SOME MIDDLE CLASS SRI LANKANS

18

SHORT STORIES

GERTRUDE DE LIVERA

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FOREWORD

Direct and enjoyable as they are, Gertrude de Livera's slim collection of short stories proffers rather more than entertainment and the evident pleasure of reading in the quarter-hours between office or house-work. The firm structure and the restraint of style, as much as the pervasive yet understanding satire reveal a balanced and mature vision of the world tempered by humour and humaneness, an awareness of what is both ridiculous and wistful in the best laid plans of mice and men.

Her characters, like many we know from the inside or outside do not ask for too much from life; their requests are modest, and they are realistic enough to make sacrifices to gain their ends: Merril Namasivayam, for instance, is prepared to sacrifice youthful sympathies and social awareness as well as present pleasures for an ideal future in **Great Aspirations**. The steady shrinkage of his expectations and the factors that cause it are traced in a fashion that shows an alert recognition of socio-economic facts and related psychological states.

It is this particular warp and woof that also forms the basis of **When The Party was Over**; the characters with their varied hopes are shaken and shifted into varying states of mind as the party is planned for and experienced. Everything is seen through the eyes of the characters: facts and people become the creatures of a mood or a mentality, the authorial presence is invisible and narrative is a subjective record in three distinct voices until the cool objectivity of the morning after.

Discarded Leaves deals with the poignant paradox of parenthood, that the successful realization of a dream preludes its end. Wisely, the story is set in the tranquil unsophisticated fifties, and the depiction of an unsatisfactory shipboard farewell between mother and son is presented with a keenness of observation and psychological penetration that mark the perceptive writer.

Gertrude de Livera's deep and sustained interest in literature has served her well, since it has not had the weakening influence of introducing distracting foreign echoes into the texture of the

stories, nor any hint of imitativeness; it has on the other hand equipped her with a skill in using concrete details in such a manner as to throw light on a character or situation, or a complete way of living and thinking. It is this freedom from superficiality that gives the stories additional value.

The author's bold use of symbols is illuminating and adds a apidary qualiy to these stories of human hopes, endeavour and loss. Solid and credible, her characters with their passionate drive towards self-fulfilment within their small spheres, become recognisable as Everyman and our critical amusement or enjoyment of the poise with which the author works is merged in a sharpened awarenees of the human condition.

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1. GREAT ASPIRATIONS

Merril Namasivayam was a Bank clerk. He worked in Colombo at a leading Bank — The Imperial Bank of India. He was proud of the place he worked in and he was proud of his job.

He considered himself not a mean personage, for he was also well to do. He had been left a property by his mother and he thought he had a duty to develop it. With his job at the Bank, it was no difficult task to get a loan and start on a scheme to build flats.

He had also married a very pretty and efficient girl who worked at the C.T.O. He was certainly well set for life, he thought. So, when his wife's father came from Australia and asked them to come over there and stay with him, he had spurned the offer.

* * *

Merril watched two Burgher girls as they walked up to the shop next door. They were smartly dressed and spoke English perfectly "I just can't stick that salesman though I am going in because it's close. I much prefer going to Liberty Plaza where Daddy has an account. It's air-conditioned you know....." Her voice trailed off. "Empty, vain things!" he muttered to himself, "spending their father's money. That's all they know. If ever I have a daughter she shall not be like those spendthrift birds."

* * *

Merril Namasivayam built his house. He colour-washed it himself and moved in with his wife. However he did not stop building. He went on to build two more flats and two shops. The building craze and the vision of what he would ultimately own had got in to him. He lived in a world of property and buildings. The bug of landlordism had bit him. He paid instalments on the loan, no doubt and the house-keeping money was trimmed down to the minimum.

Charmaine, his wife, was most peeved. She had thought she was marrying a rich man. "We are rich" he had told her. "You just wait till everything is done. We'll be the envy of the neighbours." Thus he comforted her and comforted himself. He was carried away by his vision of being a rich landlord. It uplifted him and gave him something to look forward to. So he did not mind the skimpy meals or the lack of a servant. Cheerfully he swept the house after his return from office. He cleaned the garden too and husked and scraped coconut for Charmaine.

Charmaine was not so pleased however. She found that she had less money to spend on herself now, than before she got married. Now she had to contribute to the house-keeping expenses too. Things were not as she had expected. As most middle-class Sri Lankan young girls do, when swept off their feet into marriage, she had expected a very easy life. Someone to look after her and so to live happily ever after. Now, it seemed to be hard work ever after and no more. She had removed her mantle of freedom when she had removed her wedding veil and bridal saree. When she had removed the confetti from her hair and put away the wedding bouquet because the flowers were fading, she was putting away something else too, though she did not know it then.

Merril was a happy man. He had a job, a wife and his property. When the children came, the circle was complete. He was the centre, the hub of the wheel. Now he could dominate the family even more because they depended on him.

Charmaine found fulfilment in the children but she remained as before, a cog in the wheel. When the baby came, she took maternity leave but she did not give up work, though she would have liked to, in the interests of the baby. But Merril saw to it that she didn't. "You never know how and when the money will be needed," he said.

So she worked and in the evening she shopped and cooked. It was the same round except when they occasionally went to a movie. But this luxury was rarer after the children came, for always there had to be someone to look after the baby, and it was not often that they had a servant, or Charmaine's mother to come and help in.

The two children were Timothy and Sheila. Charmaine doted on Timothy, Merril on Sheila. The years went past and they grew into strapping youngsters.

Merril wanted Sheila to be a charming, beautiful girl, brought up in the traditional Tamil customs and ways. He was English educated himself, but he believed in this.

So, there was no going out alone for Sheila. No late parties or shows unless one of the parents went. Her hair had to be long and she was not allowed to use make-up. Once she had used make-up for a friend's party and when she returned, received a slap for being so brassy. "Our girls should not be painted and look cheap," Merril had said.

He had put Sheila into a big school in Colombo. He wanted her to get what society called 'polish'. He himself did not know exactly what it meant, but he knew that the Colombo ladies had it, especially those in Colombo 7 or Cinnamon Gardens. It would be another feather in his cap, if his daughter could move into that set. The fees came to a good bit each term, but what of that, the 'Colombo 7 polish' would be worth it.

Merril was promoted to a higher grade at the Bank. His flats were coming up gradually. Next year the second floor would begin. He and Charmaine were not getting on so well now, but what of that ? He was on a sound footing financially. With his job at the Bank he could easily settle the loan in about ten years and then he would be really wealthy. Each flat would command a good rent. So the three flats would be his nest egg. He would be very comfortably off when he retired. He did not mind having to scrimp and save now. Landlordism was worth it. As a teenager he had read and believed in Marxist Socialism, but all that paled into insignificance, now that there was wealth on the horizon.

"Socialism is only for lazy people" he told his collaagues in office. "But Merrill, how can you say that ?" asked Nimal. "The capitalist world does not give a fair chance to everybody. It is only those who have the initial capital who can get rich. Can the average school-leaver ever think of being a rich man ?"

"Of course he can" said Merrill. "You have to save and invest. That's the secret."

"But how can one save from one's salary if one has a number of people to support ?"

"That's an individual matter. If there's will there's a way." So Merrill argued in favour of the capitalist system. He himself was O.K. So what of the rest? They were unimportant, lazy,

miserable people. He, Merrill Namasivayam, had a destiny. He was destined to be rich. A woman who had read his palm when he was a boy had told him that he would have great riches and property. So destiny was going to be fulfilled. That dream was there at the back of his mind.

* * *

The years had rolled on. Merrill had become greyer and may be richer. His dream of great wealth had been partially destroyed by inflation, and by successive Socialist Governments which had imposed severe rent restrictions, with more facilities for tenants than landlords. The landlord mantle was now a burden on him. He had many cases filed against his tenant and his money was going for lawyers and as batta for witnesses. He felt that his tenants were happier people than himself. "I am a land slave" he told himself "not a landlord."

Wealth had not brought him happiness, but mere cares and, worry. Charmaine had left him for another, many years ago unable to bear his stinginess for the dream of riches in the future. Sheila remained his one consolation, for she lived with him. The years of 'polishing' had gone on and she was now nearing the end of her school carrier—an accomplished, smart and beautiful young woman.

Merrill also found pleasure in his garden. He had plantain trees in the compound and everyday there was something to be done there too. The dried leaves had to be cut and burnt and if there were bunches of plantains he had to keep an eye on them. For neighbouring thieves were only too happy to steal what someone else had planted.

He didn't have many kinds of plantains. Most of it was 'suvandal' the sweet plantain that ripened early. Even now there was a bunch, but there seemed to be a strange virus attacking the trees. Often he would come home to find a tree with a bunch of plantains fallen before maturity. He couldn't do anything with such — only chop it up and put it out on the road for the Municipal dirt van.

Three of Sheila's friends had come home that day for lunch. They were engrossed in chatter and did not hear him come. He was changing in his room but could hear their voices distinctly.

"Sheila, shall we go to Fountain Cafe for tea. You can bring your Pater too, as we may get late to get back."

"Nonsense. I dont wish to be seen with him — with his grey hair and old-fashioned clothes. We must have a good time. I'll get the money out of him when he comes. That's all."

And so, another dream was shattered, thought Merrill. He had not expected his own daughter to despise him. He walked quietly into the kitchen to sit alone with a cup of tea.

He opened the window and looked out at the plantain grove. Sure enough there was another tree fallen, with its bunch still green.

Today Sheila had not prepared something for him to eat. "She must have been busy with her friends today. The bitch !" he muttered to himself, "forgetting her father, just like that."

But minutes later when Sheila stood before him, "Daddee, we are going for some tea to the Fountain. Can you give me some money, Daddy? please." Her winning whine won him over as before and silently he went to his bedroom and brought her a hundred rupee note.

2. DISCARDED LEAVES

He was striding up the lane, straight and erect in his black corduroy trousers. He had a smart carriage, and she felt proud. He was hers, her son. How splendid he was. Only last week he had got through his finals at the University with a First Class.

It was like a dream come true for her, a dream which she had in no small measure helped to realize. Ten years ago, last month, what a different picture it was then. She could almost see the long black coffin lying in state in the big hall ; her husband dead, the relations streaming in ; the wreaths, a roomful of them and Max and Leslie clinging to her arms. Max was then a short curly-headed boy of twelve. Her horizon had been bleak then. With the small pension she would get, she would have to fend for herself and the children.

After the funeral, the relations had left her to a lonely house with the children. The large house was gloomy and bleak. And there were days when they had been afraid to sleep. Many a night she had taken the children to a cousin's nearby to sleep.

Ten years ! The laborious days and nights had gone. She had stinted and foregone so much to educate Max and now she was glad. He had graduated so well. Now he could get a good job and there would be no more trouble for her.

Max was standing before her now. He was twenty two years old. How well he looked. "Mummy, I have been meeting many eminent people during the last week and on their advice I have decided...." he hesitated, shifting his feet.

"What is it Max ?" she asked rather tremulously.

"I am not going to take a job just now," he said slowly. "I want to go to England and qualify further. Then it will be better."

She pursed her lips. "What are you going to qualify in ?" she asked quietly.

"Either Accountancy or Law. I can do both. I have spoken to my professor and he approves. As for money, don't you worry. I can take a loan on my share of father's property."

"But how long will the course take ?" she asked rather sadly.

Max was silent for a minute. He knew what she must be feeling. He was her favourite son. She would not like to miss him. He almost felt sorry. Almost, but not quite. The lure of better prospects would always draw him on, he knew. That is why he had gone on — from school to the university and now abroad. He knew he would not be satisfied unless he went.

"How long will it take ?" she asked again, not looking at him.

"About four or five years" he almost whispered. He was afraid of hurting her.

She closed her eyes. Again the long road lay before her. Four or five years ! Time would stretch again. Ten years had gone. Now another four or five. And Max away from her too.

She looked out into the garden without saying anything. The jak plant by the gate was swaying in the breeze. It was tall and straight, reaching up to the sky. Like Max, she thought, reaching up to heights. She could remember planting it almost in the first year they came to that house. When would it bear fruit she wondered.

"All right Max, you can go ahead," she said, "I will not stand in the way."

The days sped by fast. There were many things to do. Max had to get his clothes ready. There was so much shopping to do. She was kept busy. Trunks, packing cases, boxes filled Max's room. For days he was sorting, packing, nailing. She hung around attending to every little thing. Leslie, her second son, was not much bothered. His brother going off to England was not his concern. He was playing in the college cricket team that year and was absorbed in practice, whenever he was free.

The day for the departure dawned. She was full of anxiety. She even consulted an astrologer. "Is his horoscope all right ? Is there any danger in his going ?"

"None at all, Lady. None at all," said the old man bowing. "He has a Raja Yoga. He will do very well. He is sure to come out on top in spite of difficulties."

She was glad. She knew this son of hers would shine. He must fulfil the destiny she had lost.

On the Jetty friends and relations were gathered. She and a few of the close family members went aboard. She lost her sorrow in inspecting the ship. The deck, the cabins, the crew were all sources of wonderment to her. Foreigners lounging on the decks ; smart, painted cabins and narrow, polished corridors.

But when the time for parting came, sorrow welled in her heart. It was like losing a vital part of her. "Don't cry, don't cry, the five years will go like five months." Someone was trying to console. But it was futile. She could not hide her tears. And Max felt ashamed. He was standing some distance away, not looking at her. He pretended to be absorbed in conversation with some friends. That hurt her more, but she could do nothing She wanted to give him some advice, to say even a few words. But she could not speak, her heart was full. When the moment of separation came she could only kiss him silently and depart.

As the days went by she only waited for his letters. Leslie was in the house but she was not so absorbed with him. Max had been and always would be her favourite. His letters came, very reassuring and very descriptive. He was very happy, he wrote but that did not satisfy her. She always had a gnawing ache inside her. Would he be loyal to her, remain hers ? She wanted him to be. He was her son. He must not marry there without coming back to her, without her consent. That was a canker which gnawed inside her always. And whenever she looked at his photographs she felt afraid. He was so good-looking and he was so headstrong. Whenever she advised him in her letters regarding girl-friends, he ignored it. That made her more afraid.

Whenever she spoke to anyone now, she would talk of Max. Max was at this College. Max was studying law. Max had written. Would she like to see his snaps and so on and so forth.

And then her fears would come out. Would he get married out there ? You never knew ! There were many such mixed marriages. He who went single, might return double, might he not ? It became almost an obsession with her — this witty pun. And she would repeat it to all and sundry.

Everybody who came to her house, from relation or friend to the fishmonger and the newspaper-man knew that she had a son who was abroad and that she feared his marriage to a foreigner.

The jak tree was growing tall however. It needed no attention and she watched it grow. But her thoughts were always with Max. She lived for Max and his letters. His photographs adorned the hall tables. Her gossip was what she gleaned from his letters. He had passed his exams. His triumph was a triumph for her, too. She was thrilled each time he got through an examination.

The time was drawing near for his coming home. She awaited the event with eagerness. She got the house colour-washed and painted. Max had written that he was coming — probably next week. He was flying home. There was no date given. This puzzled her a bit but she did not complain. At last he was coming, was he not ? Her Max ! He would be hers again !

In two days time Max was on her door-step. He had come unannounced, "I took an earlier plane than expected" he said simply.

She was a little peeved that there was no pageantry at his return. No relations buzzing round the air-port. But she was thrilled all the same. He had come. He had obtained his doctorate and he had been promised a top job in a Bank.

It pleased her to see him about the house once more. How proud she was of his achievements. It was like a draught of champagne merely to see him. And he had come alone, had he not? Her fears had been groundless after all.

Two weeks had passed when Max said one evening, "Mother I want you to come. I am having a small party for my friends."

She went. It was a small party in an hotel in Colombo. She would have preferred a large party at home for all the relations as well. But she had to give in to Max. And she did not mind giving in to him. She was so thrilled at having him back.

She was eating and drinking as if in a dream. Then she came to reality, with Max's words. He was standing before her.

"Mother, this is a good friend of mine who was with me in England." She looked up and stared. She could only do that. For it was a girl who stood before her — an English girl. She spoke, but it was mechanically. Her mind was elsewhere.

Still she did not think the worst. Surely Max would not abandon her. Surely not. He had come alone; had he not? The very thought pained her so much that she did not question Max. She could not bring herself to do it.

But a week later the blow fell. It was Max himself who told her.

"Mother, I will be going away from next week."

"But where, and why ?" she asked with characteristic brevity.

"I am getting married" he said slowly.

She stared up at him and he looked away.

"To whom ?" she asked tonelessly. Now the fear which had lain hidden rose in waves. She was like a person waiting for a sentence.

"To that girl whom I introduced to you, last week," he said. He knew he would be hurting her and he did not raise his voice.

But she was calm. She had been expecting it all along. She was staring at the garden. The Jak-tree was swaying in the breeze. It was a tall tree now. It needed no help to grow now. Like Max she thought. He was now independent. And as she watched, the wind brought down handfuls of the dry Jak leaves. The old, the feeble, they were being discarded.

3. WHEN THE PARTY WAS OVER

It was going to be a grand X'mas social and Dalrene had planned for it for weeks. She was going to meet a set of socialites whom she had never met before. So she must make a good impression. She must wear a good kit, something specially smart. So she shopped, selected, and got the material tailored. It was going to be a full length blue and white maxi. It would be very striking, she thought. She had looked at a fashion magazine and picked out an unusual pattern.

To Ravi Ekneligoda, the party was equally important. He had a good job and a car, so now he was an eligible bachelor. He must therefore seek a suitable girl. It was not looks that he so much wanted. There were pretty girls in the office he worked if he wanted looks. No, he must have a girl with looks, wealth, and social position. All three must be there, he told himself.

He selected a bright spotted tie and a smart white suit. White would look well at night. It was so stupid of some men to choose black suits for a night function. Black was hardly seen at night.

* * * *

To the host J. P. Wickremanayake the party meant a lot of work. The garden had to be cleared and trimmed, the floor of the house polished and the pots and fish tanks arranged. All this meant work and more than one headache for they were short-staffed now. So few servants to manage and man the mansion — the Walauwa. But still it had to be done.

Gloria, his daughter, was of marriageable age and she must make a good impression. So the party had to be.

J. P. ordered Podi Singho to put more polish on the floor. The once weekly polished floor had been so long neglected that much more polish was now needed. And Podi Singho would grumble about having to kneel down and apply the polish. There were no little boys now in the Walauwa to do that sort of work. Free

education had more or less eliminated child labour. J. P. had to cajole Podi Singho into applying the polish. Thank Heavens ! There were still a few retainers like Podi Singho. J. P. shuddered to think of how he would manage the mansion if these few old retainers he had, left his service.

The flower pots were now quite artistically arranged and Nihal, his son, had arranged for disco lighting. For a final touch J. P. got Podi Singho to keep the Japanese porcelain pot holder in the porch. The Pride of Japan flower pot was in it and there would be some balloons above. The Japanese porcelain pot-holder had been brought by J. P. from Japan about thirty years ago. It was probably a priceless antique like most of his furniture. But this was very attractive — the show-piece of his verandah. Today it must stand in the porch. It should catch the eye of all who come to the party. In the porch it would not fail to strike the eye. For even in the dark, the headlights of cars driving up would flash directly on to it. If he did not show off his house, his furniture and his priceless show-piece,there would be no point in having the party.

How else would Gloria make a good impression ? She had not made a mark at school and she had no job or vocation. She must be at least a leading light among the young ladies of Cinnamon Gardens who were now in the marriage market. If J.P.'s house and garden would not show off Gloria at the party tomorrow nothing else would !

* * * *

Dalrene arrived sharp on time. She did not want to come in later after everyone had sat down and made themselves comfortable. The old ladies' eyes and tongues would be most vicious once they were seated comfortably. It was then that they would attack this girl's costume or that girl's behaviour. The young men generally escaped critical comment, for older women were partial to young men and society ladies were no exception.

She must be careful not to be seen talking to Hiran too long. She would then be the victim of an attack. She could remember how at the last engagement party she went to, when she had been seen talking to Hiran, Aunt Greta had said rather bitingly, "So you know that young man !" as if implying that she had been too forward. This time she would not leave room for that. Of course

she was not going to be frightened of the old aunts' tongues. She would talk to Hiran all right but not get close to the aunts herself. They could attack only if they were at arm's length. The old dowagers had made themselves obese with rich food and little or no use of their limbs. Their energies therefore found an outlet mainly in venomous talk.

As soon as everybody entered and found seats, a Nativity Play commenced followed by Carol singing. The lights were dimmed for the Nativity Play and remained so after that. Dalreen was glad, for her costume did not look so grand after all among the ornate carved furniture, the polished floor and the chandelier lights.

The worst of it was that she did not get an opportunity to speak to anyone noteworthy for long. Hiran had not come and Hiran's brother though he obviously wanted to speak to her, did not do so, because he was not introduced. The stupid formalities of society, she thought. And the girls were catty. They didn't want to introduce her to the boys they knew. They made polite conversation because they had to. Actually they were like controlled vipers, keeping their venom submerged in polite talk. Still they did spurt a little polite poison whenever they could. They looked upon her as a rival. She did not know it until she tried to get them to introduce her. She did this by mentioning that she knew Hiran. But Renuka, the fat viper in the blue silk hissed very sweetly, "Myee ! it seems she knows Hiran," and their own polite chatter went on.

The fat cobras had ensconced themselves comfortably, their silk sarees coiled around their bodies. Dalrene did not wish to go within striking range.

The disco music began with a swinging hard beat. It was not gay, just a hard pounding beat. There was something primitive about it, decided Dalrene. She thought of women, pounding paddy. No, it was not that, it was more reminiscent of savages throbbing their war drums. Modern music ! It was bizarre. The music pounded out drowning the voices of the sleek vipers and the fat cobras. At least it did that. Some couples were dancing. They moved briskly, drawn by the beat of the music. Mere mechanical movements, thought Dalrene. No one asked her to dance and she was feeling cold.

She asked the girl next to her whether she would join her in a twist. That girl, also being new to this society, was diffident and shy. She declined. So it ended by both being wall-flowers. They chatted rather forlornly and watched other couples dance. They were missing something, they knew. The music went pounding on, ignoring individual problems. It was mad, crazy mus ic thought Dalrene. She almost wished she hadn't come.

* * * *

Ravi was restless. He wanted to ask some girl to dance. Not the old ones he knew ; but he didn't dare to do what he wanted. He was afraid of the old cobras. Polite society always stifled him. He felt like a rabbit in a cage. There were people watching him at every turn. His aunt was keeping him as a target for her cannon ball eyes. With her presence it was no use trying to talk to any girl. He would never feel at ease. Even when he bought a raffle ticket from one of the girls, he felt as if he were commiting a crime. Then even if he escaped his aunt's eyes there were still other uncles and his mother too, to contend with. He made a little small talk with some of the girls but he never spoke to anyone individually. He did not know that the girls too were suffering a little agony — the lack of freedom from adult control.

The girls too were afraid to be seen talking to a young man alone. The irony of it was that some of these young people were quite old enough to look after themselves. The conventions governing young people were so Victorian in Sri Lanka. Ravi wished he was back in France where he had studied for a year. How uninhibited most European girls were in comparison with those of his homeland. And how uninhibited he himself had been when he was abroad. Here he felt himself to be 'cabinned, cribbed, confined.' They were prisoners in the web of society.

* * * *

J. P. leaned back in his chair. His head ached. He had never done so much work as today, for many days. He had to see to the garden, the polishing of the house and the marketing. All very difficult tasks for a Sinhalese aristocrat with wealth. He usually avoided these tasks but today his wife had to see to the food. She too normally avoided this task though today she had to take it up because if the food was found wanting the criticism would be laid at her door, not J.P.'s.

J.P. had a very light dinner and went to watch the dancing. He was not in a mood for dancing himself. His dinner had been taken after everybody else had taken theirs and he had found that there was hardly anything for him to eat. The piece of chicken left for him was bony and the ham was cold and insipid. He fervently hoped that his guests had a better meal. None of the servants were within sight. They must be watching the dancing of course ! There was no point in calling out to anyone and disturbing the guests. He ate what he could and then went to pour himself a drink. Only the milk wine was left. The whisky and sherry bottles were empty. Sullenly he poured himself a little milk wine and sat down to watch the dancing. The throb of the pounding music was going on. In the dimly lit hall he could hardly see who was who.

* * *

It was nearing dawn and the band was still playing furiously. Ravi was excited. The fat cobras were dozing off. Now was his chance to ask a girl to dance. He walked through the dimly lit hall and tripped on someone's saree. "I, I say, I am sorry." Ravi stammered.

"No, no, it's all right," Dalrene replied, for it was her 'maxi' he had tripped on.

"I say, why not come for a dance ?" asked Ravi shyly.

"Thanks" said Dalrene rising, and the two began their dance. They twirled around gracefully to the music, in perfect unison. As dancers they seemed to be beautifully matched. Now the music was no longer crazy, thought Dalrene. It beat rhythmically and she seemed to float along in Ravi's arms. He was an expert dancer, she thought. It was marvellous to dance with him.

"How strange that I couldn't ask you to dance before," said Ravi.

"Now, where are you working ?" he asked.

"I am at the Inter-con."

"Receptionist" he said inquiringly.

"Yes," she said briefly. "My ! Oh My ! You are a swell dancer. I can go on dancing with you for hours. You are so light on your feet."

"Glad you like my dancing. We must meet more often Dalrene. No need to wait for family parties. I'll give a call to the hotel. O.K. ?" They went on dancing, holding each other closer. The

ice had been broken at last for Ravi. For Dalrene too new ground had been broken. She had never thought that Ravi, scion of an aristocratic and wealthy family would ever take notice of her.

She was even more surprised when after the dancing was over, Ravi approached her again. "Dalrene can I drop you home ? My mother will go with my sister."

"Yes, thank you" she said meekly, looking up to him with shining eyes. Was it the beginning of something, she wondered.

* * *

J.P. hoped that Gloria was a hit. But no, she was not dancing ! There she was, carrying a tray of eats to some friends. J.P. dozed off.

He woke up when his wife prodded him. The guests were leaving. Sleepily he rose to see them off. He shook hands mechanically and wished each couple "Good-night". Everybody had a good time it seemed. So they said as they departed, wishing him the best in the coming year. All bunkum, he thought to himself. None of them really wished to see him doing better. They were positively envious as it was. What polite hypocrites they all were!

All parties were like this, supposed J.P. , headaches for the people who gave them. But then they always hoped to achieve something very big after that. The headache would be a minor matter. What was a headache if one was able to meet a minister or some important politico on an intimate level. Even to him this party meant a lot of stress and strain on both his purse and mind. But what of that if Gloria made a hit.

It was very important to him that she should marry the son of a big-wig who would someday be, surely another big-wig. He fervently hoped she would not let him down and give her consent to that handsome but impecunious cousin of hers. Priya was a good fellow with a sweet nature. But what was the use ? He would never be able to maintain Gloria with the comforts she is used to. He would also be of no help to his business or his estate. He would certainly be a loving husband to Golria. But to J.P. that was a secondary matter. An effeminate man like Priya would be more or less useless to his business concerns. Priya was not shrewd enough.

Gloria was talking to Rohan and Vinitha. Rohan was a smart

chap — a C.A.S. cadet ; who had a promising future. J.P. hoped but he kept his hopes to himself.

* * *

Next morning Gloria tapped him as he ate his breakfast. "Daddy, I have some news for you." He got up expectantly. Surely his party had been fruitful and Gloria had made a hit.

But his hopes slumped with Gloria's words. "Daddy, do you know, Dalrene is engaged to Ravi? He proposed to her last night." As in a dream he got up and walked to the porch. Somebody else had reaped. And there, on the porch another spectacle faced him. His beautiful porcelain pot lay in pieces. Some swanky young buck had reversed his car into it. The pieces of porcelain lay just as they had been after the impact. Podi Singho had been too afraid to clear up.

4. THE PEACOCK' S CRY

It was going to be a traditional Sinhalese wedding. The young couple had met only once before deciding on marriage but then that was the custom. The whole affair was arranged by the relations and well-wishers. Among the latter, the marriage broker played a prominent part. It was he who had the idea in the first place. Manis Singho was a top class marriage broker, dressed in white coat and white cloth and with the traditional black umbrella, under his arm.

The young man, Bertram Wanigasundara, was an only son, from a very respectable aristocratic family. His parents were dead and it was his aunt who was the prime mover in this marriage. She wanted to see her nephew 'settled' as she called it. She believed that if young men remained single for long they would contract an undesirable marriage and thereby bring down the family name. So she had called the marriage broker in and explained to him the kind of bride she wished her nephew to have.

Her nephew was a landed proprietor who would be living in the country so the girl would have to be a homely person. The nephew had a home, a stately mansion, but then they all had shares in it, so the marriage was one move to get him out of it so that they could sell their property and share the money. Of course the aunt did not tell this to Bertram. She posed off, as if she was doing it entirely for his benefit.

So, she was happy when Manis Singho said that there was a homely girl around thirty years, ready for marriage with Bertram. Bertram was around thirty seven. Both were on the verge of eternal spinsterhood and eternal bachelorhood, so to speak. So both were keen on marriage even through the hands of a marriage broker.

After the marriage broker had come up and down quite a few times, for the dowry had to be agreed upon and the horoscopes

compared before the couple could even see each other, a day was fixed for the couple to meet. The meeting was in the drawing room of the bride's home. The aunt and uncle of Bertram had come along with the marriage broker. On the bride's side, her old parents were present as well. His aunt and uncle were talking with her father and mother but the marriage broker was not to be seen.

Her mother brought in a tray of cakes and sweets and gave it to the would – be bride. She was expected to go around and serve. This was the traditional custom. The bride – to – be came out and served the food while the bridegroom and his party watched her. She was not expected to speak. Brenda did this mechanically and then came and sat down at the far end of the drawing room. Bertram came near her, and was introduced. He began talking to her. He seemed very educated and cultured. He was not fat, dark and short. Of that she was glad. He was not handsome, though thin and tall and seemed kind. As he talked she felt that she rather liked him.

In an hour's time the visit was over and the visitors were departing. Brenda's mother beckoned to her and asked her what she thought of the groom. She nodded her head in assent implying that she liked the gentleman. Her mother spoke to the aunt and everything was settled. From that moment her fate was sealed. From then on it was arrangements for the wedding. The elders needed no second bidding.

Bertram himself was not so thrilled about Brenda's looks. But he knew that she had twenty five acres of fertile coconut land — her dowry and that made all the difference.

The engagement was made two weeks later with a few more uncles and aunts present. After a sumptuous lunch the engagement rings were exchanged.

Brenda lost her fears in the world of ceremony, new clothes and jewellery. She forgot what her mother had told her long ago — that she was rather different from other girls and that she might not have children even if she was lucky enough to get a husband. In looks too, she was flat breasted and thin, but only her mother knew that she had not attained puberty like other girls. It was a closely guarded secret and when relations had asked as to when

she had attained puberty, her mother had either changed the subject or said that she had not celebrated the event.

The wedding was held at a big hotel in Colombo. The traditional Poruwa ceremony was held before the reception, and Brenda looked imposing in a white lace saree and brilliant jewellery. Her mother and father had spared no expense.

Bertram was pleased. All his friends and relations were invited and he was more than thankful to his aunt and the marriage broker.

All too soon, the time for the Going Away approached and he found himself in the decorated Going Away car with Brenda and showers of confetti from all sides.

They were going to a small rest-house near Colombo for the honeymoon. His uncle had made all the arrangements.

* * * *

They went into the bed-room to change. Brenda was obviously feeling awkward so he went outside giving her time to rest and change. Meanwhile he ordered dinner with prawn curry and the rest-house keeper gave him a knowing wink and told him to order some arrack too.

When he returned to the room it was to call Brenda for dinner. There was no electricity, the lights having failed, so they ate dinner by candle light and Brenda thought the rest-house quaint and interesting. No wonder the tourists liked them, she thought to herself. Brenda found everthing very novel and interesting. It was the first time she had ever been to a rest-house. But she didn't like the looks of the rest-house keeper. He kept looking at her in an odd way.

After dinner they went back into the bed-room. Bertram was excited as he had had a tot of arrack. He wanted Brenda to strip and get into bed soon but she spent such a long time at the toilet-table removing her jewellery and trinkets that he could not have his wish. The room was faintly lit by a small kerosene lamp for a night light. So when eventually Brenda came to bed in a shimmering silk nightgown, Bertram could hardly see her figure. The arrack had got into his head and with the heavy meal he had had, he was already feeling sleepy. Sleep was what he wanted most now, not Brenda. He kissed Brenda perfunctorily, put his head on his pillow and promptly fell sound asleep.

He woke up in the morning with a feeling of guilt. For he knew he was expected to consummate the marriage on the first night. His aunt had placed a white sheet in his suitcase. "This is to be laid upon the bed," she had told him briefly. He had not asked her further questions as it was too embarrasing. The light was filtering in through the window. Brenda was still asleep. He wondered what he should do. As the Sinhala bridegroom he should have consummated the marriage last night. At least he might do it now, he thought.

He spread the sheet on his part of the bed, rolled Brenda on to it and tried to rouse her up. She woke sleepily, was affectionate and loving but not passionate. Just at the critical moment came a tap on the door. It was their morning bed-tea brought in by the room boy. He put on his sarong and brought in the tea. And that was the end of that, at least for the time being. He hoped that his uncle and aunt would not come on a visit. He had heard that, in some communities, it was the custom to come and inspect the white sheet the following morning to see whether the bride had been a virgin.

From outside the window came a strange bird call. It was a harsh, grating sound. He went up to the window. It was a peacock calling out to its mate. There they were, a fine pair. The peacock was spreading out its tail and preparing to dance.

After breakfast, which was had in the dining room, Brenda suggested that they go for a drive. She said so partly to escape from the rest-house environment. The rest-house keeper had been staring at her while pouring the tea for them. Evidently he was only too well aware of the village custom where the bridegroom's parents came the following morning to inspect the white sheet. There should be blood on the sheet. If not, well, it meant that the bride was no virgin. And in the villages of course, this would be regarded as a great dishonour, even sufficient to break up the marriage.

Soon after reading the morning papers they went for a drive. Bertram felt that he rather liked this girl he had married. Her quiet ways suited him. But after lunch when they went back into the bed-room, he thought of the white sheet and told Brenda, "You know there is this custom ; we should try again." Brenda agreed and this time he used all his ardour and passion but she was

not responsive. Evidently she did not enjoy sex. He wondered to himself while he dozed off, until they were awakened for tea.

They had tempered rice and chicken curry for dinner that night. The rest-house staff were very attentive and friendly, especially the minor staff. Brenda rather liked the room boys. She planned to take a photograph of the staff before they left, that is, if all went well and Bertram or his aunt did not kick up a fuss.

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Bertram was a man who generally did things thoroughly and did not want to be considered a nincompoop where sex was concerned. So in spite of the tot of arrack he took that night too, he subjected Brenda to a thorough examination. It was then he realised that she was not quite a normal girl. What should be done ? His aunt, he knew, was quite capable of raising hell over the issue. But should he do it too ? Outside, the peacocks were making harsh plaintive cries. Poor Brenda, it was good that she had married a man like him. He would never betray her secret.

She was sobbing now, crying her heart out in fear. "Don't worry," he said, "things will be O.K. I'll take you to a doctor. I am sure an operation will set you right. Don't cry. Your mother should have done it long ago. It's not your fault."

"But what about the sheet ?" she asked sobbing. "Your aunt will want to look at it !"

"Now look Brenda, if I kick up a fuss about this, I will be the laughing stock of my people. Besides, I like you too much to expose you to ridicule. Further, I want to stop these ridiculous marriage customs. I shall tell my aunt that we did not use the sheet, that's all."

Brenda closed her eyes in relief. She was saved from shame. She was ready to fall on her knees and worship Bertram. What a kind-hearted husband she had got. She was lucky. The white and unstained bed-sheet was like Bertram's heart — pure kindness. There and then she resolved that whatever faults she would see in him, she would forgive and overlook. The peacock's cry had been lucky for her after all.

5. NOT A COWARD

The seeming precision of his movements would have struck the attentions of an onlooker, if there was one on that busy street. The traffic dashed this way and that with a blare and a clatter. But the people were used to the noise. If at all the blare and the clatter would be dimly registered in their minds, quite unconsciously. Everybody was anxious to hurry away to the sheltered quiet of their homes, even those who had cars or possessed umbrellas. Victor Perera walked along the edge of the pavement with his characteristic dignified sedateness. He was always dressed smartly, in coat and tie even in the hottest and sunniest weather. And he always wore a hat. Charlis Silva who worked as an assistant at 'Newtons,' the bookshop at the corner, was accustomed to seeing Mr. Perera going past every Saturday afternoon at that hour. He himself was not so very big and tall but he reflected that this small made gentleman could easily pass unnoticed even among a small crowd.

Victor Perera's destination was the bakery. He would buy one loaf of newly baked bread and return with it wrapped in a neat parcel under his arm. It was not that he could not afford to get the bread delivered to his door, but his wife liked only fresh crusted bread and he did not like to displease her, even though he himself was not particular on food.

As he stepped into the house he felt some sort of dislike at its quietness. He seemed to have left behind part of the cheeriness of the warm sunshine in the street. With some hesitation he removed his hat and hung it carefully on the rack.

He himself could not understand why he had such a feeling of uneasiness on entering his own house. He always felt half his confidence gone. And yet he could not stay away from it either.

Victor Perera was not the type of man who left home at eight thirty in the morning to return at about nine or ten in the night after spending his time in bars and clubs. On principle he detested such dissipation and even on the rare occasions when one of his friends invited him for a convivial evening, he was loath to join. Somehow, he never quite enjoyed himself beyond eight in the night. That was the hour when dinner was usually served at home and the picture of his wife sitting up and waiting for him, always kept entering his mind and distracting his attention. Abeyweera and Siriwardena, his usual friends, never seemed to suffer from such qualms. Victor was ashamed to reveal his own feelings.

Abeyweera was a married man five years older than him and had two children, both boys. He was quite a good fellow, he reflected, but very hard on his wife. He remembered how shocked he had been one day. "I say Victor," Abeyweera said, "my wife did not send my lunch today and I had to go to that Cafe in Norris Road. Naturally I got late to get back and my boss gave me a telling off. I felt like murdering him as it was in front of all the others. But I shall take it out on my wife. How dare she put me into such an awkward position?"

Still he wondered if it would not have been better if he too could have put on a show of force at times. He knew he should be more forceful in his own home. The house was extremely quiet. The sunlight streamed onto the verandah. It glistened on the polished surface of the oval centre-table. It was just like Nora to forget to put down the tats. How many times had he to tell her ? Quickly he snatched at the cord and brought down the rolled tat with a clatter. He looked at the polished table with some fierceness as though expecting to see some marked change in its appearance, so that he could really blame Nora. But the table seemed unchanged.

As he had half expected Nora was asleep. He walked out of the bed-room on tiptoe and entered the dining room. The floor had not been swept. He peeped into the kitchen and felt like calling out to the cook-woman but he stopped himself in time. He looked at the clock over the plate rack. It was three-thirty. Anoma would be coming home now and wanting her tea. Oh ! bother ! he thought, why did he have to consider these things when he came home. Stifling a growing resentment at his own

nability he went into his room. And then he realised with some relief that Anoma had said that she was coming late that day as they were having sports practices.

He sat quite comfortably, ensconced in his arm-chair with the newspaper on his lap. He never missed reading at this time. Today he fiddled nervously and glanced involuntarily at his wristlet. A sudden ring at the door almost made him drop the paper to the floor, then recovering he went to see who it was. It was his mother and younger sister. He stood rigid and smiled woodenly. Nora was asleep and he hated to wake her. She always made things unpleasant for him when he did.

"I am really surprised to see you mother" he said "you come here so rarely that I had almost forgotten how you look." He beckoned them inside and clumsily upset a blue vase upon the side table. His sister was standing in the way but he managed to retrieve the vase in time. He smiled triumphantly regardless of the fact that his sister had received a scrape on the wrist in consequence.

"Where is Nora, son, and your little daughter ?" asked his mother seating herself on the sofa. "Oh ! Nora is sleeping I think, I shall go and see. Anoma has not returned as yet from school." When he had gone in Mrs. Perera was half consciously wondering whether there was not something wrong in his manner to them.

Walking up to the bed-room he debated within himself as to whether he should wake Nora. He looked at his wristlet. It was nearly four o'clock. He must wake her he thought. He tapped at the head of the bed and shook her arm. She woke with a jerk and abruptly pulled her arm away. Quickly he said, "Nora, my mother and sister have come on a visit." She stared at him. Then comprehending, jumped out of bed.

Victor turned back and went into the drawing room. "Nora will be coming now" he said smiling. "She was sleeping all this time."

"Asleep !" echoed his mother, "Why my child, isn't it very late now ? Surely, she can't have slept so long !"

"Why yes, mother," Victor put in, "She does sleep for quite awhile sometimes." He would have continued, but he heard Nora's slippers along the corridor.

His mother said, "But child ! You must not stand for such laziness. You should see to it that she does the house-work in. . . . ." It was an awkward moment. He stood up embarassed. Nora must have heard, he knew. He looked at her, but she seemed unconcerned. His mother turned in Nora's direction. "In my days, I could never have got through my work if I spent so much time wastefully. What child ! surely you must be finding it difficult to get through all your work ?"

Victor twisted nervously in his seat, his mother was so outspoken.

"Oh ! I always do my work, don't worry mother," said Nora in a very confident tone. "And today, I would not have slept so long, if Victor had had the goodness to wake me in time. He never realises the amount of work I have, with only one servant too ! But men are always like that, aren't they mother ?" asked Nora calmly sitting down.

"But, but Nora, you can't say that. . . . . !"

"Oh just keep quiet," Nora put in quickly, "I don't want to quarrel over stupid things. Besides I must see about the tea." So saying she vanished into the pantry leaving Victor furious.

The tea was served eventually in the best tea-set placed on the best tray and Victor's anger abated somewhat. Nora did know how to do things in style. She had washed and changed and looked elegant. She chatted and laughed and even went to the extent of making fun of his foibles with his mother ! She seemed quite oblivious of his moroseness. For his anger which had momentarily died down began growing again. He was relieved when at last his mother and sister left. He did not want them to see that he was annoyed with Nora. His marriage had been his choice, so now he could not turn to them. He must lie on his own bed. He gathered up the tea-cups on to the tray so angrily they all clattered.

He thought the time was right for him to turn on Nora. He tugged at his banian sleeves. Nora muttered something nonchalantly and went towards the pantry. The Hi-fi set was playing loud. The song was *Enjoy Yourself.* He twiddled with the cutlery on the side-board and when Nora appeared, burst out with, "What the hell do you mean Nora ? I can't understand."

"Can't understand what ? What are you talking about ? Quick! tell me this instant. I have to go to the kitchen or the pressure-cooker might explode," said Nora impatiently.

He stared at her. She seemed oblivious of his anger. The fury drained out of him and left him weak. He shifted uneasily, looking for something and seeing the Hi-fi set said, "What I can't understand is, Nora, why you always turn that blasted thing on so loud !"

"You fool ! only that !" said Nora and dashed into the kitchen.

6. NO SWEETS FOR THEM NOW

"*Buddhang Saranam Gachchami,*

Dhammam Saranam . . ." Lalani's voice trailed down to a mere murmer, as she knelt. Wearing white, kneeling down in front of Clement's coffin, she felt alone, despite the crowd. Alone in front of a crowd ! That was how she felt. For their sympathies were not for her she felt. That vast crowd had come because of Clement. Clement, their doctor, had died and they had all come to show their sympathy. But, she was alone ! Kneeling on the mat, murmuring *pansil* stanzas, as the Buddhist custom at funerals, she felt isolated. Their sympathies were for Clement, not for her. And the strange thing was that Clement was gone beyond feeling. Nothing could or would touch him now. So what was the use of having sympathy for him. It was she who needed sympathy because she had lost a person like Clement. But that was the last thing the crowd felt. They only felt sorry because Clement was no more and they could not now get any help from him.

She was almost glad when everything was over — the funeral ceremonies which required the public. After the relations, the friends and the patients had gone, she would know who really cared — for her and her family. For if they cared much for Clement they would be sympathetic and helpful to the bereaved family That is what she thought. She was soon to know how little it worked in practice.

About half of that vast crowd that came for the funeral shook hands, spoke to her and even kissed her but only a few were really sorry or made any genuine attempt to help. It was so even with Clement's very close and intimate friends, but she had not thought it possible. Phillip had been such a close friend of Clement's.

He had been coming every fortnight at least. And he had never come empty-handed. He had always brought a large slab of chocolate for the children.

But after the funeral and alms-giving were over, it seemed as if Lalani's social life too was over. It was not only the death of Clement, it was the death of her social life and that particular niche in society which she had held, being Clement's wife. It seemed as if even Phillip was not coming now.

But that evening she had a surprise. Her son Ravi came running in, "Uncle Phillip's car is parked on the main road near our lane Ammi ! I am sure he must be coming here."

So, Lalani spent some time clearing up and tidying and getting something ready to serve Phillip. But as if to spite her preparations no Phillip turned up. And the children finished up the biscuits that had been brought.

Again next Sunday there was a small flutter in the household, Ravi came rushing in, "Ammi ! Uncle Phillip's car has just come on the road. He is coming here, I am sure. I saw him get down and walk into Wilson's Store"

Everybody hustled and bustled tidying and Lalani made preparations as before. But Ravi had a bright idea. He sent Piyasena, their servant, to Wilson's store.

Twenty minutes later Phillip's car was still at the top of their lane, but he had not come to their house ! Where on earth could he have gone ? Lalani was puzzled.

Then Ravi burst in. "Ammi! Piyasena says uncle Phillip bought a large slab of chocolate and he saw him going with it to Aunty Sheila's house."

"What !" Lalani was aghast. So, that explained his absence the previous week, too. He was now taking chocolates to Sheila's children and having a chit-chat with Sheila and George. That was probably more profitable. Now that Clement was no more, visiting George's house was a better thing in every way — socially and materially as well. George was a high ranking Government officer and he could be useful. That was the way of the world : to visit the successful, not those in need of cheer. There was no point in commenting in the presence of the children. She did not wish to disillusion them. Her maternal instinct forced her to bottle up her sorrow. Silently she went about, putting back the glasses and the tray.

7. THE DIFFERENCE

Lalitha got out of the bed in a hurry. It was morning, the light was streaming in and sunlight glowed from the window outside. It was a beautiful morning but she had no time to admire the garden in the morning sunshine. She had to get out of bed and attend to the house-work. The breakfast had to be got ready for Shelton. Then if he wanted to take lunch she would have to make sandwiches. She would also have to iron his suit, sweep the house, feed the dogs and water the plants. And all this to be done before 8.30 as she too had to leave for her office.

By 8.30 when everything was at last done and she herself ready to leave for office, she felt really tired. She would have loved to sit down for ten minutes with the paper, but she couldn't, there simply was no time. She must dash off.

She entered her office at 9.10. Only ten minutes late but her boss looked at her sharply. He was a stickler for punctuality and travelling by car as he did, he never seemed to think of the difficulties of bus commuters. Silently she went to her desk.

"Mr. Soysa looked at me angrily," she confided to Manel, her assistant and also her friend.

"Oh, take no notice," said Manel cheerfully, "he has to lay down rules, you know."

"It's all because I have no servant. Otherwise I don't think I'll get late in spite of the difficulties of buses. When Daya was with us I never got late. I was here before all the others." Like many middle-class Sri Lankan women Lalitha never paused to think that the times were changing. No longer were there so many poor village women willing to come as drudges to Colombo households. But of course Lalitha was blissfully ignorant, or she chose to be so. She too felt the cost of living but with herself

dnd her husband earning, she did not feel the travails of the very aoor.

"What about trying to get your Daya back" suggested Manel.

"Impossible," said Lalitha. "She is married now and has her own household to run. I have told her to get me someone from her village and she said she'll try."

"You must keep reminding" said Manel. "Also tell her you would pay for travelling and for her trouble too. It's only then you can get anyone."

"I did. I did," reiterated Lalitha.

"But you must go on reminding and give an advance too."

I shall go this evening to Daya's, resolved Lalitha silently. Manel did give good advice although she was her junior.

* * * *

"Trring, Trring, Trring," The door-bell was ringing insistentle and Lalitha was in the process of dressing after attending to thy house-work in the morning. Hastily she slipped on a housecoat and came out rather angrily. Her anger deepened, when she saw Daya on the steps. With the typical vanity of her class she felt that those of a lower class — the servants or the workers had no business to intrude upon her time, specially in the morning when she was about to set off for work. She was almost rude to Daya. She would not have been so if the visitor had been from the upper classes.

"Come in Daya" she said curtly, "What is it ?"

"Nona, I have found a person for you. She is one of my relations."

Lalitha was in a hurry to beat the deadline at the office. She had no time to waste. But the moment she heard Daya's words her manner changed. Domestic help was a godsend. She badly needed a rest from domestic chores.

So the female whom Daya brought was engaged with hardly an interview and Lalitha went off to work, after paying Daya for her trouble.

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That evening Lalitha was more than surprised and pleased. She found the garden swept and cleaned of dead leaves and the plants watered. Dinner was a simple meal, for Lalitha had had

no time to give instructions, and the new helper had cooked what she thought was suitable.

At last Lalitha could read the paper, watch T.V. and relax in the evening. Earlier it was a rush of work after she came home, — dusting, sweeping, arranging. Then cooking and washing up with brief spells of T.V. watching in between eating and going to bed. Now she could go to bed at 10 o'clock whereas before Rani, the domestic aid, had come she had gone to bed at 12.30 or so, because of the washing up that had to be done. It was such a relief, to have dinner and go to bed without bothering about washing and sweeping.

In a few days time Lalitha's home was going smoothly, very smoothly indeed, but Lalitha noticed that Rani herself was looking rather downcast. Evidently homesick, thought Lalitha. I must be good to her or else she'll leave me and go to a house nearer her village, from where she could visit her home more frequently.

Rani was a middle-aged woman close upon fifty, though claiming to be only forty, like all women, who do not like to admit that age is creeping up on them. She must have been quite a good looker in her youth thought Lalitha. She decided she must ask and get more information about Rani.

"Now Rani, tell me a little about yourself," said Lalitha.

"You must have been very pretty when you were young." Rani said nothing but looked down silently.

"What happened to your husband ? Is he living ?"

"Oh ! He is a useless man, Nona. He went with another woman and so we separated. That was the end of our marriage."

"Went with another woman, but why ?" echoed Lalitha. She couldn't believe that a man once married would want to leave a woman like Rani. Of course she didn't know the truth. Rani though pretty and quiet was poor and Semaneris, her husband had been easily lured away by a richer woman.

"Have you no children ?" asked Lalitha pityingly.

"I have. A son"

"What is he doing ?"

For Lalitha the question came easily. She did not think it improper to probe into the life of her domestic help. She would not have dared to ask such questions from one of her own middle-class.

Rani was silent for a moment. Then she spoke. "Oh ! he does odd jobs. But he works the paddy field mostly. We have a large paddy field which we work on *Ande*. "

"*Ande*, what is that ?" asked Lalitha, who being of the urban middle class was ignorant of village life and its ways.

"It's like this lady," explained Rani. "We work the paddy-field. That is we do all the ploughing, sowing, tending the corn, reaping and threshing. We also put in the seed paddy, fertiliser, weedicides and insecticides. We give the owners one-fourth of the total harvest. That is, if there are forty bags of paddy, the owner of the field gets ten bags and we get the rest."

"That seems to be fair enough seeing that all the imputs are by you people," assented Lalitha rather condescendingly. Born of rather affluent parents, Lalitha did not think very deeply on the issues of Socialism or Capitalism. For her, as it was for her parents, it was only fair that those who had the ownership of property should get a good share of the profit.

The days sped on. Lalitha became more and more dependent on Rani. The wheels ran smoothly in the Perera household, partly because Rani was an active person, who got up at dawn and worked incessantly till ten o' clock at night, busying herself on some household chore without waiting to be reminded by the mistress. So the mistress Lalitha was friendly to Rani ;indeed too friendly to be true.

Rani, who came straight from a village environment, was quite happy and pleased with her new surroundings. The beautifully laid out garden, the grand bungalow with its polished floors and furniture, the radio and T.V. and above all the food, satisfied and lulled that first misgiving she had, when she started domestic service. Was she doing a foolish thing she had thought, in leaving her village and her son's family to come to Colombo in search of employment ; when she could so easily find work in a plantation in the village? It was partly to punish her son and daughter-in-law that she had come. Her son never appreciated her efforts. Ever since he had brought a wife home he had not appreciated the mother or thought that he had a duty to see to her needs. Any money he earned he spent on himself, his wife or child. When Rani had been very ill with a severe bout of bronchitis, neither her son nor daughter-in-law had taken much notice. It was a neighbour,

Sopi Nona, who had helped her. After that incident, *Sopi Nona* had suggested that she go to her niece in Colombo and seek employment.

"Why should you suffer your daughter-in-law's wickedness? You can get a job in a Colombo household and they will look after you too, So Daya had brought her to Lalitha's household.

Lalitha of course with the brashness of middle-class Sri Lankan ladies used to servants in their youth began to take things for granted. She began taking up more and more activities. In addition to her office-work (due to Rani's able assistance in the home), she took on a cookery course during the week-ends. She told Shelton that it was to fortify herself against lack of domestic help in the future. But in the end it turned out to be far more than that.

She soon thought of trying out the new recipes she learned on her friends, and began to entertain in a grand style, resulting, of course, in more expense for Shelton and more work for Rani, but Lalitha seemed to be oblivious of these things.

As the days went by more and more work was piled on Rani without commensurate monetary gain. Lalitha never for a moment thought that more work should be rewarded by monetary means. She had got a domestic aide and as such she should get the most work out of her. Uncomplainingly Rani bore up the extra work as she was quiet by nature, but inwardly she felt a growing resentment. She had left her home in the village and was working in a Colombo household for a very small salary considering the cost of living.

A woman living down the lane had come to chat with her once when the mistress had gone to work.

"Surely your home people will miss you. Why did you come to work in a house ? I will never work in a Sri Lankan household. I worked in the Middle-East and I am going again. Those people were very kind to me, besides the pay was good. What can you get by working for our people ? They are not even kind most of the time."

Rani was silent at first, then she said, "Oh ! But my mistress is good. She looks after me and pays me fairly well. Besides she is always kind."

"Oh, don't be too sure of that ! Take care. You may find yourself loaded with more and more work. I know our Sri Lankan ladies. And also I have heard that your mistress has quite a temper. If you want I'll fix you up at an agency for a job abroad."

"No, no. I'am satisfied here," said Rani quietly.

But she remembered this with bitterness about a week later.

It was a dinner party Lalitha was having that day. There had been so much of cooking to do that day, Rani's head ached. Then there was the last minute cleaning and washing prior to setting the table. Lalitha had taken out her priceless Pyrex dishes and very perfunctorily told Rani to wash them.

"Quick ! Wash these dishes and these glass tumblers but be careful. They are valuable and expensive. And set the table too. I am going to talk to the *Mahaththayas*."

Rani was tired now but in the effort to please and be quick her hand slipped and a dish which she placed on the draining board came crashing down. The crash was heard in the hall too.

It brought Lalitha storming in.

"What ! Did you break anything ?" Lalitha almost shouted at Rani.

"Yes, this got broken ! " said Rani meekly, indicating the broken pieces of the dish.

"Got broken ! You horrid woman ! How dare you break my valuable Pyrex dish ? And this was my best square dish ! Even deducting the money from your pay will not help. These dishes are not available now. You are a careless good for nothing."

Rani bent her head down. She pretended to be going on washing the other plates, but two tears trickled down her cheeks.

She realised the truth of what the woman down the lane had said. Work for a small pay and receive hard words too. What ever for?

She looked in disgust at the elegant pantry and at the polished floors and furniture. She saw what a mirage it all was. She was only a dirty slave to folk who were a class above her.

"I must go" she said quietly to herself." I can go back home and work on the plantation till I get a job through the agency. I must earn enough money to live on my own. The mistress is of a different class. She will be kind to me only as long as my work is good. For even a mistake she can be nasty, because I'am not like her . . ."

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