

The Paddy Bird



JPL



C9027

alitha K. Wilarachchi

Digitized by Noolaham Foundation
noolaham.org | asvanaham.org



THE PADDY BIRD



210202

LALITHA K. WITANACHCHI

9027cc

To my father A. B. Karalliadde
who taught me to love my village,

and

my husband Douglas D. Witanachchi
who encouraged me to write its story.

ISBN 855-88304-0-X

✓
✓

“And this our life, exempt from public haunt,
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stone, and good in everything.
I would not change it.”

(As You Like It)

823

This book
is printed through the patronage and sponsorship
of the Sri Lanka National Library Services Board. It
should be noted that the contents of this book do not
reflect the views of the National Library Services Board.

ISBN 955-95394-O-X



FOREWORD

Attachment and loss in purely human terms and of the more extensive ties that bind people to the land they have owned and inherited is a central element in **The Paddy Bird** a story which combines poignance with realism and width of vision. The author, Lalitha K. Witanachchi is a Geography Honours graduate who later gained a Diploma in Education and worked as a teacher of English and Geography. This was followed by two years as a lecturer in Nigeria. She contributed a series of warm and humorous portrayals of her African experiences to the Daily News. On her return, she joined Lake House and has worked there as a feature writer and sub-editor for nine years. She was educated at Hillwood College, Kandy, and the manner in which she captures the even tenor of an older way of life which bonded land-owner and villager in a relationship less impersonal than that of employer and retainer perhaps owes much to her intimacy with the tranquil daily round of the Kandyan village where she was born and bred.

The story opens on a note of continuity and stability with the great Kumbuk tree standing as a landmark between the ancient Walauwa occupied by Mahinda and his grandmother, the newer Pahala Walauwa where his aunt and her three daughters live and the river that flows below with Teldeniya in the hinterland, which is also a landmark in the course of events when it prompts Chuti's cry of protest against the loss of her home, "No, no, never will I go there again" and stands submerged while "only the topmost branches rose above the water." The story develops with the growth of love and answering affection between Mahinda and the imaginative bright-eyed cousin who sees horizons beyond the enfolding hills of their ancestral village and plans to go to the University where no female of her family has gone before. Change is the focal point of **The Paddy Bird**. It comes dramatically to the static village with the building of the Victoria Dam. The conservative Mahinda sees it as "this erosion of their culture and ways of life" but the grandmother who shrinks and finds comfort in withdrawal to her bed when confronted with the knowledge that the familiar surroundings including the house built by her son must go under water nonetheless recognises the building of the dam as related to the traditional values: "That is what our great kings did a thousand years ago."

We are made aware of the fact that different times are simultaneously operative in the Island, that a medieval agricultural pattern can be intersected by the technology of today, shaking and stirring men's plans and emotions as in a kaleidoscope till a new pattern is formed gradually and not entirely painlessly. The author presents the conflict of values generated by change as when a profit-seeking Mudalali attempts to buy up the last harvest from the *ande* cultivators, on the argument that since the owners have been compensated for the fields, the cultivators need not give them a share of the harvest, while the cultivators remain faithful to the old patterns of thought and action; or the generosity of the villagers who permit a stranger who asks them to sell her their garden plants to take all she wishes free, results in her profiting by the sale of the plants.

The writer deftly combines symbolism with solid realism when she describes the last days of the village.

.....“but before the walls were pulled down, tiles and zinc roofs were removed. They could be used to build new shelters.” Out of the break-up of the old life a hope of a new and more hopeful life is projected.

“But the men who had tilled the land for others, the *ande*-cultivators were pleased for their years of toil were being rewarded. Henceforth they would own their own fields.”

Lalitha Witanachchi presents a perceptive picture of the wider social aspects. She also shows considerable psychological perception in delineating her protagonist's feelings particularly in the episode of the wedding where Mahinda is trapped between an uneasy awareness of his age and the pressure of his emotions and seeks but finds no refuge for his thoughts in alcohol. The atmosphere of the wedding, the heady enjoyment and boisterous joking of the youngsters, the fluctuations of Mahinda's feelings between depression, jealousy and impulsiveness are sensitively captured.

Apart from its charm **The Paddy Bird** whether at the level of individual or communal life is satisfying because it has the texture of reality.

Dr. Lakshmi De Silva,
Department of English,
University of Kelaniya,
SRI LANKA.

PREFACE

Each country has its national river and Sri Lanka has the Mahaveli—the queen of rivers. It is a mighty river, very beautiful indeed and like most beautiful women, is capricious and moody.

It is a river sandy in many places but when the rains come it flows along in a raging torrent, flooding the land and devastating fields and habitations for miles around.

At other times, gentle as a child, its lucid waters flow cutting imperceptibly into the valleys that are rejuvenated anew, and enter the flood plains depositing a fine, rich carpet of silt.

This queen of rivers is joined by lesser tributaries but none so picturesque as the Huluganga that flows through the fertile Dumbara valley. As it flows past my village in Dumbara it is a gentle, narrow river meandering among ferns and mossy swamps, depositing its fertile silt on the paddy fields that supported a simple peasantry as peaceful and gentle as the land itself.

The Huluganga gradually gets broader and bigger as it glides past the town of Teldeniya to join the Mahaweli which now gathers strength as it flows through a narrow gorge. Frothing and churning, with a mighty roar it plunges down the Victoria rapids and leaves the Kandyan hills once more like a docile woman.

Looking down at the Huluganga from a steep mountain side one never ceased to marvel at the beauty of the landscape below—the gentle valley girt by mountains.

Our home in the village of Karalliyadde was on the left bank of the river, overlooking a vast stretch of paddy fields that belonged to our family for several hundred years. Below the rippling fields of paddy sharp edged mana grass blew in the wind and wild sunflowers grew in profusion. Year in, year out, whenever I came home for the holidays I used to sit under the beli tree with my sisters and listen to the villagers sing the eternal song of the reapers of Dumbara.

The tranquillity of the untamed river was reflected on the landscape and in the lives of the rustic peasants who lived here. No ugly sounds marred this haven of mine. Only the chirping of birds, the songs of the women harvesting the fields, the throb of temple drums or the lowing of cattle could be heard.

Then suddenly everything changed. A plan was made to build a dam across the river—a giant concrete dam at Victoria to store water in a mighty reservoir to provide water and hydro-electricity to our nation. And in the cause of development our beloved valley of Dumbara was to be inundated.

I watched with some awe the massive Victoria dam rising like a giant but when I beheld the Dumbara valley that would be buried in a watery grave, and observed the change taking place in my village, my home and within ourselves, I was filled with remorse.

You may perhaps think the story I write is a figment of my imagination. On the other hand, you may conjecture it is the story of my life. It could be one or the other.

In a few days' time our sequestered haven will be no more, and in farewell I write this requiem for our valley.

Lalitha Karalliadde Witanachchi

June 18, 1984.
Karalliadde Walauwe
Teldeniya,
Sri Lanka.

© All Copyrights reserved.



One

He stood erect with one hand on the white bark of the kumbuk tree and scanned the landscape before him. Deep in the valley the Hulu ganga meandered lazily. It flowed along the wide expanse of the Dumbara valley getting broader and bigger. As it reached the town of Teldeniya which he could see far to his left, it flowed under the bridge. A little past the town it gathered strength and disappeared as it plunged down a narrow gorge with a mighty roar that could be heard for miles.

Down the Victoria rapids the once calm waters frothed and churned tempestuously, but here in the valley everything was restful. He saw the clear line of water against the bank and the clean forms of the boulders here and there.

His very stance signified the calm approach of a man who had found the place in which he wanted to live. He had not witnessed any troubled scenes, no floods nor intense heat. There had been no violent changes before in his life which had been as placid as the river.

A gravel path led downhill to his aunt's house known as Pahala Walauwa, where she lived with her three daughters.

They were boarded in a school in Kandy and came home only for the holidays. Their father, who was his mother's brother, had died a few years ago, and he, being much older than they, performed the duties of an elder brother.

As he stood here he heard the low murmur of voices and an occasional girlish giggle. He smiled to himself. He looked down towards the footpath. Two young girls in their early teens came running up the path. One carried a small tray that was covered with a white napkin.

"Ha, Aiyandi," they said, happy to see him.

"Were you waiting for us?" asked Ira the elder one.

"Yes," he said. "I heard that you came rather late last evening. Was it because of the rain?"

“My goodness, how it rained,” said Ratna, the second girl. “What’s that you have there?” he asked pointing to the tray. “See,” said Ira lifting one edge of the napkin. “Take one,” she said proffering the tray of pink coconut preserve to him. “It’s not for you,” said Ratna hurriedly covering the tray. “Amma asked me to give it to Aththamma and not to anyone else.”

With a swing of her hips, she coquettishly tripped along. “Never mind,” he laughed, “Aththamma will keep my share.” As his young cousins began to leave, he realised that their youngest sister was missing.

“Where’s Chuti?” he inquired.

“She’s coming behind,” said Ratna hurrying up the path.

“If she wants to delay we can’t wait for her.”

“You go home,” he said. “I’ll come a little later.”

He went down the pathway towards Pahala Walauwa.

A piercing cry assailed his ears.

“Akkandi! Wait for me, wait for me!”

Undoubtedly, it was Chuti’s voice but her sisters had already disappeared.

“Aiyo! Wait for me,” she cried.

“I’m coming, I’m coming Chuti,” he answered, “but where are you?”

“Here, Mahinda Aiyandi, I’m here, near the lantana bushes.”

He hurried down the path and then saw the frightened little girl stuck among the brambles, hanging perilously on the mountain slope.

“What are you doing there?” he asked scarcely waiting for a reply. “Wait,” he said. He stretched his strong arms and held her and stopped her sliding down the slope that had become a mud chute after the previous night’s rain.

He gave her one tug and breathlessly she came and almost fell upon him. The pink and red lantanas she had in her hands were bruised as they scattered to the ground.

“You shouldn’t go wandering alone by yourself. You could have fallen down into the valley,” he said.

“But I wanted the flowers.”

"I know, I know. And the berries, too," he said laughing. He held her palm and opened the fingers one by one. The purple berries fell on the ground. Shyly she smiled at him and when her lips parted her teeth were blackened by the ripe lantana berries.

"Come along," he said.

She held his hand as he retraced his steps to the kumbuk tree.

"I like you a lot," she said spontaneously, "not like them," she said with a shrug of her shoulders, indicating her sisters who had gone ahead. "They didn't wait for me."

"That's because you went your own way."

"I wanted the berries," she said petulantly. "That was all."

"But you can't always do things your own way," he said.

"Why can't I?" she asked.

"Because it can be dangerous," he explained.

"I'll always do what I want," she said with an urgency beyond her years.

"You are a determined young lady," he said giving her ear an affectionate tweak. "Ha, let's hurry, Aththamma must be anxiously waiting to see her grand-daughter."

Hand in hand, the two cousins walked up the hill to Ihala Walauwa where Mahinda lived with his grandmother.

Two

One year later, the children came home for the holidays again. Mahinda went past the kumbuk tree and as he looked down into the compound of the house, he saw the three girls playing. When they saw him they waved to him. He waved back.

“Aiyandi I’m coming,” shouted Chuti.

He waited for her. She came panting up the hill. When he saw her close a little shock ran through him. Only last year, she was like a wild doe but now she was no longer a child.

He reached out his hand to help her up the slope. She was grateful that he had done so.

“Do you know that I have come first in class?” she said proudly.

“Congratulations! I must give you a present for it. What shall it be?”

He was pleased at her progress in school.

“Just give me anything you like, or I’ll tell you later.

Next year I’ll be sitting for the exam.”

“That’s great,” he said. “I know what I’ll give you. I’ll give you a fountain pen.”

“Ah, that will be fine. I can use it for my school work and I’ll also write to you.”

“I don’t think you’ll be allowed to write to me.”

“No, indeed not. In the hostel we write only to our parents. Besides, what can I write to you?” she mused, cupping her chin in her hands.

“Yes, what can you write?” he said, and was silent.

She reached for a bright yellow sunflower that grew on the bank.

She started plucking out the petals one by one.

She began a slow chant as she threw away each petal.

“Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor,
Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief.”

“What on earth are you saying?” he asked her.

“You silly old man, haven’t you heard this before? We play this at school. You can find out the person you are going to marry some day, by plucking the petals of a flower.”

“Hm, some way,” he laughed. “No tinker, tailor or sailor for you my little girl, and I hope it won’t be a beggar or, heaven forbid—a thief! But a rich man, certainly.”

¶ She threw away the remainder of what was once a flower.

“I was only joking.”

From this vantage point they looked down upon the river and the paddy fields. Bare bodied men clad only in span cloths were ploughing. The light of the setting sun was reflected like golden mirrors in the muddy fields. Above the shrill sound of the men driving their buffaloes as they ploughed the land Mahinda could hear Chuti’s endless light-hearted chatter. He listened amused, and felt young again—a feeling he had not experienced for a very long time.

As the happy days wore on he found that his footsteps took him to the kumbuk tree more often than he had ever done before. And it was not long before Chuti came running up the path to meet him.

They sat on a rocky outcrop overlooking the Huluganga and never ceased to marvel at the beauty of its bank that was rich with golden sunflowers bearing their special aroma. Down in the valley stretched the paddy fields as far as the eye could see.

The two cousins, one a mature man, the other a young girl hardly in her teens sat on the bank listening to the villagers singing the songs of the land tillers of Dumbara, that they had been singing for ages as they transplanted the tender green shoots of paddy.

Verdure spread in every direction and a common bond united these two for this was their grandfather's village. To them it was a refuge providing a peace and calm that was never ending.

Above the soft ripple of the water Chuti babbled like a magpie endlessly. She was a bright girl of fourteen with imaginings far surpassing those of other girls that age. She read a great deal she said and some day she would travel round the world, far beyond the perimeter of their village.

"When I'm older I shall go to the University," she announced.

"University?" he asked with astonishment. "But none of our girls have gone there before."

"Then I shall be the first."

"I don't think it is a place for a girl like you."

"Mahinda Aiyandi, you are so old-fashioned," she said with a slight smile.

"And you a very determined young girl," he said.

"May be," she said.

"And what will you do after that?" he asked.

"I want to travel, yes, travel even round the world," she said firmly.

He recognised a streak of stubbornness in her nature which he had never suspected before, and he realised that this troubled him not a little.

"What makes you think of all these new ideas?" he asked her.

"New ideas? They are not new. How many people go about these days. There is so much to see, so many kinds of people, and so many wonderful places."

Her face shone as she spoke. Her interest in the world outside gladdened his heart.

"So the young Dumbara Menike will travel round the world?" he teased her.

"Yes," she said with determination.

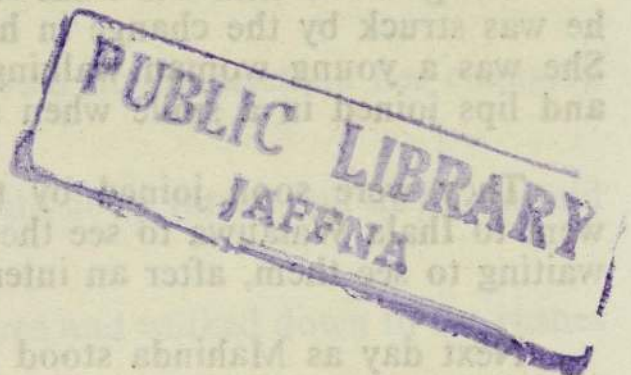
But a disturbing thought crossed his mind. Perhaps, this remote village may not hold her.

All these years Mahinda had looked after the family business, tending the land and getting a satisfactory income. He was what one would call a landed proprietor. His social life did not go beyond attending a few weddings of friends and relations or an almsgiving, and visiting Kandy once or twice a month on business.

Surprisingly, he realised that he found time from his work to spend many hours with Chuti on the river bank, and these meetings gave him a buoyancy of spirit never felt before.

He was not married and at thirty-four had no intention of doing so or so he had thought, up till now.

But the holidays were soon over and his cousins went back to the boarding school in Kandy, and he immersed himself in his work.



Three

It was August. The days were warm. The air was dry. Mahinda went to Pahala Walauwa to see his cousins who had come home for the holidays. Their mother Sumana Nanda who was his mother's sister-in law, was reading the newspaper on the verandah.

"Ha, Mahinda," she said, "we were about to go to see Aththamma."

"Where are the girls, Sumana Nande?" he asked.

"They went to the rear compound to see the new calf," she said.

"I'll go and meet them," he said and stepped towards the cattle shed.

The girls saw him and came smiling. But when he saw Chuti he was struck by the change in her. No longer was she a child. She was a young woman walking with studied grace. Her eyes and lips joined in a smile when she saw him.

They were soon joined by their mother and together they went to Ihala Walauwa to see their grandmother who was eagerly waiting to see them, after an interval of three months.

Next day as Mahinda stood with Chuti by the kumbuk tree he felt he was standing reverently amidst a beauty he had never seen before. The seemingly ordinary scene that he had observed every day was transformed, He felt he was seeing life for the first time in all its beauty and unspeakable joy.

A flock of brown paddy birds came suddenly from nowhere. They flew rapidly like arrows and settled on the lantana bushes below.

"Sh..." said Chuti putting her finger to her lips, indicating the birds should not be disturbed.

They dared not speak and in the silence she could almost hear her own heart beat.

The birds chirped softly as they nibbled the lantana berries. Then in an instant the whole flock of paddy birds flew aloft in alarm. With a fluttering of wings they circled several times above the valley and flew resolutely to the hills far away and were soon lost to view—all except one solitary bird that soared spaciously into the sky with a kind of spiritual exultation.

“Come back! Come back!” she pleaded but it was in vain.

“Oh,” she cried, “It is leaving.”

“A young rebel,” was all Mahinda said.

The minutes passed away as they watched the paddy bird fly away. It became a speck in the sky and was lost forever.

To watch the bird disappear was a moment of great sadness. They were lost in a long thoughtful silence.

Suddenly Chuti broke the silence.

“I’m going to be like that bird,” she announced.

“Yes,” she said, “and see the great, big, wonderful world,” and she laughed merrily.

He was not amused. He could not understand her changing moods.

He realised that the bird would never return and its loss would indeed be hard to bear.

He left her by the kumbuk tree and walked down to the rushes that lined the bank of the river.

“Wait for me, Aiyandi” she said, but he did not stop. He went on without once looking back.

“Aiyo! Wait for me, Aiyandi,” she cried as she came running down the hill. “Please wait. I’ll come with you. I want to come with you,” she said breathlessly.

He stopped abruptly in his tracks.

Turning round he asked her, “Anywhere?”

“Yes, anywhere.”

She looked around at the distant hills and the river and for emphasis added, "Till this river stops flowing."

"That means forever?" he asked very slowly and softly.

"Yes, Aiyandi, forever."

He reached for her. She was so trusting, yet vulnerable in her innocence. He looked at her animated face. Her dark eyes sparkled in her flushed round face. Her lithe body was vibrant under her lace jacket and frill that blew in the wind. The wind roared. As she bent down to hold her saree that was almost being blown away she laughed with happiness.

A thrill at her physical presence ran through his veins. He felt a growing sense of excitement coupled with a sense of protection. One moment she was laughing and the next she was going to slip on the rock. Instinctively he reached out and drew her to him, and at that moment he knew that he loved her.

Hand in hand they stepped into the cool water of the Hulganga. The earth was cool to his bare feet. He felt its power for the first time in his life. He got a new strength from the earth.

"The river will never stop flowing," he said as he put his arms around her and kissed her tenderly.

There was joy in the splash of crystal water. There was peace in everything, in the vastness of the evening sky, in the mountains that soared skywards. Deep within his heart he knew that he would love her forever. He had never loved a girl before.

He was thirty-five years old that day.

Four

For a whole week the storm raged, bringing rain that fell in sheets. The rain lashed the village in an unrelenting fury never witnessed before. The river was a raging torrent.

Mahinda lay in the warmth of his bed that night while outside the river and its water roared down the valley in shattering power. Deafening claps of thunder made the whole world shudder while great jagged flashes of lightning tore through the sky.

Above this fury he heard the subdued but persistent assurance, "I'll come with you, I'll come with you."

The beam of a torch light flashed swiftly across the meda-midula. With a start he sat up. He thought he saw a figure move.

"Aththamma, is it you?" he asked.

"Yes, putha," answered his grandmother. "I came to make sure whether the windows are closed."

"They are firmly shut, Aththamma," he said.

She came and sat on the edge of his bed. Gently she stroked his hair.

"This rain is terrible," she said.

"Ha," was all he said in reply.

There was a long pause.

"This lonely life is not good for you," she said after a while. He held his breath. He did not utter a word.

"Why don't you ask Sumana Nanda for the hand of your young cousin? After all you are her *avassa massina*, the girl's father's sister's son."

Aththamma was not one to mince her words, or take a circuitous route if she had to come to a particular point.

"Chuti duwa is a little stubborn at times," she explained, "but at that age all girls are that. But in time she will outgrow that weakness."

“She is very young,” he said weakly.

“She must be close upon, now let me see—about fifteen, That’s not too young. Your grandfather married me when I was fourteen.”

He thought he heard her almost chuckle.

“That was long ago. But today it’s different. Besides, there are many things to be done,” he said.

“Such as?”

“She has two older sisters. Besides, I must do up this house.”

“Ha, if you wait to build a golden cage, by the time you gild it, the little bird would have flown away.”

He was silent.

“Think about it and don’t delay. This house needs a new mistress and I am too old to run it.” There was a long pause.

“If the rain continues at this, rate, the harvest will be ruined,” she said, changing the subject. But he made no comment.

“Puthe,” she continued, “Is it true, after all—this talk about the river? That the government is going to build a dam across it?”

“Yes, Aththamma, they are going to build a dam, fairly soon.”

“That’s what our great kings did a thousand years ago,” she mused.

“But what about all these houses? I hear they have marked with a cross the houses that will go under the water. Is it true they are to be demolished, and our Sumana’s walauwa, too?”

He could sense the urgency in her voice. She held his hands tightly.

“Yes,” he said the words ever so slowly. “Even Sumana Nanda’s house will be inundated with hundreds of others, when the reservoir is built.”

“Budoo Ammo!” gasped his grandmother. “It would have been better if I had died last year with the fever I had. Apoi, Apoi,” she cried softly.

If he felt so deeply how incapable he was to resist this change, this erosion of their culture and ways of life, how much more difficult must it be, he thought, for his grandmother. She viewed

even the bulldozers that built the new highway through the village, churning the solid mountains like rubble before them, as a threat to her very existence.

“How much I told your Loku Mama not to build the new house down in the valley. But your Sumana Nande wanted a new house. This walauwa was too old, she said.” She paused. “All these years I grieved that my son should have gone to his grave so young, but had he lived today, he would have a second death, when his house is swallowed by the water.”

They were silent for a while. She wiped her eyes.

“All life is building and destroying and building anew. The cycle goes on. Old trees die. New plants shoot up and take their place.” She said very slowly.

His grandmother had experienced many tragedies in her life. She had borne the loss of her husband, her son and also her daughter who was Mahinda’s mother with great courage. So it was in her nature to accept philosophically and stoically the news of the dam that would be built to create a vast reservoir. And if it inundated her village and even her home, that was her karma—she could do nothing to overcome it. But she was weary, very weary.

“Why won’t this withered old tree that is my body shrivel up and die? I have lived long enough and seen too much sorrow in my time.”

He realised that although she had shown a brave exterior all these days she was suffering much under the strain. He grieved for her.

“Ha, you had better get some sleep,” she said rising slowly from the bed, “and you had better ask Sumana Nande about Chuti without much delay,” she added.

She walked slowly to her room. As he watched her dark shadow on the wall he realised how weary she was.

Mahinda decided to summon enough courage to speak to Sumana Nanda about Chuti. It was right that he should get her mother’s permission before he asked Chuti whether she would be his wife. That is how it should be. That was how it had always been with his people, who were also hers.

But events occurred in such quick rapidity that he had to postpone his mission, for mission it was. He expected certain objections from Sumana Nanda. He would be foolish if he pretended they did not exist.

Five

It was disquieting news. Work on the Victoria dam was proceeding fast. More than one hundred villages would be inundated once the dam was completed. More than three thousand acres of land would be acquired. Some would lose a perch here, a perch there, while others would lose several acres of land. Quite a number would lose their paddy fields, and worst of all many would lose their homes.

Mahinda was busy, like the rest of the people of the village getting the title deeds of their lands ready. He had to see to the interests of Sumana Nanda and her children as well. Aththamma had no such problem for many years ago she had made over her property to her grandchildren. He made several trips to the Land Registry in Kandy to get copies of deeds. On these trips to Kandy he often had to help his relations in the village who were not well versed in legal and official matters. They were a helpless lot of unsophisticated people, most of them.

All day long people gathered at the ambalama or the co-operative store or at the sub-post office to exchange news of the latest developments.

Mahinda was at his desk when Sumana Nanda came in a hurry into the house. She usually made her entrance calmly and sedately. This was unusual. Without a word she handed him an open letter and went in. Before he could take the letter from the envelope he heard the racking sobs of a woman.

He left the letter on the table and rose from his chair. He went into the room, Sumana Nanda was weeping.

"What shall I do? What shall I do?" she moaned. He touched her gently on her shoulders. Her shoulders trembled.

"Why, what has happened?" he inquired.

"Haven't you read the letter?" she asked.

He went back to his table and began to read the letter, slowly, very slowly. The words sank into all his being. So the letter

had finally come informing her that her house would have to be demolished as it would be inundated by the waters of the new reservoir.

How could he console her? Most of all, how would his Chuti face this calamity? Would she be brave or would she want to run away? Theirs was not the only house to be singled out. There were hundreds of others. He realised there was precious little to do to save their home.

“Sumana Nande,” he said, ever so slowly, “there is nothing we can do to save your house. I knew it would have to go.”

“You knew it? But you never told me?”

She was almost accusing him for his silence on the matter.

“Nande, we are powerless in these matters. But all is not lost, I assure you.”

“But why do you say that?” she asked.

“Listen. There’s always this place for you and your children. It is a rambling place, far too large for the two of us. Besides, I was told that all those who lose their houses will be amply compensated.”

“Amply?” she said with almost a sneer. “What compensation can anyone give for a home built with so much love?”

He felt a worm. He meant no disrespect to her memories of all that she held dear. He was a clumsy fool.

“Forgive me, please. I have thought of this matter for a long time. Listen to me patiently for a moment, please.”

Then he went on. “You will get a substantial amount as compensation. The highest fee is paid to those who lose their houses. It shouldn’t be difficult for you to put up a nice house, overlooking the reservoir on the land at Kalagolla, on a higher elevation. Or you could even buy a house in Kandy, putting in a little extra money.”

But for the present these words seemed to be of poor consolation. He had never seen her so troubled. He could do little to assuage her grief.

“I’ve also met Victor Mama. We have discussed various solutions.”

“You have?” she asked in disbelief. “You have already spoken to my brother about this?”

“Yes I have. He, too, has a solution of sorts.”

“What is that?”

“He has a possible solution, although I’m not very much in favour of it. The house adjoining his in Colombo is for sale. He is trying to negotiate terms. The last I heard from him was that the deal could go through in a few months’ time.”

She did not speak for a while. She was in deep thought.

“I think that will be a good idea,” she said slowly.

He half expected this reply, but when she pronounced it he was visibly shaken. Sumana Nanda’s lot caused him deep personal concern but her decision could, perhaps, alter his entire life.

“Mahinda, you have been always thoughtful, but this—I have no words to express my gratitude to you. All this time I thought I would have to face this all by myself. I will never forget what you have done for us, not just today but everyday these many years.”

Sumana Nanda rose from her chair. She walked towards the front door.

Mahinda’s eyes followed Sumana Nanda cross the garden and go towards the steps that led down from the walauwa. She paused awhile at the top of the steps, then looked at the beli tree that was there to see if there were any ripe fruits. Noticing there weren’t any she leaned against it. It was a habit for whoever stood under that tree to look up, for should a ripe fruit fall on one’s head it would be disastrous. The beli fruit had such a hard shell.

Whenever a child stood at the top of the steps every adult who was close by would shout: “Look out! A fruit may fall on your head.”

Mahinda joined Sumana Nanda at the top of the steps. They looked around the garden, at the sapodilla and avocado trees, the tall arecanut and coconut palm trees and the sapu trees choked by the pepper vines that entwined them.

The cocoa pods that hung like pendulous breasts were ripe and had turned a reddish orange.

“The cocoa is ready for plucking,” said Sumana Nanda.

“Yes,” said Mahinda. “Punchi Rala will be coming tomorrow to pluck them.”

A gentle wind blew from the fields. The tall trees began to sway back and forth. A wood pigeon’s mournful cry was heard. A flock of green parakeets flew across the fields.

“When you stand here you feel there are no troubles in the world,” said Sumana Nanda. “It is so peaceful and quiet, with the trees waving in the breeze.”

“Most of these trees are quite old,” said Mahinda. “It was Grandfather who planted most of them. But now..... so many of them will have to be cut down when the land by the cart track is acquired for the new Batticaloa-Colombo highway. One can never imagine what changes there will be then.”

The sun was setting. The paddy fields were tinged with gold. The treetops sparkled in the mellow light. Even the clouds were edged in gold.

“I had better go. It will soon be dark,” said Sumana Nanda.

“I’ll accompany you to Pahala Walauwa,” said Mahinda.

“It’s not necessary. In a few minutes I’ll be home. Athamma is alone so you had better go in as it’s almost time to light the lamps.”

Mahinda watched her go along the path that led to Pahala Walauwa. For a brief moment he watched the scene before him. The large stretch of paddy fields was alluring. He watched a large flock of paddy birds speeding across the ripened paddy to the hills beyond.

He heard the rumble of a tractor used to build the new road that had now come as far as Bimpussa.

He had heard people say that the concrete dam of Victoria was rising steadily. He had not been that way for a long time, but the newspapers reported its progress almost every day. There was jubilation as they indicated the height of the dam as it rose foot by foot and calculated the aggregation of rock that would finally dam the Victoria gorge and tame the river.

Mahinda knew that the day was not far off when the last spade of cement would be applied and the dam would be complete. And then the Huluganga will start to back up and one fateful day the river that had flowed through the valley from the beginning of time would be strangled. The river that flowed jubilantly down the valley would lose its freedom. And when freedom is lost it is always very sad, pondered Mahinda.

There will be many changes but can we live here undisturbed as we have done all these years, he asked himself. In the brooding silence he pressed the knuckles of his fist against his chin, but he could find no answer to his question. The sun vanished behind the hill and in a trice all the gold was gone.

Mahinda went back to the house. Punchi Menika had already brought the lighted lamp and placed it on the round table in the sitting room. Mahinda stretched his hands and drew the three brass chains that hung from the ceiling towards him. Carefully he placed the lamp in the holder, secured it firmly and let the lamp slide a few feet up. The room was filled with a soft, warm glow.

He had done this for the past many years and never tired of admiring the iridescent beauty of the pink globe that encircled the long white chimney.

It was made of Bohemian glass and no one dared wash and clean it or place it on the holder save Mahinda.

The clock struck the half hour after six. Mahinda looked up at the clock on the wall.

"That clock must be at least seventy-five years old," said Aththamma who had entered the room without a sound. "I was told that it was bought the year your Grandfather's elder sister was married."

They sat on the couch as they were wont to do every evening, talking in the mellow lamplight.

"What things of quality there were in the old days," she continued. "Clocks, lamps and sewing machines. They were all made in England or Germany and never gave any trouble. One must admit that the White Man never made a third rate article. Even the chintz cloth they sold us lasted years and years and however much the dhoby beat it on the stone, it never tore and not one bit of the colour ran."

She looked again at the clock.

“Have you noticed something about that clock? It has three hands.”

“I have noticed the three hands but never gave a thought to it,” replied Mahinda. “I know that there are the hour hand and the minute hand, but what is the other one?”

“I’ll tell you what it is. See that thing at the tip of the third hand? It is the crescent moon and that shows the lunar calendar. But these things don’t really matter,” she added changing the subject. “It is our Sumana that I am concerned about. I’m glad she is not so upset about the house after you spoke to her.”

“Aththamma, how do you know?” he asked.

“Puthe, when I heard our Sumana sobbing I knew it had to be about the house. I could do nothing to help her except to offer her this place, which I have already done. So while you two were talking I sat there by the meda midula and just waited. Besides you two were talking in English so why should I disturb you two when you are discussing something serious. So now she has made up her mind to live close to Wilmot?”

Mahinda smiled. “You are right, Aththamma. You can certainly understand English even though you can’t talk it.”

“Yes, yes. That’s how I know everything, everything that is going on and being discussed in this home,” she chuckled.

“Sumana will be happy to live close to her brother, but I shall miss them, the little girls especially. And what about this house of ours?” She looked around her and up at the ceiling, which was of beautifully carved light wood.

“How soon this seems much too large for us,” she said reaching for the chew of betel from the brass stand on the table.

“Oh, this was such a large house when your grandfather brought me here from my village at Mediwake. I remember I was struck by the white trellis work in the front portico. There were so many rooms, the front rooms were for the males mostly, and the rooms on either side of the dining room for the females and the servants with their families occupied those little rooms at the back. There were store rooms for pepper, coconuts, arecanuts, an out-

house for firewood and of course the *atuwa* for paddy. Someone told me that in all if you counted the corridors and verandahs there are as many as twenty rooms!

“Your Grandfather said that as each member of the family got married and the babies were born a new room was added, for most of our women married in *binna*. They did not leave the home. Instead their husbands came and lived here as members of this family. We all got on well, living together as one large family, helping each other in sickness or other troubles.”

Mahinda listened. He did not want to disturb the old lady as she recalled the past.

“When your Grandfather’s brother’s wife died he brought his children here. Six daughters. How happy they were here and we were so happy to have them. There was so much singing and laughter then.

“And do you know, my mother-in-law used to say that so many children who had lost either their father or their mother, and sometimes both parents, grew up in this *walauwe* and not one went astray. There was always room for one extra person. They knew to share what they had got. This was a haven for so many. Oh, this is a noble place, even though it is so old now.”

She went on chewing the betel. Then she continued.

“It is incredible that while so many houses—many of them newer than this one—should have to be submerged and will be forgotten later on, that this our ancient home should have been singled out and be saved. That is because whoever built this would have chosen a very auspicious time to lay the foundation stone. It is not just luck. Perhaps destiny has reserved for it a special role to play.”

Six

Several times Mahinda and Sumana Nanda went to the Victoria Project in Sangharaja Mawatha, Kandy. It was the former Hotel Suisse converted into a government office to handle land acquisition matters relating to the Victoria Project.

But these two were not the only people who had business to transact here. Almost all their relations went on scheduled dates to the office. Nervously, the villagers sat on the benches, a timorous lot, and awaited their turn, holding fast to their precious deeds. Some could barely grapple with the fact that their land would be inundated. They realised very slowly that they were powerless to hold on to their lands. There was something askew in all this, they thought. While some lost their fields and houses, others who owned not an inch of land were gaining, albeit, in the dry zone. But the men who had tilled the land for others as *ande*-cultivators were pleased for their years of toil were being rewarded. Henceforth, they would own their own fields at Uthiyawa or at Talawa or wherever they were sent.

As the inquiries progressed, they realised how understanding and sympathetic were the officers handling the acquisitions.

Where there was any controversy as to ownership of the land, they tried to devise some kind of amicable settlement. They were ready to explain any point that was obscure. Above all, they listened patiently to the people from remote villages who were slow to understand, some of whom could hardly sign their names, and were always afraid of authority. The attitude of these officers never failed to impress Sumana Nanda and Mahinda who could be classed among the educated people of the village.

Slowly the anxiety of the people disappeared. Sumana Nanda and others like her who were losing their homes were even able to smile when they received their compensation.

Sumana Nanda and Mahinda went several times to Kandy with their deeds and documents. The trips to Kandy took on a pleasant aspect. While driving the twelve miles to Kandy Mahinda found that he seemed to understand better the reserved lady who was Chuti's mother.

Once she understood her affairs he was free to leave her to discuss her business with the officers inside the room. He would walk up and down along the open verandah upstairs, smoking a cigarette or he would lean against the banisters and watch the soft ripples of the Kandy Lake with the shady trees around it. Often his eyes strayed to the school far above the lake on the opposite hill. The two-storeyed school buildings, each connected with a covered way, were perched on the hill.

Somewhere within these sprawling white buildings, surrounded by woods, was Chuti in her hostel, in the school upon the hill.

He had not yet been able to ask Sumana Nanda for Chuti's hand in marriage. They had all been busy. Perhaps, he could speak to her on his way home.

When the inquiry was over Mahinda and Sumana Nanda usually visited her children in the hostel. They proceeded along the narrow winding drive, past the lake.

Visiting hours were strictly observed. If they were early they waited in the old English cottage which was now the parlour. Through a trellis they could see the well laid out garden. Roses and lilies were in bloom, temple trees provided shade. Bright coloured bougainvilleas and flamboyants grew in profusion.

The gay laughter of children at play could be heard. Some times the sound of hymns being sung at evensong wafted from the little chapel. This school had been founded by Christian missionaries. Although the English missionaries had long since departed they had left their stamp. The school had not lost its character, its peace and quiet dignity.

Both Sumana Nanda and Mahinda were thankful that the girls were being educated in this place. It was a dignified school for any young girl of good family to grow up in.

The girls would come running into the parlour and hug their mother. They were pleased to see Mahinda Aiyandi, too.

They chatted happily, but in a subdued, lady-like manner. When the bell rang they had to go back to the hostel for prep.

At other times they were given permission to go for a drive. Mahinda would ask them where they would like to go. Sometimes he drove them round the lake, sometimes to Wace Park above the school, above the lake or they went shopping. They were taken

to a cafe where they were given a treat of cake and ice-cream. They were given parcels of sweets and chocolates, and sharp to time they were returned to the hostel.

When the children were younger leave taking was a sad affair. The children would begin to cry, and Chuti especially used to cry aloud and cling on to her mother. Only the firm hand of the matron would bring an end to this sad parting.

But now the children were older. They did not suffer from home-sickness. Or if they did, they did not show it. They went back to the hostel, a little sadly, but sensibly.

Whenever a child in the hostel fell ill, the parents were informed. On one occasion, after their business at the Victoria office was over, Sumana Nanda and Mahinda went to the school for a letter had been received to say that Chuti was ill.

Sumana Nanda was taken to the sick room. Meanwhile Mahinda walked in the garden wondering what Chuti's illness could be. He hoped it was not anything very serious.

He looked on towards the lake. The low hum of traffic could be heard in the distance. Across the lake against the backdrop of the forest of Udawattakele could be seen the Temple of the Tooth. The persistent throb of temple drums was carried across the water. Against the deep blue evening sky loomed the sharp peak of Hunnasgiriya. He marvelled at the beauty that lay before him. No wonder Chuti was a sensitive child, almost poetic, growing up in a place like this.

Sumana Nanda returned sometime later. There was nothing to be alarmed about. Chuti had got measles. Her fever had gone down. She was recovering.

They drove down the drive and instead of turning to the right, Mahinda turned left to the Kandy market. He alighted and went into the red building. He came out with some parcels.

"Let's go back to the school. I've got some oranges and grapes for Chuti," he said.

"It's very kind of you," said Sumana Nanda.

When they reached the school he parked the car. "You can wait. I'll hand this to the matron."

He went up the steps to the office.

He was back in a couple of minutes.

They drove back home a little later than on other days. The lights at Teldeniya were already burning. At home the lamps were lit.

Two weeks later Mahinda was going through his mail. A letter in a neat feminine hand caught his eye. He recognised Chuti's handwriting. He opened the letter a little hurriedly.

He read it.

"My dear Aiyandi,

Thank you very much for the fruits and the big slab of chocolates you sent me. Matron said they were from my uncle who came with Amma, But I knew it was from you. Please don't reply as I will get into trouble.

With love,
Chuti

P.S. I'm writing this with the pen you gave. Thanks again, C".

He held the letter for a long time. He remembered that the boarders were not expected to write letters except to their parents. Apparently she would have got a day scholar to post this letter. The school authorities would view this breaking of their rules as a serious offence. He was not happy. He must warn her. Yet he could not help but appreciate the risk she had taken—and it was all for him.

Seven

There was great excitement in the entire family circle. Ira was getting married., There was genuine happiness all round, for she had been a gentle, obedient girl always ready to give a helping hand to anybody in need.

It was Victor who had arranged the marriage for his sister's daughter. The groom was a young man of twenty-six, recently returned from London where he was an accountant. The family was related to Victor's wife. The young man's name was Thejan. When Ira's and Thejan's horoscopes were compared they were found to be compatible. So a date was fixed for the young man and his family to visit the prospective bride.

Coming to the village was out of the question. The construction of the new highway was going on apace. The roads were almost impassable. So it was decided that the meeting would take place at Victor's home in Colombo. Aththamma who had during the past months felt no inclination to do anything, suddenly found a hidden source of energy buried deep within her, that gave her strength to set about the task of preparing for her grand-daughter's forthcoming marriage.

On an auspicious Wednesday, she took bags of paddy from the large *atuwa* that resembled a barn and got the servants to sun-dry the paddy. Long mats were spread out in the compound and the golden grain was poured on to them. Punchi Menika and Kollamoo carefully spread the paddy evenly on the mats. Every hour or so they squat on the ground and with their hands gently stirred the paddy till every grain was evenly dried.

The dried paddy was then sent to the mill. During the next few days, there was heard the sound of pestle strike the mortar as rice was pounded and turned into flour.

Doog, doog,

Doog, doog went the pestles and you knew there were two women pounding the flour in the kitchen.

Doog, doog, doog.

Doog, doog, doog went the pestles and you knew another had joined them.

Gently the flour was sifted. Slowly a soft, snow-white floury mountain rose. The hearths were lit and the women chatting away began to fry the oil cakes and kokis. Aththamma watched with joy as Kollamoo fried the kokis. Slowly the mould was dipped in the batter and then immersed in the sizzling oil. A deft flick of the wrist and there was the patterned waffle dancing in the oil.

The night before the family left for Colombo five 'Kuruni' boxes were packed with sweetmeats to be taken for the welcome feast on the occasion of the groom's first visit.

"Look after the Walauwe, Punchirala," said Aththamma. "We shall go and return." Punchi Rala bowed his head and with his hands folded, he watched the car leave.

The young man arrived with his parents and brother. At first neither Mahinda nor the grandmother could identify the groom. The two young men looked equally handsome and remarkably alike. They had clean, frank expressions, and Mahinda thought to himself, "Either one would be good for our Ira. I like these people."

The younger brother Ravi sat next to Mahinda at lunch. He, too, was a junior accountant and would join his brother in London in two years' time. He was an intelligent, lively youth, with a ready smile and cheerful disposition.

The parents were pleasant people and from their expressions it was obvious they had taken Ira to their hearts.

Mahinda was especially happy for Ira who had lacked a father. And he was happy for Sumana Nanda and the whole family. They had at last found a strong anchor.

After the visitors departed Victor Mama in his usual ebullient manner asked Ira loudly, "Well Ira, what have you to say? Is the young man to your liking?"

Poor Ira, she blushed. She ran into the room.

“Aiya, don’t embarrass the girl, like that,” said Sumana Nanda.

But later, when her mother asked Ira whether she would consider the marriage, she replied shyly. “If you don’t mind him, Amma, I have nothing against him.”

And so the matter was settled.

Athamma was the one who was most pleased. When she heard that the groom Thejan wished to have the wedding early—within two months, and leave for England with his bride, she did not object.

“Don’t delay this marriage,” she said. “It is not one to be postponed.”

There was much work to be done before the wedding.

The hotel in Kandy had to be reserved, the Registrar of Marriages had to be notified. Wedding invitations had to be printed and then posted to friends and relations. Mahinda did the work of father and brother, but he wasn’t complaining. He would do anything for this family. Several times he drove to Kandy.

As the days flitted past he grew more and more exhausted driving on the ruddy road. The car bumped and often skidded in the mud, for the old road was obliterated and the new highway was being built. He was delayed whenever the bulldozer was at work.

Each night he threw himself on the bed in sheer exhaustion and mercifully fell asleep very quickly.

It was a very wise decision to have the wedding at the Queen’s Hotel in Kandy.

On the day of the wedding, he drove very early to Kandy. Among other things, he had to make arrangements to see that the dancers and drummers were in the hotel well in time.

But as usual, as it often happens on these occasions, someone had forgotten to bring an important parcel of things needed for the ceremony. So he drove back to the village and brought the parcel to the hotel just in time—so he thought.

But he was late to join the bridal party. Late guests blocked the entrance to the Hotel. The drummers were beating the drums at the foot of the stairs. He inched his way slowly and reached the bottom of the stairway. The bridal party descended.

Ira was a radiant bride in white. Her jewels sparkled. Holding her uncle Victor's arm, looking shy and nervous, she took each step with care, while her mother came behind, smiling happily.

And then as he looked more closely at his relatives following the bride, he saw a young girl of exceeding beauty. Her hair was tied up in a fashionable konde. She held a small bouquet in her hand. Her eyes shone like stars.

The girl seemed amused at something. He imagined for a moment that she was looking at him and when she winked at him mischievously—why, it was only then that he recognised that this vision of loveliness was Chuti.

His heart missed a beat. All his tiredness was forgotten. Amidst the throb of 'magul bera' the party walked into the hall.

Mahinda could not remember the details of the wedding. In any case, he was not one to be too fascinated by them. He did not take his place with the bridal party, on the side of the poruwa despite the messages sent to him.

Instead he sat on a chair on a side. He wished to be alone. He heard some girls sing the Jayamangala gathas. The bridal couple looked very happy. But he could not take his eyes off Chuti. He could not think of anything else but that she was the most compelling human being he had ever met. He must speak to her and ask her to marry him. He could not afford to waste time. He had been very, very busy these past few months. But nothing mattered more to him than speaking to her and getting her answer. He would do so sometime today or tomorrow.

The ceremony was over in a little while. There was much happiness and laughter and the guests moved around greeting old friends and relations. How proudly the groom conducted his bride introducing her to his family and friends. They were exceedingly happy and they were young, very young indeed, and like an arrow's shaft, a piercing pain struck Mahinda—the joy of the day burnt down to ashes.

He moved around the hall and was hardly aware that the time had come for the couple to leave the hotel.

Amidst fond farewells and cheers Ira and Thejan left to begin a new life together.

Mahinda sincerely wished them happiness.

But the wedding was not yet over. He observed that a place in the hall had been cleared of chairs. Strains of music came forth, not the heavy tattoo of Kandyan drums but some heavy rhythmic beat of pop music. Chuti came and sat by him.

“You look great”, he said. “A real Dumbara Menike. I couldn’t recognise you at first.”

She was embarrassed by the compliment, but pleased. Her face was flushed.

“It was a lovely ceremony, wasn’t it? Ira Akkandi looked lovely.”

“Why, what about you and Ratna? You all looked wonderful, but you, were the best of them all,” he said.

But before she could speak further a smart young man came up to him and saying, “Excuse me uncle”, he turned to Chuti and extending his hand, he said, “May I?”

She did not seem to understand.

“I want to dance with you.” And as she demurred, “Come on, come on,” shouted the other young men in the group, and before she knew what had happened she was whisked off.

Mahinda watched the young couples dancing, their bodies swinging gracefully. They were laughing and sometimes singing, and as the couples wheeled round and round he felt he was being stifled.

He was about to leave this noisy place when his cousin Senerath spoke to him.

“Mahinda, I hear they have almost finalised the land acquisitions of Victoria.”

He had not met Senerath for a long time. One by one the others joined the group. The talk was nothing but Victoria—the dam, land acquisitions and compensation that was to be paid.

The noise was increasing. It was then that a lawyer friend of Mahinda’s introduced him to Mr. Jinasena, a businessman from Colombo and his wife.

“He has a little problem. Perhaps, you will be able to help him. I told him you’re the best man for it.”

“What’s it?” inquired Mahinda. “I’ll see what can be done.”

Getting closer and speaking almost into his ear Mr. Jinasena said, “I’m interested in buying a block of land overlooking the reservoir. Nice view and all that. Can you find one for me?”

How far these business men think—yes, even beyond the reservoir that has not yet been constructed thought Mahinda.

“I can’t think of anything just now,” replied Mahinda.

“Man, I hear some of these *gamayas* are real fools. They don’t know the value of their land. They say you can buy it for a song..”

Mahinda was angry. The words jarred on him even more than the music. At this stage, the businessman’s wife began to speak.

“Last week we went with a group of people to see this project and the town that is going under water. Can you believe it, there were some fine crotons and rare flowering plants in the gardens and when we asked the villagers whether they could sell some to us they just said, ‘Nona, take as much as you want.’ So we loaded the van with the stuff,” she chuckled. “Real fools, We were able to sell each slip in Colombo for twenty rupees!”

She had made a wonderful deal and gloated over it.

“So madam, did you give the villagers anything for their generosity?” he asked.

“Mad! What generosity? It was all yours for the asking. All for free. Not that,” she continued as though she had just thought of some bright idea. “Not that, you can put up a fine hotel on your land and have paying guests.” She went on and on.

“Madam, we never will have paying guests. If you ever wish to come to our village you can stay at our old walauwa and enjoy our hospitality. All for free.”

“My, I’d like to come and see some of your antiques. Must be having some rare pieces. Ah, Jine? We’ll go there one day.”

“You can come when the road to our village is constructed. At the moment the road to our place is long and impassable. Excuse me,” he said and left the group.

His head ached. The music was intolerable.

The gaiety jarred upon his spirits. He could not understand what joy Chuti found in dancing with these gyrating young fellows. Her zest for dancing surprised him.

They changed partners often. But Mahinda noticed that there was one handsome young man who more than any other was paying attention to Chuti. It took him some time to discern who he was. That handsome face that brought about Mahinda's complete discomfiture belonged to young Ravi, the groom's younger brother, who indeed had come to supplant him, even as a brother.

He walked towards the bar and had a drink. He realised that this was his third for the evening. He seldom drank—but he needed more than one drink to fortify himself today.

His agitation was great. He stood up. He left the hotel through a side entrance.

He walked to the parking lot. He took his car and drove it to the hotel porch. If anyone wanted a lift home, he could provide it. Otherwise he would drive straight home.

A stream of cars was slowly leaving amidst happy shouts and cheers. As he drew up there was only the same crowd of noisy youngsters. He looked above their heads but there was no one no relations or family members. Just then another car that was ahead of him reversed and came to an abrupt halt. The rear door opened and out stepped Chuti.

"Wait, wait," she said, waving her bouquet, "I'm coming with you. There is hardly any room in this car."

At last. He was glad, very glad.

He opened the door of his car for her to enter. And just as she got in, "Uncle, Uncle!" shouted the young men. "Take good care of her!"

"Uncle, don't drop her in the Mahaveli! Uncle, uncle!"

Chuti giggled and seemed not to mind this boisterousness in the least. He tore past the lake. His head was beginning to ache once more.

"It was a lovely, lovely wedding, wasn't it Aiyandi?" she asked.

"Yes," he said observing her animated face. She went on chatting happily. He was only conscious of her delicate presence.

He did not realise he was speeding till he almost crashed into a concrete structure that lay by the side of the road. With a streech of brakes the car came to an abrupt halt. And even as it did so, he thrust out a protective arm to stop her from hitting her face against the dashboard.

“Darling, are you hurt?” he asked her anxiously.

“No. I’m alright. But what happened? Where are we?” She was beginning to worry.

“Wait a minute. Let me see. My God, we are on the Hangu-ranketa road. Now let me think.” He placed his hands on the steering wheel and held his head. His head was befuddled. He shook his head a few times.

“I know what has happened. I have missed the bridge. We have to reverse. I missed the bridge,” he reiterated.

“And if you didn’t stop in time, you would have really dropped me in the river.” She laughed heartily.

“We would have both gone into the river,” he said.

She laughed louder than ever. Oh, she was a wonderful girl. She was great. She had the capacity to laugh even though she was on the brink of catastrophe.

Slowly and carefully, he reversed the car for a few hundred yards or so till he came to a massive concrete bridge. It lay athwart the Mahaweli, dwarfing the old Tennekumbura bridge.

“No wonder I missed the turn off to Teldeniya,” he said.

“Aiyandi, drive carefully, please,” she said.

“I will, my precious. Have no fear.”

He drove slowly in the dark. Each time they skirted the river, the water glistened in the headlights.

Neither of them spoke.

All of a sudden a mass of electric lights came into view.

“What’s that?” Chuti asked.

“That’s the new Digana complex. Most of the Victoria engineers live here. In time to come our village, too, will have lights like this.”

He halted the car. "I must check the tyres," he said, "and if you don't mind I'll smoke a cigarette."

Having checked the tyres, he leaned against the bonnet of the car and began to smoke. She watched him taking a deep breath as he inhaled the strong vapours. Already he felt his head clearing. She stepped out of the car and stood close to him.

"Oh! It's so cold," she said.

"Here, take my coat," he said, removing it and covering her shoulders with it.

The Mahaveli flowed like a silver ribbon. It was so peaceful here. And she was so close to him. He put one arm around her, and went on smoking.

"Let's go," he said when he had finished smoking. He led her gently to the car.

As he started the car he saw her bending down.

"What are you doing?" he asked her.

"I'm taking my shoes off. My feet are aching," She dragged the words.

"Mind if I sleep?" she asked. "I feel so tired."

"Not at all."

"But Aiyandi, you'll be careful, won't you?" she asked.

"Sleep, my little girl, you have nothing to fear," he said gently.

She placed her head on his shoulder and nestled against him. He adjusted the coat around her and drove home carefully—yes, he must drive carefully.

She fell asleep almost immediately. He could hear her breathing. He wanted to embrace her. But he needed all his powers to concentrate on his driving. The road had not been repaired for months, for this, too, would be drowned. The car bumped and groaned as he drove along the wretched road. They came to the doomed town of Teldeniya that had only a month or two more to live. Now the night was dark. It looked a ghost town already.

After crossing the bridge the car started climbing slowly up the hill to the village. As he reached the summit, he stopped the engine as he often did when he came here. He looked at her. She slept peacefully, the sleep of the innocent. He gazed long at the sleeping child. He was loathe to wake her.

Softly he touched her cheek with his fingers. She stirred.

“Chuti, wake up, wake up,” he said softly.

“Have we come home?” she asked.

“Not yet. In a few minutes we will. But I want you to take a last look at the Dumbara valley on a moonlit night.”

She opened her eyes wide.

The moon had risen like an enormous disc from behind the hills. The valley was bathed in a soft silvery light. The Hulganga flowed like a narrow ribbon of silver. Deep in the valley the people were asleep. Only the moaning wind rustled the trees.

He reached for her and held her tight. His lips brushed her hair and then her face. With a start she placed her hands on his shoulders and moved herself away from him. She flinched from his overt affection.

“Aiyandi,” she said with fear, “you have been.....”

“Drinking, my little girl, drinking,” he said. He took his hands off her and started the car.

He tore down the drive to Pahala Walauwa.

The door of the house was already open. He could see someone, covered in a blanket holding a lamp to let Chuti in.

“Good night,” she said and rushing out of the car like a phantom, she vanished into the house.

Punchirala, the watcher, had risen from the mat on the far end of the verandah where he had been sleeping.

Mahinda started the car. He remembered something.

“Punchirala,” he called. The man came to the car.

“Take these,” he said “they are Chuti Appe’s shoes.”

“It is very late,” the old man muttered in disapproval. He took the shoes. Mahinda tore up the hill, and did not stop till he reached home.

“What a fool, what a fool I have been,” he thought.

He did not even lock the car. He went to his room, changed hurriedly and fell on his bed.

His head ached. The noise—the music and those stupid pups. His head whirled.

“Don’t fall into the river!” Well we almost did.....“and crotons all for free.”

He was soon fast asleep.

Eight

Everyday for the last fifteen years or more Mahinda had gone to Pahala Walauwa to see how Sumana Nanda was getting on. He would have a quiet friendly chat with her and if his cousins were home for the holidays he spent a longer time with them. There were other days he would sit on the verandah and read the paper scarcely talking to Nanda. But whatever it was he was satisfied that all was well. If ever he went to town or to Kandy he did not fail to ask whether there was anything she wanted him to bring.

But the day after the wedding, he did not drop in at the house. Nor did he for several days after. He knew the children had gone back to school. He knew the reason that held him back.

But when Sumana Nanda sent him a message asking him to come he decided that it was time he visited her.

He must meet her to make arrangements to transport her belongings to the new house in Colombo, which she had finally bought.

He walked down the driveway and surveyed the house. What an elegant house it was. It was made of good seasoned timber. The front verandah which was open and not enclosed like the one in the older Ihala Walauwa, overlooked a stretch of paddy fields.

Large doors and windows let in the sunlight—unlike the smaller windows of the older house.

He stepped into the half empty sitting room and its forlorn look struck him hard. Almost all the furniture was stacked against the walls. He heard the whirring of a sewing machine.

Surely, she was not sewing at the eleventh hour? He went to the dining room where he saw Sumana Nanda, with a quick snip of the pair of scissors cut off the thread. She gave a quick flick to the flowered garment she had been sewing, then folded it neatly and placed it on the table....

“Ha, that’s done,” she said.

"Isn't it time you stopped all this sewing?" he said, looking at the neat pile of clothes.

"These are for Chuti. She's growing up so fast that she soon outgrows her clothes. I'll not be able to sew for sometime, so I thought I might as well sew these clothes now and send them to the hostel".

Mahinda did not speak.

"You didn't come this way for a long time," she said.

"I've been very busy." He rose from his seat. "I'll see what more has to be done."

He left the room to supervise the loading of the furniture into the lorry that had arrived.

Once the lorry was loaded it pulled out of the porch and with potted plants waving in the rear, it noisily climbed the hill. The fields were visible once again.

His memory went back to a day far off when he was a lad, waiting for the bridal party. As soon as he heard the sound of the drums he ran along the narrow path, scarcely two feet wide, that led to this house which was then very new. Loku Mama looked regal in his Kandyan chieftain's attire, with his straight back and broad shoulders. Beside him walked his demure bride Sumana Nanda wearing a saree that glistened in the morning sun. It was also reflected in the water that lay around the tender shoots that were rising from the paddy field.

Women who a while ago were bending and transplanting the tender paddy plants, straightened their backs and smiled. The proud groom declared. "Aren't you going to make use of your privilege?" and he gave a hearty laugh.

"Apoi! No." they said and they began to sing a joyful 'sivupada'.

*"Your hair sleekly oiled and combed,
An 'atamale' round your neck,
Your garments softly draped about your waist,
Let us go and reap the harvest, oh sister-in-law.
Their necks entwined with gems and pearl studded chains,
Their ears adorned with golden thodu round,
Their hands jingling with golden bangles round,
Their bodies clad with white osari."*

He couldn't remember the rest of the songs that described the beautiful Nanda who was coming to the village. It was his grand-uncle who asked him. "Do you know what the privilege is that your uncle spoke of?"

"No," he replied.

"Then know it now. Young man, it is a custom in our village that if a man brings a wife who is not pretty, and crosses a 'niyara', of a field, the women who are transplanting, if they happen to be there, have the privilege of throwing handfuls of mud at the couple. Ha! Ha! Ha!" he laughed. "So young man, remember this when you go looking for a bride. She must be beautiful—a woman to be proud of when you walk with her on the road."

The very recollection was amusing.

"Why are you laughing?" asked Sumana Nanda from behind.

"Was I?" he asked.

"Of course, you were. I could even see your shoulders shaking."

So he related the incident. He remembered Loku Mama very well. He was a man who always presented the government as an incompetent meddler. He prided himself on being a landlord—attuned to the land and fiercely independent. It was not surprising that Chuti had inherited more than her share of her father's independent spirit.

"How many years ago was it Nanda?" he asked.

"Twenty years ago, I was twenty years old. I remember you were going to school then." She paused. "How old would you have been?" she asked.

He made a mental calculation.

"I would have been fifteen years old."

"So you are only five years younger than I."

He caught the ominous quiet in her voice.

"Let's have some tea," she said. He followed her to the dining room. He sat on the chair while she poured him some tea. Slowly, they sipped the tea.

"Mahinda, I wish to speak to you."

He looked up.

"It's about Chuti."

There was a long pause of taciturnity.

"People are talking."

"What is there for people to talk about?"

"Don't be so naive, Mahinda. Do you think this place is different from any other village? Here, too, everyone knows what everyone else is doing."

Mahinda was at a loss for words.

"In fact, Aththamma spoke to me about the two of you."

"I didn't ask her to intercede on my behalf."

"I know you didn't but since you were delaying to broach the subject she took it upon herself to do so."

He was silent.

"Have you spoken to Chuti?"

"About what?" He was getting confused.

"What else, but your intentions, if you have any."

"Look, Nande," he said summoning up courage at last. "She knows I love her, yes very much. But as for marriage, I doubt whether she is mature enough to understand, to contemplate marriage."

"I think so too."

"Besides, there is another reason, more important. Do I have the right to ask her for her hand in marriage when I am so much older? All this is tormenting me, Nande. Will I be committing a sin? sometimes I ask myself."

He could not plead further either by strenuous appeal or elaborate arguments.

Sumana Nanda held him by his shoulder.

"Please Mahinda, don't speak to Chuti about marriage. Please don't. She's very young. She needs to go to school where she is doing very well. Let her be. Try not to meet her again."

He looked directly at her.

“The rest I promise you, but not this. I must meet her even once before she leaves the village. But you can trust me not to upset her”

“You are an honourable person. I can trust you. But meanwhile let her enjoy life a little bit more. Today’s children are freer than we were.”

The word “we” made him realise that she had put him into a different category—one that was much older, one that was closer to the role of a parent.

“Don’t think that I shall ever forget what you have done for us all these years. We had no problems here, whatsoever. But this is a different matter altogether.”

She paused. He realised that he was smoking heavily. He had never smoked in her presence before, but he went on.

“I might as well get it off my chest,” she continued at length.

“Just consider the life both Aththamma and I have been leading, both widowed very early, because we married men who were much older than ourselves.”

“I understand” he said rising from his seat. “I have been foolish. Don’t chide the child. I should have known better.”

“It’s not only Chuti I’m concerned about. You also mean a lot to me. I don’t want either of you to be hurt in any way in later years.”

He saw Sumana Nanda in a different light. She had an inner strength that he had not seen before.

“You can depend on me always,” he said “as before.”

“I must go now,” he added.

He walked along the verandah. Long shadows caused by the bleak sunshine filled the almost empty house. She saw him walk towards the heap of timber that was piled in the garden. He leaned against one of the few trees left, his shoulders sagging—lost in a long thoughtful silence. His hair was grey about his temples. She had not noticed it before. And she realised that although he must be very disappointed now, in the long run he would realise that she was right.

Black clouds, translucent at the edge, gathered on the horizon. He stood there for a long time watching the ominous darkening of the sky.

Nine

Tom-tom beaters arrived in the village. People ran to the road to listen to what they had to say.

“This is the final warning! The *Anthima Nivedanaya*. It is now January. You are hereby ordered to take all your belongings, vacate your houses and demolish them before the end of February. All houses that are to go under water have been numbered in black.”

All day long the valley echoed to the sound of hammers knocking down the walls of houses. Crowbars, axes and iron rods struck hard at the walls of brick and mortar. Wattle and daub houses were demolished with less effort. But before the walls were pulled down tiles and zinc roofs were removed. They could be used to build new shelters.

Almost every man, woman and child in the village, except the old and the infirm, worked. Labour was scarce so families got together just as they worked their fields, and demolished the houses one by one. Thousands of trees had to be felled. Men spat at their hands, picked up their axes and swung them at the massive jak and breadfruit trees and tall coconut palms that came crashing down, bearing with them the tangled pepper vines.

Men and elephants hauled the logs to the roadside. Timber and logs were piled high along the road. Timber merchants arrived in the town and village and bought the material for a reasonable price. So the villagers thought, for they were handling more money than they had ever handled before.

As each hill was cleared one could see another hill, beyond, shorn of its cover, like some slain vegetation god.

All day long the hammers pounded. Meals were forgotten. Each man, woman and child moved purposefully from one house to the other to break down the walls and salvage bricks and tiles.

There was no time now for recrimination. At first the people were deeply perplexed as to why of all the villages there were in

this country, theirs and theirs alone, should have been picked upon. But as time went on they accepted it stoically as part of their Karma, their fate.

Nevertheless, it was not such a bad Karma after all. It was even benevolent. Those who had been *ande* cultivators, growing paddy that belonged to others were getting land in the dry zone. It meant getting accustomed to a drier climate and practising a different form of agriculture. But they would still be using the water that flowed down their own river. For the massive irrigation channels would carry their own water past the Victoria dam to nurture their new fields. And what was more, they would own the land they cultivated. It was not a bad Karma, not bad at all. Three acres of land down stream at Ulhitiya or Talawa for paddy cultivation and half an acre of highland was compensation enough.

Those who lost their own paddy fields or houses, too, received compensation which was considered adequate. Not so the people who lost land on account of the highway that was going to run through the village. With the money they got, they doubted whether they would be able to buy alternative land elsewhere. It was very unlikely. So they did not experience the euphoria of the others. They felt that somehow or other they had been cheated. So they lived in hope expecting that their loss would be made good by getting land at that same price in any of the new towns that were planned.

At night the people returned to their temporary lodgings. Huddled in their relations' homes which were now overcrowded, they talked far into the night. They were exhausted.

"The Victoria dam is almost completed. It is 400 feet high," announced one.

"It is bigger than the Abhayagiri dagoba," said another.

"Buddu Ammo! As tall as that?" asked someone else.

"Why not? If it is going to submerge more than 5000 acres!"

"And 283 villages."

"All the land below the 1417 feet contour line. That's the line. Everything below that goes."

Their spirits were at their lowest when they had these discussions. The pressure of Victoria was pervasive. They had to leave their ancestral lands, the lands where their dead lay buried,

and where they themselves hoped someday to lay their weary bones, in a final resting place. But now the time had come to leave their temples and their gods and the land they loved.

Wearily, they lay down to sleep. Then, the night fell silent.

Pahala Walauwa was one of the best houses to be demolished. Its value could not be assessed in rupees and cents. Nevertheless, with the compensation Sumana Nanda received and some of her savings, her brother was able to buy a house for her next door to his. It had only a very small front garden. But the house was solid and had a pleasant appearance.

The enclosed front verandah led to a sitting room and a dining room. Along its length ran a corridor with doors leading to three large bedrooms into which sunlight streamed in. The kitchen and pantry in the rear of the house overlooked a more spacious courtyard with a shady mango tree occupying the centre.

Sumana Nanda had already gone to Colombo. Ira was away in England. Ratna and Chuti were in the boarding school. It was understandable that none of them would want to be here when their home was demolished. Mahinda must accomplish that job and leave no trace of the house when the family came for their last holiday at Ihala Walauwe.

For five days the labourers removed the tiles and stacked them neatly in the compound. Next the door and window frames were taken down. Each day that Mahinda came to the house to supervise the work his heart grew heavier. Wherever he looked he could picture Chuti. He recalled the lively cherished companionship of his young cousin. Each day he saw the desolation, his spirits ebbed.

He crossed the threshold of this shell of a house that had once echoed to the sound of laughter and children singing. He wandered from room to room till he came to what was known as the 'big room.'

Here a baby was born. Fifteen years ago when he was still a youth he remembered how he had tapped at the door one dawn. Even as he neared the house, he could hear the infant crying.

He had heard Aththamma say that the baby hadn't enough mother's milk and that was the reason she cried so much.

He had known that Kiri Naida's cow had calved. He had set off before dawn in the cold mist and asked for a bottle of milk and brought it here. Aththamma could not believe her eyes when he unwrapped the newspaper which covered the pure white bottle of milk, that was still warm.

"You will be blessed my boy," she said as she gratefully reached for the bottle. "Now the infant will stop crying." She never forgot what he had done that day.

And today that infant was a young woman and he loved her.

Through the long afternoon and far into the night, in the light of petromax lamps, the workmen broke down the walls. It took only ten days to demolish the house that had taken two years to build and nearly two decades to give it character. A bulldozer would have accomplished it in a couple of minutes.

The demolition of Pahala Walauwe was complete. No one would have known that here people had lived.

Only the scars remained.

In a few days time Sumana Nanda and the two girls would also come back to spend a few days with Mahinda and Aththamma at Ihala Walauwe. Mahinda had done everything possible to make their stay as comfortable as possible.

He was well in time for the Colombo train that arrived at the Kandy railway station to meet Sumana Nanda. She looked calm as usual and inquired after Aththamma. She told him she was very comfortable in Colombo even though it was much hotter and noisier than the village.

When they reached the school the girls were awaiting them. Just as at other times they were happy to go home for the holidays.

They had many questions to ask their mother whom they had not met for some time. Mahinda had not met the girls ever since

Ira's wedding. He felt he must make conversation with them but he found he was tongue-tied. So he drove on while they chatted with their mother.

Suddenly, there was a deadly silence. They were seeing the destruction of the houses for the first time. They felt as if some hideous earthquake had struck the entire country side. He hurried past the town of Teldeniya and as he climbed the hill, through the windshield mirror he saw that they were all softly crying.

He drove as fast as he could, past the turn to their former home, and reached Ihala Walauwe.

It was a journey they would remember for the rest of their lives.

The days dragged on. Ratna and Chuti were not happy. Often the two girls argued. If they began a game of Scrabble or cards, it always ended in recriminations.

"Stop quarrelling, you two", Sumana Nanda would shout, "You are driving me mad."

Mahinda understood that all these ill feelings in this otherwise friendly family were due to the stress they were undergoing owing to the loss of their home. It was as though some evil hand was driving them to this state.

Each one of them reacted to the situation in a different way. Ratna was turning out to be a spiteful girl. Sumana Nanda was losing her calmness and becoming impatient. All the while Athamma found comfort in her bed.

Chuti, too, adapted poorly to the change. Often she was in tears.

One day when Mahinda was returning from work he saw her under the beli tree, sobbing her heart out. He felt sorry that she should look so forlorn.

She began to cry uncontrollably.

"Aiyandi, take me away" she said between her tears.

"Come Chuti, let's go to the river."

Hand in hand they walked down the path and as he turned towards the kumbuk tree, she pulled away and cried. "No, no, never again will I go there."

Without a moment's hesitation he took her to a place from where they could not see even a single branch of the kumbuk tree nor any part of the path leading to Pahala Walauwe.

"We're going to Colombo" said Chuti after a while.

"I know."

"Amma says the house is very nice."

"So she said."

"What's the matter with you?" she demanded angrily.

There she goes, he thought, like Ratna. I must do something to placate her. He must be patient.

"Why don't you say something?" she asked.

"What is there for me to say?"

"Anything. Just anything."

"You know what I really want to say, Chuti," he said softly.

"What is it you want to say?" It was more a demand than a request.

"Chuti I don't want you to go away. Don't you want to stay back, here?"

"Here?" she asked in a contemptuous tone.

"Yes, here. I will be here."

"I know you will be here. But for you it will always be the same."

"And with you?"

"I'm going. And as long as I live I'll never go anywhere there," she said pointing in the direction of the house and the tree.

Her eyes leaped in a wild fury. He caught it in the glint of her eyes.

"I'll always be reminded of our home so I'm going away."

"But Chuti," he began. He thought he would plead with her one last more chance. "You can stay here, at Ihala Walauwe."

"You'll never understand," she said.

"Why, why do you say that?"

"Because you've been always stuck to this place. You don't want to see an inch beyond your village. You're old, as old as everything in this ancient place," she lashed out like some creature possessed.

When he heard the ominous words he felt an excruciating pain in his heart. It almost stopped beating. She did not notice the pained look on his face.

She was resolute. She wanted to get away from this defaced countryside. She wished to be alone like some wicked obdurate creature.

She went stubbornly to the rocky ledge and sat on the edge, swinging her legs, angrily.

He looked beyond her at the river flowing in the deep ravine. The difference in their ages could never be bridged. It was deeper than the ravine itself. He knew it would separate them some day. But this outburst? He had never, never, expected it from her.

He felt the weight of all his years as he began to climb the hill very slowly. His breath came rapidly. He was panting. If it was a farewell, he had expected to part in a civilized manner but never this way.

He had gone a few steps when she cried after him. "Aiyandi, wait." He was determined not to stop.

"Please, please. Don't leave me," she cried. Panting, she came running after him. He tried to brush her aside.

"Please don't go," she cried again. It was a pitiful cry. Her eyes were full of tears. She became contrite. He put his arms about her and held her.

"Its alright," he said.

The tenseness between them began to subside. The pressure at his temples eased.

"I'm sorry, terribly sorry I said such wicked things to you. What is happening to all of us that we should quarrel so?" she asked.

"It's all this change we see around us. It affects us all in different ways. Only a few can withstand it," he explained.

"I feel so afraid, sometimes," she confided.

"There's no need to be afraid. Things will turn out well. You are very young, and the whole world is before you."

He held her firm to reassure her, but he knew that all that he had come to love and hold as his very own would be changed forever.

"The place will change but what is the reason for the people to change?"

"It is the pressure of these sudden changes. But later there will come a time when all this will be forgotten. There will be better times ahead. But let's not talk about all this. Let's talk of something else."

And then he remembered the night of Ira's wedding.

He held her hand and said apologetically, "I meant to talk to you about this a long time ago, but I got no opportunity. I'm sorry for my ill temper and churlish behaviour."

"Today? Now? Why? It is I who was so rude to you."

"No that's not what I'm talking about. It's about the night I brought you home after Ira's wedding."

"There's no need to apologise. I have forgotten it long ago."

"All the same please forgive me."

"Everything is forgiven," she said.

He pressed her hand affectionately. "Yes, everything. That is how it will be between us. That is how it must always be."

Slowly, he drew his arms about her.

She stood on her toes and looked into his face. He held her to his heart and kissed her upturned face. The whole expanse of blue sky spread overhead. And at that moment he knew that he must not ask her to be his wife. She was young and the whole world lay before her. She must be free to test her wings and fly like the paddy bird. If he were to marry her he would only entrap her in a golden cage and in the years to come her song would lack its joy and sweetness. It would become only a plaintive cry. So he held her in his arms. He could feel her heartbeat beneath her dress.

"I'll always love you, my little one" he said and he knew that it would be always so to the very end.

Ten

It was now time for the first batch of settlers to leave their mountain girt village for their houses were demolished. Wijekoon Banda, Tikiri Banda and ten others formed the advance guard that moved to Talawa. The latter and his family spent their last night at Ihala Walauwa. A few days earlier Mahinda had accompanied Tikiri Banda to town to help him buy zinc sheets, door frames, timber, bricks, planks and all the other things even nails and nuts and bolts to build his new house at Talawa. It would be better than the thatched cottage in which they had lived all these years.

These people were not wealthy by any means but the ability to purchase their requirements without being indebted was an emancipation by itself.

Meanwhile, the women built up their stocks of rice, coconuts, pepper and spices. They wove coconut fronds to thatch their *wadiyas* that would be their temporary houses till the permanent ones were built. Everybody in the village participated in the pirth ceremony that was held at the Purana Vihara. Next day alms were offered to twenty monks. Vows were made as they were going to a new land. They sorely needed the blessings of their gods.

In the forenoon eleven lorries from the Mahaweli Board arrived. The building materials, foodstuffs, the pots and pans were loaded into the lorries.

Not all the members of these families could go at first. Old parents, young children and most of the women stayed behind. The men would come for them later.

Almost all the youths accompanied their relations to build the houses and clear the land. This was their first big adventure.

The women placed in the lorries the *adukku petti* that contained the meal the men would partake of when they arrived at Talawa.

It was a sad leave taking as the women worshipped their men and children fell at their fathers' feet.

"*Api gihing ennang*", they said as they took their seats in the lorries.

The engine revved. There was a shout of **'Sadhu! Sadhu!'** and Punchi Banda's voice that usually echoed in the valley as he drove the buffaloes to the plough was heard above the rest. Leaving a trail of dust the lorries disappeared. The young ones ran behind them, as far as their legs could carry them.

"*Aney! Apoi!*" was all that the old people gathered at the ambalama could say as they looked with disbelief at this sudden uprooting.

After a few weeks the pioneers returned one by one. When Tikiri Banda came back Mahinda asked him how it was at Talawa, **"Not bad, not bad at all. We have been treated well. We were given knives and mammoties to clear the land. Even torches and lanterns."**

"And what about food?" he asked.

"May the gods be praised, we are given rice, dhall, green gram, coconuts, sugar and dryfish every fifteen days. We are very well off. We even get water delivered to us in bowsers."

Things were not so bad, after all, and he hoped it would be just as good for all the others who would be uprooted from the village. He prayed it would be even better for Sumana Nanda and her children.

"But it is very difficult to be away for long periods from our wives and little ones, so we must come back whenever we get the opportunity. So I have come back, just for a short time," said Tikiri Banda.

Eleven

It was imperative that Mahinda should spend even a few moments with Chuti alone, undisturbed. It was her last day in the village. But he had important business at Randeniya. If he started early, perhaps, he could contrive some way.

As he went down the steps of the house, Chuti came running behind.

“Aiyandi, where are you going?”

“To Randeniya,” he said.

“I’ll come;” she said, “wait for me.”

“I’ll be there for a long time.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said.

“It’s very hot at this time. You’ll have to cover your head.”

She ran into the house and came back in a moment wearing a pretty straw hat that framed her round face.

“That suits you well,” he said.

She was pleased.

“We’ll have to walk. No cart ride this time. The bulls get scared. The tractors and bulldozers are at work.”

They walked a few hundred yards or so and then were compelled to stop. It was amazing the way the bulldozer gorged the hillside, pouring the red earth down the hill, flattening the land. Massive boulders of granite came tumbling down. People gathered and watched in awe this spectacle. Then when the dump trucks came, the village lads scrambled into them. Singing and waving to the people on the roadside they went happily to the construction site where the new Orutota bridge was being built.

Farther on the road a tall dark man came with a kind of confident swagger. He had a fountain pen in his shirt pocket. His wrist watch was a large square one. Several rings gleamed on his fingers. When he saw Mahinda he bowed with a form of deference.

"Going somewhere?" he asked.

"Yes, to my land," replied Mahinda and passed on.

"Who's that man?" asked Chuti in a whisper.

"He's the Mudalali."

"We never had a Mudalali before?"

"Well, he's now the king of the road! All those young fellows think the world of him."

They reached Randeniya. There was a small one roomed house with a narrow verandah where Punchi Rala and Kiri Banda were seated, awaiting Mahinda's arrival.

They stood up when they saw Mahinda.

"I got your message," he said. Pointing to a rustic bench under the tamarind tree, he asked Chuti to sit there for a little while till he discussed some matter with the two men.

She was entranced by the tranquillity of the landscape. But above the cooing of the wild pigeons she heard the men's voices.

"This is the last harvest from Randeniya and it is a good one. I have worked this field from the time I can remember with our Appachchi. But Punchi Rala tells me there is talk," said Kiri Banda.

"It is Pelis who is behind this. He and the Mudalali are now in one camp. They say that since all the paddy field owners have been paid compensation for these fields, we need not give the share to the owners."

"Thoo!" said Kiri Banda spitting in contempt. "Those ungrateful bastards. They forget that if not for people like the Kumarihamy who always gave us rice and coconuts even our muscles would not have been strong to do any type of work, let alone ploughing these fields."

"They say the Mudalali is ready to pay an advance for the crop," said Punchi Rala in a whisper.

"We'll see, we'll see" said Kiri Banda, "As long as I have these two eyes, upon my mother I swear that this last harvest is taken to the *atuwa* in the *walauwa*. Don't fear. I'll bring all my boys to harvest the field. The work at Talawa can wait. We'll keep watch at night."

Faithful Kiribanda. People like him are hard to find today. They are rarer than gems, mused Mahinda.

He knew that from tonight till the harvest was reaped there would be ten men keeping watch. And the ten men would all be the sons of Kiribanda who was mightier and more noble than any monarch of this village.

The men prepared to leave.

"It's late now. Don't linger. You had better take Chuti Appe home now. The road is not safe now for young girls. Things are not the same as they were before," said Punchi Rala.

"We'll not be long," said Mahinda.

Mahinda watched the men depart. Then he went and sat by Chuti on the bench.

From this point they could see the fertile valley.

He was lost in thought.

"Change, change, everywhere," he said in desperation. "So many things to tear people apart. Last week there was a fight over a boundary when one man claimed the land that he had been occupying illegally.

"It's all because land values have gone up and people have become greedy. They are not satisfied with what they have. They want more and more," he paused. "But Chuti, let all this not spoil the few moments we have together."

He held her by the waist and drew her close to him.

Far away men were reaping the last harvest of the fields of Alutwela. Women in gaily printed chintzes were carrying the sheaves on their heads to the threshing floor. Round and round the buffaloes went, trampling the harvest, separating the grain from the straw.

"Oo oa! o o oa!" shouted a man as he drove the animals round and round in the warm afternoon sun. "*Pita Pichenavo...o...!*"

A little closer stretched the Randeniya field. Next week the paddy will be harvested. The wind blew through the golden stalks that swayed like golden waves in quick succession.

"Chuti," said Mahinda, "do you know that we are looking at the Dumbara valley for the last time, the valley where our ancestors lived, yours and mine? The valley across which, once long ago, a king rode on an elephant and marvelled at the fertility of the land, that produced the golden paddy which touched his palanquin. And he declared. "This is, indeed, a 'liyadda' full of paddy, and so he gave the name of Karalliyadde to our village."

He was almost lost in a trance. He went on.

"And then he sent for the farmers who tilled the land. They were our forefathers—yours and mine. And he gifted the golden field to them."

"The golden field of Randeniya," she said. With veneration she pronounced the name. "See how the sun shines on the ripened paddy."

"This is our hallowed valley. This is how it should always be etched in our memory. Ran-deniya," he said.

On a distant hill a light flickered. Then, suddenly, like a myriad stars more lights began to twinkle.

"Look, Aiyandi! It's beautiful. I've never seen that before."

"They are the lights above the Victoria dam. There," he said pointing in that direction. "If you look hard you'll see a light gray structure. Do you see it?"

"Yes," she said.

"That's the Victoria Dam."

"Ah, so it's risen so high that we can see it this far?"

"Yes, that's the massive dam that wants a whole valley drowned to store water to feed its powerful machines!"

She noticed an edge in his voice, a sharpness that she had never heard before. His face was dark.

She held his hand. "But the sacrifice will not be in vain."

Now it was her turn to console him. "There will be development. This same water will nurture many more fields. There will be power to run the machines. There will be more production and people will have work. It is for the good of our whole country."

He looked at her in admiration. She who at first had resisted change was now prepared to accept it. Why shouldn't he?

'Old trees die, new shoots grow up'. He remembered those words. It was so in nature. It was so in everything. Nothing was permanent.

"Thank you Chuti. I have been stupid. Yes, I see that it has to be this way. We had better go now, but I want to make one small request." She looked at him inquiringly.

"I want you to sing the song of our valley, that you and your sisters often sang as children."

She demurred at first, but with a little coaxing softly she began to sing the song of the Dumbara reapers.

*"Dumbara Kethe weta bendala rekum belum
Maweli gange diya bendala kethata gilum
Dumbara liyo kara osawa balana belum
Thumpath ratawaki dumbara kethe nelum."*

*"In the Dumbara fields protective fences have been erected,
Mahaweli waters have been diverted to flood the fields.
Dumbara women arch their necks and glance around,
In a triangular design paddy has been transplanted
In the fields of Dumbara."*

The rustle of the wind among the leaves of the tamarind tree was her accompaniment. Far away an elephant bathing in the river rose slowly to his feet. With water streaming down his sides he heaved himself to the bank. A young boy drove the loitering cattle from the harvested fields to his homestead.

Above the broken tree line the white spire of Bambaragala temple thrust upward to the sky. They sat silently, bound by an affinity, watching the scene for the last time.

A strident horn rent the air. Then followed an explosive burst of dynamite, somewhere along the new road. Rocks and stones, the very bowels of the earth that had lain dormant from the beginning of time, were hurled into the air.

Chuti clung to Mahinda. He held her shivering body close to his heart as he beheld the mountain tumbling down. It was symbolic of the uprooting of everything that he had come to love and hold as his own. The sun sank behind the low hill and all the gold that bathed the valley was gone.

The lights of Victoria sparkled in the distance.

“Hm, let’s go” he said.

He put a protective arm around her as they walked home.

A cold breeze blew from the valley.

By the time they reached home the lamps were already lit.

A little while later Victor Mama arrived in his car.

“The drive from Kandy was terrible,” he said. “I have never been on such a bad road before.”

“It’s not surprising,” said Mahinda. “Most of it will go under water. The next time you come here you will drive along the new highway.”

Everything will be new, he thought to himself, even our relationships with those we have known.

Twelve

They sat around the dining table for dinner. There was an atmosphere of warmth as they sat there in the lamplight. The cutlery shone in a soft glow, on the white table cloth. Sumana Nanda drew the steaming dish of rice to serve Aththamma and her brother Victor. When she had finished serving them Aththamma held her hand.

"That's enough. Let me serve you children with my own hand."

One by one the plates were passed on and she served a generous helping for each one.

"Go on, eat," she said.

As they ate, they talked animatedly. The conversation was mainly about the new town that was going to come up at Karalliyadde.

"Soon you should have electricity" said Victor. "But there is nothing to equal the warmth of lamplight in a cosy room."

"I remember the time we used Kekuna oil to light our lamps, when we were little" said Aththamma. "There were so many Kekuna trees then. Now even if you want it for a medicine I don't think you will find one. As children we played with the seeds. Oh, I remember my cousin Paba. She could pick up twenty Kekuna seeds in her palm, all in one sweep, yes, all in one sweep."

She went on and on recalling her childhood.

"There was a time when so many people died of malaria. There wasn't a day when we did not hear the 'mini bera.' How many people were carried on chairs strung on the shoulders of the stronger men, and taken to the hospital. When it rained the river was a torrent. No one could get across it. So when our Heen Mama became the 'Sabhapathy' he made this road with the help of the other men in the village. He should have lived today to see them turning it into such a great big road."

"And when Loku Malli brought his new car to take us to the Maligawa you should have seen the cattle." She began to laugh merrily.

“They ran all the way to Bimpussa with their tails in the air. So, everytime he set off in the car he had to send a message to the cattle owners to tie up their cattle when he sounded the horn.”

They did not realise that almost one hour had passed while Aththamma related these interesting stories.

“I almost forgot to tell you this,” she continued. “You know the year they had martial law? The Muslim riots?” she asked.

“I think it was in 1916 or so,” said Victor.

“Well, it was a terrible time. So all the children were hidden in that *atuwa*.

They all began to laugh.

“Why do you laugh?” she asked. “We were so frightened of the white soldiers. That’s why we had to hide.”

“One of you should write all these things down” said Victor. “In later years when this is a big town all these things will be forgotten.”

The big wall clock struck the hour of nine.

“It’s very late. You children have to get up in the morning,” said Aththamma.

They rose from the table. The table was cleared. While the ladies retired to their rooms Mahinda and Victor went to the sitting room to smoke. The wicks in the lamps were lowered. Only the glow of their cigarettes could be seen as they chatted far into the night.

On the next morning after breakfast it was time for Sumana and her daughters to leave Karalliyadde.

“Come here my little ones,” said Aththamma. She stretched out her hands to the two girls. Then she put her hand inside her jacket and drew a small bundle which she placed carefully on the table. The girls looked on. They were soon joined by the rest of the family. She undid the knotted ball of muslin. She opened the tissue paper within. There lay two beautiful necklaces of gold beads and two silver waist chains.

“These are for you two. I have given Ira’s ones to her before she went away. Here, Sumane, my hands are not steady. Put the necklaces around their necks.”

Their mother did so. The two girls were very pleased. They looked down and felt the beads round their necks and smiled.

Then they were given the two waist chains.

“Wear your ‘hawadiya’ as well,” she told them.

When this too was done she said, “Now look this way. I want to see you.”

The girls looked at her. Everybody admired them.

“Now you two look like Dumbara Menikes.”

She was greatly pleased. The girls hugged her.

“It’s time to go,” said Victor after a few minutes.

Sumana Nanda fell at Aththamma’s feet and worshipped her.

“Our mother, we are going,” she said.

“Don’t say that. Say, *gihing ennang*—We will go and return.”

Then she kissed the hands of her daughter-in-law. “May the Triple Gem bless you. You have led an honourable life and have been a dutiful daughter to me.”

Then like the floodgates opening, both mother-in-law and daughter-in-law began to weep, embracing each other.

One by one the girls fell at their grandmother’s feet and bade her goodbye. Mahinda worshipped Sumana Nanda. The two girls fell down and worshipped their cousin Mahinda.

As Chuti fell at his feet Mahinda’s grief was great. He bent down to help her up. When she stood up he saw her tear-stained face. He gathered her in his arms.

“My little Chuti,” he whispered.

“*Gihing Ennang Aiyandi*,” she said softly.

They moved to the porch where the car was parked.

They got into the car one by one. Mahinda closed the door. In a moment it was gone leaving a cloud of dust in its wake.

Thirteen

Mahinda walked down to the kumbuk tree and leaned against it. Far to the left he could see the abandoned town of Teldeniya. It was now a ghost town—something exposed in all its nakedness.

He closed his eyes for a moment. Chuti was like a fawn dodging among the trees. And she was never more tantalising as when she surprised him suddenly from behind a tree and shut his eyes tight from behind and cried excitedly "Guess who, guess who." And then he pretended not to know who it was, and when he opened and beheld her with her hair thrown carelessly across her breast..... He was only dreaming.

Tears filled his eyes. He looked towards the desolate town. No trees impeded his view.

A little white speck approached the bridge. He recognised the car. It sped across the bridge, climbed the steep hill and disappeared from view.

The words came sadly to his lips.

"Oh Chuti, Chuti" he whispered. "Why were you not born fifteen years earlier? Then you need not have gone away. You could have always stayed here with me. But if ever you should return I shall be waiting for you."

Thirteen

On a late July evening Mahinda watched the low clouds heavy with moisture gathering in the horizon. Lightning flashed across the sky revealing the countryside now naked and pitiful, robbed of its luxuriant vegetation.

Punchi Rala came breathlessly up the steps. He was usually a calm man of quiet demeanour. But not so today. His voice was agitated. "The water level is rising fast," he announced. "Rambukwella village is submerged. If it rains tonight, they say the water will reach the Teldeniya bridge. Ammo! This is like the end of the world!" he groaned, striking his forehead with his hands.

"What did you say?"

It was Aththamma. Neither Mahinda nor Punchi Rala had heard her approach.

"Walauwe hamuduruwo! The water is rising and many parts of our village and most of the town have gone! Even the clock tower can hardly be seen. Aiyo! Aiyo!" he wailed.

"The clock tower, too?" asked Aththamma incredulously. "Then the ground on which Pahala Walauwe stood, too, must be no more", she said ever so slowly, as she dragged her feet back into the house.

Some time later when Mahinda went into the house Aththamma was in her bed with a sheet covering her from head to toe.

Punchi Menika was seated on a low stool by her side gently stroking her mistress' head.

Mahinda went to the dining hall, lowered the wick of the lamp and retired to his room.

All night long the storm raged. Enormous amounts of water roared down the hillside washing away the freshly dug earth. But towards dawn the rain ceased.

The morning was cloudless. Mahinda walked purposefully towards the kumbuk tree where he had not been for nearly two months.

But what he saw was a vast expanse of water stretched across the land obliterating forever the beautiful vale of Dumbara. He stood almost reverently before this massive body of water that spread as far as the eye could see.

At various points people had gathered to watch the water rise. Their voices drifted.

“Apoi! Look at the town!”

But there was no town, no bridge—nothing but water.

The water dazzled in the morning sun. There had been no devastating rush of angry water. Instead there had been an imperceptible rise in its level day by day and week by week, silently, slowly and insidiously. He could not but marvel at the size of the reservoir. that held the vast spread of the Mahaveli water. How incredibly beautiful and awesome it was.

And the 122 metres high doubly curved Victoria dam that he had seen a few months ago was dwarfed by the water gathering behind it

He was humbled by the ingenuity of the men that could have built a dam so big and strong. Most of them were young Lankan engineers and even one of them, Gamini, was a distant relation. The reservoir would provide water not only to the people here, but to those who had gone to Ulhitiyawa. It would irrigate more than a hundred thousand acres of land. And when the flood gates are opened this surging body of water will provide power for an entire nation.

Mahinda looked to his left. Where the Multi-Purpose Co-operative store had stood there loomed the grim skeleton of what had once been a brick building. Whatever could have been removed had long since been carried away by the owners. There were gaping holes where there had been doors and windows earlier.

Here and there a blackened wall stood up revealing a hearth where a mother had cooked the pot of rice day in and day out for her husband and children.

A few intrepid youths and children strode across the bridge that was submerged clinging on to the railings as a guide. Some cyclists wheeled their bicycles across the submerged bridge shouting "Last time! Last time!" and ringing their bells furiously.

"What is there for these good-for-nothing rascals to laugh about?" murmured the older men who were on the tattered roofs removing the rafters that showed like ribs of a skeleton.

Silently, Mahinda stood on the bank taking in the scene that unfolded before him. Gone were the familiar haunts of his ancestral village and gone, too, were most of his people. In a few years people will, perhaps, forget that there ever was a valley such as the one at Dumbara with its pulsating life and its rich history.

The spire of Bambaragala Vihare rose above the placid waters, now so far removed by the massive Victoria Reservoir that had buried forever much of the beautiful village of Karalliyadde where he and all his ancestors were born, and where they had been buried. He could hear the ringing of crowbars and a grating noise. People were furiously breaking the few remaining walls of houses to salvage whatever they could.

He realised with much sadness that he would never see the green paddy fields of Randeniya ever again, nor the reapers reaping the golden paddy as they sang the songs of Dumbara. There were no more harvests to be brought home. The *atuwa* in the *walauwe* would gradually be empty.

He tried to locate the place where Pahala Walauwe once stood. But only the topmost branches of the kumbuk tree rose above the water.

Here, hundreds of paddy birds nested chirping desperately unable to comprehend the disappearance of their feeding grounds.

They were pecking and quarrelling and flitting to and fro from branch to branch.

All of a sudden two birds paired off. They rose into the sky, chirping and reeling. After a while, however, one of them flew back into the branches. Occasionally, it flapped its wings. It rose a few feet in the air, but flew back lamely once again to its nest, piteously chirping all the while. It was loathe to leave its nest.

But his companion rose into the sky chirping merrily, winging its way gracefully across the water towards the farther shore. This

solitary paddy bird soared higher and higher and as its cry grew fainter and fainter, the great big sky swallowed it, and it was seen no more.

“I’m like that lame bird” mused Mahinda. “I will stay here forever. And Chuti—she’s like the little paddy bird that flew away.”

He looked once more at the large body of water. The splendid fields had vanished. The beautiful Dumbara vae was gone. The water was placid and still.

With a searing pain he realised that the river had stopped flowing.

THE END

PUBLIC LIBRARY
SPECIAL COLLECTION

PUBLIC LIBRARY
JAFFNA

GLOSSARY OF SINHALA WORDS

Aiyandi	—	elder brother
Akkandi	—	elder sister
Aththamma	—	grandmother
Putha	—	son
Avassa massina	—	cross-cousin, usually mother's brother's son, or father's sister's son
Duwa	—	daughter
Ambalama	—	wayside resting place
Atuwa	—	barn to store paddy
Binna	—	A Kandyan form of marriage where the husband lives in the wife's home and has equal rights as a son of the family. Matrilocal marriage
Aiya	—	elder brother
Gamayasa	—	derogatory term meaning country bumpkin
Anthima nivedanaya	—	last and final notice
Api gihing ennang	—	We shall go, but return
Apachchi	—	father
Mini bera	—	drums beaten for the dead.
Chuti	—	little one
Ande cultivator	—	a share cropper

PUBLIC LIBRARY

JAFFNA

SPECIAL COLLECTION

210202

9027 C.C.



This story set in Sri Lanka is historically true.

Lalitha Karalliadde Witanachchi who grew up in the village of Karalliyadde in Pata Dumbara experienced the anguish of the inhabitants of Teldeniya as their lands were acquired and their homes submerged by the Victoria Reservoir.

With deep understanding of village culture she writes this moving novel with empathy as only one who has been born and bred in a Kandyan village can write, of the forces that tear people apart as the rising waters drown the beautiful Dumbara Valley.

Lalitha K. Witanachchi is a Geography Honours graduate and has a post graduate Diploma in Education. She won the University Exhibition for Geography and after graduation taught in schools in Nuwara Eliya, Anuradhapura, Kalutara, Kurunegala, Kandy and Colombo.

For two years she was a Senior Master Lecturer in Haliru Abdu Teachers' College in Birnin Kebbi, Sokoto, Nigeria. On her return to Sri Lanka in September, 1981, she joined the Daily News as a Journalist attached to the Features Desk. She is a perspicuous and prolific writer of feature articles, short stories and poems.

She won the first prize in the Short Story Contest of New Writing, 1984, organised by the Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia.

She had her education at Hillwood College, Kandy.

ISBN 955-95394-0-1

Cover drawing by: Stanley Kirinde

Offset by ANCL Commercial Printing Dept. Digitized by Noolaham Foundation. aavanaham.org