maker, licking his lips and his fingers smeared with the melting jaggery. Your ancestor began to speak, "may it please your majesty we bathe and cleanse ourselves and sprinkle ourselves



with saffron water and then wear clean clothes. We clean the pots and pans and the spoons until they shine and we see ourselves reflected in them, and then we build a hearth in the centre of the special outhouse we have constructed for the purpose of making jaggery exclusively for the palace. The palm sap which we use is collected from selected trees, and is strained a dozen times before it is poured into the clean pot and kept on the fire. The fuel we use in the hearth is the wood of the scented sandalwood. There is a canopy above the hearth, of golden braid, with heavy tassels to keep it in place and to prevent dust and things falling into the open pot. I do not leave the pot even for a minute, it has to be stirred right from the beginning to the end. When it boils and thickens and is ready, it is poured out to firm and set in little cups, which are clean and gleam like mirrors. They are the very size of coconut shells."

"What great pains the poor man takes," said the queens.

"He should be rewarded for his pains." voiced the councillors.

"He has taken my place here today," whispered the court jester in the ears of the king. The king said nothing, nodded gravely and adjourned his court.

"Perhaps the jester was right," said the little old woman, when I paused, thinking that I had come to the end of my story.

"Of course he was right," I said, "in ancient times when kings wanted to find out the truth about things, they sent spies or went themselves in disguise. The king went to the house of your ancestor in the guise of a beggar, and what do you think he saw?"

"The outhouse, the canopy of golden braid, the gleaming pots and pans, and my ancestor at his best," she said in mock seriousness.

"He saw the man clad in a dirty span cloth, sweat oozing out of his bare torso, and dripping in streams from his face, stirring the palm sap with a wooden ladle. The boiling sap was in a



dirty pot blackened with age. There was no outhouse, no canopy, the hearth was three rock stones built in the open yard. The yard was filthy with the shit of dogs and children, and the flies settled alternately on the filth and the row of coconut shells lined up to pour the sap to set in."

"It's a fine story," she said, "but what happened to my ancestor afterwards."

"Perhaps he was beheaded or impaled, such were the punishments then."

"For fibbing?"

"You can't fib a king and get away with it. It's not like fibbing me," I said, winking at her.

"To tell you the truth, we do add a little, a wee bit of sugar to make it dry up evenly, and to firm it, and to prevent it from turning sticky," she said, "and the next time when I come I shall bring you a special one, one of the best."

"Made under a golden canopy in gleaming pots and pans?" I asked.

"Made in our mud walled kitchen with the palm thatched roof, and the dung dried floor, in a three stone hearth built on the floor. Made in clean earthenware pots and poured into coconut shells," She rattled off.

I gave her the two notes, she took them and examined each of them closely. She seemed to find something wrong with one.

"There is a patch in this. I think it is pasted. I may find it difficult, to get rid of it," she said, handing it back to me. I looked and explained to her that there was some slight paint mark on it, and that the reverse was unmarked, and that its number was clear enough. She still seemed hesitant to accept it and so I went in and tried to find seven rupees to give her in place of the note, in the secret hiding place of my woman, but I couldn't find the money.



In the end she was compelled to take the note. She gave me my change in a crumpled ten rupee note, and she was a long time trying to find the remaining three rupees in coins, so much so, that I thought that she was deliberately trying to hold back the three rupee to compensate for the "bad" note. And as she had wasted a lot of time and had a long way to go selling her stuff, and at the end of it walk up a hill to the village where her people lived. I said,

"It's alright if you don't have the money, you can forget about it, after all what can you buy with it, it's the price of three arecanuts."

In the fold of her cloth that she wore tucked into her waist, was a knot, she undid this knot, and from this she took out three shining rupee coins and handed them to me.

"If you find it difficult to give away the note I gave you, bring it back when you come next time, I will change it."

"I will get rid of the bad note along with some good ones, when I buy this week's provisions. I'll go there when his lamp is lit. The flickering light in his bottle lamp, is like that of a fire-fly's. His eyesight isn't as good as mine, although he is much younger than I."

"Who?" I asked

"Kira, my cousin, the shopkeeper."

"Poor Kira," I said.

He is the richest and the stingiest man in the village," she said. I helped her with the pots. I crowned her with the ring of straw, on which she placed the pots, and grinned like a cat, righting and balancing them. She walked away with a slight limp, giving a swing to her walk. The further away she went, the younger she looked, yes, she will go as long as it goes, right to the very end.



## THE SON OF JAMIS

"The son of Dauthuwa was Thauthuwa. The son of Thauthuwa was Jamis, the son of Jamis is Piyadasa. Piyadasa, they say was a dangerous man."

"Who says that?"

"The boys."

"The boys?"

"Yes, the boys," said Piyadasa, his face disintegrating and his voice frothing out like muddy water from a clogged up fountain. There was something rough and stilted in the manner of his speech, and it seemed to run in a narrow groove as he continued,

"Dauthuwa lived in a house above the rice fields. Thauthuwa lived in the same house. His son Jamis did not live there."

"Jamis?"

"Jamis, the son of Thauthuwa, Jamis, my father."

"Why?"

"The house fell to bits, and there is no house there now. There is only the skeleton of the wall twigs, the doorframe is gone, the termites have eaten it from the inside, and there is a hollow where the window was. Thauthuwa lived there alone after his wife Ungie died. Thauthuwa was a man of few words. He kept to himself. Jamis had gone on a spree, ostensibly to grow cash crops in the dry zone. When he came back, he had to break into the house through the window. The door was barred with a stout hard-wood pole. Thauthuwa was found rotting in the house, god knows how long he had been dead. The stench in there was like that of a thousand dead rats. Jamis threw up so much that it cured his asthma. My mother did not like to live in that evil house, she separated a bit of land from the land of Thema and built a house there."

"Thema?"



"Thema is her brother," he said.

"Do you live there now?"

"Where?"

"Why, in the house that your mother built?"

"My mother, my younger brother and myself live there. My father Jamis has gone to live in the house of my sister. She has a husband and three kids. I lived there too till my sister said to me, big brother, go and live with mother, she is old and needs looking after, and when I went to her, she said,"

"Who said?" I asked.

"My mother said, son your sister has sent you to me because you are sick and a fool, but it does not matter, you are not in excess here, and so I stayed with her and learnt from her about Thauthuwa."

"And Jamis your father, does he not come there?"

"He comes several times a day. They are so near, we can hear them talk at night when it is quiet."

"They told me that your father beat you up and chained you in the cattle-shed."

"Yes, he did that after I strayed away having lost my way."

"Why, how was that?"

"I took the wrong turn and went on till I found myself in a big village full of houses and strange people. They asked me all kinds of questions there."

"What questions?"

"Where are you going?" they asked me. I told them I was going forward. They did not like that. Where are you from? they asked me. From my mother's womb I said, they did not seem to like that either. A fair crowd had gathered there by then," What's your name? What's your name? They kept on pestering me.



"You must have told them what you told me, that the son of Dauthuwa....." I said to help him on with the tale.

"I did not know the answer then, it was later, when I was chained to the shed that my father taught me the answer."

"How did you answer them then?" I asked.

"I told them that my father calls me son, and my sisters and brother call me big brother."

"Oh! It's the truth you have told them." I said.

"They did not seem to like that answer at all. It was then that they started pushing and pulling me, and calling me a thief and a scoundrel. That's when I lost my temper. There was a heap of rubble where we stood, and so I let them have it. They fled like rats and from far away, they threw stones at me feebly. They hardly reached me, and then a man came up holding out a stick with a piece of white paper stuck on it. He came forward as if he was undecided. I waited till he came quite close, hiding a stone behind my back and let him have it. It hit on the head. He fell like a rock. It was then that my father came there. He said that they would have murdered me if he had not turned up then."

"What happened after that?" I asked.

"Nothing much, my father explained to them that I was an epileptic, and that I was soft in the head, and so on. Then they all said what the boys say."

"What?"

They said I'm dangerous. That I should be put away, or kept locked up."

He stood like a pigmy general, standing with his legs apart. His legs were muscular and strong. He had extra broad shoulders. He lifted his short strong arms above his head for emphasis. His thick bearded face was lifted to the sun. There was a fiery glint in his eyes. I knew that he had great strength in him, that he could lift and carry huge logs, which should need at least



four strong men to carry, and he could work from dawn to dusk untiringly.

"The son of Jamis is Piyadasa," I said laughing, "and Piyadasa is a dangerous man."

It infected and grew in him, he laughed outrageously, his massive shoulders shaking.

"My father brought me home, tied me to a tree and beat me up, and later on, he went to the village blacksmith and got an iron chain made with which they tie up elephants, and chained me to a post in the cattle-shed. He kept me there and fed me and told me that I was not to move out of the place without telling him. He taught me that the son of Dathuwa was Thauthuwa and the son of Thauthuwa was Jamis, and the son of Jamis is Piyadasa, that is myself, and that we live in Dobagasdeniya, Meegastenne, Matale on route number 594, coming from Kandy, and if I were ever to get lost, I was to tell them all these things.

"Are you afraid of your father?" I asked in jest.

"Why should I be afraid of him? He is an old man, if I were to club him, he would drop dead, and if I were to do that, my mother would come out and cry, Good God! what have you done my son, what have you done to him?" He looked at me confidentially and asked me in a whisper,

"One does not club one's parents, do they?"

"No, of course not," I assured him.

One day when I opened the door, he was seated on the broad steps of the open verandah. His beard was rough, and his clothes were in tatters, but when the morning sun shone upon him, there was a strange majesty about him, as if he had come to terms with the universe, as if he owned the world.

"Have you been waiting long?" I asked him, speaking from the door.



"Shall we go for the logs?"

He said looking at me directly, ignoring my question.

"Yes, but let's eat first."

I gave him a plate of rice with three curries. He ate the curries first, one after, and then ate the rice.

"Why don't you mix the curries with the rice and eat as we all do?"

"I don't know, this is how I have been eating from the beginning."

"People normally mix the curries with the rice before they eat." I observed.

"It will all get mixed up here," he said, tapping his stomach.

He carried heavy logs on his shoulders, coming over the plain at an even pace, taking short quick steps. He dropped them all in a heap, behind the house near the shed where they would be split up and stacked. The way to the plain from the house was intriguing to him, if left to himself, he would take the wrong turning and end up in the bazaar, and so I had to go with him each time he went for the logs.

On another day, there was a heap of coconuts which I had to count and store. He offered to help. I got the window of the store-room opened, and threw the nuts in through it, counting them. He did the same. After I had put in five hundred, I asked him how many he had put in.

"Five," he said.

"Five, hundred, fine. I' put in the same number," I said.

"Not five hundred," he said, "I counted only up to five."

"What do you mean? " I asked exasperated, "do you mean to tell me that you put in all the nuts counting only up to five?"

"But I went on counting all the time, over and over again.



I counted every nut I put in, just like I saw you do."

"You did? I said crushed. Irony meant nothing to him.

"Of course I did, and I put in two, each time you put in one."

"That's better, you must have put in, a thousand nuts then," I conjectured.

"Yes, a thousand nuts," he agreed, although it meant nothing to him. He had with him a small cloth pouch in which he kept his betel, his tobacco, cut arecanut pieces and lime, in a small box. After a meal, or after tea, or when he was free and felt like it, he would sit under a tree and unfold the cloth pouch. He would select a betel leaf, pinch off the vertical edges, and apply streaks of lime from the little box. He would then take two or three pieces of arecanut, and place them in the centre of the leaf, together with a small piece of tobacco. He would then fold the leaf over, and thrust it in to his mouth. He would keep on chewing it like a cow chewing its cud.

He had a weakness for faces when I passed him on the road. He could never recognize me, unless I spoke to him. One day Thema met him in the bazaar. He passed by without any form of recognition. Thema took offence. He went up to Piyadasa and said,

"Are you angry with me, why don't you speak to me?"

Piyadasa looked hard at him trying to place him.

"Why, don't you know me, you scoundrel?" Thema rebuked him.

"Of course I know you, I remember you now. You are my mother's lover, my father caught you sleeping in the house. He put red ants, under your sarong." The sundry in the bazaar laughed and jeered as Thema beat a hasty retreat.

He came with his hair cut differently, one day. I thought that somebody was trying to make fun of him. The crown was completely shaven off, so that it looked as if he was bald there. Around



this in a circle, was left a fringe of short hair. His beard had been shaven off too. His face looked small and pinched. For a short man with extra broad shoulders, he looked like an inverted triangle, balancing on its tip. He looked absurd and clownish.

"Who cut your hair?" I asked.

"The new sister?" He told me.

"The new sister?"

"Yes the new sister, the woman of my younger brother. He calls her Githa. I'm not to call her that. I am to call her sister."

"Who asked you to call her that?"

"Why she, herself, and my mother. The new sister is good, she does all the work in the house," he said.

It so happened that this Githa died, giving birth to her first child. Piyadasa did not seem to fully grasp the situation, or its meaning.

They kept her in a box, in the centre of the room. Lots of people came to see her. Each time new people came, my mother lamented and cried, what's going to happen to us now, who will look after us now? She cried out again and again, until I lost my patience and told her to shut up, and that I will look after her if nobody will. You are an epileptic and a fool, how can you look after me when you cannot even look after yourself, she cried. The people gave us money and brought us food. We did not want for anything, after three days, they took her away.

"Where did they take her?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said.

Six months after this he told me that the new sister had come back.

"What, the same one who was in the box?"

"Yes, the same one," he said.



"Githa?"

"They call her Sitha now," he said.

"Why, how is that?"

"I don't know, that is what they call her now."

"Who?"

"My brother calls her that, I still call her sister. When she came back, I asked her to cut my hair and shave me, later on, later on, she said, putting it off. I think for some reason or other, she is reluctant to cut my hair."

I was made aware that his brother had brought the dead girl's sister as his second wife, mostly to look after the baby and his mother. Piyadasa of course did not see of a difference because both girls looked alike.

"Can you sweep the compound?"

"Yes, but my mother told me not to because the tablets are over and we couldn't go to the clinic. She said that the dust might bring in the fits."

"Then it's best for you to rest today." I said.

"No," he said, going up to the shed and bringing out an axe, "I will split the logs and stack them."

Before I could protest, he had selected the biggest log, and went at it with such force that I thought the very earth shook. After this he did not turn up for three days.

"Why didn't you come, did your father put you back in chains?" I asked in jest when he turned up.

"I got the fits, my mother told me that they were something terrible and hellish, they benumbed and crippled my legs. I couldn't move them. My mother applied some herbal oil on them and fermented them with heated leaves until the blood flowed back in them and I could move them."



His head was close cropped, and his beard was shaven, he looked a little pale in the face.

Who cut your hair and shaved you?" I asked.

"The new sister, my mother pressed her to do it, she did it unwillingly, unlike in the earlier times. She had to do it, my mother is old and feeble, her sight is weak, and her hands shake," he said.

"How old is your mother now?"

"Nearly five," he said.



## SECRET LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

"Will you marry me?" he asked.

"I will have to ask my father first," she said.

"If he refuses, will you still come with me?"

She kept silent, looking down, her eyes resting on the ground and rubbing her big toe which wasn't big at all, but small, rosy and plump, into the ground, making a hole in the cow - dunged smooth floor. A faint colour was rapidly mounting into her face. She looked excited, embarrassed and shy.

"Does your silence mean that you will still come?" he asked her, gently lowering his voice to a whisper, but with a sense of urgent firmness.

"Yes," she said and ran into the house.

He was with a party of foresters working in the forests of Laggala. They were camping a few miles away from the plain near the main rough roadway, leading to Matale and Pallegama from Hasalaka. At Laggala he had heard of the little hamlet of Rambukoluwa and especially of the drink. They told him there, that if he took the jungle foot-path up, he would come there. The distance measured by sound, would be the distance covered by about four shouts they said. A shout would have to be carried a good kilometre he thought as he walked up. He had been walking for about an hour now. He must have covered at least four kilometres until he came to the frail old man with a flowering beard, after crossing the rough ford of a spanning tree trunk, balancing gingerly on bare feet, carrying his rubber shoes in his hands. The old man was seated on his haunches outside the elevated foundation ledge of his mud hut of wattle and daub. The roof was of brown decaying straw. The old man, Kiri Banda, didn't seem to notice him until he came right up to him. When Kiri Banda looked at him with questioning bead like eyes, they seemed to ask Epola directly,



"Who are you, and why have you come intruding here?"

So that he answered,

"I am from the forest camp. I have walked all the way. I have come to quench my thirst."

An understanding smile lit up his face, making his face roguish, conspiring and youthful.

He spang up, and tucked his sarong, folding it in a triangle in front and bringing it rolled up between his buttocks and tying it up behind.

"Sit," said Kiri Banda, pointing to the rough bench placed on the elevated foundation ledge. Epola sat tired out, leaning against the wall.

Kiri Banda went into the house and came out within a sharp shining knife, and a rough square container, made out of areca sheet.

Epola had noticed the yellow bamboo tied to the dark kitul plant, near the water ford when he had crossed it. Kiri Banda went up the bamboo, climbing up the protruding cut stem shoots, like climbing steps gingerly on his toes; the container dangled at his waist on the handle of his knife, stuck at the waist-band.

He saw Kiri Banda pour the frothing toddy into the container from a pot hanging below the tapped flower-stem. Thin bits of flower stem fell on the ground below as he sliced it, to make the juice flow and fall like rain drops into the pot, and ferment there.

Kiri Banda had put some Kenda bark to give it an extra kick. Epola did not look directly but covetously, because he knew that they believed that looks could dry up the juice in tapping flowers.

The container was full, it contained about four bottles. The toddy was fresh, clear and frothing, nectar he thought, fit to



quench the thirst of gods. Kiri Banda spooned out a few dead bees floating in the liquor with a leaf, and then using his moustache as a strainer, drank a coconut shell full of liquor in a steady breath. He then placed the shell on the ground and then poured the liquor for Epola into the shell, gently tilting the container so as not to disturb the sedimentary yeast at the bottom of it. The liquor in the coconut shell was bluish and crystal clear and had a faint pulpish taste, Epola took it in sips and when Kiri Banda saw Epola sipping, he laughed outright merrily, the sound was carried over the mountain, merging within the bird song, the constant cricket cheep and the strange intimate sounds of the forest.

"That is no way to take it," he said. "Take it in one draught holding the breath. Flow it into you, the whole thing." He drank as instructed, he began to feel tipsy, the stuff was good. He lit a cigarette and handed one to Kiri Banda who took it in both hands. The old man poured out another shell.

"You take it, I have had enough," said Epola.

"I don't drink at this time of the day," said Kiri Banda.

"But you did drink."

"That was just to show you that the stuff was good."

"Oh!" exclaimed Epola, realising for the first time the implication. It was customary for the brewer to drink first to ensure that the stuff was not poisoned. He had heard of ancient secret poisons administered through drink to enemies and offenders. The oil of the python would knit the bowels together and block the passage to kill a man surely but slowly, and then there was the fish powder, which would be dormant until the victim had a fish meal, activating the poison, and rotting guts within him, and bringing out a dead corpse stench.

"Does the village extend up the hill?" asked Epola, stretching out his arm and pointing outwards.



"No it does not," he replied emphatically.

"But the pathway, where does it lead to?"

To the jungle, it's a cattle track, sometimes women use it, going for firewood."

"I should like to go along it, will you come with me to show me the way?"

"No, go back the way you have come, " said Kiri Banda shortly. He thought that Kiri Banda for some reason or other did not like him to go up the pathway.

Epola was curious. He thought that he should go up the jungle track.

" Father," he said, addressing him familiarly, intimately, " I must get back now." He pulled out his purse, a new one, it was padded with new bank notes from the payroll he had drawn yesterday. The old man was impressed. He pulled out a new ten rupee note,

"Here," he said, "You may keep the change."

"May the gods bless you," said Kiri Banda, taking hold of the note with both hands," and give you plenty more."

"I will come again," he said. " But where are the people of the village?"

" They have all gone clearing new lands for highland cultivation, they will come back in the evening."

He made a detour and went back along the forbidden path through mere curiosity. The drink made him adventurous. He came upon a little cottage in a creek, and as he approached it, he saw a young woman outside seated on a low foot-stool, washing dark clay cooking pots.

The moment she saw him, she darted in and banged the door shut. And when he came up to the compound he could hear her chanting a prayer in fear or panic, " Itipiso Bagava Arahan



Samma Sambuddho....."

"Don't be afraid," he called out, " I am a stranger to your village. I am from the forest party camping at Pallegama. I came to your village to drink."

" There is no drink here," she said. " Go away, I am alone here."

" I want a glass of water then," he said.

There was silence, and then in a small voice she said, "Come the back way to the window." Her voice was like the peal of bells, pure clear and carrying although she spoke haltingly in panic or fear.

A well rounded arm, the colour of pure ivory, stretched out of the window and held out the water in a glass, and as he took the glass he deliberately touched her fingers, it was the drink making him bold. Some of the water spilled by the contact. When he wanted to return the glass she said,

"Please leave it on the ledge and go away soon. My father and mother will be coming back any moment now, and they will kill me if they find out that I have been talking to a stranger."

"I will wait for them then," he said, becoming bolder with the drink taking a stronger hold of him.

She peeped through the window, a perfect oval face, with the first flush of youth, and the child like innocence of her face hit him like a rock, stunning him.

"Please go away," she pleaded, " and don't tell anyone that I gave you water to drink.

"I will do as you say, whatever you say," he said, a strong disturbing tenderness for her taking hold of him. "But I will come back tomorrow," he said and left her.

When he suddenly turned back at the creek corner, he saw her face framed in the little casement. He raised his hand in



fond farewell. She drew back her face suddenly, and her little arm shot out of the window and waved back frantically.

He felt a surge of happiness.

The next day he came earlier, directly to her cottage, evading deliberately the house of the old man. It was on this day that he proposed marriage and she consented.

"I will have to go away for a while," he said and make the necessary arrangements,"

"What arrangements?" she asked.

"We will have to do it secretly. I will get the registrar to come over to my camp and marry us, after that nobody can do anything. You must be over eighteen?" he asked.

"Yes", she said and smiled, a dimple appeared on her cheek.

"You are the most beautiful woman I have seen," he said earnestly, truthfully.

She looked away and hid her face in her hands, embarrassed and shy. When he went there the next time he heard voices and he knew that she wasn't alone. They had left Herat, a little spy, after she had told her mother about him; but Herat had been won over and had promised her not to divulge anything, and thus, they were as free as ever.

"My father wouldn't hear of it," she said.

"Why?"

"Well, our people have never married outsiders, and he is suspicious of outsiders."

"Did you tell him about my .....

"He wouldn't listen to anything at all, and told me not to talk to you or have anything to do with you."

"I have arranged everything, you must meet me at the water-fall tonight, at what time do you all go to sleep?"



"An hour or so after the sun goes down," she said.

"I will wait for you at the waterfall tonight at nine o'clock" he said.

"Don't fail me."

"I will not," she said.

"And don't bring anything, come just as you are."

"Yes," she said.

He came with two men from the camp and reached the waterfall at eight thirty and waited, chain-smoking impatiently till nine o'clock. She did not come. At nine thirty he became restless and began to have doubts. He resolved to jump over the cliff-face and end everything if she did not come. At five minutes past ten she came stealthily, and closed his eyes with her hands, and said playfully,

"Guess who."

"You have come after all," he said.

"Why, did you doubt me?"

"You said you will come at nine."

"I thought it would be about nine."

"Don't you have a clock?"

"We never had one," she said, "we had no use for a clock."

And then she saw the other two seated quietly a little away, and suddenly became modest and shy.

"It's all right, they are two labourers from the camp. They have come to assist us. "Here," he continued, "are clothes for you to wear, there is a jacket, an under-skirt, a saree, bangles and a chain for you, wear them quickly, leave the clothes you are wearing on the rock."

She disappeared behind the rock with the parcel, when she



had been behind the rock for about ten minutes, he became impatient.

"Hurry up," he said.

"It's the saree," she said "I can't manage it. I am not quite used to wearing it with the frills and the sash. Shall I fold it in two and just wear it like a cloth?"

"Yes," he said, "that would be better."

They reached the camp during the early hours of the morning. A small and separate tent had been put up for them with two beds and a screen in between, for tomorrow they would marry and until then they must sleep separately, he said. She fell out of the bed twice, and after that she slept on the floor, spreading the sheet on the floor for she had always slept on a mat.

On the next day they sent the jeep for the marriage registrar, for extra provisions, for groceries, for six bottles of arrack and beef and a fancy cake.

They were married quietly at an auspicious hour.

And afterwards when the celebrations were on and when the men in the camp were jolly and enjoying themselves, singing and dancing outside the camp; the anguished parents of the bride came searching for her. They had enlisted a little troop of relations comprising of the bride's father, three uncles, a sister of her mother and a young man, a cousin, of the bride who had a right to the hand of the bride by tradition, but who it appeared was not prepared to fight for the right, being somewhat dull in the head and evasive. They were greeted at the door by the bridegroom who was bold and somewhat tipsy with the drink.

"What have you done to my daughter?" asked the mother.

"Why nothing at all."

"Where is she?"

"She is safe," he said.

"I will inform the police, you have abducted her," she



accused him.

"We have already done that," he lied, " against you for keeping her as a prisoner."

"My own daughter a prisoner?" she queried.

"She is over eighteen years and she is free to do what she likes," he said, rubbing in his smattering of law, alarming them.

"The police can take you into custody."

This statement created a stir among them for they were innocent folk leading a sheltered life and they feared the police. They feared even postmen wearing dark uniforms, not knowing the difference, and after some little time he said,

"I have married your daughter, mother. I am of the highest caste, a Kandyan aristocrat," and when he disclosed his name, they were impressed, for indeed it was a prestigious aristocratic clan name, and they after all were Kandyans of good order but below the rank of aristocracy.

"How will your parents take it?" they asked.

"They love me, they will forgive."

And then went into the tent and brought her out holding her by the hand, wearing the new clothes and things the mother started to weep.

He is a good man after all they all agreed, and then they joined in the wedding feast. The men not quite used to the fiery liquor, took large quantities of it and were much the worse for it. They left late in the evening when it was growing dark, after the moon nearing the full phase rose early to light their way to the little hamlet having taken leave of the bride and the bride-groom who had knelt at their feet and had been blessed by them. Kiri Banda followed behind flicking a firebrand to and fro to light his way as his sight was poor.

*This story was told by a forester and I am sure it is true. Epola is a fictitious name I have used to avoid embarrassment.*



## RAMBARANA AND AFTERWARDS

In their compound, the mist lay thick and compressed. It was cold there like the inside of a refrigerator. The kerosene lantern, standing on the foundation ledge, of the mud-walled, straw-roofed, peasant shack threw a feeble light; like the suppressed smile of a shy child. A wooden push cart stood in front of the door, in the centre of the compound. Rambarana was busy loading it with bunches of young coconut. His wife was helping him. He drove strong staves into the sides of the cart, as the pile of young coconuts grew to a mountain. They made the load firm by strapping it to the sides of the cart, with strong rope, criss-crossing over the top. On top of all this, they packed a sack of boiled sun-dried paddy, to be milled, and brought back from the city.

“Etene, go wake up the children, we will need their help today to push the cart up to the main road. The load is full and so heavy.” said Rambarana to his wife in a whisper. She nodded and went inside the shack.

The children came out after a while propelled by Etene, they were strong healthy boys, aged eight, seven and five. The youngest was naked, because he slept naked, and did not wear clothes, most of the time. He was the baby of the household, at least Etene thought so, and still breast fed him, although he had strong teeth, and viciously bit her nipple, when the milk did not flow evenly, making her yelp. The children were sleepy eyed, the youngest was squeezing his eyes in podgy fists. They acted as if in pantomime, they had been tutored to do so, so as not to awaken their neighbours, and catch their evil eye. Their neighbours, Rambarana’s sister Rankiri and her husband Siriya, were intensely jealous of them. They were a childless couple with nothing much to do. Their jealousy erupted in scenes of bitter hatred, especially after Rambarana had bought the push cart to trade in young coconuts.

Rambarana had instructed his wife and sons to completely ignore them and to have absolutely nothing to do with them, but



Siriya and his wife would not leave them alone. They created certain situations to bring about stress and ill will. They moved their boundary fence, narrowing the cart track, making it difficult for Rambarana to take the cart through. They made oblique and insidious remarks such as,

“Did you see the bitch, with the three pups?”

Etene, and her three sons stood at the back of the cart, and pushed, and Rambarana having tied a rope to the front axle, gently hauled the cart walking backwards, digging his bare heels, into the ground carefully guiding it, avoiding the ruts and the potholes, on the cart track. It would take them a good half hour to get to the main road, and from there Rambarana would manage alone, because the main road was tarred, macadamized and smooth surfaced.

When they came to the main road, it was still dark and still grey. The street lamp at the bend, was burning in an orange glow. There was a faint iridescent halo around it, with a cloud of flies engaged, in a hapless assault trying to get at the burning core of the bulb. They stopped underneath this lamp.

“Don’t forget to bring the shoes.” She said.

“If I make enough today, with the grace of God, I shall. If not you will have to hold on for a few more days.” Rambarana said, in a flat, matter of fact voice, addressing his eldest son Upasena.

“I am the only boy who drills without shoes, they might drop me from the squad if I don’t get the shoes in time.” Upasena said.

Etene untied a knot in the fold of her sari, and took out a crumpled currency note, and holding it out to Rambarana said.

“Here, take this and use it to get the shoes.” Rambarana was amazed at its high denomination.

“From where did you get so much money?”

“Is it a lot?” She asked “It’s what they gave me in exchange



for the coins in the till..”She was not numerate.

“It’s a five hundred rupee note, I will get you the shoes my boy.” He said messing up the boy’s hair in affection.

“And a pair of white socks.” added Upasena.

“And a pair of white socks.” Intoned Rambarana.

Rambarana started pushing the cart, smoothly at a walking pace. Etene and the kids stood underneath the street lamp watching.

At the bend he looked back as he always did. They waved and went silently homewards.

When they came to their neighbours fence, Siriya came rushing out, and raising his sarong high above his bare torso, began to urinate in full view of them.

The children began to twitter, she silenced them and spat out, looking the other way. Containing her anger with utmost difficulty, she said under her breath,

“Only dogs do such things.”

As usual Rambarana rode the cart, from the top of the little hill, down the incline up to the city park. The road was gentle and rubberised. He sat in front steering the cart with his feet on the axle. On this day, when he went down the incline, with the wind blowing gently in his hair, and the crystal rays of the sun, dazzling his eyes, he felt like a bird on the wing.

The day showed promise, it would be a warm day, a day good for trade. On warm days the people become thirsty, he knew that they would drink up his mountain of young coconuts in no time.

He would be able to go home early. His hopes rose steadily, as he went down the hill gathering speed. When he was half way through, he felt a subtle vibration in the front axle, the wheels began to wobble, he felt disconcerted. He leaned back



drawing on the brake, checking the speed and brought the cart almost to a stop, when both wheels flapped out jarring the axle and the axle making a grove on the road. The cart came to an abrupt halt, with a thud. The sack of paddy propped on top slid off and hit Rambarana somersaulting him on to the road. The mountain of coconuts held.

Rambarana picked himself up unhurt. It did not take him long to jack up the axle, on a large stone, retrieve the wheels and put them back.

Of one fact he was made aware somebody had loosened the wooden shafts that held the racers in the wheels. It must have been done by Siriya. Last night he had heard the dog bark, but had been too lazy to check.

The delay did not matter in the least, for he was able to take the cart right up to the clock tower, in the heart of the city, and from there, as it was a central spot, his sales were brisk.

From time to time, he cut up a few nuts and handed them over with a great show of reverence to the constabulary on the beat, to appease them, to make sure that he would not be impounded or chased away, for trading in such a place.

Before noon he had finished his sales. His profits were good. He had sold the nuts at a high price, because as he had hoped. the day had been unusually warm, bringing the people clamouring to him, to quench their thirst. He always capitalized on such days, fixing arbitrary prices, furthermore, he had been the only vendor of coconuts there, an absolute monopolist without any sort of competition.

He bought the shoes, and a pair of socks for his son. He remembered that his wife's jacket was torn at the seams and threadbare. He bought a red T-shirt for her from a pavement hawker at a bargain price. He bought a loaf of bread, some sugar, red chillie, and salt. On the way back home he got the rice milled and while it was being milled he drank two shots of pot arrack from a filthy bootlegger.



When he went home they were overjoyed, when they saw what he had bought.

His wife was jubilant with the red T-shirt. Many women in the village wore T-shirts now, instead of the jacket, some even wore frocks. The T-shirt made her look young.

“Almost like a girl,” he commented

“You are flattering me, I am an old woman, the mother of three children.”

She said modestly. Upasena was walking up and down all the time wearing the new shoes and socks.

“To get used to them.” He said.

In the night, when the children were asleep, and when they were stretched out on the mat, she told him as to how Siriya had urinated at the fence and he told her of the mishap, how the wheels had come off.

“They are evil people, vicious and dangerous.” She said

“Yes, we must be on our guard, as things are, they will stop at nothing.”

“Yes,” she said, “but sooner or later, the gods will punish them because we are innocent people who would not even harm a fly.”

On the next day Rambarana’s cloth ring which he used as a foot hold, for climbing coconut trees snapped in two when he was on a high tree and losing his balance, fell off, breaking his neck. Death was instantaneous, somebody had tampered with the ring.

After the burial, she lived in a twilight zone, and grew to a shadow moving her lips soundlessly and flapping her hands as she moved about. The children trailed behind her wailing. After the burial the dead man’s mother, a weathered tough woman with guts, stayed back until Etene regained her footing.



The push cart lay in the shed. The neighbours fence moved outwards making a footpath of the cart track and other boundaries alarmingly encroached into their land.

A week after the three months religious rites had been performed to bestow merit on the dead, a Malayali gypsy soothsayer woman came to the house of the dead man.

She wore flowers in her jet black copious hair tied up in a bun, high on her head. Her lips were a burnt red, with the stain of chewing pun. She wore coloured glass bangles on her rounded arms right up to her elbows. They made a merry tinkle when she blessed them with the sheaf of peacock feathers she carried in her hands.

The peacock is a symbol of the god at the holy shrine of Kataragama, to whom they paid homage annually at a festival. Her jacket was a dark green with a sheen and her sari a blood red. She wore brass rings on her ears, and cheap white rings on her toes and fingers. She was dark robust and bursting with health.

“Come great lady,” she said. They always addressed the inmates of a house as great lady of great lord.

“There is much evil in your house, let me tell you all about it.”

“I have no money to pay you with.” Said Etene truthfully

“It does not matter, give me a little rice, or a red cloth to dance the kavadi at the festival at Kataragama.”

“I can give you a little rice, but I have no cloth for you.”

“Let me look at your palm.” She said.

Etene held out her palm. The soothsayer woman grasped her finger tips, and blessed her in the name of the god at Kataragama, touching Etene’s head with the sheaf of peacock feathers a number of times, making the glass bangles to chime gently.



Her eyes shone brightly, as if they had caught the glint edge gleam of the glass bangles.

“Let us sit,” said the woman, throwing the cloth bundle she carried slung over shoulder roughly on the foundation ledge. She squatted on her haunches beside the bundle near the doorway. Etene sat on the door step stretching her hand out to the woman, with the palm turned upwards. Gazing into Etene’s palm she said,

“You are surrounded by enemies, they are your own people.”

How true thought Etene. Etene recalled how two young lovers had committed suicide last year after a soothsayer woman had foretold that the bride would die if they were ever to marry.

“Yes” said Etene bending forward and listening intensely, convinced beyond a shadow of doubt of what the woman said. The woman thus encouraged gave vent to a long mumbled tirade ending abruptly saying,

“There is much evil in your house, there has been great misery.”

“My man died,” said Etene sobbing.

“I know, but he is concerned about you.” She said folding Etene’s hand into a fist.

“What?”

“He is looking after your welfare, the only thing is I feel that there is a counter force working against you all here. There is an evil spirit lodged in the house.”

“How can you tell?” Asked Etene, and without waiting for an answer, said,

“What can we do about it?”

“We must get rid of it, you must do as I say.”

“But of course.” Said Etene.



From her bundle she took out a small match box with a bright red and yellow label and from inside the box she took out a tiny pin like horn, with a little fur around it at the pin head.

“This is the horn of a monkey, it’s very rare, monkeys here do not grow horns but in our home land, sometimes a monkey grows a horn, and with it one can do wonders. One can take revenge, one can destroy one’s enemies, one can drive away evil spirits. This is more precious than pearls and gems. I got this as dowry on my wedding day. Now clasp this in your right hand, while I bless you.” the woman said.

Etene held the horn tight in her fist, closing her eyes automatically.

“No evil will befall you, your enemies will be vanquished,” she said in a solemn sonorous voice. Then she made Etene to bring a small bottle into which she put a tiny piece of cloth soaked in a dark oil.

“Now,” she said, “get me a thread of your wearing apparel.”

Etene got a thread out of the red T-shirt and gave it to her. The woman put the thread too into the bottle, corked it and gave it back to Etene . Then bending forward arching her body and speaking in a whisper she said,

“When you go to sleep, keep the bottle under your pillow, on the ninth day you will dream of a dark man. He is the evil spirit who is tormenting you. He will tell you that he will go away. Do not be afraid. He cannot harm you, for the talisman in the bottle is full of power. In the morning, take a good quantity of live coal into an old pot, take an egg, three red chillies, a few grains of salt, and the stuff in the bottle and roast all over the burning coal inside the pot. This is an offering to the evil spirits. After this is done everyone of you must jump over the pot three times up and over and then bury the pot in a desolate spot. Your troubles will be over and perhaps you will think of me kindly.”

Another woman came there then. She was a fair woman. She



had a child of about three astraddle her hips. She was also carrying a bundle of cloth slung over her shoulder. She was pale and pregnant, with a stomach jutting out like a bullet head, and the thin foot of the child she was carrying pressing and folding over it. She did not carry peacock feathers. She flung her bundle on the foundation ledge, made the child sit on it, and then she sat beside the dark woman stretching out her legs.

“This is my sister’s child.” Said the dark woman.

The fair woman smiled, and then started eating the raw uncooked rice, that Etene had brought out to give the dark woman.

“It is a pregnancy longing with her, you cannot stop her, she eats as much as two measures of raw rice a day,” the dark woman explained. The fair woman smiled and said nothing.

“I had a sister,” continued the dark woman, “she ate earthen tiles and bits of pots, she used to keep them near the hearth, bake them to a crust and then eat them.”

The fair woman finished up all the rice. She took out a safety pin from the front of her jacket, exposing her pale full breasts, and started pricking her teeth, making loud sucking noises.”

“Give me some water to drink.” she said, speaking for the first time in a small musical child voice. When Etene brought the water the dark woman said,

“Now bring a large firebrand and keep it between her fat buttocks to cook the raw rice.” They laughed at the coarse joke. Etene and the children laughed for the first time after the death of Rambarana. Etene gave them a little more rice which they took away and left, promising to come again.

Etene did dream the predicted dream at least she dreamt a good part of it. She saw a dark man in her dream. The dark man did not speak to her or opt to go away. However she followed the instructions of the soothsayer woman with great faith and zest. After the things had been burnt on live coal in a pot, and



they had all jumped over it they buried it near the tomb of Rambarana.

Soon after this, on a hot Sunday morning, a white snake came in to their house. The children saw it first. They wanted to splash it with kerosene, as they did to rat snakes to make it go in a flash and shed its skin afterwards, but Etene would allow no such thing.

“Oh king of snakes, please go away, and do not harm us.” Etene told the snake. It seemed to understand, it glided away at a quiet unruffled pace.

The next day when Etene went out to get some clay to the ant hill to repair the hearth, she saw the snake standing sentinel behind her, like a stick .

“Please go away, oh king of the snakes,” pleaded Etene. The snake glided away to the edge of the fence.

On the next day when Etene came into the kitchen, at mid-day, she saw the snake coiled around the slim neck of the cool water pot. Vague doubts and strange forebodings assailed her.

“It’s him, I am sure, he is concerned about us,” she conjectured.

“If you are Rambarana, please go out through the window, she said in a shaking voice. The snake went out through the window, but she realized later that the door, had been closed.

Etene obsessed with the idea that the albino snake was indeed Rambarana reincarnated, thought of going to the temple with the children in the evening. She went with a sense of deep resignation and piety, but when they passed their neighbour’s house, her equanimity was disturbed because Siriya came rushing up to the fence, raising his sarong. She knew what he had in mind, she hurried the children and they walked fast before he could come up to the fence. They heard Siriya laugh jeeringly.

In the temple they offered prayers and flowers, and burnt

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incense and lit the little clay oil lamps in front of the ancient monolith Buddha statue and finishing up with a deep sense of commitment, she said.

“May all beings be freed of sickness and sorrow, may all beings become well and wholesome.” In her troubles, turmoils and disaster the teachings of the one of infinite kindness had sustained her and given her a new breadth of vision.

When they were returning home, they saw a large gathering of people outside their neighbour’s house. It appeared that Siriya had been stung by a white snake and had fallen senseless. All attempts to revive him had been futile, as the snake had stung him again and again several times before disappearing into a fissure in the ant hill. He died a short while afterwards.

A week later his wife died, clutching at her heart with a sudden pain. They say she died of grief.

As the days went by, Upasena grew up to be a sturdy lad. He took out the push cart from the shed, looking it over, he gave it a fresh paint and one day early in the morning took his first load of young coconuts to the city. And as for their neighbour’s land, they come to inherit it as they were the nearest kith and kin.



## THE POSSESSED

The tiny hamlet of Inniebendiruppa (the waterway of bound-ed posts), is like a superstitious dark thought. The mud-walled square huts, with sodden unkempt drooping hay-head roofs, huddle evenly around a common courtyard; as if they are afraid of a sudden onslaught from the intruding forest. Heavy hard-wooded knotted logs press down the hay-heads, to prevent them from being blown off by the fast May winds, cutting through a wind gap, in the rock cliff. Soon afterwards, when the July monsoons come, making a rainy season of it, raining in a steady monotone, the hay-heads drip, and drip and drip, they cannot quite hold out the flow. The rain comes in seeping insidiously, coloured a clotting red blood, through the blotting hay-heads, and fall on the dung floors, making little holes, and making the floors smell of mud and festering wounds.

A large out-spreading flamboyant tree stands in the centre of the courtyard and burns like a flaming torch, in its covering profusion of scarlet flowers. On its gnarled peeling trunk is struck the white skull of an elephant. A part of its jaw bones has been taken out, from time to time, to be grit into a paste, and rubbed into the jaws of those afflicted with mumps and measles, god's diseases, and whenever the gods are angry they bring in an epidemic to punish them.

At the foot of the tree is a little plank bench, little naked children sit in a line on it they fold their arms around each other's shoulders, in a lock, and sing quaint ancient ditties, bending up and down, drawing in the rhythm, coming up and ozing it out bending down.

During the wet season, when the green grass suddenly springs to life, the hamlet's small head of cattle wanders into the forest hinterland, to graze, and comes back in the evening to rest under the flamboyant tree, in the dry season they stay back, eating the flesh pods of the flamboyant and nibble the grass, turning brown at the tank bund.



The tank is elevated, its bund is straight and broad enough to allow two stout oxen to pass abreast. The mud huts are at the bottom. After the rains, when the tank is full, it sparkles, clear, like a sheet of pale blue glass, when the sun shines on it. When the water is taken through the ancient stone sluice to the rice puddies, and used up in cultivation, and done away with in domestic uses, and evaporated, when the water level drops, small herds of tame buffalo wallow at the shallow edge of the tank. When the drought sets in, and the bottom of the tank is cracked up like bits of a giant jigsaw, and when only little pot holes of water remain, the forest animals come in stealthily to drink there, in the night.

They are then trapped and killed, and their flesh stripped and dried on rocks, that heat like furnaces, and preserved in pots of bee honey for food.

At a season, in the early dawn, they walk in single file, carrying ancient implements, along the tank bund, facing the sun, to tame the jungle, and grow highland cereal, vegetable and the watermelon with its sweet blood red pulp, and black hard pips. In the evening they come back along the same bund again in single file, and dip in the tank water, scaring the water birds that rise and fly away in a cloud.

Once in the December floods of 1957 the bund burst open in the dark night and took away half of them, dissolving the mud huts in the flood, and floating the wood and the rafters, the straw, and drowning most of them.

Today the flamboyant tree has spread a carpet of red flowers beneath it. At the foot of the tree, where the little children sit and sing quaint ditties, is erected a little niche of tender coconut palm leaves, on four poles. Inside the niche are idols of black clay with beady eyes, and bronze figures with elephant trunk noses and protruding bellies. There are statues with multiple heads, and the clear beautiful faces of gods. There are statues of the Buddha in simple symmetry in ivory, silver and gold, all



symbolising their cultural heritage, cutting through primordial, tribal-aboriginal-Veddha, Hindu and Buddhistic traditions and beliefs. There are offerings, in tiny trays, trays woven of dry palm leaves. They are symbolic offerings of multi-coloured flowers, of oil cake and fruit. The statues are garlanded, in garlands of the sweet scented Jasmin. There is here an aura of piety, purity, innocence, depth, power, strange forces, and the scent of passionate burning incense.

There is a chorus of men sitting, in a line, in front of the niche, in front of the wooden plank bench; the bench is under the niche today.

They are naked to the waist. They are in sarong or span cloth, they chant a hymn to the gods, and praise the Buddhas who were, and the one who is to come. The one of infinite kindness and love, 'Maitri Buddha'. The rhythm is mesmeric, therapeutic and harmonious. The knife edge voice of the exorcist, cuts into the chorus rhythm. He is pleading for the power of the gods, to drive away the devil. A drum keeps time to the rhythm of the chanting voices.

The drummer is seated cross-legged, the drum is balanced on his lap, he is bearded, a red kerchief is tied around his head, and is wearing a red sarong.

The onlookers are seated, or standing around in casual bunches, the infants, the little children, and one big child are naked. The young women are in cloth, in two pieces, one worn at the waist, and the other thrown over their shoulders to cover their breasts. The old women wear a cloth at the waist, like the men. Some old women display firm young breasts.

The pleading voice of the exorcist, is gathering momentum. He is in a trance, the chorus is catching up to keep pace, the beat of the drum intensifies maintaining a running even crescendo. An old man with a sheaf of ivory white coconut flowers swaying to the beat of the drum, comes up to the exorcist, and hands the sheaf with unsteady hands, like those of a nervous chronic



alcoholic. The hands of the exorcist, are not much steadier, as he takes it. There is a strong mystic force prevailing here, gathering all in a mesmeric clutch.

And then, from the inside of a mud hut, Bundimenika is brought out, she is half carried, half pushed and pulled. She is all straining limbs, with her hair wild falling over, as she spins her head, round and round, making weird noises. The men hold on to her. Her breasts are bare with the devil surfacing in them.

They say, that she had taken a meal, by the running waters of a stream, which she should not have done, and tempted the devil. Furthermore, she had eaten fried venison, fried things tempts the devil so, and most of all, she had gone and done it, at midday. This is the worst time to eat out in the open, and the best time for the devil to enter into one. Bandimenike had been possessed by the devil the day before.

They bring her up to face the exorcist, to confront him. The exorcist, it now appears, is the goddess Kali. His eyes have turned red, his mouth has extended and his tongue is hanging out elongated.

"What devil are you?" He calls out loudly, addressing Bandimenike.

He is trying to identify the particular devil in her. Bandimenike gives garbled, unintelligible answers. The exorcist suddenly strikes her a lightning blow, across her breasts, with the sheaf of coconut flowers. She bends double, he repeats another blow on her bent back, the small white coconut flowers cascade and fall like confetti among the red carpet of flowers.

"Will you leave? Will you leave?" He questions her again, and again, beating her. She is bruised all over and the sheaf without the flowers is as much a cat of nine tails now.

At last she answers, or was it the devil in her?

"I will leave, if you give me blood."



They give her a white fowl. She bites off its neck and sucks its blood. The head of the white fowl splutters, for a while, as it falls among the red flowers and stops dead. She then throws the fowl away having sucked its blood. The fowl looks deflated, like an empty paper bag.

"Now will you leave, you greedy devil of the graveyard?" Says the exorcist, identifying and naming the devil.

"I will leave."

"Show us a sign at your departure." Says the exorcist.

Suddenly from somewhere inside Bandimenike, comes an eerie carrying hoot, the sound is impersonal, like the sound of a ventriloquist's puppet. It travels, like a sharp wind over us, ripping a sturdy branch of the flamboyant tree, and flies into the dark forest.

Bandimenike drops on the ground, like a rock. Everything ends in a crescendo, the end is rapid, like the crack of a shot. She is carried back to the mud hut.

The exorcist, takes away the effigies of gods and the buddha statues, but the niche remains. They put the offerings, the next day, at a centre where three roads cross. Bandimenike is herself again, and there would be another perhaps, sooner or later, whom the devil will possess. It happens that way in the hamlet of Inniebendiruppa.

SAGA.C.C



## THE STRANGER

Haramanis had made a hot pumpkin curry, with lots of chilli, and gravy, for the men to eat their breakfast bread with. He had cut large square pieces of pumpkin, so that they did not dissolve, to make a sodden broth when cooked. He used coconut milk sparingly, in the gravy, because coconuts were up in price, instead he used, much water, and tempered it in oil, adding garlic and spices for flavour, to cover up the difference.

Haramanis though frugal, was a good cook. The men relished the curry, and called for more. They were eating out of tin plates, seated in a ring, on mats in the shed. He went round the men, with the curry in a small bucket, consisting now mostly of gravy, serving it out with a wooden, coconut shell spoon giving them extra helpings. They ate up and wiped their plates clean, with bread crumbs, and licked their fingers. They made sucking noises, drawing the air in, to cool their smarting tongues, for the chilli in the curry was still hot in them. The warm sugared tea, which they drank soon afterwards, satiated and soothed them.

They then rolled up the mats, and put them away, in a corner of the planked cubicle, at the end of the shed; where they kept the tools and things. They chewed betel, exchanging betel leaves, areca, bits of tobacco and lime amongst themselves, chewing all to a cud. They spat out the blood red juice. They smoked "beedi", biting off the tips, of these short smokes, before lighting them up. They drew the smoke into their lungs in five or six quick deep breaths, and spat out the stubs.

They left in clusters, talking and jesting, making fun of the idiot, who was of their crew. They went to clear the hinterland jungle, to expand the estate called Nona Watha.

After they had left, Haramanis who preferred soaked rice to bread for breakfast, because he believed that it gave him strength and also cooled his system, scraped the left over rice, from the pot. He had added water and soaked the rice overnight.



The rice was soft and white, and came out easily. He squeezed out the water in fist fulls of rice balls and put them into his tin plate. He added lime, and was eating it, with a piece of dried salted fish roasted over the fire, when the stranger came upon him like an apparition and stood before him.

There was something unnerving and strongly forbidding, in the manner of the stranger. He looked at Haramanis and the plate of rice, like a dog about to fight for a bone, with a tense beastiality, so that the food stuck in his throat. He drank a little water to force it down, and left off eating, leaving the plate on the floor.

“Is this place Nona Watha?” the stranger asked in a cold flat steel like voice, hardly moving his lips, the sound coming out, like from a metal speaker.

“Yes”

“I have been asked to inquire for work.”

“Who sent you here?” Haramanis brought out with difficulty.

“The owner.” he said vaguely

“Which one?”

“The elder one.”

Haramanis was afraid to question him further. He could not meet the eyes of the stranger.

They looked like the eyes of a beast, and there was a deep gray emptiness, making them impersonal and distant, the eyes of a killer, thought Haramanis.

“You will have to ask the supervisor, he has just left with the men.”

“When will he be back?”

“At noon for lunch.”

“I will wait for him then.” He said, keeping his eyes on the



plate of rice.

“There is yesterday’s water soaked rice, if you like.”

“Yes.”

Haramanis gave him a plate full with dried fish, chilli and sliced onion. He ate silently, masticating the food, like a man biting his teeth in anger. After he had finished eating every grain, he poured water into the plate, from the water pot. and drank deeply out of the hollow of the plate.

He then pulled out his shirt, rolled it up and using it as a pillow, slept on the heap of planks, stacked at the edge of the shed. In a little while Haramanis heard him snore, making a sound, like men sawing hard wood secretly in the deep forest, with long saws. Haramanis crept up to him, and looked at him cautiously and was shocked to see the scars covered by the copious tangle of hair on his chest. He slept till the men came back for lunch.

“What’s your name?” asked the supervisor

“They call me Big Brother.”

“Where do you come from?”

“From the south.”

“Ah.”

The stranger gave vague answers nothing concrete or definite, however the supervisor continued,

“What kind of work can you do?”

“Any kind.”

“And your wages?”

“Whatever you pay the others.”

“Good, can you work from tomorrow?”

“From any moment.”

After the men had gone Haramanis gave him lunch. The



stranger ate two plate-fulls, hardly speaking a word, and when Haramanis was eating the stranger asked him, where he could bathe and clean himself. Haramanis directed him to go along the footpath to the stream, and gave him his cake of toilet soap cut in two, with a tin foil stuck at the bottom, to save it for long use.

The stranger was gone a long while, and when he did come back Haramanis noticed that the stranger had washed his clothes as well. His shirt was wet at the cuffs and the collar. He must have used the toilet soap to wash his clothes thought Haramanis regretfully.

“Give me a cup of tea.” said the stranger coldly.

Haramanis already had a pot of boiling water on the fire, to make tea for the men, who would be returning at any moment now, perhaps the stranger had noticed it and called for the tea. Haramanis made him the tea. The stranger drank the hot tea tilting the mug and sucking in the tea, making a hosepipe noise, he hardly used the rim of the mug. He left the mug on the floor, and walked casually up to the gun leaning on the wall.

“It’s a fine gun you have got here, the bead is perfect.” He observed looking over the barrel, and after a while handling it, he asked.

“Have you got cartridges for it?”

“Yes,” said Haramanis, faultingly, afraid to lie, “in the box, under the bench.”

“S.Gs,” said the stranger, looking over them quickly, “good for big game.”

He left the gun leaning against the wall, and went back to the planks. This time he hung his shirt, on a nail, in the wall, and went to sleep, with his head resting on his folded arms, looking at the thatched roof. When the men came back he was fast asleep.



Haramanis told the supervisor that the stranger seems to be a good for nothing rotter, bent on eating and sleeping.

“We shall see tomorrow, perhaps he is tired today” said the supervisor.

The night meal was the best meal, rice with roasted wild boar, and two vegetables. The stranger was given a handsome helping.

In the morning, they found the stranger gone, with the gun and cartridges. There was no trace of him.

Dharmadasa came unannounced through the back door, into kitchen, with the gun. Hema was cooking the noon meal then. It was hot in the kitchen, with the twig fire hearth, and with the new zinc sheets, on the roof warming up; it was like the inside of a furnace. Hema was wearing a bit of chintz cloth at the waist, coming up short above her knees, a towel was thrown around her shoulders. She was trying to beat the unbearable heat.

Dharmadasa crept up to Hema, as she was minding the hearth.

“Is this the house of Appu Henedige Ariyatillake, the man they call little brother?” He asked in his flat steel voice.

Hema spun round, and found him standing, holding the gun, like a man on parade with the butt on the floor, and clutching the barrel with one hand, standing at ease.

“Yes,” she said mechanically, a sense of overpowering hypnotic fear coming over her. She felt his eyes ‘X-Ray’ her right down to the bone.

“You must be his woman,” he said. “I am Dharmadasa, his bosom friend otherwise called Big Brother, come from the dead.” He continued. “Did he not tell you of me?”

“No,” she said.



“But, where is Ari?”

“He is in the cow shed, I will fetch him,” she said, backing out of the door, afraid to turn her back to him.

“Ari, there is a terrible man, come to see you, he is with a gun.” she said

“What?”

“He says he is Dharmadasa, otherwise called big brother.”

“They sentenced him to death, I thought they hanged him.”

“He says he has come from the dead.” she said, “He says he is your bosom friend.”

“We are from the same village, from the south, that’s how I know him, I will see what he wants.”

“Send him away, as soon as possible, I am so afraid.” she pleaded, “He is evil, I will stay in the cow shed till he goes.”

“I will see what he wants.” said Ari going towards the house.

When Ari went into the kitchen, Dharmadasa was seated on a bench, and looking into the fire, and sucking a drumstick, which he had taken out of the curry pot.

“I thought you were dead.” said Ari

“They gave me a life sentence.”

“How did you get out of gaol, did they...”

“I broke gaol, they are looking for me.”

“How?”

“When the insurgents attacked the guards, I got through in the confusion. They are looking for me, I stayed at Nona Watha yesterday, I took this gun from there.” He explained.

“Give it to me, I will keep it in the room, you know they say that even a rice pounder fires when one’s stars are bad.



“I have come for the money, give it to me, and I shall be gone.” he said.

“I haven’t got it here, I have hidden it in a hollow in the woods.”

“Then I shall stay here ’til you get it.”

“Hush don’t raise your voice, I will go for it tomorrow, and get it out.”

Dharmadasa started to shiver and seemed to go into a colic, gripping his belly.

“What’s the matter with you?”

“I think I have got a fever, it comes and goes.”

“I know what it is, it is the malaria.”

“It must be the wild boar flesh I ate at Nona Watha, from the time I ate, my stomach has been foul.”

“In any case I will get Hema to brew you a pot of coriander, you can inhale the vapour, and drink a cup.” Ari went out into the compound and called out to Hema, she came reluctantly.

“Has he gone?” she asked.

“He cannot go, he is sick, he has a fever and a stomach upset.” he explained.

“Where is he now?”

“I have put him in the front room, on a mat, you go the back way, and brew a pot of coriander for him.”

“I don’t like it at all.” she said.

Ari went in and stayed in the front room with Dharmadasa, and when the pot was ready she called out from the kitchen. Ari fetched the boiling pot, and brought an old sarong for Dharmadasa to cover his head with and inhale the vapour from the pot, and when Dharmadasa had covered his head, Ari knelt down beside him and taking the gun, shot him through the head.



Hema came running into the room when she heard the gun shot.

“The gun got entangled in the sarong and went off.” He said.

“I knew that something evil will happen, now what shall we do?” she lamented.

The police who had been on the track, of Dharmadasa, came in almost immediately, they took the credit for shooting down the much wanted criminal wanted for arson, rape, robbery and murder.

They say that Hema and Ari did not live happily ever after.



## LECHIEMIE, THE RUNAWAY

She slipped in quietly, through the back door, leaving her red rubber slippers, on the steps. She came the back way, through the kitchen, the way through which the village sundry and the servants come.

She was late, later than usual. My wife fired a rapid burst of words, into her, as she stood framed against the doorway.

"You are late again. What's come over you? You were so early and punctual then, and now you are always late, and your mind is never on your work."

"Well 'am sorry mam." She said timidly, "It's my mother, she is so helpless now. She is like a child, so demanding, calling for attention all the time, and now she is as blind as a bat. I have got to do everything for her; and what with one thing and another, the time passes by, however much I try, I cannot make it." She tried to explain.

"That's enough, how you can go on, I don't believe a word of what you say. She was blind then, even at the beginning when you started coming here, was she not?" said my wife accusingly, throwing her hair back and knotting it in a tight bun at the nape of her neck, and placing her hands on hips, looking decidedly belligerent.

"Yes, but then, she did see things like shadows, and she could do most things all by herself, but now she sees nothing at all. It's so sad and dreadful." The tears came easily to her rounded eyes, and her long black lashes fluttered like the wings of butterflies trying to land on a stem.

"But Lechiemie," said my wife softening up, "you know how difficult it is for me to cope up in the morning, doing everything all by myself with these two hands." She stretched them out for emphasis.

"Yes," said Lechiemie sniffing, her shoulders shaking in little sobs.



"Make yourself a cup of tea," said my wife thawing visibly.

Lechiemie was a day girl, who came to help in the kitchen, grinding chillie, saffron and things, pounding rice, drawing water from the well, washing pots and pans, fetching fire-wood, minding the cooking, puffing up her cheeks and blowing into the hearth when the fire-wood was damp and not dry enough to crackle and burn evenly to keep the fire going. At such times she would get the smoke in her eyes and hair, and her eyes would glisten wet with tears. She was slim and young and well made. She was swift and smooth in her actions like a swell acrobat. She was an efficient and willing maid at the start, and now she was going suddenly slack.

On the next day she did not come at all, or ever afterwards. Late in the evening, when the shadows of the areca, the nutmeg, the rubber, the coconut, the cocoa shrubs, and the varied trees of the mixed plantation, made the pathway leading up to our house, dark and indistinct, Lechiemie's father, the man called Kegan, the man of corded muscle, the man with the bare torso, wearing only a span cloth, came with a burning torch, and the three dogs we had let loose for the night, barking at his heels, to our front door step, inquiring for Lechiemie. He had come the front way because of the urgency, we conjectured.

"She did not come today." We told him.

"What?"

"She did not come today." We repeated.

"Where is she then?"

"Where is she then?" We repeated after him.

"Good God!" He exclaimed, " She must have run away with that bum." And turning on his heels, ran through the pathway, holding the torch high above his head to light the way, and the dogs we had quietened into silence, springing back to life and taking up the chase, barking at his heels, going part of the way up to the boundary gate, and returning with their heads down



and panting, their tongues hanging out.

We saw the red blot of the flaming torch and its red blue, purple tail fly tacking like a kite between the shadows of the trees.

"How could she do a thing like that?" We asked each other.

"There isn't a single thing to his credit. He is a drunk. He is slovenly, he is old enough to be her father, and he is as poor as a church mouse."

On the next day we went to the house of Kegan, not only as a matter of courtesy, as good neighbours should, but also as a matter of positive concern, for we were anxious for Lechiemie, and we wondered most of all as to how the blind woman was getting on.

The blind woman then, was as thin as stick, she beat her skull head on the floor, spreading her white hair like a feather fan opening out, each time she beat her forehead on the floor. Lamenting, "She has left me to die, the ungrateful pup, she has taken all, even the coins from the till." She screeched in an owl voice. Kegan, the man of the corded muscle, the bare torso, wearing the span cloth, looked on and said nothing, offering no solace to her.

"Nothing will come of it." He said at last in the halting voice of a prophet, and remained silent for a longish time.

"Kegan, is there anything I can do for you?." I brought out embarrassed by his long silence.

Then squatting down suddenly on the door step, crouching and holding his head in his hands, he said,

"Look after her, if something should happen to me."

"Whom?"

"The blind one."

"Of course ." I said in a firm voice , with conviction.

We came away then, my wife and I, holding hands as if afraid



of losing each other, and shooting the eye of the new electric torch outwards, lighting up the pathway distinctly.

In 1991, when there were two days more for war or peace, in the Middle East, on a Sunday night, on the thirteenth of January, when the government of Sri Lanka proclaimed that it was prepared for any eventuality, Lechiemie's man left her in the lurch, taking away her gold and the coins from the till.

Between the initial shock of reality, and the sustaining numbered unreality, in a nightmarish, "daymarish" haze, she walked and walked and walked.

She walked through python streets, streets that stretched and curved, and went zig zagging downwards. Streets that straightened out in the plains, From the Central Hills she walked to the Southern shore to gaze in wonder at the sea for the first time, and the sun going down like a ball of fire, flinging its flames in the sea, like a drowning pea-cock. She was searching for him.

One day she saw him in a bus queue, she ran up to him,

"So, here you are at last, why did you run away? How could you do this to me? Good God, what have I done to deserve all this?"

The man looked away puzzled.

"Why do you turn away from me?"

The man did not reply.

"This town is full of them, nobody takes notice of them anymore," said the first man in the queue.

"They are a nuisance. They should be put away." They all agreed. The police man at the cross-road came up to the queue, he had a carbine which he raised,

"Get away you bitch," he said.

She shied away from him. She saw the man who had betrayed her, again and again. Standing casually at a gate, walk-



ing in a crowd, following fugitively behind, each time she accosted him. And each time he denied her.

Even if it had actually been the man who had betrayed her, he would not have known her, for with the passage of time, she had quickly turned into a filthy slut of a woman, covered in sores; with a wild look and an animal scent about her.

At a shallow stretch, in the sandy beach, where the fisher folk excreted in the early dawn, looking at the horizon, Lechiemie, at high tide walked into the sea, right up to her knees. She was flung back with the flow. She picked herself up, and found herself imprisoned in a circle by them. They, the rough urchins of the fisher folk, made fun of her, throwing filth at her, calling her names making faces at her, and obscene gestures. She broke the vicious ring and turned back and then she walked and walked and walked coming up the winding smooth carpeted new road, leading to the ancient city of Senkadagala. At an abandoned stretch, where a new road gave way to the old, in a sort of stone granite tunnel where she rested, an old man with a long, off white, grey beard, a cloth bundle, and a tin stuck on a stick, took to her. He fed her with bread from the bundle and brewed tea in the tin, holding it over a twig fire by the stick, handle. And because he spoke to her gently and rested beside her, she followed at his heels. They went through Senkadagala and descended upon the great plain of Matale.

In Matale, the water falling on the leeward side of the mountain called Wiltshire by the British, is trapped into a cleft and brought down a smooth granite rock, in a stream. It flows through a fertile stretch of rice paddies. The local authorities built a dam across the water flow at the bottom, and installed six, 6 inch pipes at the dam, to form six communal baths, divided into two segments by a wall. The lower middle class urban people, came to bathe there from early dawn to late evening. They were under the street lamp. They could hear the water from the six spouts gushing. Under the light of the street lamp, the old man shaved her head with a razor, sharpening the wast-



ed blade on his rubbery thigh. Long locks of hair lay at her feet, they had been summarily cut. The remaining stubble was shaved off in sharp little pecks. The short rough hair was smeared with pus and blood, from the old festering sores, for her head and her body were covered in angry sores all over.

After her hair was cropped, the old man led her to the spouts, there weren't any people bathing at this time. It was late.

"Get into the water and hold your head under the flow," he said. She desisted for a while. He had to lead her in, and make her squat under, so that the water cascaded on to her head and fell over the dress she was wearing, making it ghostly transparent. She held her hands over her forehead to shield her face and ease her breathing.

After a while he said. "come out of it."

She came out of the water on to a flat rock, he brought out a bit of washing soap wrapped up in a leaf.

"Here," he said, " take it and rub it on your head."

"It hurts," she said, making a face.

"The sting will cure your sores,"

"Now what?"

"Now come over and loosen your frock"

She came over to him, he scrubbed her all over, with a flat smooth stone.

"Get into the water and squat," he said.

She got in timidly and came out after a while, fresh and clean.

"I shall not bathe," he said.

"Why not?"

"It's too late, I will get the cramps and the rheumatism."

He did a quick wash.



In a fortnight of regular late evening baths, the sluggishness of her mind, the physical lethargy, the sores of sloth and neglect, were all washed away, in the cascading waters of the six spouts. Lechiemie was more or less redeemed, there was a reawakening, and her angular form became rounded and whole, she retrieved her glow of youth. And in the temple she felt a complete sense of liberation.

In an incense fug, in the stone walled Hindu temple tabernacle, where the gods are garlanded, in white stings of Jasmine flowers, and where joss sticks and camphors are burnt, and where the blessings of the gods are invoked by the bare-bodied priest wearing a white flimsy cloth at the waist, ringing a bell and chanting prayers in a deep monotone; holding a lighted oil lamp, moving it up and down describing a circle in front of the effigy of each deity, Lechiemie and the old man sought refuge and solace for thirteen nights. They joined in the ritual of the evening prayers, and slept the nights away in the shed of the temple; where the great Tow-carts are kept. The carts in which, at the annual festivals the effigies of the gods are carried through the streets of the town in triumph and glory. This temple forms the head of the long reptilian Trincomalee street of Matale.

On the thirteenth night the moon was at its full, and its light a mellow fluorescent distilled white light.

"You must go back to them, now that you are well and yourself again," said the old man on the thirteenth night.

"I cannot go back to them,"

"But you must."

"I'd rather stay with you."

"But you must, your parents need you now."

"I cannot face them and the others."

"They will understand," he said.

"It's not that."



"Then what?"

"I want to stay with you."

"It cannot be done." He said in a tone of finality.

"Is there no other way?"

"No there isn't, you must leave early tomorrow."

"I will find a way," she said and left that night in the moonlight. In the morning he found her gone.

One morning in the month of April in 1991, the timber yard of the stingy merchant Premaratna was a hive of activity. Groups of men worked in a friendish haste to get things done. There were four groups of three each, comprising of twelve men in all. They made little clefts, all along the bark of the logs and swinging their sharp axes scalped off the bark in slabs, leaving the centre wood with its fine timber naked, ready to be sawn into planks with long saws, with one man standing at the top elevated platform, and another at the bottom, drawing the saw up and down between them. The planks were numbered and their sizes indicated in an ink made of the carbon of discarded torch batteries. The men were paid in accordance with the work load, and so they hurried.

In the yard there was saw dust of varying shades; there were discarded logs and knotted logs and rotten logs, on which little rabbit ear mushrooms sprouted and enlarged suddenly when it rained. The woman came to collect the bark slabs for firewood, and the mushrooms for food. There was a Rembrandt richness in the yard there in the hot April forenoon. In the afternoon the sky was overcast with heavy rain clouds. When the air became oppressive, and the men working there would rush to the deep well at the edge of the yard, and draw water in the bucket with a wooden bottom. The old pulley would screech as if in protest. The men would then drink deeply, and splash their hot teeming brown bodies with the cool crystal water, and then the thunderstorm would break like an epileptic fit, suddenly.



"There is a shitty smell in the water," said Thema, the logger.

"It must be a dead rat, or something." Nandina said.

They peered over the rim of the well, they could see nothing, it was dark and deep inside.

On the next day when Thema lowered the bucket over the pulley, it stuck something and would not go in. When he looked in he saw a dark form in it. He called out the others, they brought Nandina's five battery torch and flashed it in, and saw the bloated belly with a dark ring around the naval, at the bottom of the well. Her face wrapped up in the cloth, come up.

"It's a woman in there," they said.

They untied the bucket, and tied palm leaves to flush the well, moving the rope up and down in the well before they went in for her. They hauled her up on two pulleys; she came up ripe and ready to burst. The coroner passed a verdict of suicide after the father, Kegan the man of corded muscle, the bare torso, wearing the span cloth, identified her.

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