



Aasi Kantharajah

# HORIZON

*A Collection of Stories*





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32/9 Arcot Road, Kodambakkam  
Chennai - 600 024. India

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## FOREWORD

Despite all their differences — social, economic, political and so on — Tamilians know that they have a complex system of values, beliefs and customs, which, though forged long ago, has never really been broken or interrupted. The Tamil language is ancient and rich; Tamil literature, equally ancient and richer. This literature has, in recent years, been enriched further, by what is referred to as 'diasporic' literature. After the ethnic riots of 1983 in Sri Lanka, many Tamils of Sri Lanka migrated to several countries across the globe. Gifted writers among them, have recorded their experiences both in their motherland and the country where they now live. This 'literature', especially fiction, not only makes interesting reading, but also gives an insight into the kind of life led by the writers, and their problems, both physical and mental.

Aasi Kantharajah, was born in Sri Lanka, and is currently living in Sydney, Australia. His published works include two collections of short stories. The one titled 'Pavanai Pesalanri' has won him the Sri Lanka Sahitya Award in 2001. As a world renowned academic, he has travelled extensively all over the world at the invitation of Universities and Scientific Research

Institutes. For the past twenty years, he has been attached to Australian Universities. Earlier, he studied and worked in German and Japanese Universities for fourteen years.

In his collection of short stories, he has given us glimpses of the various countries that he has visited, in his official capacity as a University Professor. These stories also offer us an insight into the working of the human mind, covering a wide spectrum, ranging from the extremely loving parent, to the indifferent spouse, or the callous son/daughter-in-law and so on. Without being moralistic, he allows us to judge for ourselves and come to our own conclusions.

Literature, they say, is a mirror of life. It reflects the various facets of man's life — at times child-like, at times hypocritical; at times self-effacing, at times selfish to the core, at times kind, at times cruel. What is it that makes man behave the way he does? Man's life, as never before, has now acquired an uncertainty that compels him to move along with the current. Those who pause and ponder on man's predicament, are faced with a number of questions which are vital and need an urgent answer. Kantharajah tries his best to grapple with these questions and find a solution to them. His strength as a writer lies in his ability to take the readers along with him on his quest.

A word about translation. Language is not only a means of communication, but a mirror of life. It represents a whole culture — stories, myths, legends, imbibed values and concepts. indigenous medical cures, superstitious beliefs, humour, traditions and a way of seeing and enjoying life. Through the centuries, Tamil literature has been enriched by contributions from writers belonging to various regions, religions and ethnic groups. We can preserve language and literary works only through translations. They help us to have a deeper



understanding of the language and culture of the original work. In this sense, a translation gives us 'cultural education'. A literary work written in one of the regional languages, is meant to be read by a particular section of society which is familiar with the culture and background of the writer. When such a work is translated into English, much of its ethnic flavour may be lost. The translator, therefore, has not only to reproduce the creative urge of the writer, but bring in his or her own brand of creativity to the translation. At this level, translation no longer remains a faithful reproduction of the original work in another language, but rises above it to become a transcreation, a kind of rebirth.

Translating Kantharajah's short stories was a pleasant, as well as a challenging task. His objective in having his stories translated into English, was to make them easily accessible to the younger generation of readers who lack fluency in Tamil. A literary work is always read in a particular cultural context. When it is translated into another language much of the ethnic flavour may be lost, along with the cultural ambience and the idiom that is peculiar to that language. I have endeavoured, to the best of my ability, to reproduce the virtues of the original stories. However, a translation will always be a translation. If readers all over the world are able to read these stories and appreciate Kantharajah's creative genius through this translation, I shall consider myself more than amply rewarded.

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## DEPRIVED JOYS

**T**he Maths class was going on!

Mrs. Thomson, the Maths teacher, was explaining a new method of dividing twelve into groups of three. But the thoughts of little Raji, studying in 4th standard, revolved around the merry-go-round being installed in Kingswood Park.

Raji always sat in the first row. It was in obedience to her mother's order. Her mother was very particular that her daughter should somehow secure the first rank in everything!

Raji had already studied complicated division sums last year itself in the tuition classes being held on Saturdays. Tuition classes were not conducted on an individual basis. They too were like regular school classes. There were ten to fifteen students in each class. More than half of them were Asian migrants, especially Tamils.

It was Raji's view that Mrs. Thomson was a better teacher than the tuition master. Her neighbour Vani had been selected to the 'selective' stream in 6th standard, only after

attending tuition classes. That was why Raji's mother also sent her daughter to the same tuition class. This was the secret behind several mothers sending their children for tuition in the primary classes itself.

After she had explained long division, Mrs. Thomson distributed to the students, the mark sheets of the test held the previous week. This time, Sunitha who lived in the next street, had scored two marks more than what Raji did.

Raji's mother attended the Parent-Teacher meetings regularly. She knew very well that at the end of every month, a class test would be conducted in the lessons taught during that month, and that on the last Friday, Mrs. Thomson would give the mark sheets of that test.

As soon as Raji reached home that day, the first thing her mother did, was to enquire, "How much did you score?" This question would usually be followed by an enquiry about the marks scored by the other Tamil children in the class. Her mother was very particular that Raji should always get more marks than those of other children - especially the Tamils. This 'always' was a source of irritation to Raji, now and then.

In the matter of studies, there was nothing new in Raji's mother scolding her. But, in the matter of the inauguration of the carnival at Kingswood Park the next day, the problem for Raji lay in the two marks more which Sunitha had secured. Raji knew that for the sake of those two marks, she would have to spend several extra hours with her books.

Raji's perennial complaint was that her parents never took her where she wanted to go. Every Monday, her class-mate Evelyn, would be full of stories of how her family had spent the weekend. She would narrate with pride, how she



went 'bush walking' with her father, or how her family went to the beach, or a camp, or to an amusement fair. Raji longed to experience such things at least once.

The Australian government conducted 'fun fairs' frequently, in an attempt to promote multiculturalism among the various ethnic communities. Their Social Studies teacher had told Raji's class that such a carnival would be held that weekend at Kingswood Park.

Kingswood Park was quite close to Raji's house. While washing her face on Friday morning, Raji could see through the bathroom window, arrangements being made to instal the merry-go-round and the giant-wheel. Horses and mules meant for children's rides, were tethered to the pine trees at the Northern end of the Park.

During lunchbreak, Evelyn boasted that on Saturday her father, and on Sunday her mother would take her brother and herself to the carnival. She knew very well that Raji's parents would never let her go to the carnival. Good enough reason, why she enjoyed teasing Raji like this, often.

For Social Studies, three children were clubbed together to do a 'project'. The group consisting of Raji, Evelyn and Catherine, was given the topic 'multiculturalism'. They collected suitable pictures from journals and magazines. Raji invited Evelyn and Catherine to her house, to discuss the project, to paste the pictures in the right places, and to write notes on them.

Evelyn could not suppress her wonder when she saw the trophies displayed in Raji's drawing room. "We never knew that you were an athlete... why didn't you participate in the school competitions?" she asked Raji.



It was customary to give only a small badge or a flag to the winners of the school competitions, including debates. A trophy was something exceptional. "I won all these in Tamil competitions. Even now, I was preparing a speech for a competition" said Raji.

Catherine, who had never before heard of a trophy being given for an oratorical competition, asked, "What are you going to talk about, this time?"

"The greatness of medieval Tamil" replied Raji. "I don't know its meaning. But I have memorised the whole speech". She could not suppress her laughter as she said this.

Evelyn took up a trophy. The inscription on it indicated that Raji had secured it as the 3rd prize in a memory contest. "What! Do they give a trophy even for a 3rd place?" she asked in a mocking tone.

"Why not? Sometimes they give trophies to all the participants in a Tamil competition" said Raji, laughing.

"Isn't this too an aspect of multiculturalism? Tell us in detail. We can mention it in our project also" said Catherine, in all seriousness.

"Oh, no... no... This doesn't happen in our country. Here, trophies are very cheap; that is why they give them away generously" said Raji, unwilling to let down Tamil culture.

Having completed the project work, Evelyn reminded Raji of the 'cultural' carnival the next day, before taking leave. "We'll come here at eight, tomorrow morning. Don't forget to get your mother's permission" said Catherine.

After they left, Raji thought of all the things she usually did during the weekends. Maths tuition would begin at 8.30 a.m. on Saturdays. The English class which followed this would end at 12 noon. Lunch at home; then Tamil classes at 2 p.m. "Sai" bhajans at night. On Sunday morning, there was the bharatanatyam class. In the forenoon, Raji had to attend 'Moral Philosophy' lessons and then the 'speech and drama' class. In addition, she had to participate in the Tamil competitions that would be held the following week, and win prizes. Whenever Raji won prizes in competitions, her mother would say, "My daughter is a genius". Otherwise, she would keep nagging her for the next few days. Raji could never quite understand these quirks in her mother's character.

Raji decided that somehow she would visit the carnival the next day.

If she had to accompany her friends at 8 in the morning, she would have to 'cut' the 8.30 Maths tuition class. That was difficult. Her mother herself dropped and picked her up by car. In the forenoon, there was the Tamil class. She could feign sickness and remain at home. Her mother would go away at 2 p.m. to the Tamil school conducted on Saturdays alone. She was a 'volunteer' teacher there.

If Raji crossed the bamboo gate situated between the plantain tree and the curry-leaves tree near the fence at the back of their compound, she could enter Kingswood Park. If she crept in there around 2, she could spend the next three hours (of the Tamil school) happily. She knew for certain that Evelyn and Catherine would be there the whole day. Daniyela had said that she would also come at 3 p.m.



Raji opened her 'piggybank'. There was quite a sum which she had saved little by little. It would be enough for the next day's expenses. How to induce a fake fever, was her problem now.

A movie which she had seen with her mother, came to her mind. Keeping an onion in the armpit the whole night, would bring on a fever the next morning - was the technique depicted in the film.

It was difficult to place a big onion - available at home - in the armpit. Raji knew that her neighbour, an old lady from Batticaloa, usually bought small onions from a Tamil grocery store. Raji could get a few of them, saying that her mother wanted them. The old lady was very forgetful. So, it was unlikely that Raji's mother would come to know of her daughter having borrowed onions from the old lady.

Every Friday evening, Raji's family visited the temple without fail. On their return from the temple that Friday, Raji went to the old lady with sandalwood paste and sacred ash. Casually, she obtained half a dozen onions from the old lady and deposited them in her table drawer.

Around 9 p.m. she peeled the onions carefully (without minding the irritation in her eyes), kept them in her armpits, covered herself completely with a blanket and went to sleep.

Saturday dawned!

Raji opened her eyes to the sound of her mother's voice saying, "No intention of going to the tuition class today?"

The onions which she had kept in her armpits were scattered all over the bed. She placed her hand on her forehead. The onions had failed her!



Raji got up with the feeling that everyone - from her relatives at home down to the onions - was scheming against her.

The rattle of the merry-go-round and the music of the band announced the fact that the carnival had begun. Raji could not bear it any longer.

She mustered all her courage and decided to ask her mother for permission.

Her mother was busy in the kitchen. In a bid to plumb her mother's mood, she asked her, "Shall I wake up brother and wash his face?"

"If you wake him up now, he will mess up things. You have your breakfast, drink your coffee and get ready for the tuition class. Only after dropping you, I must go to Flemington Market to make some purchases" said her mother, with an uncommon calm.

Raji felt that her mother was in a good mood.

"Catherine and Evelyn will be going to the carnival at Kingswood Park today. They asked me also to come. Shall I go, mummy?" Raji asked, pleadingly and expectantly.

Her mother sprang up, as if she had stepped on hot coals.

"Don't you know that there is tuition class and Tamil school today? Moreover, there is the rehearsal for the play to be staged at the cultural fete. It was with great difficulty that I managed to get the main role for you. You are taking it all so lightly?... If you keep gallivanting like this without attending tuition classes, you will disgrace us by failing in the 'selective'

test for the 6th standard.... Go and get ready for the tuition class" her mother burst out in a rage.

Heartbroken, Raji got into the car with her books. As the car left the garage, Evelyn and Catherine could be seen walking down the drive-way.

Lowering the window glass slightly, her mother told them, "Raji has her tuition class. She won't come..."

"Tuition?" asked the girls in wonder, and waving to Raji, they walked towards Kingswood Park.

At the same time, Raji, a 4th standard student, was going to her tuition class, to acquire the 'knowledge and wisdom' which she was expected to gain two years hence - in the 6th standard!



## NOTHING BUT LIP - SERVICE

**“Sinnathurai Vaadyar (teacher) passed away in Sydney yesterday...”** began the obituary announcement made by ‘Thamizh Muzhakkam’, the Sydney - based Tamil broadcast.

“He was the beloved father of Dr. Perambalam and father-in-law of Mrs. Anusha, the Accountant and Financial Controller of Telecom Ltd; the Sambanthi (the parents-in-law of one’s son or daughter ) of the reputed eye specialist of Colombo, the late Dr. Ponnambalam and Mrs. Gayathri Ponnambalam, former Principal of Hindu College; the brother of the late Mrs. Visalaatchi; the uncle of Indhu from London, Mahesh and Vasanthi from America, Pranavan from South Africa, and the loving grandfather of Divya and Dinesh...” continued the announcement.

The announcer listed the names of relatives spread across the world and added that the body of the late Vaadyar would be kept for public view the next day at his son’s residence, and at the Town Hall the day after, for people to pay their last respects, and it would be cremated in Rookwood



cemetery after the final rites. The announcer appealed sincerely to all the relatives, friends and well-wishers, to accept this announcement on behalf of the Vaadyar's son.

It was Sinnathurai Vaadyar who taught me the three 'R's. I lost my father in my childhood. It was Vaadyar who was responsible for elevating me to the position I now occupy. As it is a strong bond, I have always loved and respected him. Had this tragedy taken place in Jaffna, I would have rushed to his house as soon as I got the news. But here in Australia... Vaadyar's body would be brought to his house the next day, only after obtaining permission from the Municipal Council. Until then, it would be kept in the 'freezer' box along with other corpses in the undertaker's office. I did not want to go to the Vaadyar's son's house just to convey my condolences for the sake of formality and then indulge in gossip. Vaadyar's death affected me deeply, and my mind longed to share this sorrow with someone.

## II

### The day after.

I went to his house in the morning. It was a spacious bungalow. It would be more appropriate to call it a sprawling mansion. Nevertheless, in view of Dr. Perambalam's popularity, a large gathering of visitors was expected. Hence, a temporary enclosure had been erected in the space between the swimming pool and the tennis court at the back of the house. Chairs were arranged neatly in rows. There are many companies in Australia which undertake such work on order. Its not necessary for the relatives to strain themselves.

In a corner of the enclosure sat Vaadyar's students like me and acquaintances. Some recounted in Tamil his achievements and greatness. In between, we also discussed in subdued voices, the ethnic conflicts in native Sri Lanka.

As time passed, the top brass in Sydney began arriving in large luxury cars. In accordance with the 'funeral' custom in Australia, they wore black suits and ties, and composed their faces with a look of artificial sorrow and sympathy. Vaadyar's sambanthi, Mrs. Ponnambalam, was making herself appear 'busy' by greeting the fresh arrivals with a 'Hi, Hello' and then disappearing.

Around 10 a.m., Vaadyar's body arrived. The undertakers had brought it in a mortuary van. One couldn't dismiss it as a mortuary van. It was actually a black Benz car. The body was lowered from the vehicle and placed in the middle of the enclosure. Those seated there vied with one another to participate in the process of lowering the body. That the order for the funeral arrangements involved a huge budget, was evident in each and every movement of the men who had brought the corpse home. The visitors watched the proceedings with a kind of awe.

However, not many who had gathered there, knew that Vaadyar who had left that house six years ago, was returning from an old-age home as a 'corpse' only that day. His daughter-in-law, Anusha, was very clever. On a table beside the body, she had dusted and neatly arranged the Tamil books which he had written and the awards that he had received for his service to Tamil and Tamil literature.

Vaadyar lay in an expensive teak-wood coffin, ornamented with silver in-laid work. His 'dress' was a veritable



feast for the eyes: a silk 'kurta' and a silk veshti with a broad zari border. A matching shawl, its fan-fold crisp and unruffled, completed the grand outfit. This was the first time I was seeing Vaadyar dressed in such splendour.

*The Vaadyar whom I knew back home, never liked luxury and pomp. He was always dressed in a milk-white cotton veshti, a shirt made of hand-spun cotton and a white shawl. It would look brand new everyday. You should have seen his eyes in those days. We talk of love, compassion and serenity. I have seen them only in his eyes.*

*In the rural school, upto the sixth standard, he was all-in-all. At the end of the fifth standard itself, he would start preparing the students for the 'scholarship' test. It was his coaching that laid a strong foundation for the production of doctors and engineers from our village. Sinnathurai Vaadyar's contribution in making our village famous worldwide, was substantial.*

*That he was a genius in Mathematics, even the neighboring villagers knew. He would solve even a difficult problem in a minute, mentally. He would then explain it in easy terms, with examples. Even after we had entered the pre-university class, we used to go to his house to study Maths for an hour. This was also like a 'tuition' class. But he never received any money from any student.*

*Till the very end, Sinnathurai Vaadyar strictly followed the policy that the 'Goddess of Learning should never be sold.'*



### III

A major portion of the enclosure where Vaadyar's body was kept, was filled with the wreaths placed by the visitors. The 'upper-class' mourners in their black dress, lowered their voices to the level set by the required norms, and discussed the merits and demerits of the recently imposed GST, in English. Mrs. Ponnambalam sat with some of the celebrities of Sydney and tried to draw up a 'budget' for the obsequies.

"Are the visitors going to see what the Saivite priest is doing...? Who will understand all this? I do not even know what some of these things mentioned in your list are. Where will I go and get them from, in Sydney?" So saying, she struck off a few items from the list. A discreet way of cutting down the expenditure.

*At no time did Vaadyar give undue importance to money. Neither did he, like other teachers, make money by farming or taking tuitions. His salary was just enough to cover his monthly expenses. He did not worry about it also.*

*He bought books and gave them to poor children. Even when I was in the higher claases, he had paid my exam fees now and then. Whether it was a land dispute or a clash between brothers or a matrimonial discussion, Sinnathurai Vaadyar was so respected by the villagers that his presence was sought by one and all. His word was never questioned or disregarded.*

Among the younger of the mourners who had come to pay their respects, the on-going war in Northern Sri Lanka

was naturally given importance in their talk. Some of the elders too, joined them. Colombo Maniam broke the news that because there was a war in Kondavil, the tobacco cultivated there had not been harvested and so was going waste. He had come to lay a wreath on behalf of the Tamil Cultural Association.

"A single betel leaf is being sold for ten rupees in Jaffna. Hence, the price of tobacco and cigars is soon going to soar sky-high..." lamented Maniam's henchman, Namasivayam.

*In those days, Vaadyar would always have a stock of the best tobacco. He never smoked a cigar filled with second-grade or adulterated tobacco. As soon as he received his salary, he would go to Kondavil. There, he would buy a bundle of tobacco from the famous tobacco merchant, Appudurai. This would last him and his occasional smoker-friends for a month.*

*Chinnapody, the barber, used to come early in the morning to shave Vaadyar. When he finished his work, Vaadyar would tear off just the required tobacco for a cigar and give it to Chinnapody. One day, Vaadyar's son tore a tobacco leaf cross-wise to offer it to someone. Vaadyar must have been very angry. He had never concealed his passion for tobacco. He called his son and myself from play. Fearing punishment, we went hesitantly. But he merely explained in detail, how the tobacco leaf must be torn length-wise, and that if it were cut breadth-wise, the life of the cigar would be reduced. It was his habit to explain even little things in great detail.*



## IV

The discussion on the budget for the obsequies was not yet over. Mrs. Ponnambalam was putting forward the arguments – for and against the expenditure. In the meanwhile, as she got up to go to the toilet, she saw me and requested me to get betel leaves and coins to be given to the priest, on my way there the next day. I have never seen any other person anywhere, as good as Mrs. Ponnambalam in exploiting a situation to the maximum extent possible.

*I have received sundry gifts from Vaadyar many times. My father and he, had been classmates in the Teachers' Training Institute. My father would get a gift from Vaadyar for the New Year. Vaadyar would give my father two rupees one cent, and myself one rupee one cent, kept folded in betel leaves. One rupee then, was big money. A dosai was available for five cents at that time. Hence, I used to wait for the new year to arrive. Even after my father's death, Vaadyar never forgot to give me this New Year gift.*

Telephone calls from abroad, conveying condolence messages, continued to pour in. Vaadyar's son, Perambalam, could not manage these calls by himself. Both the landlines and his mobile phone kept ringing one after the other. Hence, Vaadyar's daughter-in-law, who was preparing the list of things required, had to attend the calls leaving her work. Perambalam, therefore, requested me to receive the calls and note down the details.

Mrs. Ponnambalam would never easily accept what others said. She was so stingy that she would spend half a day arguing, to save half a dollar on turmeric powder. I did not also like the airs she put on while handling certain things. Luckily for me, the Saivaite priest in charge of the obsequies, came to my rescue as my saviour. He checked the list of articles necessary for the ceremony, as prepared by Mrs. Ponnambalam -- copper pots, lamp etc. It was, indeed, surprising to see the great lady sitting quite humbly in front of the priest.

I considered myself privileged, when Vaadyar's son, Perambalam, asked me to procure all the things required for the funeral rites. My greatest problem was, where to get the copper pots from. It was true that many people in Sydney did possess copper pots and lamps of different sizes. But they were polished and displayed as antique showpieces. I did not want to make a fool of myself by asking them to be lent (that too, for funeral rites).

## V

"You are the President of the Tamil Cultural Association. Instead of organising music and dance programmes, why don't you buy these things in the Association's account and keep them in a common place so that people can use them?" asked Viswalingam Master, finding fault with Colombo Maniam. He had an eye on the President's post held by Maniam. Hence, he was careful to point out in public, lapses in Maniam's functioning.



Mrs. Ponnambalam entered, saying, "Please don't release your election tension in a house of bereavement..." She was also an important figure in society. She knew Maniam even in Colombo. She was keen on securing at least the post of a Secretary the next year, with Maniam's support.

Before Viswalingam Master could respond to Mrs. Ponnambalam's remark, I began to read aloud the list of articles, with a view to normalise the situation. "Turmeric, ghee, rice flour, rice..." continued the list and ended with "cooked rice".

"What is the need for cooked rice in a house of death?" drawled Viswalingam Master. "After ordinary rice is served, cooked and puffed rice should also be added. Only then will the soul of the departed, rest in peace" explained the Saivaite priest.

"Then, offer the Vaadyar good hand - pounded rice. It must be five or six years since he ate such rice" said Namasivayam, with an implicit meaning.

*Vaadyar preferred hand-pounded rice. As soon as harvesting was over in the village, he would stock grain enough for a year in his house.*

*His wife was an expert cook. The dishes which she prepared had a special taste. Whenever she cooked mutton curry, he would invite me for lunch after class.*

*His son, Perambalam, now living in Sydney, was two years older to me. He secured the first rank in the District in his first attempt itself and entered the Medical College. Vaadyar had never boasted about this at any*

time. That everyone should study well and progress in life, was his policy. He believed that if one cared for others' children, one's own children would prosper.

Vaadyar's daughter, Chitralekha, was younger to me by two years. You should have seen her. She was fair like her mother; majestic like a chariot. She was the personification of beauty combined with intelligence. As I was considered more as a member of the family, there was no objection to my moving with her freely.

I too got admission into the Engineering Course in the university. Vaadyar's wife invited me for lunch before I left to join Peradeniya University.

Chitralekha herself had prepared lunch that day. It was a sumptuous feast comprising my favourite dishes--brinjal and potato curry, dhal, peas, lamb with gravy, appalam and so on. After the meal, she gifted me a Pilot pen. I realised that it was an unwritten love story.

Emboldened by the prospect of becoming an engineer in the near future, I asked Vaadyar for Chitralekha's hand in marriage. Her shyness made her look more beautiful. Vaadyar looked at both of us with joy and pride. I knew that my mother would not raise any objection to our union.

After the final exams were over, I received a letter from my mother, which was a veritable thunderbolt. While Chitralekha was drawing water from the well one day, a shell discharged from the army camp south of their house, struck her, killing her instantly. Her father seems to have requested my mother not to inform me about this until I had completed my exams.



*I did not wish to go back to my native place, after learning of this tragedy. I took up a job, brought my mother, and settled in Colombo itself.*

## VI

By 4 p.m., friends, relatives and acquaintances had gathered in large numbers.

Mrs. Ponnambalam was busy ushering the mourners to the corpse and arranging the wreaths that they had brought. In between, she changed the Thevaaram songs on the CD and displayed the cards attached to the wreaths conspicuously, with great care. She must have thought that the number of wreaths and the identity of those who placed them, was an indication of her son-in-law's 'status'.

As time passed, the 'white' colleagues of Vaadyar's son and daughter-in-law began to arrive. His son stood beside Vaadyar's head, dressed in a black suit and coat. The daughter-in-law too, dressed in black, sat on a chair near her husband. It is no exaggeration to say that, even after so many years of married life, they looked like a "made for each other" couple.

*The two of them were married in Colombo, at an impressive ceremony. The famous eye specialist, Dr. Ponnambalam, promoted Vaadyar's son who was working in his clinic, as his son-in-law.*

*After the tragic death of Chitralkha, I met Vaadyar for the first time, only on that day. As soon as*

*I saw him, I cried, unmindful of the fact that it was a wedding hall. But Vaadyar patted me, suppressing his emotions as usual. He was the same old Vaadyar. In the midst of the 'high-class' wedding guests and the grand display of the bride's affluence, Vaadyar stood out with his simplicity and unassuming nature.*

*Perambalam, who came to Sydney for higher studies a year after his wedding, settled down there itself, obtained his citizenship, and rose to great heights of prosperity and influence.*

*In the wake of the ethnic riots in Sri Lanka, I also migrated to Sydney many years later. One day, soon after my arrival, I went to the posh area where Vaadyar's son lived, in a second-hand car -- my first car. That the daughter-in-law did not like my car being parked in their 'driveway', was evident from the expression on her face. Perambalam, who had shortened his name to 'Pal', could not treat me as his good old friend. It was obvious that the wife had the upper hand in all matters of domestic life. I stopped going to their house after that. Vaadyar would often say, "A good cow needs no second branding".*

*One day, I met Perambalam at a 'debut' dance performance. He said that Vaadyar would soon be coming to Sydney. Unable to bear Chitrlekha's loss, Vaadyar's wife too had died. As the situation in Jaffna was not satisfactory, Vaadyar had gone to Colombo.*

*"How does he spend his time in Colombo" I asked, spontaneously. Perambalam informed me that one of Vaadyar's students who occupied a top posi-*



tion there, had cleared a room for him. As usual, he was taking tuitions in the morning and evening, he said.

Eager to find out whether the son was supporting him from Sydney, I asked again, "Vaadyar will not take any money from the students. How does he manage life in Colombo with just his pension?"

Quite casually Perambalam replied that the same student who gave him the room paid the major part of the rent, under the pretext of paying Vaadyar for giving tuition to his own children.

## VII

Vaadyar's grandchildren were running here and there, and playing with the silk tassels hanging on the edge of their grandfather's coffin.

Noticing me, his granddaughter came to me and said, "Hi, uncle why didn't you bring your daughter?" Perhaps she didn't have a companion to play with. "She'll come tomorrow, to hold the pandham (torch) for grandfather, along with you and your younger brother", I said in English, so that she could understand easily.

"What is a pandham?" she asked in surprise.

"Grandchildren will carry lighted torches as a mark of respect for the departed soul. This is our tradition. But they will not allow you to do that in the hall here. So you can light long candles and carry them" I explained. She was listening eagerly, when her brother called her to play and she left.

*These two children were born to Perambalam and his wife, after they had enjoyed married life for a few years, practising 'family planning'. The girl was a replica of Vaadyar's wife. Had the latter been alive, how happy she would have been.*

*It is not an easy job to bring up children in foreign countries without anybody's help. Especially so, if the husband and wife are both working. It seems Mrs. Ponnambalam came to Sydney only for her daughter's confinement. In America, where she stayed with her son, she was very busy. Her activities were connected with art, culture and education. The Sri Lankan government honoured her with the title, "Vidya Jothi" for the service she rendered to education as a former College Principal. Political influence is necessary for receiving such awards. It is a well-known fact that compared to Vaadyar's contribution to education, Mrs. Ponnambalam's service was nothing at all. But how would the government in Colombo come to know of the work of a humble teacher in a small village near Jaffna?*

*'Somebody' was needed to take Dr. Perambalam's children to the kindergarten school, bring them back and look after them in the evenings. It was difficult to find a trustworthy person in Sydney. And employing such a person was very expensive. Was it possible to ask Mrs. Ponnambalam who, as a famous social activist, was always on the move, flying between New York, Sydney and Colombo, to baby - sit? Who would be bold enough to suggest this solution to the lady who was ever boasting of the fact that she had herself employed two ayahs (women servants) and a boy, to look after her own two children?*



It was the daughter-in-law who put forward the idea: "Father-in-law is 'whiling away his time' in Colombo. Why not bring him here?" This appeared to be a good suggestion to Perambalam. He wrote a very affectionate letter to his father, enclosing some of the photographs taken on the son's birthday.

Following this, the daughter-in-law also wrote another 'loving' letter, saying that the grandchildren were 'longing' to see their grandfather.

Vaadyar knew very well that life in a foreign country would not suit him. Even in Colombo, he felt like a fish out of water.

"Your son has invited you affectionately. You should consider yourself fortunate to be able to play with your grandchildren during the last lap of your earthly journey. The situation in Sri Lanka is also not quite favourable" advised many of those around him. His mind relented. Nevertheless, he submitted his application for a visa only half-heartedly. But the sponsorship documents provided by Perambalam carried such weight, that Vaadyar was granted his visa very quickly.

Perambalam could not go to the airport to receive his father because of an important appointment. The daughter-in-law herself went there. Vaadyar could not recognise her at the Sydney airport.

In Colombo, Anusha had worn her hair in a long, thick plait. Whenever she came wearing a sari and with flowers in her hair, Vaadyar would introduce her with great pride. At Sydney, she received her father - in -

*law, clad in jeans and T-shirt, with her hair cut and bobbed. This was the first shock on his arrival.*

*At the airport, Anusha met an acquaintance of hers. Both of them walked at a distance from Vaadyar, pushing the trolley with the suitcase. When he reached home, the grandchildren looked at him as if he were a novelty, because he was wearing a veshti and shirt, with a shawl (angavastram) on his shoulder and slippers on his feet*

## VIII

The flame of the single lamp kept by the side of the coffin, began blazing for want of oil. Mrs. Ponnambalam trimmed the wick, poured some oil in the lamp, and lighted a few incense sticks. Pondering over something, she came and sat in the vacant chair next to mine.

"Tomorrow we can expect quite a crowd. There is hardly anybody here who has not known my daughter and son-in-law. The secretaries of the Tamil Association, the Literary Circle, the Hindu Association etc., phoned and requested me to allot them time to read out their condolence messages. But they will merely say a few words about Vaadyar's service to Tamil and religion, for the sake of formality. Can Vaadyar's greatness be dismissed so lightly? I feel we can publish a booklet in English and Tamil, on Vaadyar's many achievements... Except for you, who else is here who has known Vaadyar so intimately? If you can help me, I will have the matter composed on the computer overnight and have it



printed in the Chinese Press before the funeral rites begin tomorrow. Must you do this only at my request...?" Her words flowed like honey.

I understood very well, what Mrs. Ponnambalam meant by "Vaadyar's many achievements". Under the pretext of paying tribute to Vaadyar's greatness, what she wanted was to highlight and record the status of her daughter, son - in - law and her own self. She was an expert in getting things done, the way she wanted them done

I agreed to do what she requested me to, and let my thoughts wander through Vaadyar's life at Sydney.

*Soon after his arrival in Sydney, a get-together was arranged to felicitate Vaadyar. He had invited me to attend the function without fail. At the appointed time, I went there with my wife and daughter. It was probably the first time that he was seeing them. He lifted the little girl and kissed her on her forehead, with tears in his eyes.*

*"How do you like life in Sydney?" I asked. Before he could reply, guests began to arrive, carrying vessels containing cooked food. Vaadyar was shocked to see this.*

*"Why do you carry all these?" asked Anusha, as she received the vessels and arranged them on the dining table.*

*Only then, Vaadyar understood the secret of Australian hospitality. He had been wondering how the guests invited for dinner were to be served, when nothing had been prepared by Anusha. This B.Y.O system*

was entirely new to him. Back home, on important occasions such as weddings, funerals and other celebrations, Sinnathurai Vaadyar used to have huge quantities of food cooked for his guests. "Bringing your own food and eating it, is against the very concept of playing host..." he murmured, as he lighted a cigar specially rolled and brought from home. The smell of the cigar was too strong for the 'high - class' ladies who had come there. Some of them began to cough, grimacing.

Understanding the situation, his daughter-in-law said, "Uncle, please stop smoking cigars hereafter... Tobacco and cigars are not available also, here. If the carpet absorbs the smell of the cigar, the whole house will start smelling of tobacco". She then politely removed the cigar from his hand and flushed it in the toilet. Vaadyar looked at me pathetically, but I pretended not to notice him.

The invitees gathered in the adjoining room were talking idly, with glasses of wine in their hands and cigarettes between their lips. As for the ladies, beginning with 'non-alcoholic' wine, they had advanced to the consumption of 'Demi Martin' as an appetiser.

The party was in full swing. The guests started tasting the various 'bites' as they swayed to the rhythm of the music played on the CD. Vaadyar did not fail to observe a certain order that was followed throughout the proceedings. At the party organised in his honour, no one cared for him. Quietly, he came and sat beside me.



*From the way he folded and spread his fingers, I knew that he was emotionally upset. I looked carefully. There was a fresh cigar in his hand. Slowly I got up and took him to my car. I gave him the lighter from the car. Silently, he lighted the cigar and heaved a long sigh.*

*"I shouldn't have come here.. I've committed a blunder..." he said, his eyes moist.*

*"Don't come to hasty conclusions. In course of time you will like the place. We are all here. Don't worry" I consoled him.*

*For a long time he sat in the car and shared pleasant memories of his 'village home' with me.*

## IX

The Municipal Council will not allow a dead body to be kept at home the whole night. Hence, the undertakers came around 9 p.m to take away the corpse. The body would be brought at 10 a.m the next day directly to the hall specially arranged for performing the Saivaite obsequies.

When the lid of the coffin was put in place, Perambalam sobbed inconsolably. It was an emotional outburst at the last minute. I wondered whether he was, in addition, lamenting his incapacity.

"Vaadyar has lived life 'to the lees' and left. That too, on a Friday; considered to be a good death. You have also looked after him well. Please see that the children eat something. They have been going around the whole day taking

only 'cola'..." said Mrs. Ponnambalam, placing the food brought by the relatives on the table. Stubbornly refusing to take rice and curry, the children opened the freezer, took out some sausages and heated them in the microwave oven.

*"But for the microwave oven and the refrigerator, people here would have died of starvation... chicken spend more time in the freezer than outside as 'live' creatures" These words which Vaadyar had once uttered jokingly, now flashed in my mind.*

*A few days after his arrival in Sydney, Vaadyar had summarised his experiences. It is interesting to recollect 'a day in his life in Sydney'*

*He woke up at 5 a.m itself. Unmindful of the change in time (between Colombo and Sydney), he had got up, saying that he could not sleep because of the new surroundings.*

*Two slices of bread, taken from the fridge, had been toasted, buttered and kept on the table. Vaadyar understood that THAT was his breakfast. His son, Perambalam, explained in detail to Vaadyar, how to toast the bread, how to use the microwave oven and so on. Seeing Vaadyar looking helpless and lost, his son assured him, "In the beginning it may be a little difficult, but in course of time, you'll get used to it. For lunch today, take some rice and curry from the fridge and heat it in the microwave. Be careful how long you heat it... See that it doesn't get burnt".*

*The daughter-in-law left the house early, in her Sports - model car, in order to avoid getting stuck in a traffic jam.*



Wishing to prepare a reasonably good lunch, Vaadyar went into the kitchen eagerly. He opened the upper chamber of the fridge. A whiff of cold air struck his face sharply. Disregarding the unease, he looked at the contents stored inside. Meat was packed in plastic bags, marked with the date of packing and frozen. He calculated mentally. Some of the packs were nearly three months old. Green chillies and curry leaves were tied neatly in polythene bags and frozen.

As a sample, he took out a box of meat and opened it. What should have been soft like tomato pulp, was hard as stone. Following Perambalam's instructions, he heated the rice and curry kept as his share in a vessel and tasted it.

It was like sawdust. He dumped the whole thing into the garbage bin.

Assuming that at least for dinner the daughter-in-law would prepare something fresh after her return from the office, he smoked two or three cigars liberally.

But when she returned from the office, the daughter-in-law turned into a fuming volcano. "Uncle, how many times have I told you not to smoke cigars inside the house? The whole house is smelling of tobacco. If a visitor were to come, what will he think?

Vaadyar was stunned. In all his life, none had dared to speak even loudly to him. That was not the end of the episode.

After she had returned from the toilet, she kept murmuring. The words were not clear. She commented

on the fact that the vessels in the kitchen had not been washed. It was as if there had been a downpour.

For dinner, she took out the bread slices and as she buttered them and prepared sandwiches, she spoke to Vaadyar.

"Uncle, tomorrow please go and collect the children from the school. It would be a good exercise for you, walking down. They too, normally come exhausted from the afternoon child care centre... It would give them also an opportunity to get closer to you". She and the children then ate the sandwiches, and went upstairs to watch TV. Vaadyar had never gone upstairs

He looked around for his dinner. The hardened tomato curry from the fridge had been heated. Beside it were a few slices of bread. The toaster too, was on the table, apparently to enable him to toast the bread slices, so that they would become crisp.

Perambalam came home late. When he saw his father, he asked, "Have you finished your dinner?". and without waiting for an answer went upstairs. He did not come down that night. It was only after many days that Vaadyar came to know that his son had his dinner everyday at the Sports Club, after a game of tennis.

Back home, when Vaadyar's wife, the good soul, was alive.. what care and affection she showed in the matter of his diet! There was no question of stale food at all. In fact, I know that she took pride in declaring how Vaadyar preferred only hot freshly cooked food.



## X

In the morning, I went with all the necessary items to the hall where Vaadyar's obseques were to be held. I had taken my wife and daughter along. It was a tribute to Vaadyar who had moulded me. I wished to participate in that ceremony with my family. My wife had become very close to Vaadyar at one time. On hearing of his demise, she cried the whole night. I knew well that this emotion was genuine, and had nothing insincere or hypocritical about it.

*As days passed, Vaadyar used to come walking to my house. I was overwhelmed by the thought that, disregarding the formalities prevailing in this country, he took the liberty of coming to my house freely. Though he gave an excuse saying, "This visit serves a double purpose; it is a good exercise for me, and I can also see you all", I knew that it served more to release the tension in his mind.*

*My wife had lost her father early in life. Hence, she soon began to consider Vaadyar more as her father than her husband's mentor. Vaadyar, who usually never ate outside his own home, readily accepted my wife's invitation for dinner. I had bought from a 'Tamil' store and stocked hand-pounded rice and tobacco specially for him. The care and attention which my wife showed in this matter, gave me great satisfaction.*

*My wife and myself were particular that we should talk to our daughter only in Tamil at home. We*

*followed it as a policy. Vaadyar appreciated this 'home-ly' atmosphere greatly. Because of the interest shown by him, my daughter won several prizes in the debates and oratorical competitions conducted by the 'Tamil' school and earned the reputation of being the girl 'most proficient in Tamil'.*

*One day, my wife unwittingly asked Vaadyar, "Sir, why haven't your grandchildren been sent to a Tamil school?" She works as a volunteer teacher in a Tamil school which works only on weekends.*

*Only a long sigh emerged as Vaadyar's answer. I was upset, wondering whether she had hurt his sentiments by asking him that question.*

*My wife was crying profusely. I felt sorry for her. I remembered that some of the things to be taken to the Rockwood cemetery were in my car. I came out. Why should my mind be so distressed? The final parting must be terribly cruel.*

*I had parked my car in an isolated place near the hall so as not to hamper the movement of others' vehicles. Someone stood close to my car, smoking. He was also a Tamilian. As the corpse had not yet been brought to the hall, he was blowing smoke rings to while away the time.*

*Whenever Vaadyar had his meals in my house, I felt delighted as if a feast had been arranged. Soon after the meal, he would smoke his cigar, relaxing on the verandah at the back of my house.*

*Vaadyar had never spoken of his domestic problems to anyone outside his family circle. Only when it*



*was unbearable, he revealed them to me, to unburden and clear his mind. It was on one such occasion that he narrated the story of the loss of his cigar bundle.*

*He had kept a part of the tobacco which he had brought carefully from Sri Lanka, in an airtight packet, on top of the almirah, in such a way that it could not be easily seen by anybody. A shock awaited him, when he went to the almirah after he had exhausted all the stock that he had with him. The packet containing the tobacco was not to be seen. Everyone in the house swore that they had never set eyes on it. It was only some days later, when he was bringing the grandchildren home, that his grandson let the cat out of the bag.*

*His mother had found the packet when she was cleaning the room, kept it hidden in the garage, and thrown it into the garbage bin on the day the Municipal Council cleared the garbage. She had also threatened the boy not to tell the 'old man' anything about this.*

*Since then, Vaadyar would smoke only when he came to my house. He was not a slave to smoking cigars. I felt, however, that he perceived smoking as a symbol of his freedom and of his identity.*

## **XI**

**A**t the Rockwood cemetery, I unloaded from my car the things I had brought. It was rather early. Time appeared to crawl on all fours, as my memories weighed me down.

Intending to go back to the hall where the funeral rites would be conducted, I got into my car. Only then it struck me that I was supposed to collect the booklet containing the tributes to Vaadyar prepared by Mrs. Ponnambalam and given to the Chinese printer for printing. That press was in front of Westmead Hospital. I should reach the hall before 10 a.m.

On the way, repairs were going on, on the road in front of Westmead Hospital. In order to avoid getting caught in the traffic jam arising out of the new rules for road diversions, I drove fast along Paramatta Road. Even though my car went past the hospital, my memories lingered around it.

*Vaadyar had plenty of experiences in Westmead Hospital.*

*When he was first admitted there, Perambalam rang me up in my office, and said that his father wished to see me urgently. That very evening I went to the hospital with my wife. Vaadyar lay in the Urology Department, passing urine with the help of a catheter.*

*As soon as he saw us, he smiled, holding back the tears in his eyes. "What happened?" I asked. He narrated the story in fits and starts. I put the pieces together and understood it as a whole.*

*A couple of days back, he had taken the children to their kindergarten school in the morning. Only when he returned, did he realise that he had locked the door without taking the keys. He sat on the bench outside until his daughter-in-law came back. As the winter cold affected the kidney, the prostate gland was swollen, and he could not urinate.*



"You could have phoned Perambalam or me..." I said, a bit annoyed.

"I certainly could have. But to go to the foreign 'white' neighbour and explain the situation was not possible because of the language problem. I could have gone to the telephone booth and rung up. But I didn't have any money..." He turned the other way and wiped his tears.

"Were the grandchildren also with you in the cold after school?" my wife asked.

It appears that the granddaughter went to the neighbour's house and rang up her mother, who came home on 'short' leave, and made a hue and cry about the entire incident. She seems to have shouted, "Don't sit on the garden bench the whole day and disgrace us. Have you lost your senses to such an extent that you didn't know that you had to take the keys before locking the door?"

"Is forgetfulness a sin...? I am absolutely fed up with everything" said Vaadyar falteringly, once again turning the other way to hide his tears.

Whenever his sorrows became unbearable, he would express them thus. On such occasions, I turned into a 'sumaitaangi' (a structure with two vertical stone-pillars and a slab over them to rest the head load, found along rural roads in ancient times) for him.

The doctors at the hospital discharged him only on condition that he should soon be operated upon to have the prostate gland removed.

## XII

That I had made a big blunder in taking the Paramatta Road, I realised much later. After some unnecessary detours, I arrived late at the obsequies hall.

I was just in time to see the undertakers placing the coffin (containing Vaadyar's body) on the platform. Sitting in a corner, Viswalingam Master was chanting the 'Thevaaram' and 'Thiruvaasagam' verses plaintively. I had earlier asked him to sing the 'sunnappadal' (the songs of Pattinathar) also.

My mobile phone tinkled. The Saivaite priest informed me that he was on his way and that he would reach the hall in another ten to fifteen minutes.

I noticed the changes that had been effected in Vaadyar's dress. He was now clad in a new light yellow 'kurta'. It was made of silk and of the latest fashion. Having lived his entire life in a simple and austere manner, it was strange to see him dressed in a 'cinematic' dress after death.

Elaborate embroidery on the chest added to the richness of the kurta. I felt sorry to see that Vaadyar did not appear his usual and natural self in this dress.

But who could appeal against Mrs. Ponnambalam's argument, "When our 'white' friends come, should they not realise that our good old styles are trendy even now...?"

*Vaadyar had to face many difficulties in wearing his usual traditional dress in Sydney. Everyday, the grandchildren complained that it was 'funny' to see their*



grandfather wearing a veshti in the presence of other 'high-class' children.

"When in Rome, do as the Romans do' they say. So many of our countrymen who wore a veshti in Sri Lanka, have changed their lifestyle and are wearing pants and shirts. How can one bear the cold of this country, clad in a veshti?" asked his son, daughter-in-law and even Mrs. Ponnambalam, in different tones and in different ways. But Vaadyar stuck to his habit.

"I have been going around in a veshti for ages. How can I now change into pants for your sake?" asked Vaadyar, adamantly. After the first winter, he got over his fear.

It was at this time, that Malathi gave him some good news. She had been his student in Sri Lanka. She was now working in 'Centrelink' an organisation that granted financial assistance to the unemployed, the elderly and single mothers.

"It is a year and nine months since you came to Australia . As per the prevailing regulations, you are entitled to receive financial assistance only on completing two years' stay here, if you have come on a 'sponsorship'. I shall complete all the formalities required, within three months, so that you get your 'social dole' once every fortnight" Malathi told Vaadyar.

When he next spoke to my wife, Vaadyar told her openly, all that he intended doing with the 'dole' when he received it.

*"I can travel by train and bus the whole day on a one-dollar ticket... I shall go to the Tamil shops, buy books and newspapers and read them" he said, hoping to save his self-esteem at least to a certain extent.*

But those hopes...

### XIII

The Saivaite priest began the funeral rites. The pleasant smell of the burning incense sticks and frankincense pervaded the whole hall. This smoke and smell were alien to Australian soil. But the people gathered there, were under the impression that a Tamil flavour had been instilled into Vaadyar's funeral rites by the presence of that smoke and smell.

*Once again the chill affected the bladder and he couldn't control the passage of urine. The consequent mental strain took its toll on his appearance. In less than two years, he felt as if he had aged ten years.*

*"The whole house smells of urine. I feel ashamed to invite people..." the daughter-in-law started muttering. It was Mrs. Ponnambalam who first raised the issue of the smell of urine. She was an expert in scheming and implementing her plans. She knew well that the facilities offered to senior citizens in Australia were not available in America. Hence, through her daughter's sponsorship, she had obtained a permanent resident visa and entered Sydney. For the past two years, she had been flying between New York, Sydney*



and Colombo and now had come to Sydney to settle down permanently and claim her 'social dole'.

With the help of Colombo Maniam, she had rented a two - roomed apartment close to her daughter's house and bought a car also. The grandchildren too, had begun to go to school in her car. Slowly she started her social work in Sydney.

She began frequenting her daughter's house, under the pretext of bringing left - over meat packed in plastic containers. It was never her custom to attend to the business on hand and leave. How could one do social service without poking one's nose into others' affairs...?

"Please keep the toilet clean, Sir. The children may get infected" she said politely, laying the foundation for making it an issue. She was always conscious of the fact that she had been the Principal of a college in Colombo, while Vaadyar was only a village school-master.

Only a fortnight remained, for Vaadyar to get his 'social dole'.

"Instead of keeping Vaadyar at home and letting him suffer, it is better to have him admitted into a nursing home. He will be taken good care of. Maniam's sambanthi too, is in a nursing home. They provide proper meals at the right time" Mrs. Ponnambalam advised her daughter, loud enough to be audible to Vaadyar. Perambalam was also there at that time. Mrs. Ponnambalam was a genius in choosing appropriate opportunities to have things done her way.

*Vaadyar could not bear this.*

*"You need not take me anywhere. Send me back to Jaffna. I can live on my pension. I have people enough there, to provide me with food at least once a day", said Vaadyar, raising his voice.*

*"Who will now take you to that war-torn place? Even if you go there, people will talk ill of my son-in-law saying that he doesn't take care of his father. Stay here quietly and don't try to earn your son a bad name" said Mrs. Ponnambalam, on behalf of her son-in-law.*

*Perambalam's words carried no weight even under normal circumstances. In the presence of his mother-in-law, he was veritably a dumb creature. Before a decision could be arrived at, regarding the suggestion put forward by Mrs. Ponnambalam, Vaadyar was suddenly affected by bacterial infection and admitted into the hospital.*

*As soon as he recovered, he was taken directly to a nursing home. Mrs. Ponnambalam must have made all the arrangements in advance. Until he was admitted there, mother and daughter kept the matter a secret.*

*On hearing the news, I went the next Saturday to the nursing home to see Vaadyar. As soon as he saw me, he broke down. The boiled potato and meat, served for lunch, had become cold. He had taken only the banana and left the skin on the plate. The white lady who came to take back the plate, asked in English, "Wasn't the food tasty?" Vaadyar did not reply. She asked in surprise, whether he couldn't understand English. I then explained to her his greatness and*



achievements, and how so many of his students had risen to great heights. I requested her to take maximum care of him. Considering his plight sympathetically, she caressed his cheeks lovingly.

I could very well comprehend Vaadyar's difficulty, finding himself in a foreign land, and not being able to communicate with others freely. As my daughter's Bharathanatyam classes were held close to the nursing home, I decided to visit him every Saturday, with a food packet and Tamil newspapers.

I derived great mental satisfaction doing this 'duty'.

### **That day was Fathers' Day**

I went to see Vaadyar with a tiffin - carrier containing cooked hand-pounded rice and meat which my wife had prepared. His son, Perambalam came with his wife, carrying a bouquet. The tiffin carrier which I had taken, must have offended their eyes.

"What, uncle... we have paid extra money for a balanced diet to be supplied to you. The other residents here, will start complaining about the smell of hand-pounded rice and meat..." said Vaadyar's daughter-in-law.

"Dad, why don't you adjust your lifestyle to suit your surroundings? You're not a small child..." said Perambalam, in his wife's presence.

Vaadyar's lips quivered.

Realising the gravity of the situation, I pacified them saying, "What does it matter, Perambalam? Its only for today. After he has had his meal, I shall open the window and have the air - freshener sprayed".

No one spoke for some time. Breaking the silence, Vaadyar told his son slowly, "Tomorrow is your mother's death anniversary. It is also my granddaughter Divya's birthday".

"Uncle, who celebrates death anniversaries here? I shall tell my mother to have an archana performed in mother-in-law's name in the Murugan temple", his daughter-in-law intervened.

"Divya's friends have been invited for her birthday party", Perambalam added.

"Are you celebrating her birthday at home" I would like to see the grandchildren". Vaadyar expressed his wish openly. I waited eagerly for Perambalam's reply.

Mrs. Ponnambalam entered just then, saying, "Happy Father's Day. How are you?" She then addressed her daughter and son-in-law. "Why are you wasting your time here? Have you bought all the things? There's such a lot of work to be completed by tomorrow. Divya has invited her classmates. It will take quite long to get the icing on her birthday cake to be done", she said, whisking them away.

I had never witnessed compassion and human love plunging so abysmally low.



## XIV

Viswalingam Master was singing the 'Sunnappadal' very movingly.

Perambalam began pounding the Sunnam as if to drive home to all those gathered there, the idea that he was the most dutiful son in the world.

But my mind still lingered on the incident in the nursing home on Fathers' Day. Who was pounding inside my head? What was it?

*That even Vaadyar's minor desire was not fulfilled, grated on my mind.*

*I was waiting in my car for my daughter's Bharathanatyam class to be over. But my thoughts...?*

*During the entire period of his stay in the nursing home, never once was Vaadyar taken home.*

*I decided that the next day I would take Vaadyar to the temple so that he could himself offer 'Thivasam' to his wife. I was quite convinced that in this way I would be fulfilling my duty towards one who was responsible for elevating me to the position I now occupied.*

*My daughter got into the car. She was happy when I bought her a 'junior' burger from MacDonald's close by. I turned the car once again towards the nursing home.*

A Chinese was now appointed as Manager there. He was born and brought up in Singapore. He knew Hindu customs and traditions very well. I explained everything in detail to him and sought his permission to take Vaadyar to the Murugan temple the next day.

"Murugan temple" exclaimed the Chinese. He recollected the festivities at the temple on Serangoon Road in Singapore for Thai 'Poosam' -- including the 'Kaavadi' -- and gave me a form to be signed by Vaadyar.

I explained the matter to Vaadyar and asked him to sign. As he did so, he wept. I had never expected him to cry like a child. Finally he composed himself and hugging my daughter, he kissed her lovingly.

The next day, taking the things necessary for the priest to perform 'Thivasam', I went with Vaadyar to the Murugan temple. He went round the temple like an inquisitive child and then stood leaning against a pillar silently, for a long time.

When we returned to the nursing home, Vaadyar was quite tired. But there was a kind of serenity on his face. He spoke at length about Chitrlekha and his wife.

"Had Chitrlekha been alive, I wouldn't have been in this state... I would have been with you now. One should be lucky in life..." he said, with tears in his eyes.

Before we parted that day, he held my hands warmly and said, "I don't know how much longer I will



live. I can't trust Perambalam. He dances to the tunes of the ladies. If I die, you must take up the responsibility of doing everything properly. Will you...?"

I nodded my head in assent and turned towards the door to conceal from him the tears in my eyes.

For the next two weeks I was abroad on official business. On my return, I was busy with the backlog of work in the office. During my absence, my wife visited the nursing home as usual, on my behalf.

I had resolved to see him somehow that Sunday and collected a few Tamil newspapers for him.

It was by chance that I listened to the obituary announcement after the main news on 'Tamil Muzhakkam' Radio.

"Sinnathurai Vaadyar passed away in Sydney yesterday..."

## XV

**Mrs.** Ponnambalam was immensely pleased to see the 'funeral' hall overflowing with people. She put on an air of being the 'over-all supervisor'.

Perambalam's two children came to hold the torch for their grandfather. The Saivaite priest asked them to hold long candles instead of torches. I gave a candle to my daughter too, as she used to call him 'grandfather' affectionately and also as a sign of my great respect for Vaadyar.

Many of her friends tried to console Vaadyar's daughter - in - law, who was sobbing her heart out beside the coffin. I wondered which were the flood - gates that released so much water.

"We looked after uncle so well; he could have lived for some more time and seen his grandchildren's growth" said the daughter-in-law between her sobs.

"My dear girl! All those who are born must one day die. Who else here would have taken care of her father-in-law as you did? You have done your best when he was alive..." said Mrs. Maragatham, wiping the eyes of the daughter-in-law with the edge of her sari.

The funeral procession proceeded towards Rookwood cemetery. It was a procession carrying the mortal remains of Sinnathurai Vaadyar. It was a procession that proclaimed the status that had been earned in Sydney by Dr. Perambalam, the son-in-law of the famous eye specialist, the late Dr. Ponnambalam of Colombo and his wife. And it was going towards the cemetery.

Tributes were paid at the cemetery also. Colombo Maniam, who had merely seen Vaadyar's face inside the coffin, spoke eloquently. He referred to the celebrities who made up the procession, and the magnitude of the house which Perambalam owned. Although he did not say so explicitly, he implied that this was the first step towards the success of Mrs. Ponnambalam in the next election of office - bearers for the Sydney Tamil Cultural Association.

Mrs. Ponnambalam was distributing copies of the booklet to each and every one carefully. Who were these people to speak of Vaadyar's achievements? I was not prepared to



lose my soul, by getting entangled in the formality of paying a tribute in 'condolence'.

The incense sticks kept burning near the coffin were shedding their ashes. Some of the embers were about to fall on the carpet. I took the burning sticks, inserted them into the single banana near Vaadyar's head, and got down.

I do not know why, at that time, I remembered that I had learnt Bharathiyar's songs only from Vaadyar.

I did not want the memories of Sinnathurai Vaadyar, who died in Sydney, to fade away slowly like dreams and old wives' tales.

This story, therefore, is dedicated to the man who taught me Tamil, and nurtured my interest in Tamil literature.

## GRAFTING? WHY NOT?

**A** huge truck lumbered to a halt in the cul-de-sac. The children, who were playing there, got on to the platform as a mark of respect to the enormity of the vehicle.

The byroads in some of the Australian housing colonies end in blind alleys called cul-de-sacs. Perhaps they derived this name from the fact that they resembled the lower part of a rice bag-large and shapeless. In such alleys, normally, there will not be much traffic. Hence, the children of that area use the dead end as a playground.

The long, vertical iron pipe, sticking out between the driver's seat and the box behind it, coughed up rings of smoke. Abhirami counted the rings by folding her fingers one by one, and shouted 'six' in English.

"Wrong. Five and a half" corrected Tony.

"How can there be half?" intervened John, in support of Abhirami.

"The engine was switched off half way through the last ring...!" said Tony, sticking out his tongue mischievously.



All these children were studying in the primary school close by. If Peter and James from the next street also joined this group, the evening was spent in gaiety unlimited.

In New South Wales, Australia, state-level competitive examinations were conducted in primary schools, to select the most intelligent students from the 4th standard. Some primary schools conducted special 'opportunity classes' (o.c.) for their students to enable them to do well in these competitive examinations. John and Abhi studied in one of these classes. Tony was very playful; so he was placed in the ordinary stream.

"Hi, John, is your mom at home?" asked Albert as he jumped down from the driver's seat. Without waiting for the boy's reply, he unloaded a 'beer case', and instructed John to open the case and store the bottles in the refrigerator.

Whenever Albert came, it was celebration time. Until he left, there would be parties and get-togethers on many days in John's house. During this period, John would not play with the other children. He had several odd jobs to do at home.

As soon as John left the scene, the children's games went haywire. Abhi surveyed the alley blankly.

Abhirami's mother, who had returned from work early that day, must have observed all this from the bedroom window. Just as she called out "Abhi", her father's car could be seen coming up the driveway. Abhi knew that the moment her father saw the truck, he would get into a bad mood. True to her expectations, her father entered the house cursing Albert and his truck as a "bloody nuisance". Abhi's father did not like Albert parking his truck there, as he felt that it detracted from the value of his house.

"Why don't you discipline Abhi? All the time she's playing with those white boys...." her mother complained as usual. Her father didn't say a word. He went upstairs directly. Abhi was her father's pet, as she was born after a long interval - after their coming to Australia.

"You are the one who's pampering her too much. She should be disciplined. Sangeetha was Abhi's age when we came here. Did she roam around with those white boys? If any problem crops up later because of Abhi, I am not responsible. I am warning you now itself" declared her mother, as she followed her husband upstairs.

Abhi's family moved into this house only last year. One of her father's British colleagues had bought that piece of land a few years ago and built the house newly. A beautiful house, in serene surroundings, with bedrooms on the first floor. Abhi's father had dreamt of such a house, but had never imagined that his dream would materialize. As the Englishman who built the house got a better job in the neighboring state, he needed money urgently to establish himself there. Hence, he had announced in the office that he was willing to sell the house at cost price itself!

That was how Abhi's father happened to acquire the house. Her mother, who went round the house and the large compound at the back, gazed at it open-mouthed. She also enquired about the educational facilities for the children. The elder daughter, Sangeetha, was studying in the university. Transport facilities were available at the end of the next road for Sangeetha to commute to the university and for her mother to go to her office. Abhi was the younger daughter. A difference of ten years. Her primary school was close by. It was her mother's firm belief (and source of irritation) that 'Truckee'



Albert was an eyesore in that heavenly setting - a house with all facilities.

Abhi's mother always referred to Albert as a 'Truckee'. She was under the strong impression that truck drivers were half-brutes, with a weakness for women.

Albert was powerful. Well-built. Handlebar moustache. Clean-shaven head. He had tattooed pictures of glamorous girls on his broad chest and arms. All these features served to increase mother's dislike for Albert. Though his appearance was far from gentlemanly, he was quite courteous towards strangers. Whenever the truck was parked in the alley, John would be cooped up in house. But Abhi's parents were very eager to gather information about his activities and 'spy' on him. As a child, Abhi resented this.

Among children of Abhi's age, Albert was a hero. It is no easy matter to drive a truck with two or three containers in tow. It required great skill and a special license. Provisions and other articles were transported between states across Australia's sprawling landscape, only by such trucks. Albert had a fan-following among children who loved to watch him negotiating street corners dexterously. Abhi could never understand why her parents detested such a talented man like Albert.

Abhi's mother continued to be patriotic towards her motherland. When she moved into this house, she had brought from the old one, most of the trees and plants which she could uproot and transplant. She did not mind the expense. Her father too, had taken two days' leave to see that the plants were planted properly.

Abhi's mother's hopes were not belied. Within a year, a mini-Jaffna had been created in the backyard. Mother had proved that indeed, she had 'green fingers'. All the trees that had been transplanted had taken root and flourished.

At the rear end of the compound, the eucalyptus tree planted by the Englishman had grown tall and stately. It is not an easy task cutting the eucalyptus trees characteristic of the Australian landscape. One had to get permission from the Council and that was well-nigh impossible. Thus, this tree escaped the axe.

There was a cement garden bench in the backyard. The curry-leaves tree had been planted near it. This tree had often served as the Bodhi tree (the tree under which the Buddha acquired Enlightenment) for Abhi's parents. Many a time, wisdom had dawned on them when they sat on the garden bench. It was also a great place to relax and to indulge in all the local gossip.

It was incredible initially, to Abhi's mother that John should study along with Abhi in the 'opportunity class' meant for exceptionally brilliant children. She could not digest the fact that a "Truckee's son" could acquire such interest and success in studies.

"John is not the Truckee's son, it seems. His mother left her husband two years ago and has been living with Albert since then!"

"Why did she leave her first husband?"

"Who knows? Those people lead such shameful lives. That's why I've been shouting myself hoarse that Abhi should not play and mingle with them."



To diffuse the tension, her father began to talk about Sangeetha. Much of the talk about her would take place only on that bench. Inside the house, it could be overheard by the 'young ones'.

Her mother knew from various sources that Sangeetha was interested in Raghavan. He was the elder son of Sundaram Uncle. The latter lived in a posh area occupied by the more affluent section of the people in Sydney. Sundaram Uncle and Abhi's father had been colleagues in Colombo, earlier. He was also distantly related to Abhi's mother. Abhi's father kept the friendship and relationship alive through birthday invitations.

Sundaram Uncle's younger son, Saravanan, was Abhi's classmate. He enjoyed teasing others. He was a little scared of the British students. Abhi was timid by nature. Hence, Saravanan would tease her often. On such occasions, John would support Abhi. In course of time, John came to occupy a high place in Abhi's estimation.

Raghavan was a medical student in the same university where Sangeetha studied Economics. Of late, Raghavan could be seen dropping Sangeetha home in his Sports - model car. She too was in the habit of attending parties with him. She took greater care of her appearance, and delighted in admiring herself in the mirror. In short, Raghavan's friendship had caused Sangeetha's spirits to soar skyward.

This turn of events made Abhi's mother secretly happy. Love - that too with a Tamil boy and what's more, a potential Doctor! Abhi's parents discussed this development also on the bench near the curry-leaves tree.

"If everything goes well, it'll be fine... Keep the young man in good spirits."

"As if you should tell me all this. Sangeetha informed me that the guy likes dosais. That's why I prepared them on Saturday. He said 'Aunty's dosais are good' and even took some home."

"How about next Saturday?"

"Catch me 'napping'! I've made all the arrangements. Even yesterday, when he came to drop Sangeetha, he asked me, 'When is the next instalment of dosais, Aunty?' Tomorrow, on your way back home, buy masala powder and a bottle of gingelly oil from the Tamil store. I'll prepare good sambar and 'paper roast' dosais."

"As soon as our Sangeetha was born, our Alavetti astrologer, Vinasithambi Sastriyar predicted that her matrimonial prospects were at a peak and that an excellent match would be arranged".

Their 'dream-world' conversation was brought to an abrupt end by the arrival of Abhi, who rushed sobbing into the backyard. Sangeetha, who came chasing her, burst out "Mingling with those English boys, she has learnt to tell black lies and vulgar stories."

The enquiry began.

Incensed by the revelations made by Sangeetha in fits and starts, her mother became a veritable Goddess of Fire. Abhi, who took refuge behind her father's back, received a good thrashing. In this matter, her father could not support Abhi.



Here is what Abhi was guilty of!

On her way to school, Abhi had seen Raghavan's car often. She knew him and his red Sports-model car quite well. She would observe very carefully whether Sangeetha was beside him in his car. She had seen several girls from other communities also, taking a ride with him. Even to her young mind it had occurred that if Raghavan had so many girl friends, what would be Sangeetha's position? Having been born and brought up in the 'liberal' social set-up of Australia, it was obvious to Abhi that Raghavan was deceiving her sister, Sangeetha. It was because she had been frank in breaking this news to her sister, that the latter chastised her by screwing her ear and knocking her on her head.

"Only if we send her to 'after-school class' she'll be disciplined." said Abhi's mother, with an air of finality.

Summer arrived. All the 'Jaffna' vegetable plants and trees that had been planted in the backyard during the spring were laden with fruit. The plantain tree in the southern corner had put forth a bunch of plantains. The snake-gourd creeper had moved from the trellis erected for it, and had begun climbing the eucalyptus tree near by. The pot-shaped 'Mattuvil' brinjals had become immensely popular among friends and mother's Tamil colleagues. "Just like the ones we bought in Jaffna", is praise, not easily obtained. Hence, father also took greater care in the development of the garden.

Maragatham 'paatti' (an elderly lady) from the next street loved the pot-shaped Mattuvil brinjals. She had been born and brought up in Mattuvil. In a way, she was father's aunt. Under the pretext of making kind enquiries, she would come home often. Abhi's mother, of course, did not like her.

"The old lady has no other work... Going from house to house, spreading gossip... It's because of her evil eye that the brinjals have become rotten", mother would complain behind the old lady's back. Whenever the lady asked for some brinjals, mother would pick out all the rotten ones and send them. The old lady, who frequented the houses of the Tamils, knew well enough that mother, who worked in the Income Tax Department, was distributing brinjals and snake-gourds to her friends to publicize the greatness of her garden produce. Nevertheless, for the sake of the Jaffna vegetables, the old lady eschewed her anger against mother, and visited Abhi's house as usual.

Abhi's mother had to go to small business establishments now and then, to explain the new Goods and Services Tax Scheme introduced by the Income Tax department. It was easier to travel directly to such companies in the morning, and then report for work at the office. On one occasion, having such a plan, Abhi's mother had brought the official car home the previous evening. She also felt that it was an honor to drive the official car. So she had parked it on the drive-way in such a manner that the Government emblem could be seen clearly.

She was supposed to pick up her colleague, Monica, in the morning and visit the business establishment. Preoccupied with this thought and also thinking of the shortest route to her destination, Abhi's mother started the car and reversed it on to the main road. Just then the telephone rang. It could be her superior officer or Monica. In her agitation, she pressed the central lock inadvertently, and closed the door leaving the engine running.

Only after taking the phone call, she realized her mis-



take. The engine was on. She couldn't enter the car. There was no one at home. What could be done?

John, who emerged just then, on his way to school, noticed that Abhi's mother was agitated. Understanding the gravity of the situation in a moment, he rushed in and fetched Albert. Albert came armed with a long iron rod, set to work busily and within two minutes, opened the door and switched off the engine. Only then, Abhi's mother heaved a sigh of relief.

Whole-heartedly, Abhi's mother said, "Thanks, Albert", uttering his name for the first time.

Acknowledging her mother's thanks with a smile, Albert helped her until the car was again on the main road. His conduct throughout was indicative of a responsible stranger.

For the past few days, Sangeetha appeared disinterested. She spent most of her time cooped up in her room. Raghavan too, did not visit her as before. Her parents presumed that it was merely examination blues.

It was a Saturday. Nevertheless, a day of fasting. Having decided to cook brinjals, Maragatham paatti came to Abhi's house.

"Here comes the newspaper" Mother's comment must have been clearly audible to the old lady.

Stifling her anger, Maragatham paatti began her story. "Do you know the latest?"

Thinking that it must be some familiar local story, Abhi's mother did not show much interest. This lack of interest irritated the old lady.

"Didn't your Sangeetha tell you? All the university students know it. How can you be uninformed? This Sundaram's son, Raghavan, has married a North Indian girl studying in the university, at the Registrar's Office, without his family's knowledge."

Mother's face blanched. Her body shivered slightly. Happy at having taught mother 'a lesson', the old lady left without taking the brinjals, which she had come for.

For some days, an eerie silence prevailed in the house. Aware of the gravity of the situation, Abhi did not go out to play. Everyone remained cooped up inside.

It was a holiday. The call bell rang. John, from next door, had come to invite Abhi to play. Having ensured that the visitor was not a Tamilian, her father came to the door, and said to Abhi. "Why don't you go and play?"

Abhi felt that it was better to inform her mother before going out. So she ran to the backyard in search of her mother. The bench near the curry-leaves tree was vacant. Contrary to practice, her mother stood deep in thought, leaning against a branch of the eucalyptus tree up which the snake-gourd creeper had climbed.

The wisdom that it was neither practical nor prudent in the Australian environment, to construct a "Jaffna-only" fence and live within it, must have dawned on Abhi's mother under the eucalyptus tree.



## **HIGH - FLYING CROWS**

**S**ukumar had come to my house!

In all the ten years that I had lived in Sydney, he had never once visited me. Today he had come with a parcel of vadais and kozhukattais, bought from an eatery selling typical Jaffna snacks. More than anything else, I was flummoxed by something totally unexpected. It was just this. He introduced the lady who accompanied him, as his wife!

Without disclosing my surprise, I welcomed them and introduced them to my wife. She was a housewife who had not lost her characteristic Jaffna hospitality. Though she had spent a decade in Sydney, she still believed in following the Meikandaan calendar imported from Jaffna.

Recognizing our long-standing friendship from our conversation, she invited them saying, "You should have dinner with us. I'll be preparing 'idiyappam' (rice noodles)...." Without voicing any protest, Sukumar accepted her invitation. This too, was a significant change which I noticed in him. He was quick to understand my surprise at the strange happenings. He had always been a 'sharp' guy.

"Sundaram! You can't believe your eyes, can you? This is the reality" he said philosophically.

You do not know Sukumar, of course. Simply because, in his (former) language, you would all be 'Dirty Tamil folk'. This does not imply that he is not a Tamil. He belongs to a Tamil family that had lived in the cinnamon gardens for two generations and risen to great heights in Colombo. His father was the honorary President of several Tamil organizations. On account of the top government post which he occupied, all the Tamil social organizations had made him their President, earning some honor in the process. Though he did not speak Tamil at home, he managed to stumble his way through his Tamil speeches, whenever he had to preside over the meetings held by these Tamil organizations.

Sukumar and I had been classmates in one of the popular educational institutions in Colombo. Our class consisted of students from various communities - Tamils, Sinhalese, Muslims and Burghers (Dutch - Srilankan mix) Invariably, they were mostly from affluent families.

In those days, my father too worked as a clerk in a government department. My grandfather, who was a small-scale farmer, could not afford to give his son higher education in a university. My father often complained "If only I had gone to a university, I would have been prosperous." My mother, who had done her 10th in a small village near Jaffna, never grew tired of sympathizing with father. For my part, I could never understand at that time, why my father who claimed to be a genius, did not progress beyond being a Grade II clerk.

Nevertheless, I cannot deny the fact that he helped me to study in a school meant for rich boys, though he could ill-



afford it. He wanted me to fulfil his unrealized dream of becoming a doctor or an engineer.

Whenever my mother came up with the valid question, "If you spend everything on Sundaram's education, what will you do for our daughter?" he would retort, "If he studies well and progresses in life, he'll get a handsome dowry and give it to his sister!" On the whole, he had great faith in me and my prospective, wealthy wife.

Due to the influence of my mother who had studied Tamil literature, my father too developed a liking for Tamil literature and language. He tried to become at least a committee member of the Tamil organizations of which Sukumar's father was the President. His attempts were not in vain. He was elected as the Secretary in some of those organizations. My mother, naturally, was very proud of this achievement.

Both my parents used to advise me to get acquainted with children from higher circles, especially Sukumar, saying that it would pay rich dividends in later life. I never could understand how this was possible.

Whenever my father got ready to attend the committee meetings of the Tamil organizations, my mother would instruct him saying, "Why don't you butter that chap (Sukumar's father) and get your promotion to Grade I?" And her nagging continued until my father retired - as a Grade II clerk.

Unable to resist my father's pressure, I tried my best to make friends with Sukumar, who simply ignored me. All his friends were wealthy guys who spoke English fluently because they spoke English even at home.

It was not surprising that Sukumar and his friends who participated in English debates and plays did not recognize me who spoke Jaffna Tamil at home and outside and won prizes only in Tamil debates and essay competitions, as one among them.

When I migrated to Australia, I brought all my books, including the ones I had studied when I was in school. I had arranged them neatly in a shelf adjoining the drawing room in my Sydney house. I had learnt this from my father. He had always been a sincere government servant. He was very systematic in everything. He maintained all his documents - from official files to personal papers - neatly and methodically.

A huge old volume in my bookshelf must have attracted Sukumar's attention. He got up and fetched it. It was the Tamil translation of the English edition of the Chemistry book which I had studied in 12th standard. He opened it and flipped through some of the pages. He then fell silent, looking out of the window. I understood his silence. Unwilling to disturb him, I went to the kitchen under the pretext of seeing if my wife had prepared tea.

It was when we (Sukumar and I) passed the 8th standard and went to the 9th, that a law was enacted in Sri Lanka, that the mother-tongue should be the medium of instruction. We were expected to take the final examination in the 10th standard in our mother-tongue. I was one of the first batch of students who studied the science subjects in Tamil and took the University Entrance Examination. I take great pride in this fact, even now.

Even when the English-loving people belonging to the higher strata of society sank their differences and agitated



against the switch-over to instruction through the mother-tongue, the Sri Lankan government did not give in. The government passed an order that Tamils should study in the Tamil medium, the Sinhalese in their own language, the Burghers in English and the Muslims in whatever language they preferred, and pass the 10th and 12th standard examinations. Apparently the government thought that this move would facilitate the implementation of the "Sinhalese only" language policy.

Sukumar's father had a thorough knowledge of the legal implications of Government orders and their intricacies. In his parental anxiety to find an answer to the question, "What'll my son do, taking his final examination in Tamil?" he adopted a short cut. Without allowing Sukumar to study in the 9th standard, he made arrangements for him to take the 10th standard final examination in the English medium. He also arranged tuition in the 9th standard syllabus for his son. The school administration too, co-operated with him, considering his high position in government service. Some of the other students also followed this short cut; but my father's economic status and influence were not sufficient to procure such facilities for me.

The language policy of the government widened the gap between Sukumar and me. Our friendship was reduced to a mere 'hello' whenever we met. Sukumar and his friends began to ridicule my pronunciation of scientific terms in Tamil, to such an extent that I realized that they considered the Tamil students as second-class citizens.

Sinhala was the national (and government) language. Hence, students who studied in the Sinhalese medium strutted about, certain that they would get first preference in gov-

ernment jobs. Under such circumstances, it was but natural that the Tamil medium classes in the schools in Colombo were given a step-motherly treatment. Nevertheless, due to the experience and personal interest taken by the teachers who taught in the Tamil medium, students like me took up higher education in college as a challenge and applied ourselves to studies very seriously.

I had seen Sukumar's mother at some of the Tamil functions presided over by his father. She was quite fair. Her hereditary affluence enhanced her flawless complexion. Sukumar's maternal grand and great-grandfathers had been wealthy landlords of the cinnamon gardens for two generations. Sukumar's father, however, was coal-black. He had his early education in a missionary school, and rose to a top post in the Administrative Service at an early age. Realizing his potential, Sukumar's maternal grandfather made him his son-in-law easily. All this, my father told me.

Sukumar was a replica of his father, both in his features and color. He must have grown up regretting the fact that he had not acquired his mother's color. He had a great fondness for 'white' skin. Hence, he always surrounded himself with the children of foreign origin, in school.

Due to the divisive politics adopted by the Sri Lankan government, the Sinhalese and the Tamils considered themselves as antagonists and decided to follow different paths. Sukumar, who was attracted by Western culture, felt that the British and the other foreigners were superior to the Sinhalese and the Tamils, and preferred their friendship more. What was important to him was their white skin.

Sukumar was engaged in many non-academic activities. His tuition masters tried to cram his head with the 9th



and 10th standard syllabi simultaneously. He could not digest it all, and so developed a dislike for studies. Because of this, though he took the University Entrance Examination three times, he could not get the required marks. Thus, he lost the opportunity of entering the university.

Hundreds of students, who, without taking any short cuts, studied in the Tamil medium, were admitted to the medical, engineering, science and agriculture degree courses in the Colombo and Peradeniya universities. I was one of those lucky ones.

I completed my engineering course from Peradeniya University. The very next month, I got a permanent job in one of the Government Organizations.

My father who was proud (rather, arrogant) of my achievement, began the process of selecting a bride for me. From the time I became an engineer changes began to surface in my father's lifestyle and conduct. He started talking insolently to everyone. He demanded that he should be made the President of the Tamil organizations in which he had so far been a mere committee member.

When Sukumar's father retired from Government Service, he lost his control over the Tamil organizations of which he had been the president. All the honorary posts that he had hitherto held were easily procured by my father. As his self-respect did not allow Sukumar's father to be an ordinary member in the organizations of which he had once been the President, he severed all connection with those organizations.

I heard that Sukumar who couldn't enter the university, joined the Cost and Management Accountancy Course in

Colombo, and after several unsuccessful attempts, finally managed to become an accountant. I did not get an opportunity to meet him.

My wife served tea to everyone. In accordance with the Australian custom, she had kept the sugar in a separate cup, for the guests to serve themselves as they desired. The snacks and the banana which Sukumar had brought from Flemington market were also served. I was surprised to see him take a bite from the vadais and another from the banana and relishing them. I controlled my laughter with difficulty.

Earlier, Sukumar never went to an eatery. He used to ridicule people who went to roadside eateries and ate vadais and dosais there. Today, he was eating those vadais with relish, unashamedly.

Sukumar didn't eat the kozhukattais. He did not add sugar to his tea, either. He cited 'blood sugar' as the reason. His father too, had suffered from diabetes during his last days. After his retirement, the very feeling that people didn't respect him as before, took its toll on his health. That Sukumar had gone astray, served to aggravate his diabetes, and made him a permanent invalid until his death. He was not very old when he died.

My father, who returned after laying a wreath on his body on behalf of one of the Tamil organizations, informed my mother, "What a prosperous life that family had led in those days! After his death, what a fall! Only a few people attended the funeral". Wishing to convey my condolences to Sukumar personally, I asked my father, "Did you speak to Sukumar?"

"Sukumar? He arrived home only on the evening of the day after his father's death. He has married a Burgher



woman and doesn't stir out from his place. Didn't you hear about it?" my father asked me.

My mother whispered to my father, "Don't talk ill of others. God knows what our son will do!" "Let's see if he dares! Will he bring someone home without my consent? I'll hang him upside down and light a fire underneath" my father burst out, seething.

As usual, my mother slipped into the kitchen.

That, two years later, I too fell in love with and married one of my colleagues without any dowry, and gave my father a shock treatment, is another story. However, I could not find a loving husband like myself for my sister. Only then I understood my father's earlier anxiety.

Though I was an engineer. I could not earn enough money in Sri Lanka to be given as dowry for my sister. I decided, therefore, to go overseas. With the help of a friend, I got a job in a British Engineering firm in Zambia and went to Africa. The money I earned in Zambia, earned a good husband for my sister.

The experience I gained in the British Engineering Firm in Zambia, also enabled me to migrate to Australia. I bade 'good bye' to Zambia. While waiting at the Lusaka airport, I ran into Sukumar most unexpectedly.

He informed me that he was an accountant in an American firm, and that he had come to the airport to receive his 'foreign' boss from America. It seemed to me, that in spite of his earning his livelihood in a country of 'blacks', he pronounced the words 'American Firm' and 'foreign boss' with great emphasis.

Setting aside my view that Sukumar had not changed one bit, I asked him, "How long have you been here?" He said that he had been there for the past six months, and lamented the fact that it was difficult to survive in the midst of brainless half-brutes.

I felt embarrassed to hear him talk ill of the Africans, standing in their own airport. Wishing to change the topic of our conversation, I asked, "Is your wife also working here?" He said that his wife had migrated to Australia under the quota system available for the Burghers (Dutch - Srilankan mix), and that he was expecting her sponsorship under the 'family reunion' scheme, to join her there. "Australia is a nice country; lots of white people to live with" he added proudly.

He never expected that I would say, "I'm also migrating to Australia. That is why I am here". I noticed a ray of disbelief flash across his face, implying, "What! Is this chap also going there?"

To avoid any uneasiness, I said, "Once your wife enters Australia, she can stay overseas for three years", with an air of one who was thorough with the Migration Laws of Australia. "This place? Oh, no... Let her remain there itself. I'll join her soon" he said. After some consideration, he took out his diary, wrote down his wife's address and gave it to me. "If possible, ring her up, introduce yourself as my friend, and say 'hello'. She's staying with her relatives who are running a 'motel' in Perth" he added, giving me her phone number also.

**S**ukumar and I were discussing Zambia and the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, sitting in my drawing room. Our conversation must have been dull and tiring to his wife; looking here



and there, she yawned. I slowly went to the kitchen and explained the matter to my wife, who followed me to the drawing room, and discreetly led Sukumar's wife to the kitchen.

Our conversation ranged from Zambia to Sri Lanka and finally ended in an analysis of the current employment opportunities in Australia. Sukumar did not possess a degree from a recognised university. With his "Cost and Management Accountant" qualification, he could not register himself as a qualified accountant in the Association of Australian Accountants. Hence, he passed the Public Service Examination and occupied a responsible position in Centrelink, a department which grants financial assistance to the unemployed. In the course of our conversation, I was able to gather useful information about the unemployment problem.

When I migrated to Australia, I had also hunted for a job. In those days, the department where Sukumar now worked, was called the "Social Security" department. Until I got a proper job, I subsisted on the 'dole' given by that department. Though I applied for several jobs, I could not get one. I was not even called for an interview. My applications were duly acknowledged. But, after some time I received letters regretting that I could not be accommodated. Only after I began working, I came to know that workers would already be working there on a temporary basis, and that these advertisements were merely an eyewash to make those casual workers permanent, legally.

After several attempts, an Engineering Firm in Perth called me for an interview. They also sent me an air ticket from Sydney to Perth. But I was asked to bear the cost of my

stay there. The prospect of a couple of days' stay in Perth, reminded me of Sukumar's wife's family and the 'motel' they ran. Perth was nearly 2500 kms from Sydney. The flight itself would take three hours.

I had no idea of the rates prevailing in the lodges there. With the intention of finding out what a day's rate would be like, I fished out the phone number which Sukumar had given me at the Lusaka airport, and rang up. The voice at the other end sounded very friendly. When he heard my full name Sundaramurthy, he asked whether I was a Sri Lankan or an Indian. When I gave the details, he said that he was a Burgher from Sri Lanka, and that he had come to Australia in the 1960s when the government adhered to the 'Whites only' policy. He insisted that I should stay in his motel and that he would give a 20% discount and free breakfast.

I was a complete stranger to Perth. So, I did not want to refuse the hospitality extended to me. On my arrival at Perth I stayed in their motel. But I never divulged my acquaintance with Sukumar on any occasion.

The interview was over. The results would be announced, they said. I was due to return to Sydney the next day. I had a fifty-fifty chance of getting the job. In the meantime, I wondered if I could meet Sukumar's wife. I mentioned her name to the lady at the cash-counter and enquired about her. She said that the former was her friend, and that, right then she was living in a house close to the motel with her Romanian boy-friend. "Did you know her in Sri Lanka?" she asked, tenderly.

Purposely I said, "I am a friend of her husband working in Zambia." The lady at the counter cut short her conversation abruptly, and concentrated on the computer.



I felt very sorry for Sukumar. He was crazy after the white Burgher skin. His wife was crazy after the white skin of the English.

Are 'skin-deep' relationships bound to go astray like this?

While I was waiting for the job in Perth, I received an offer that was more appropriate to my educational qualification. With that, I forgot all about Sukumar.

The telephone rang. My wife picked up the cordless phone and brought it to the drawing room. It was a call from my sister in London. Her family had recently been granted the visa to migrate to Australia. She enquired about employment opportunities here. I explained to her the prevailing situation in the job market, saying that it was difficult to get an ideal job straightaway, and that one would have to wait and progress step by step.

My son had grown up. He was studying in the 12th standard. The practice of arranging tuition for their children, has caught on, among migrants here. Parents are naturally afraid that without tuition, their children may not score good marks. On a cross road adjoining the one on which the Sydney University is located, English tuition classes were being conducted by a retired English teacher.

As I grew older, I became more and more like my father. He had given me a choice of careers - doctor or engineer. But I told my son categorically that he must become a doctor. Among the Australian Tamils there was great respect and demand for doctors. One had to get high marks to get a seat in the medical college. The Chinese preferred Commerce. The engineering course had greater respect in

Sri Lanka than in Australia. Here, one could get into a university with comparatively low marks. These are observations related to education and employment in Australia.

When my son was in the 12th standard, my most important job was to drop him and pick him up. While he was taking English tuition for an hour, I used to take a walk on the pavement on the Sydney Freeway.

One day, as I was slowly passing a Super Market on the road, Sukumar emerged from it with a lady. We were meeting after many years. In spite of my grey hair and moustache, he recognised me and asked, "Hi, Sundaram, how are you?" He had dyed his hair and looked quite young. He introduced the lady by his side as his wife. Undoubtedly, she was an original English lady.

He must have understood my thoughts.

Since his wife would understand him if he spoke in English, he spoke in Tamil. His anger with his Burgher wife was evident in his talk. Burghers were not 'decent' by birth, he said. He translated into Tamil all the foul words used for the Burghers in Sri Lanka.

I told him the story of what happened during my stay in the motel at Perth. His face darkened further with anger and disgrace. "That woman could marry only a Hungarian. It was only to prove that I could go one step higher, that I married a true-blooded English lady" he said, wiping his face with his handkerchief.

Sensing his discomfort, his wife led him away courteously, with the words, "Darling, let us move on."



Sukumar, who bade me 'good-bye' with his English wife that day, had come home today, five years later, with a Sri Lankan wife. In the course of our conversation, I gathered that her name was Vadanee, and that she belonged to Karavetti near Jaffna. Vadanee and my wife were engaged in a friendly chat in the kitchen. My wife was giving her tips on how to reduce cooking time and on how to cook meat without adding coconut milk.

I left the tea-cups in the kitchen sink, and returned to the drawing room. Sukumar was reading the international edition of a Tamil daily published from Sri Lanka. "I am happy to see you reading a Tamil paper" I said, without any implication or malice. After a moment's silence, he smiled at me and said, "I missed the bus, Sundaram. I am happy and proud to see you." His voice quivered.

My son was learning to play the mridangam. He was planning to have his 'Arangetram' (maiden concert) soon. Taking my car to the mridangam class, he picked up my daughter from her violin class, on his way back home.

Seeing my daughter in a churidar, with a violin in her hand, and my son with his mridangam, Sukumar said, "Your children?... Your son looks just like what you were as a teenager. I am very happy to see that even after coming here, you have brought them up inculcating the traditional values of Jaffna Tamil culture. I'm afraid I myself will cast my eyes on them". He then cracked his knuckles on the table three times. I remained silent.

"Only now my life is on the right track - peaceful and contented. I should have done this much earlier" he said regretfully. Taking this as a cue, I asked him, "What hap-

pened?" He understood that my question implied, "That day I saw you with an English lady. Today, you have come as Vadanees husband. What happened in the intervening period?"

"Sundaram"...., he said, "Vadanees is my third wife. Don't imagine that it is my pastime to marry and divorce women. Wet clay and burnt clay can never be stuck together. I learnt this only late in life. You may consider this as 'enlightenment after the loss of vision.' These days, all that I ask God for, is a child. That too, not for myself, but for Vadanees. And I have the physical and mental strength for it". His lips quivered. Sukumar sat before me, an object of pity.

Our conversation may be heard by the ladies in the kitchen, I thought. So I went and closed the door between the drawing room and the kitchen. His eyes thanked me. "The second time, I married an English lady, only to spite my first wife. I proved that I could soar higher and dive deeper than her. My anger at having been cheated by her, tormented me. None in my family could ever bear an insult or a failure."

"I loved that Burgher lady sincerely. It was my first love. And I fondly imagined that it would last forever. While I lived in Zambia thinking only of her, here she was, having a gala time with another chap. I could not digest that. My Jaffna lineage seemed to question my very masculinity. When failure, frustration and inability combine together, one would go to any lengths. I chased the English lady day in and day out, until she agreed to marry me. I married her, feeling as if heaven had slid into my lap. We went to the Bali islands for our honeymoon. But we realised the gulf between us, too soon. Very cleverly, she began to use my weaknesses against me - as weapons. I developed an inferiority complex, imagining



that she was treating me as a 'black'. I became suspicious of her acquaintance with other Englishmen. Suspicion and distrust replaced affection and understanding. Everyday there were differences of opinion and arguments. She came home heavily drunk. Sometimes she brought young girls for sex. New friends appeared in plenty. The bedroom became hell..." He closed his eyes with his fingers and fell silent.

With the intention of relieving his tension, I went to the 'bar' in my house, and returned with a bottle of whisky, ice cubes, soda and two glasses. "Sundaram... Please put these back. It is two years since I stopped taking liquor. I don't eat meat, either. It seems to me that only as one gets older, one begins to recognise one's identity" he said, and laughed drily.

In Australia, divorces are such expensive matters, that they could make men bankrupt. So I asked him, "Did you get both your divorces in Australia?"

"In the first case, I didn't have any problem. She simply signed on the dotted line and the Sri Lankan embassy here completed the formalities easily. But the English lady accused me of abuse and harrassment and siphoned off all the money that I had earned in Zambia, in the name of compensation and maintenance". He stopped and asked for water.

I brought a glass of water and placed it in front of him. He drank it in one gulp and continued with Vadanee's story.

"When I went to Zambia, I lost contact with my mother. Only when I lost everything and became penniless, I remembered my mother. I am the only son in the family. Now, not a day passes without my thinking of how much my mother would have suffered during her last days. 'I've had enough' I

thought, bought a ticket and returned to Sri Lanka." He turned his face the other way, but I could see that his eyes were moist.

"Your mother must have passed away when I came to Australia. I remember to have seen her 'Obituary' notice in the Sunday edition of the 'Veerakesari' sold in Sydney. Let bygones be bygones. Raking up the past will only cause anguish" I consoled him.

Sukumar was silent for sometime. He then asked where the toilet was, and went to ease himself.

When he returned, he said, "I read the words on the poster which you have framed and hung in the toilet. 'Nobody is perfect'. Very true, Sundaram. You know my nature quite well. I have never thought that it is too late to do anything. One of my uncles, living close to my house in Sri Lanka, has shown me a new path in life. He is running an orphanage there. He was the one who introduced Vadanees to me. She lost all her relatives in the ethnic war. Within a week of our acquaintance, we became good friends. Unmindful of our age-difference, we got married." He then asked, "Shall I tell you something?" He laughed. His face was serene now.

"Come on; tell me" I said, laughing.

"Is there a special 'Tamil' fragrance in the love that blossoms after marriage?" Oblivious of his surroundings, he laughed aloud.

The sound of his laugh must have reached Vadanees's ears.



## **ALL FOR LOVE**

### **(FRIDAY FASTS)**

**I**n the course of the long journey in search of greener pastures in this dark continent, why was he sorry that he had lost the rich native cultural traditions such as fasting on Fridays?

Veerasingham had come to give special lectures in an African University. His lectures were both educative and interesting. He would work hard to make them so. But the lectures given on Fridays were sparsely attended. Ladies were not to be seen and only fifty percent of the men could be expected. Were the students not interested in his lectures? The thought pained him. He decided to unburden his mind to Morris.

The University Administration had arranged for his stay in a three - star hotel near the university. Morris was a room - boy in that hotel. In addition, he studied Social History in the university. It was interesting to talk to Morris. He was an African youth with a social consciousness. More than all this, he was an energetic worker. He would complete in two hours, a work that would normally take four. There was a sense of

satisfaction and fullness in his work. During his leisure hours, he would come to Veerasingam's room and talk to him. He was an ideal companion for Veerasingam to share his thoughts with, in the evenings when he was alone.

Although he was quite friendly, Morris was rather strict in money matters. He would extract almost double the charge for any work. The hotel management had specified the charges for laundering, polishing shoes etc. Morris would perform these tasks secretly (without the knowledge of the hotel authorities) and earn money. The eagerness which he displayed in earning money, appeared contradictory to his speech which smacked of humanitarianism and understanding. Veerasingam had reflected on this contradiction, but had not discussed it with Morris.

"Why is attendance thin in my evening classes? Why do ladies especially not attend my classes on Friday evenings? Is something lacking in my lectures?", he asked Morris.

The boy smiled. Realising that Veerasingam expected an answer, he said, "I know that there is great appreciation for your lectures among the students. There is no connection between the quality of your lectures and the ladies' absence on Friday evenings" said Morris smiling.

Veerasingam could not understand his smile.

It was a Saturday. In response to Veerasingam's request, Morris had arranged for a safari. African animals were allowed to wander freely in an area covering several square miles. There were tall dense grasses and thick bushes here and there. Rough roads had been laid for 4 - wheelers and signposts erected here and there, in imitation of cityscape.



Morris had brought Gloria for the safari. Veerasingam had seen her many times in the hotel bar. She was the first lady to impress in his mind the notion that black was beautiful. That Morris would introduce her as his 'beloved' was something he least expected. There was a reason for this. Whenever Veerasingam had seen her, she was seen enjoying herself in the company of several men. She went around, kissing them unashamedly. Veerasingam had, on many occasions, felt sorry that the beauty of this rare African 'beauty' was being wasted - cheaply.

But that day, he was seeing her in a new light. She was Morris's love, willing to do anything for him. She spoke very politely and intelligently. She explained, with appreciation, all the details about the various African animals. She then pointed to pairs of rhinos engaged in loveplay, and saying, "These are the love - gods of our race. It is from their horns that medicines for increasing male virility are produced", she looked impishly at Morris and winked.

The next day, Veerasingam went with Morris to the countryside. Only then he understood the significance of the rhino-horn mentioned by Gloria. The headman introduced by Morris, lived in a central cottage provided with all facilities. Surrounding this cottage were smaller ones made of thatch. In each cottage, the headman had accommodated each of his many wives. He had no work other than making love to his wives, who worked hard and felt that their greatest happiness lay in worshipping their husband. Small and large rhino horns hung here and there in his cottage. Veerasingam thought that it was these horns that enabled the headman to manipulate all his wives like puppets.

Having gone as his guest, Veerasingam felt he should say something. So he asked Morris, "Isn't this pure male chauvinism...? It is the duty of every man to work and take care of his wife. As a student of Social History, don't you think you should voice your protest against this social injustice?"

"What is happening here, is wrong. Similarly, your policy of the man working for and looking after his family, is also wrong. The time when both husband and wife work and share their duties, should dawn in Africa. It is very difficult to break the fetters of these people who live in a narrow circle of 'tribe - race - head'. However, I believe that they should be broken". Just then, a young girl entered the headman's cottage. Pointing to her, Morris said, "She is his new wife. Today is her turn. There are daughters born to his senior wives, who are as old as this girl. But all these wives have been 'bought' on payment of a 'bridal fee'".

"Bridal fee?"

"Yes. The girl's father has brought her up, having provided her with food and clothing. Now she has come of age and is ready to serve another man. 'Bridal fee' is almost like compensation" explained Morris.

"In Indian societies, its not like that. It is the girl's father who gives a 'dowry' to the man who accepts his daughter as his wife".

"I too have studied about the marriage customs of Indians. Sometimes I have myself wished that I had been born an Indian" said Morris, laughing.

"Why? Is your Gloria's father demanding an exorbitant sum from you?" asked Veerasingam, joining in the laughter.



"What a question! The old man is terribly greedy. He has ten daughters. He has already calculated how much money he would get for them. Now you know why I am slogging to save money!" replied Morris.

The way he said it, touched Veerasingam's heart. He decided that henceforth, he would be generous in his tips to Morris for all the work that he did.

Since their going on the safari, Gloria became quite friendly with Veerasingam. Whenever there was not much work to be done in the bar, she would spend her time talking to Veerasingam. Her comments on the problems of black Africans, surprised him. But he did not at all like the manner in which she enticed rich Africans with the skill of a prostitute, and extracted money from them. His mind was heavy at the thought that Morris, like a fool, was slogging and earning money for the sake of this 'loose' girl.

It rained cats and dogs that day. The bar was dotted by four or five men, drinking beer. There was nothing much to do there. Gloria brought a glass of beer and sat in front of Veerasingam.

He began the conversation cautiously.

"Gloria, Morris loves you sincerely. Do you know how he toils just to win you? Is it right on your part to be disloyal to him?"

She was silent for some time.

He felt rather guilty, and wondered whether he was poking his nose unnecessarily into her personal life.

"How much, do you think, can Morris earn by doing part-time work and polishing the shoes of people like you?" asked Gloria, staring at him.

He did not say anything.

"My father demands a huge sum from Morris. Can I fight with him saying that this is wrong? We can't dream of doing such a thing in our community. I know only too well that Morris simply cannot save the amount my father demands, in his lifetime. Morris also knows it. I love him wholeheartedly. I don't wish to be 'one' of the wives to a wealthy old man who can buy me easily. Our love should triumph. To full fil my wish, I have sometimes to sell my body. But I shall certainly not sell my mind along with my body to anyone".

Gloria took the empty beer glass to the bar and returned to her seat in front of Veerasingam.

"Sir, the values in your community are different from the ones that exist here. It is very common for young girls here to sell their bodies during week-ends, just to earn money enough to win the men they love. I do not wish to justify this. Rather than lose their love and lovers, the youth today, prefer this arrangement".

She couldn't continue further. She rose with her head bowed, and walked away.

Veerasingam wanted to divert his mind from those sorrowful thoughts to something more intellectual. He understood then, the secret of why his lectures lacked attendance on Fridays. His enlightenment was crossed by the thought that a new gospel of love that transcends sex, was beginning to blossom in Africa.



## ALL ARE BROTHERS

**M**ukundan had once again received an invitation from the Yercaud hills.

From the town at the base of the hill, the road ascends northwards. Comprising several hair-pin bends, this road extends for about 20 kms, and reaches Yercaud. The hill is dotted with sandalwood trees owned by the Forest Department. In the middle of the forest is a big lake, where pleasure lovers take boat-rides to while away the time. If one were to travel another five kms along the road that goes through the marketplace and the park adjacent to the lake, one would reach the lush tea-gardens.

It is true, that the Research Centre that stands in the midst of the luxuriant tea - gardens, sticks out like a sore thumb. However, it was necessary to have it there, to meet the challenges faced by the money - spinning tea plants. Mukundan had been brought down from Australia, to give advanced training to the personnel in the Research Centre. Having benefitted from his services, the authorities at the centre had invited Mukundan for the third time, now.

The first thing that springs to Mukundan's mind at the mention of Yercaud, is not only its lushness, but also Muthuswamy who works there, and the 'milk appams' with a special Sri Landan flavour prepared lovingly by his mother! During his entire stay at Yercaud, Mukundan's breakfast consisted only of these milk appams from Muthuswamy's house. This was an unwritten condition laid down by Mudundan to the Research Centre authorities.

At 6.30 a.m., fresh after his bath and neatly dressed, Mukundan would be ready on the front verandah of the Guest House. He loved to take in the cool breeze drifting through the tea leaves. It was at that time that Muthuswamy would arrive with the milk appams. Happy times were they!

Mudundan would eat the milk appams in a ceremonious manner. He would eat the crisp edges first, together with a chutney prepared the Sri Lankan way-dry fish ground together with fried red chillies and coconut. His tongue tingling with the taste of the hot chutney, he would fold the soft central part of the appam into two, and stuff it into his mouth, slowly relishing the unique hot and sweet mixed taste.

It was during this appam-eating session, that Muthuswamy would discuss the latest news and local politics with Mukundan.

**M**ukundan knew Muthuswamy in Sri Lanka itself. Great days they were! It was a time when the Jaffna Tamils had earned the reputation of being faithful employees of the British lords who owned the tea - estates and rubber plantations of Sri Lanka. These Jaffnaites occupied posts just under the British lords but above the supervisors.



Mukundan's uncle worked as an accountant in one of the lush tea-estates of Ratnapura, a hill town in Sri Lanka. It was in this uncle's house that Mukundan first met Muthuswamy as a young boy.

Muthuswamy would bring appams to the uncle's house in the morning. The appams prepared by the boy's mother were famous in the whole neighbourhood. Muthuswamy was not the kind of boy who 'came, delivered and left'. He would read with great enthusiasm, the newspapers and books available in the house. Mukundan's uncle appreciated the reading habit which Muthuswamy had cultivated. Hence, he had given him the liberty to go around freely and read whatever magazines and newspapers he wanted. Whenever his children scored low marks in the examinations, he would say ruefully, "I could have educated Muthuswamy rather than you. How interested he is in studies!"

It was at that time that tea - estates in Sri Lanka were nationalised. After that, Sinhalese youth were appointed in the posts hitherto occupied by the Jaffnaites. A Sinhalese youth was appointed as a 'conductor' in the tea - estate where Muthuswamy worked. Born in an affluent family in Kandy, the Sinhalese youth could not distinguish himself academically, though he studied in Christian College. He secured a job in the tea - estate through political influence. During the day he would roam around the garden in his capacity as a conductor. At night, it was not only drinks and harmless rioting... With the help of henchmen, he indulged in a hunt for the virgin bodies of the young tea-bud pluckers. Those who refused to co-operate, were forced to comply by a threat of 'dismissal from the rolls'! Muthuswamy could not tolerate this. He tried to make it an issue. The conductor, wishing to nip this voice of protest in the bud itself, removed

Muthuswamy's name promptly from the 'check - roll' (list of workers).

The tea-plantation Employees' Union obtained the services, easily, of Muthuswamy, who went around, unemployed and frustrated. After that, the tea - plantation management considered him as an 'unwanted element' and whenever ethnic riots broke out, he was given a 'special' treatment.

During the 1983 ethnic conflict, a group of gangsters attacked Muthuswamy's house first. The Sinhalese conductor had brought his henchmen in his jeep itself. Shouting foul words and using crude language such as,

"You Tamil dogs of illegal boats...

How dare you oppose the conductor...

Let's see if your union saves you now..."

they doused Muthuswamy's house with the petrol from the jeep and set fire to it. His sister entered the burning house and tried to take out the valuables inside. The conductor who had been sitting inside the jeep till then, grabbed her by her hair and dragged her into the jeep. Muthuswamy who tried to intervene, was severely thrashed by the henchmen, while his sister, with her hands tied behind her back, was brutally raped inside the jeep. All the Tamils, who were a minority amidst the Sinhalese majority that day, became refugees in their own land, and had no strength to fight their oppressors.

Whether it was due to foresight (that such things would happen) or just Providence, Muthuswamy's family had already applied for permission to go to India, under the Sirimavo - Shastri Accord.



When the roots of humanitarianism were cut off in 1983, thousands of Sri Lankan Tamils sought refuge in various countries across the globe. As one of the refugees, Mukundan came to Australia, and joined service as a researcher in the Government Research Centre at Canberra. The Research Centre at Yercaud, India, requested him to share his specialised knowledge and give them advice on important matters regarding tea - cultivation. It was for that purpose that he first came to Yercaud.

When he saw Muthuswamy in Yercaud, Mukundan rejoiced in the fact that the world was, indeed, small! On his part, after a long time, Muthuswamy unloaded all his sorrows to Mukundan. He narrated tearfully, how his sixteen-year-old sister's body was thrown out on the street after the sexual assault and how his father was burnt alive.

Considering that they had had enough, Muthuswamy and his mother left the land which they had toiled on and enriched for three generations, and came to Tamil Nadu with dreams of living peacefully in the sacred land of their forefathers.

In the midst of these sorrows, tasting the delicious milk appams was, for Mukundan, like touching the soft spots of human relationships. "This soil of Tamil Nadu has taught man the great truth of 'All the world is one and we're all brothers' and preserved an excellent culture for the past two thousand years and more. Here, you will certainly be blessed with a good life". Mukundan consoled Muthuswamy and left for Australia.

When Mudundan came to Yercaud for the second time, Muthuswamy complained about the problems faced by the

workers from Sri Lanka, in the new set - up. "Sir, we are unwanted elements here... We are referred to as Ceylonese (Srilankans) here. In Ceylon (Srilanka) they called us Indians and drove us out. Here, they insult us as Ceylonese without any identity. In what way is this fair?" lamented Muthuswamy.

In a few days, Mudundan realised the facts behind these laments.

Most of the tea - estates in Yercaud were owned by the Tamils in Singapore. They had invested part of their wealth in these tea - estates. Most of them belonged to the 'Thevar' caste. Hence, Thevars were given first preference and higher posts in those tea - estates. Sundara Thevar was a man who believed that he had been appointed there only to affirm the greatness and superiority of the Thevars and so expressed himself to that effect. He went around the tea - estates of Yercaud as the Head Supervisor. On one occasion, he voiced some of his views to Mukundan as a representative of the managements of all the tea - estates in Yercaud.

"These estates are the property of the Thevars. They are our relatives. Who are these Ceylonese, tell me? Though they live in Singapore, Thevars are Thevars..."

"Should the Tamils not help one another and live in harmony?", asked Mukundan hesitantly.

Sundara Thevar did not know that Mukundan was born in Sri Lanka. He mistook the latter's Jaffna accent to be that of a Malayalee!

"It is politics to talk of the Tamils... Our party leaders will take care of that... Today they'll call us Indians and talk of



nationalism... Tomorrow they'll call us Tamils and quote from Tamil literature- 'Puranaanooru'. It will vary from election to election and from constituency to constituency. All that it is the party leaders' stuff. But for us, the honour of our caste is very important. The Thevars are heroes, warriors! We'll give our lives to save our honour" said Sundara Thevar.

Realising that it was futile to argue about justice with Thevar, Mukundan remained silent.

**A**long with the Research Centre authorities who had come to the airport to receive Mukundan, Muthuswamy too had come, to carry his luggage. It seemed to Mukundan that Muthuswamy's worries made him look older than he actually was.

As soon as they reached the Guest House, Mukundan enquired lovingly, "What's all the news, Muthuswamy?"

"Carrying on as usual, Sir..." said the latter, and heaving a long sigh, fell silent. Then, as though recollecting something, he said, "At tomorrow's meeting, they're going to decide the fate of all those who have come from Ceylon.." He smiled sorrowfully.

Mukundan looked at him affectionately.

Placing the suitcases beside the cot, Muthuswamy held Mukundan's hands tightly and asked, "Is everyone at home fine?" Mukundan did not fail to notice the tears in Muthuswamy's eyes, as he asked that question.

Brushing it aside as an expression of emotion at seeing him after a long time, Mukundan thrust a wad of currency into Muthuswamy's hands and said, "Don't forget the appams".

Because of the time-change, Mukundan got up only around noon, the next day. He looked out. There was tension in the tea - estates. Armed police were patrolling the streets. Some of them were trying to disperse a buzzing crowd that had gathered near the Research Centre, adjacent to the Guest House.

The milk appams brought by Muthuswamy in the morning and kept on the table on the front verandah, had become cold. Mukundan looked out for Muthuswamy. He was not to be seen.

Ramaswamy who worked in the Research Centre, came to Mukundan, with tension written large on his face. What he said, made Mukundan freeze.

At the meeting that morning, the administration seemed to have said that as the tea - estates were running at a loss, retrenchment had become necessary, and hence, only those born in India would be made permanent employees there. The Ceylon tamils who had come to India under the Rehabilitation Programme were to be suspended for some time, the administration announced. The Thevars welcomed this announcement with jubilation. At this juncture, Muthuswamy rose and demanded justice.

Gnashing his teeth, Sundara Thevar shouted, "Who invited these Ceylon dogs here?" Infuriated, Muthuswamy shot back.

"The owner of this garden is a Singaporean of Indian origin. I am also of Indian origin, though from Ceylon. In Ceylon, we were accused of being Indians and driven out from there. Now, you, Tamilians yourselves, brand us as Ceylonese and ostracize us... Is this just?"



Before he could complete his question, Sundara Thevar dashed across, yelling angrily, "Shut your bloody mouth... This estate belongs to Thevars... We are Thevars... Who the hell are you? You don't even know what caste you are..." and beat Muthuswamy.

It appears that some of Thevar's henchmen who were at the meeting, lifted Muthuswamy and carried him out of the hall. Ramaswamy said that nothing was heard of Muthuswamy after that.

Just then, a police jeep, with its red light, came and stopped there. Muthuswamy's mother got down from it, lamenting loudly. Disregarding Ramaswamy's plea, and having lost his patience, Mukundan came out. As soon as she saw Mukundan, Muthuswamy's mother fell at his feet, and wailed.

"My boy...! These people have beaten my son to death. We had come here thinking that the people here were of our blood... that this was our land..." With these words, she fainted at his feet.

With the help of Ramaswamy, Mukundan carried the elderly lady and laid her on the bench, on the verandah of the Guest House.

On the table near the bench, large black ants had begun gorging on the milk appams which Muthuswamy had brought and placed there that morning.

## RAT - REIGN

“What kind of rice have you bought? It’s full of rat - dung. How on earth can I clean it?” murmured my wife. It was her tiredness, born out of heavy work. Moreover, only if she finished her cooking, could she attend to her daughter’s studies. Provisions like rice, pulses etc., were available here, cleaned and unadulterated in the shops. If found adulterated, complaints could be lodged in the Consumer Department. A heavy fine would be clamped on the shopkeepers. Hence, they were very careful in this matter.

This rat - dung was a great challenge to my wife, who normally washed the rice twice in water and then put it in the rice cooker, without much ado.

“If you have a winnowing pan, give it to me. I shall winnow the rice” said my mother. Only two months ago, she had obtained a permanent visa and come down to Sydney to stay with me. She was a widow.

“There is no winnowing pan here. We have to pick out the dung with our hands only” said my wife. She then took a newspaper, and spread the rice on it. The mother and daugh-



ter - in - law then began picking out the rat - dung from the rice.

"Why take such trouble? Put the rice in water and the light rat - dung will float on top. The rice will sink. You can easily separate the two" said I, proud of my expert knowledge of science.

"What if the dung happens to be heavy?" asked my wife. I did not expect her to cross - question me like this. She too, was a science graduate.

"I bought the sack of rice only from a Tamil shop. I'll return it and get fresh rice", I said, and went to the garage. I tied the mouth of the sack kept there and lifted it into the car.

What a surprise! From a hole on the side, rice began dropping on the ground. I looked closely. Oh! There was no doubt that this was the work of a rat. "Its not the shopkeeper who sold us adulterated rice. The rat has caused the havoc only here" I explained.

"Are there rats here also?" asked my mother. She had problems with rats, snakes, and army shelling only in Sri Lanka. She thought she had left all of them behind, and come to live peacefully in Australia.

"Not only rats, but even cockroaches, lizards, spiders and all kinds of insects are to be found here. Just wait till summer. You will know how many insects there are" said my wife, not losing an opportunity to display her knowledge of the Australian environment.

"The rat is in the garage. Don't keep the doors open. If it enters the house, it'll destroy everything" I said, as a responsible head of the family. I then fell to thinking how to kill the rat.

I had built this house on a plot which I bought from 'Land.com', a Government Department. The Government had divided what had been farmland into 800 square metre plots and sold them. Before buying the plot, I had made sure that it was good land and not a low-lying area which had recently been filled with sand. Moreover, before building the house, I had the soil treated with pesticides to prevent the pests from attacking the house.

For the first two years, there was no problem with pests. Then gradually, one after the other, the insects began arriving. In Australia, we've got to live with them. But now, a rat had joined the gang. If it were allowed to breed, there would be large - scale destruction. This thought worried me no end. I decided that getting rid of the rat was the first thing to be done. I therefore took the car and went to a supermarket. Along with other pesticides, rat poison was also displayed on the shelves. I bought one that looked very much like cheese. Only after I brought it and kept it in the garage, could I heave a sigh of relief.

The next day, I went to the garage to see the success of my scheme. I could not notice any change. But I could see the marks of just the two front teeth of the rat on the cheese - like poison.

The next day dawned without further damage by the rat. I was happy that I had got rid of it. I presumed that it had eaten the poison and died somewhere outside.

It was a Saturday. I had invited some of my friends for dinner. My wife who had just started the cooking, shouted suddenly.



"The rat has come inside. Look here, it has spoilt all the red chillies in the kitchen cupboard. There is rat - dung even in the dal" she poured out her woes.

"How many chillies have been wasted! The rat must be inside the kitchen cupboard only. Take out all the tins and see" said my mother, calm and cool. Words of wisdom born out of long experience!

We took out everything, including the tins. My mother's surmise was not wrong. The rat jumped out of the cupboard and hid inside my daughter's room. My daughter was just ten years old. She was terribly afraid of insects. As soon as she saw the rat, she got on to the chair and refused to come down until it was caught. We were under compulsion to catch the rat right before her eyes.

Setting aside the cooking, all of us got into the room where the rat was and began searching, each one in a corner. As we moved the cot, the rat ran from one corner to the other, playing hide and seek with us.

My elder son now mooted an idea. He said we could suck the rat using the rear end of the vacuum cleaner. Although I had my own doubts about the success of this operation, I let him have his own way, in the fond hope that the rat may be caught somehow. Holding the vacuum cleaner in the reverse with both his hands, he got up and down the cot and the chair, in all seriousness. The end result, however, was that he broke his leg and the vacuum cleaner. The rat was happily free still!

That evening, the problem of the rat came up unexpectedly in the course of our conversation with our guests. Each one of them proposed a different method.

One of my friends, who always found fault with everything, said, "No matter how much you spend disinfecting even your planes, you cannot get rid of the insects and pests here. Germany is not like this. You won't see a single spider or lizard there". He had recently migrated from Germany. He felt that all that was 'made in Germany' was of the best quality. Why on earth did he come to Australia then...?

Once again my mother suggested that it was not advisable to keep rat poison in a house where there were children, and that it was best to set a trap and catch the rat.

The very next day, I bought a few rat traps and following the shopkeeper's instructions to the letter, I placed the traps in all the locations frequented by the rat. The rat, however, was not to be caught.

My mother suggested, yet again, that instead of keeping a piece of cheese to lure the rat into the trap, it would be better to use dry fish, as its strong smell would attract the rat wherever it was. Accordingly, pieces of 'arukkula' dry fish were bought from the Tamil shop nearby, and placed in each trap.

Nothing worked with the rat.

The whole house smelt of dry fish. That was all.

For some days, there was no problem with the rat. I assumed that it had gone out of its own. No one mentioned anything about it either.

But the relief did not last long.

One day, my daughter said that she had seen the rat jumping out of the almirah in which my wife kept all her



sarees. She was right. Four or five sarees had been damaged by the rat. One of them had great sentimental value. I noticed that my wife's eyes were filled with tears at the sight of that saree.

"What's the use of having three men in this house? You can't catch a rat!" she burst out, distressed and indignant.

It took me some time to realise that she had included my fourteen and fifteen year - old sons in the list of adult men.

At this time, my daughter came up with what appeared to be a very good idea. If we had had a cat as a pet in the house, it would have caught the rat, she said. I wondered how such an idea occurred to her, who had been born and brought up in Australia. On serious enquiry, many facts emerged. All of us at home were very particular, that though she was born and brought up in an alien land, she should not forget Tamil and Tamil culture. Hence, she attended special Tamil classes conducted by Tamilians on weekends. My mother too encouraged her to study Tamil enthusiastically. She had learnt from her Tamil book, that "Cats catch rats" and "Dogs protect homes". Thus, she had concluded that the best way to solve the rat problem was to get a cat.

Though my daughter wanted to have a cat, I was hesitant to have pets like cats, dogs and rabbits in the house. This was not only because they would make the house dirty, but also because, in course of time the responsibility of maintaining them would fall either on me or my wife.

"After all of you leave for school and office, not even a crow will be here for company. She is eager to have a cat. Why don't you buy her one? It'll serve to catch the rat and be a companion to me also..." recommended my mother, in sup-

port of my daughter. I realised that no further appeal could be made, when the eldest and the youngest in the family got together.

The next day, I went to a pet shop, bought a cute kitten and came home. My daughter's joy knew no bounds. But my younger son was angry that I did not buy him the puppy which he had asked for. There was a reason for buying a cat. But what was the connection between a dog and a rat? A dog wouldn't catch a rat, would it? Even after explaining this patiently, my son went around sulking for three or four days.

As the kitten had been bought at a pet shop, it refused to eat any food prepared at home. My mother offered it rice and fish curry. It refused to oblige even her. Feeling sorry to see the kitten starving, my wife went to a supermarket, and bought a few tins of 'cat food'.

"Is even cat food sold in shops...?" asked my mother in surprise.

My daughter fed the cat regularly, cleaned it and kept it with her. The cat had tasted comfort. It ate heartily and slept in a corner of my daughter's bed.

This gave an excellent opportunity to my wife to compare the cat with me saying, that like me it ate at regular times and slept without a care in the world.

"How will the cat catch the rat if you fatten it with the choicest food...? Let it starve a bit" said my mother, thereby saving some of my honour.

The cat's ration was, accordingly, reduced. Nevertheless, the cat did not catch the rat, and the latter's nuisance continued unabated.



I racked my 'scientific' brain in the matter of catching a rat. I even consulted a few 'big' books.

"You are a man! You don't know how to catch a rat". My wife's persistent nagging produced an everlasting hatred of rats, in my mind.

That day I had a stomach upset. Only the day before, I had been invited by a friend for dinner. I always did full justice to a feast. Hence I ate to my heart's content and returned home. Late at night, my tummy started churning. I switched on the light to go to the toilet. My daughter's room was adjacent to the toilet.

Quite unexpectedly, the rat rushed from a corner of the toilet, jumped over the cat and hid somewhere.

The cat opened its eyes, saw the rat, closed its eyes again and went to sleep. I was furious with the cat. I decided that something must be done about it, and attended to my tummy problem.

It was a Saturday. One of my 'white' colleagues (working in the university) came to see me. He was a lecturer in the Zoology Department. His house itself would be like a zoo. His favourite dog would always accompany him. That day also, he had brought his dog along.

I usually took my close friends to the sit - out at the back of my house, to avoid being disturbed.

We were talking about university matters. His dog sat near him, with its hind legs folded. Seeing our cat sleeping near the wall, the dog growled.

"Stop it" said my friend. The dog obeyed implicitly!

Of late, my mother had begun moving around the house freely. She slept in my daughter's room. The cat also ate heartily and slept with my daughter.

My mother was refolding her sarees and arranging them. It was her contention that the chillness in the weather and sweat would produce fungus in a white saree. As she moved another box in the cupboard, it creaked. Along with it came another screeching sound. The rat which had been holding sway in our house, ran out. My mother shouted. The rat jumped over the cat and came towards us.

As soon as my friend saw the rat, "Catch it", he ordered his dog.

Swift as lightning, the dog seized the rat in its mouth, shook its head twice and dropped it on the ground.

That was the end of the rat's chapter.

In the midst of all this racket, our cat half - opened its eyes, and then went to sleep, blissfully.

"Saw that...? The cat which you bought is just like you...! The dog is now doing the cat's work... At home too, it is me who has to do your work..." my wife accused me, implying how it was she who took the children to their tuition classes.

Normally, it is the cats who'll catch the rats. Everyone knows this. But in Australia, don't cats catch rats...? The sentence in the Tamil book of Australia must certainly be corrected in its next edition.

Because, that book was written against an Australian background!



## **A GLIMPSE OF THE TEMPLE TOWER**

**T**hat residential complex does not need a clock. The residents there, worked like the hands of a clock.

If the sound of an apartment door banging was followed by the sound of boots on the stairs, it meant that 'meat shop' Yousuf was going to his shop at 5 a.m.

But Mathias, a garbage truck driver, who left for work at 4 a.m., would go noiselessly like a cat. He was very particular that others should not lose their sleep because of him. After Yousuf, it was Helen, working in the Customs Department of the airport, who would leave in a hurry. In her anxiety to catch two trains and reach the airport on time, she had no thought for others. If Syamala, working in 'Centrelink' came down the stairs, one could be sure that it was 7 o'clock. After that, the whole complex would wake up and come to life.

At 8 AM, children of different races would leave for school noisily. Several languages, many kinds of voices. A cacophony of carefree, happy sounds.

If one were to ascend to the second storey of this block of flats through the rear entrance, one would reach number six, the central apartment where Parvathi Ammal lived. It was five years since she occupied this apartment built by the 'Council'.

As far as the majority of the residents of this complex were concerned, Parvathi Ammal was an old lady who lived alone. She never publicised the fact that she was the wife of the once - famous Dr. Nadarajasivam. Parvathi Ammal would wake up before 'meat - shop' Yousuf set out to work. Getting up early, was a habit she had imbibed from childhood. This habit continued even when she lived with her husband in Australia. When she first came here, this habit of waking up early, was very helpful in getting her husband's children ready for school, and preparing for her husband's departure for his clinic.

"...Mmm, those were the days. I was on my toes all the time... Now, even if I want to, my body will not co-operate".

The whole of the previous night, Parvathi Ammal had no sleep. Age had crept in. Along with it came all the ailments and problems of the body. The habit of waking up early, however, continued. But today, contrary to custom, Parvathi Ammal could not get up though it was past 5.

"My whole body aches as if it has been 'broken'. How many times am I to take Panadeine tablets? Is a heavier dose necessary because of constant use? I'll take two more tablets and see".

She composed her mind and decided that she would take two more tablets of Panadeine. She planted her right hand firmly on the bed, and holding on to the frame of the cot



with her left, she sat up slowly. The pain which began at the centre of the spine, shot up to her neck. Without minding it, she turned, bent down and took the water jug which was usually kept under the cot. There was no water in it. She then remembered how, at midnight she had taken some tablets and along with them all the water in the jug. She felt lazy to go to the kitchen and fetch water. She put the Panadeine tablets in her mouth, chewed and gulped them down. Her mouth tasted bitter; she felt like drinking water to get rid of the bitterness. But she consoled herself saying, "I have taken the tablets. Where is the need for water?" and once again lay down on her bed.

She realised that during the past twelve hours, she had taken ten Panadeine tablets. "It seems the Codeine content in Panadeine tablets reduces pain. He told me. But, though it is a medicine, shouldn't take an excess of it. He was very strict in that medicines should be treated as medicines only. He said that Codeine too was like a drug and if one became addicted to it, one couldn't do without it later. I've probably become addicted to Codeine now..." These thoughts disturbed Parvathi Ammal for a moment.

"So what if I have become an addict? Do I have any children...? Had he been alive, he would've given me an injection. With that my illness would have disappeared. He had the Midas touch. These damned tablets have caused an ulcer in my tummy. If I don't take them, I can't walk today. Because of the tablets that I took this morning, I think I feel a little better. It was also good that I chewed them rather than swallowed them. The medicine has worked faster, I think... If I don't get up now, no work will be done..."

She switched on the 24-hour Tamil Radio, near the cot. Devotional songs were being aired. In between, the announcer gave detailed information regarding the flag-hoisting in the Murugan temple and the ten festivals following it.

"What else did I swallow so many tablets and get up for? Only to go and see the flag-hoisting in the Murugan temple, is it not? Will that bond be broken...?" she murmured, as she got down from the cot and walked slowly towards the bathroom. Everything will now be done as per schedule; just as things begin to move once the machine gets going. In the mechanical world of today, her closeness to Lord Muruga had given Parvathi Ammal a human touch.

"If the Murugan temple had not been there, I would have been completely lost. Earlier, going to the temple and worshipping the Lord took nearly twelve hours of day - time. To go to the temple at Helensberg and return, one had to cover about 150 kms. No matter how busy he was, at least twice a month he would take me to the Ventakeswarar temple there. The clinic had to be closed. But he would do it all very systematically. His only worry was that the forms of pooja (worship) followed there, were not like the ones followed in Jaffna. Hence, he and some others got together and set up a committee, saying that a temple should be built closer home, where we could follow our own forms of worship."

Tamil Radio was broadcasting the song, 'Tamizhukku marupeyar Murugan' (The other name for Tamil is Murugan), sung by Sirgazhi Sivachidambaram.

"What if he was a famous doctor? He was also a staunch supporter of Tamil. And he never tried to deny it or be hypocritical about it. If he began talking about Tamil or reli-



gion, he would forget even to take food. He would keep on talking. If Murugesar came, he would forget even the clinic. Murugesar would say that our culture was that of Kanda Puranam. In such matters, he would talk like a Tamil pandit. He insisted that temple festivals should be conducted according to the Jaffna tradition. It was very satisfying... The drummers were brought from Jaffna and the archana is performed according to the Jaffna tradition... When all is said and done, the Sydney Murugan gives me peace of mind..."

The train of thoughts about the temple, which ran through Parvathi Ammal's mind, like the chariot drawn by devotees through the temple street, was disrupted by the telephone ring.

It was Maragatham Maami alias Maragathalakshmi at the other end. Her husband, Namasivaayagam, had been on the temple committee along with Dr. Natarajasivam, during the initial stages.

"What Maragatham, getting ready to go to the temple for the flag-hoisting, are you?"

Maragatham Maami must have been irritated by this innocent question. She burst out like mustard seeds thrown into hot oil.

"Long ago we decided that we wouldn't step into the temple. We had saved dollar by dollar (like a sparrow saves grain) and raised the temple. But now, like a snake occupying an ant-hill, so many posts such as Governor, President, Secretary and so on (occupied by unworthy men) have mushroomed. Leave alone my husband... how much would your husband have spent and done?"

Parvathi Ammal was not in a mood to continue to listen to Maragatham Maami's verbal fireworks. These days, she never thought of family, society, status etc. There was no need, either, for her to do so. Parvathi Ammal now lived with the thought that relationships were formed by one's birth and fate. She cut the telephone line, saying, "The milk is boiling over."

Parvathi Ammal remembered what Murugesar used to say often. "Temple work should be done sincerely. Lord Muruga sees everything. We don't do temple work merely for the sake of praise from tongues which will wag either way."

When Parvathi Ammal came to Australia, she was twenty. Living in a village in Jaffna with moderate rural dreams, she had been brought to Sydney by Dr. Natarajasivam, who was well past forty... as his second wife, of course. When the local marriage broker, Thambiah, said, "Wondering why she should be the second wife, are you? Who is the more popular of Lord Muruga's two wives? Its his second wife, Valli, is it not?", Parvathi's father had no answer to that question. The wedding took place.

Leaving three small children semi-orphaned, his wife had died. Dr. Natarajasivam needed somebody to look after his kids. He went to Jaffna, intending to bring his mother along. Her ill-health, however, created problems with the visa, in the Australian embassy in Colombo, and he changed his mind. It was at this time, that fate, in the person of broker Thambiah, brought Parvathi Ammal and Natarajasivam together in wedlock.

Alavetti Padmanadhan and Chavagacheri Panchapakesan's son, Nagendram, were playing the



nadaswaram. It was being broadcast by the Tamil Radio. It was a tradition which lasted for ten days before the pooja for the flag mast.

"Only if I leave now, I can get down at Parametta station and take a bus to the temple. Syamala, in the flat upstairs, working in 'Centrelink', must have taken leave today. There is no sign of her going to work. God knows when she'll go to the temple. Why be obliged to her unnecessarily?" thought Parvathi Ammal, as she bathed and got ready to go to the temple.

Parvathi Ammal was on fast that day. On all the ten days of the festival in the Sydney Murugan temple, during the month of Panguni (the Tamil month extending from mid-March to mid - April ), she would eat only once a day. This observance of fasting would continue in view of the festivals at the Pillaiyar temple back home, then at the Nayeena Theevu Nagabhushani Amman temple, the Nalloor temple and Chella Sannadhi, until the month of Purattaasi (the Tamil month extending from mid - September to mid - October).

Fasting was a kind of 'battle' to conquer one's physical desires, by imposing restrictions on the body. In addition to being associated with devotion to God, it was also well - suited to her present economic condition.

"Last year, there was free food distribution on all the ten days of the festival. This year also, they would definitely do it. Food 'donation' too, is a kind of pooja or worship. Don't we call it 'Maheswara poojai'? In the name of God, the temple has quite a substantial income. Of course, the temple authorities spend it properly and after a great deal of planning. If one wants to find fault, one could do it with anything. Haven't

we seen the temple growing before our own eyes? Gradually and step by step, they have been buying the adjacent lands and building a car park, mandapam (hall) etc. If they were to acquire all the land upto the Cross Road, people could use it as a short cut. Paramatta Road, on which the temple entrance now stands, has a heavy flow of traffic consisting of cars, lorries and so on... Muruga, it is all Your Will..."

Parvathi Ammal has been used to thinking and doing only good to others. Nevertheless, her loneliness has been taking its toll on her. "I'll change my saree and get going" she thought, and moved from the living room. Just then, she saw her husband's photograph on the wall. "He who had guided ever so many people, failed to guide me. When he married me, he was only forty two. Can a man be considered old at that age? Why did he not understand my desire that I too wanted to have a child of my own? Whenever I conceived, he aborted it one after the other... how many tablets I swallowed? All given by him... I didn't say anything... What does it matter whose children they are? I brought up his children as lovingly as if they were mine. Its all his selfishness..."

Parvathi Ammal's better nature prevailed, and her long-ing deep down, got suppressed. "I shouldn't think like this. It was natural for him to do what he did. How many stories are there, of the second wife torturing the first wife's children? How badly did Paranthaman's second wife treat his first wife's children...? But just because other ladies did such things, how could he think that I would do the same? How much love did I shower on his children? The younger son was not born to me. But I bore him in my shoulder. He who knew justice, did not mete out justice to me..."

The very things that, with great difficulty, Parvathi



Ammal wished not to recollect, kept recurring in her mind. Due to their impact, she experienced unbearable pain in her neck and nape. "Hereafter I shall not take Panadeine tablets. I'll leave everything to Lord Muruga..." she thought, and began singing the Skanda Sashti Kavacham from memory. She felt as if the pain reduced and her mind became lighter.

'Centrelink' Syamala, who had come down to check her mail-box, peeped in. She saw Parvathi Ammal clad in a saree, ready to leave and singing the Skanda Sashti Kavacham. "Off to the temple, aunty? Wait, I'm also going there. My husband couldn't take leave, and so has gone to work. I have taken 'flexi-leave' to see the flag-hoisting". With these words, she ran up to keep the letters in her house and return. Syamala's car was going on the main road towards the Murugan temple. Breaking the silence, Syamala began talking. "Earlier, you were in the forefront during the temple festival, taking the place of honour. Whatever it is, uncle should not have done like this. Being an embodiment of patience, you are enduring all this. Had I been in your place, I would have dragged the whole lot of them to court". Syamala knew that Parvathi Ammal's husband and his love for his children, were responsible for her present economic constraints.

Parvathi Ammal did not say anything. She gave a smile (indicative of her frustration) and remained silent.

"Aunty, it is because of ladies like you, who, proclaiming patience as a virtue, are willing to be subdued, that men think they can get away with everything that they do. These days, one's own children don't take care of their parents. How did uncle expect that his first wife's children will take care of you? Couldn't he leave some property in your name?

The car was now proceeding along a cross road. Busy talking to Parvathi Ammal, Syamala failed to allow another car which came on the main road, the right of way, as per the traffic rules. The other car was driven by a 'white' man. Abusing Syamala with the foulest word in English, he overtook her car.

Without caring one bit about the bad word, Syamala continued to drive and talk. She was a member of a Women's Rights Organization. She could not tolerate the injustice meted out to Parvathi Ammal. "In his later life, uncle spent all his money on public causes, befitting his status. The only house that remained, was seized, after his death, by his children who said that as the house had been bought for their mother, it belonged to them, and left you to fend for yourself. Didn't you have a share in bringing them up? The house you lived in, at today's rate, is worth more than ten million dollars. You should have argued that you also have a share in it. Even now, it is not too late, aunty" she said, and turned towards Parvathi Ammal.

It was not her intention to incite Parvathi Ammal. She believed that women should be given not only justice but equal rights.

"Who do I have, dear...? When he is not there, why do I need property? The money that I get from your 'Centrelink' department, is enough for me".

"Aunty, I am now in the division which distributes monetary assistance to people like you. Once in three months, it is our duty to check, with the help of the computer, if the money is being distributed properly. Last month, I checked your file. Only then I knew your case history. I was shocked.



Whatever it is, you shouldn't be so lenient. Please write a letter and give it to me. I'll take action through 'Centrelink'."

Sitting in the car, with her eyes half-shut, Parvathi Ammal listened silently to all that Syamala said. It might have been tiredness brought on by an excess of Panadeine tablets, or a recollection of her husband's memory. She did not say anything.

Syamala drove the car, rebuking Dr. Natarajasivam for his callousness and his children for their ingratitude. Her anger and speech could not be contained.

The car reached the temple.

Syamala stopped the car slowly near the temple entrance and said, "Aunty, you get down and go inside... The car-park is full... They said that it would be difficult to find parking space at this time. I'll park the car somewhere on the cross road and come".

Parvathi Ammal got down.

Without entering immediately, she stood at the side of the road and looked up at the temple tower. It stood tall and majestic. It seemed to Parvathi Ammal that the temple tower shone with a divine grace.

The chant of "Arohara" could be heard from the temple. Lord Muruga must have 'appeared' before the flag-mast, with Valli and Deivanai on either side.

It appeared to Parvathi Ammal that she could also hear faintly, what the broker Thanbiah said long ago - - - "Valliyai

Manam Puriya Vanda Mugam Onre" (It was as a lover that Lord Muruga married Valli).

The sound of "Arohara" mingled with that of the drums and reached the sky. "Lord Muruga's flag must have been hoisted" informed Parvathi Ammal's mind to her, as she hurried inside.

"Arohara" she said, feebly but with devotional fervour.

"Why do you groan, aunty? Say 'Arohara' loudly. I'm with you. Come inside" said Syamala assuringly, and took Parvathi Ammal inside the temple.

"Deepa aaradanai\* was being performed to the flag-mast.

"Arohara..."

In the midst of the voices of all the devotees gathered there, Parvathi Ammal's voice and Syamala's, rose loud and clear, and blended into one harmonious fervent chant.

\* a light or lighted camphor in a plate, waved in a circular manner three times before the image of God, in places of worship



## TWILIGHT DREAMS

**T**he invitation was beautifully created.

It had been designed on the computer and printed by the colour printer. The way the invitation lay on the table, indicated that it had been sent by someone whom my wife did not like.

A friend in Sydney had invited me and my family to attend his wife's fortieth birthday party. Being rich, he was accustomed to doing everything with a lot of noise and publicity. Only recently, he had celebrated his wedding anniversary on a grand scale, in a hall specially hired for the occasion. 'White' friends too, had come to that party. All of them were dressed in modern clothes. Taking their friendship for granted, Sundaramurthy had gone to the party plainly dressed, for which his wife nagged him no end. Remembering it, he decided that this time he would be as well-dressed as the others.

That night, during dinner time, his daughter raised the issue of what gift to take to the party. Poor thing. She would

usually say something innocently and create problems for Sundaramurthy.

"What does it matter for them? They are rich. To show off their wealth, they'll have a party every other month. You'll also go there grinning, eat, drink and return. People earn money in four or five ways and show it off. How on earth are you qualified to compete with them?" my wife exploded.

On such occasions, Sundaramurthy normally held his peace. During that silence, a review of his monthly salary made him cringe. To make up for this, he involved himself in social work. It enabled him to acquire the friendship of rich men. But, this was a case of "two feet up, three feet down". In the end, he would wallow in self - pity. His bouts of silence gave his wife the satisfaction of having won the game.

With a view to breaking the silence, his son came up with a fantastic suggestion. A Singaporean lady had gifted Sundaramurthy's wife a sari, which she had not worn because she didn't like its colour. Her son reminded them of that sari and said that it could be given as the birthday gift. He said that the sari should be wrapped in an attractive glossy paper, that the parcel should be given separately and the birthday card separately and it would be great fun to imagine them tearing their hair trying to find out who brought the sari with such an unpleasant colour. These ideas were dropped at the dining table. In the midst of all this hullabaloo, the son also put forward another idea which put Sundaramurthy in a fix. He said their old car was frequently giving them trouble, and that it was not proper for them to go to such parties in that car and hence a new car should soon be bought. Although the suggestion was expressed by his son, Sundaramurthy guessed that the brain behind it was his



wife's. He accepted her idea that a good car should be bought by taking a personal loan from the bank. Dinner got over on that happy note.

The day of the party dawned. Sundaramurthy's wife, son and daughter had dressed elegantly and looked very nice. His wife's aesthetic sense and care must be responsible for it. She had selected even the dress that he was to wear. She was particular that her children should not, in any way, seem inferior to the other children attending the party. Before getting into the car, she checked if the son's tie was tied properly. All of them got into the car. Though it was an old car, Sundaramurthy had washed it clean and 'polished' it to go to the party. Whether water had got into the engine or it was due to some other problem, the car refused to start.

"This is why I don't like to go out anywhere", began his wife; she then launched into a long speech, beginning with the worth of the car which her father had in Jaffna long ago, and pointing out her husband's inability to buy even a 'decent' car. She was an expert in singing praises of her parental greatness.

Pressing the accelerator as a sign of his being angry with his wife, Sundaramurthy pumped the petrol and started the car again. After a couple of hiccups, the engine came to life. He drove fast, applied the brake suddenly, thus reducing his wrath. Whenever he couldn't scold his wife, he would take out his anger thus. Because of this trait, he was considered short - tempered by many people.

Many of the invitees were already there, when Sundaramurthy and his family arrived. The entire stretch of the road in front of his friend's house, was blocked by all

kinds of cars. Yoganathan had parked his newly acquired Benz car right in front of the friend's house. Just behind it was Dr. Thanikachalam's brand new B.M.W. The friend's garage door was open. Inside it, both his cars shone. One of them was a German model sports car, which he had recently bought for his wife.

Just round the bend of the road, there was space enough to park a car. Thinking that he could park his car there, Sundaramurthy started reversing; but before that, Ramanathan came from the other side and parked his Toyota Cammery which he had newly bought.

"Oh, my! Even this fellow has bought a new car! Where do they get the money from? They have parties only to show off their cars" said Sundaramurthy's wife, openly expressing her jealousy.

"In a way it is good that I didn't get a place here. I'll park the car on the next cross road (where no one will see it) and come. All of you get down and wait." said Sundaramurthy; and as soon as they alighted, he drove ahead, parked the car hurriedly and returned.

Sundaramurthy's wife was staring at the sports model car gifted by the friend to his wife, and drifting in a dream world. Sundaramurthy had to tap her on her shoulder and bring her back to reality. His daughter hugged the gift parcel (which was neatly wrapped) to her heart. Greatly relieved, Sundaramurthy pressed the door bell. His friend's wife opened the door saying, "Why are you so late? Such close friends coming so leisurely!"

"Just as we were leaving the house, my brother rang from the USA. He pestered us to come there during the next



vacation for the children. That is why we are late" said Sundaramurthy's wife, skilfully concealing the truth about the trouble with the car. These days, the story of relatives calling from abroad, had no takers. Yet, compared to Germany, France and Canada, calls from the USA had not stopped altogether. Sundaramurthy's wife knew this very well.

Before Sundaramurthy could recover from this shock, his friend appeared by his side like a saviour, and said, "Hi buddy, why do you stand here looking lost? Come to the bar". Their friendship began when they were president and secretary respectively, of the Tamil Sangam. "Buddy, whatever you take, you will be steady. I'll prepare a cocktail for you" the friend said, and without even waiting for Sundaramurthy's acceptance, he poured wine from different bottles into a glass and prepared a cocktail. Such drinks would be good to taste. But the next day, one would not be able to lift one's head. It would then be necessary to take Panadol, apply a balm and so on. It would not be decent to talk about such things at a party. Moreover, how could one understand the doings of 'high-class' people, except at such parties?

"This cocktail is my speciality. Only you know my taste". Sundaramurthy praised his friend, and saying 'Cheers' to Dr. Thanikachalam sitting next to him, he emptied the glass.

The party was in full swing.

In another room, the children who had come, were being entertained by the video of an English film on a 78 cms TV set. God knows how many stories our women have saved for such parties! They were engaged in whispers and occasional loud laughter. And how many hair-styles could be seen! Sundaramurthy was proud to see his wife among these

ladies. She was a beauty who stood out in any gathering. That it had been reaffirmed, gave him immense satisfaction.

As for the men, the more their glasses 'struck' one another, the more intoxicated they became. The friend was an expert in organising parties of this kind. Hot, pungent bites were passed round. The friend himself served them, thus creating an atmosphere of intimacy.

At one point, "Why should we sit in separate groups? Gents and ladies can sit together, can't we?" said Ramanathan, who had bought a new Toyota recently. As his socialistic policy was welcomed by everyone, chairs were moved into one big circle. As though he had been waiting just for this moment, the friend played a popular song from the Tamil movie 'Genes' on his CD player. That song, combining Western and Carnatic music, set to tune by A.R. Rehman, and sung by Nityasree, served to energise even the 40 plus oldies among those gathered there. Benz car owner, Yoganathan, spread out his hands, folded his fingers to form a 'mudra' and swayed his body under the pretext of 'dancing' bharatanatyam. Seeing the ladies appreciating his dance, other elderly men also joined him. Although Sundaramurthy's legs itched to dance before the ladies and earn their 'sabaash' (an expression of appreciation) he noticed the red light in his wife's eyes, and controlled himself with great difficulty.

"We cannot deny that it was A. R. Rehman who made our children listen to Tamil music" said Mrs. Ram Mohan, voicing her 'discovery' in the midst of all that racket. As if to endorse this claim, Sivamani teacher who conducted music classes, sang a song set to music by A. R. Rehman, from the movie 'Sangamam'. Her voice was perfect. Many of the



invitees felt that it was a good advertisement for her music classes.

As the men became more and more intoxicated, the conversation took a different direction. It offered a good opportunity for some to publicise how much they had donated to the Sydney Murugan temple. As usual, the topic of what should be done to promote Tamil and Tamil culture in Sydney, acquired great importance. It is gratifying to note that our Tamilians imagine that it is only by talking thus, that they can identify themselves, even when drunk, as Tamils.

Dr. Thanikachalam made an eloquent appeal in English, that in Australia where people of various races live, the Tamils who spoke two languages and followed two cultures, should preserve their identity.

"Doctor Sir, stop advising others; practise what you preach. Here we are, eating and drinking happily. There in Vanni, how many of our people are suffering? What have you done for them, tell us. Don't just talk philosophy" said Ramanathan. Young blood. Must have also had some old grouse against Dr. Thanikachalam.

Dr. Thanikachalam must have taken this as a challenge thrown to him by a 'green' lad. His eyes flashed red.

"My dear boy! It is 'Tamil' blood that runs through my body also. How much are you going to give to help the Vanni people? I'll give a cheque for five times that amount now itself" he said, taking out his cheque book and pen.

Fearing that in his intoxicated state he might mention a huge sum, Mrs. Ramanathan was about to caution him, but her husband snatched her handbag and took out the cheque

book. "What doctor, I came to Australia long after you did. But don't assume that we take out money only from the 'teller machine'. I'm an engineer, and my wife is an accountant. We also carry a cheque book with us" he said, and writing out a cheque towards the Vanni Refugees Rehabilitation Fund for a thousand dollars, he placed it on the table for everyone to see. The entire gathering held its breath.

Dr. Thanikachalam did not say anything. He wrote out a cheque for 5000 dollars, signed it and placed it beside Ramanathan's.

Realising that the party and the celebrations were going awry, the friend collected himself.

"The food is getting cold. Please ask the children to eat. This food cannot be sent to Vanni. All of you have come honouring my invitation. Please eat heartily and finish up everything. Otherwise, my wife will refrigerate all the left-over food, heat it in the microwave oven periodically and make me eat it for one whole month" said the friend loudly.

Dinner began, hesitantly. Then, there was an uneasy silence. A sort of tension.

Sundaramurthy's family came out after the party.

"All this is because of impudence born of affluence. As if we have not seen money in Sri Lanka" murmured Sundaramurthy's wife, as she reached the road. All of them entered the cross road where the car had been parked.

Abracadabra! Where was the car?



"I remember very well. I parked the car just here" said Sundaramurthy, shaking his head twice, to get rid of his inebriation.

Just below a mail - box near where he had parked the car, was an envelope bearing the car registration number. It was a notice to indicate that his car had been towed away by the police. Only then, he realised that, in his confusion and hurry, he had parked his car blocking the entrance to a residence.

What could be done? In fits and starts, Sundaramurthy suggested that they could ask the friend (who had hosted the party) to give them a lift home.

His wife became a veritable seething volcano. "As if the humiliation we have suffered is not enough. Want to have something more? Even in the matter of giving a donation for the Vanni people, there is perversity. You people can never be corrected. If we go back, they'll start asking us what model car, which year it was manufactured and so on. Come on, let's walk down to the telephone booth and call a taxi" she said, and without even waiting for her husband's response, began walking with the children towards the main road. Luckily, an unoccupied taxi happened to come along. Stopping it, all of them got in. The taxi driver, a Greek, spoke familiarly. During the course of the conversation, Sundaramurthy cautiously informed him of how the police had towed his car away.

The taxi driver showered two rounds of abuse on the police. He then recounted how he too had a similar experience. As it was a Saturday, Sundaramurthy could retrieve his car only on Monday, and he might have to spend about four

hundred dollars, said the taxi driver, explaining the formalities. A low moan issued from the wife who was sitting in the rear and listening to all this. Sundaramurthy understood very well, the meaning of this code language.

The taxi was going towards the suburbs of Sydney. Sundaramurthy resolved that at least to satisfy his wife and children, he should take a bank loan and buy a trouble - free new car as early as possible. He felt that it was good that he had five or six drinks shamelessly, at his friend's party. Under the influence of the intoxication, Sundaramurthy would have a peaceful time that night.

Tomorrows are waiting to dawn, carrying any number of problems. This holds good not only for the displaced Vanni refugees, but also for the migrants!



## THE HORIZON

**T**hat day was a government holiday.

It was on this day, that the two Germanys which had been poles apart since the Second World War, were again unified. In memory of that merger, a public holiday had been declared.

On holidays, Veerasingam loved to laze away the time. His dreams, however, were shattered by his young son. The kid was creating havoc in the kitchen. "Dear... why don't you take this fellow to the park? It would be a good change for him" his wife shouted, screwing the ear of her son who had dislodged the vessels from the cupboard and was playing with them.

His wife's shouts were lost in the howling of his son. It was like pandemonium let loose. Goodbye to idleness and daydreams!

Pacifying his son, Veerasingam stepped into the street. There is a children's park between Turm street and Almoabit

Road in Berlin. Adjoining the park, evergreen pine trees were planted neatly along with 'larche' and 'papa' trees which shed their leaves and stand naked during winter. Such man - made green clusters were created to counter the environmental pollution in Germany's metros choked with industries.

There was no dearth of people in the park. During the day, it served mostly as a forum for old ladies to meet and gossip. Seats fixed under the lamp posts in the park were most convenient for them. These ladies who had lost their husbands in the war, had battled their way through life, single - handedly.

In the evenings, drunkards, called 'penners', occupied these seats in their inebriated condition.

In Germany, liquor was available in bottles of various shapes and sizes -- even in the 'mini' quarter size -- in all the shops, including those selling paper, vegetables, food items and so on. Habitual drunkards always carried these mini - quarter liquor bottles in their pockets. Whenever they recovered from their inebriated state, they would replenish themselves with the contents of these mini bottles and curl up on the seats under the lamp posts. These men had lost their (family) relationships. They were trying to find the meaning of life in the intoxication provided by liquor.

His son was playing on a sand dune. Veerasingam walked leisurely along the park. In the midst of the tall, majestic pine trees, on one of the seats under a lamp post, sat a figure with his head drooping. One look at him was enough to show that he was not a confirmed addict. His shirt was crumpled and dirty. Empty Vodka mini - quarter bottles were scattered around the seat.



Veerasingham stared at him. Ronald...?

Veerasingham could not believe his eyes. "How did he...? Here...? In such a state...?" Several questions arose in his mind simultaneously.

Veerasingham went closer. There was no doubt at all. The man was Ronald Chulz. He had been, at one time, Veerasingham's most intimate friend. During the past ten years they had journeyed in different directions. And now, this sudden meeting in such strange circumstances. How did Ronald come to such a pass?

Veerasingham turned and looked at his son. The boy was busy playing in the sand.

Veerasingham shook his friend by his shoulders twice and asked,

"Ronald, do you recognise me...?"

He raised his head. Narrowing his eyes, he stared keenly.

"Uncle Veera" he said.

Even in his drunken state, the joy of seeing his friend spread across his face. His children used to call Veerasingham, "Uncle Veera". Out of respect, he and his wife also got used to calling him in the same manner.

"What's this, Ronald? How miserable you look" Veerasingham faltered in his speech.

"You can't believe this, can you? This is the reward which a unified Germany has given me", he said, laughing listlessly.

"Where do you live now? Is your wife fine? Your sons must be quite grown - up. Where are they...?" Veerasingam piled up his questions, prompted more by his heart than by his reason.

"Don't ask questions, my friend... I'm not in a state to answer them. If you can spare twenty Deutsch Marks, give me and leave. I must drink. Before my head clears from its inebriation, I must drink..." Even while asking for a favour, he did not lose his dignity.

Veerasingam wanted to take him home. But was it proper to do so? His mind was in a whirl.

"My house is close by" he said hesitantly.

"Let it be. Do you have the money or not?"

Veerasingam was relieved. He thrust twenty Deutsch Marks into his friend's hands. "Don't drink too much. I would like to meet you again, Ronald" he told him lovingly.

"I remember your telling me that you were working in the University in West Berlin. Tomorrow I shall myself come to meet you there. Positively. Now, leave me alone..." he said, thrusting the money into his pocket and rising.

"Don't forget. I'll be in my office room the whole day. See you then".

Whether Ronald heard what Veerasingam said or not, was not clear. He was hurrying towards the nearest shop. His immediate need was... only liquor.



## II

Ronald Chulz was born and brought up in East Germany when it was under Socialist control. He grew up as a true representative of a society dominated by the socialist philosophy of Karl Marx and Lenin. He had secured the first rank in his state in the University Entrance Examination. It was when he entered Dresden University that Veerasingam first met him.

At one time, Sri Lanka had declared itself as a Socialist country under Sirimavo's rule. This gave the Sri Lankan students an opportunity to gain admission into the universities of other socialist countries. Veerasingam had thus obtained a scholarship and gone to Dresden University.

It was an age when a 'cold war' prevailed between capitalist and socialist countries. An invisible iron curtain separated the two camps. Hence, opportunities to get acquainted with the Westerners and their literature were mostly denied by the socialist countries.

Nevertheless, Ronald appeared to be totally different. He was very eager to know the latest developments. German was his mother - tongue. In addition, he had voluntarily learnt and mastered English; he also knew the Russian language, which was absolutely necessary in a socialist country.

Veerasingam and Ronald had joined the Faculty of Forestry. The course was a slightly difficult one. To make it easier for the practical classes, the faculty was situated in a village close to the forest. Hence students had to perform

stay in the university hostel. Two students had to share a room.

Veerasingham possessed some rare books published in the west. Ronald was very eager to read them. So he opted to be Veerasingham's room-mate. Their interest in books drew them closer and soon they became intimate friends.

Ronald loved speed; and he showed it not only in studies but also in life. While he was in Std XI, he appears to have met and love a Monica. In Germany, love is merely a preliminary to marriage and family life. He was just a fresher in the university when Monica became pregnant. In Western countries, it was not considered a sin for girl students to conceive or to terminate an unwanted pregnancy. However, Ronald was willing to accept his manly duties. He was eager to prove that it was not the product of adolescent whimsical love and its consequent rashness.

It would be more proper to say that Monica was extraordinarily beautiful than to say that she was just beautiful. Even after she had become the mother of two children, she looked like a young bride. As she had passed the tenth standard, she completed her two-year Nurses' Training Course, after the first child was born. She then conceived for the second time. Ronald was in the third year of his university course, when Monica came to live with him with their two sons.

Ronald rented a house close to the university hostel and lived there with his family. As his first son called Veerasingham "Veera Uncle", the rest of the family also chose to call him so, and he almost became a member of that family.



Six years rolled by, unbelievably quickly. After the completion of his six-year degree course, Veerasingam crossed the border and came to West Germany. Ronald secured a job as a Forest Officer and continued to live in East Germany with his family. As East and west Germany considered themselves antagonists, it was not easy for the two friends to communicate with each other and keep their friendship alive. Moreover, as Veerasingam also got married and had to shoulder additional responsibilities, it became well-nigh impossible for him to keep in touch with Ronald.

Good reason why he was overwhelmed with sorrow on seeing his best friend in such a miserable state in the park that day.

### III

**A**fter the ethnic riots of 1983, many Tamils from Sri Lanka arrived in Germany as refugees. They used the East - West Berlin boundary as an entry point to enter West Germany without a visa. The geographical features of the two divided nations and the administrative legalities of Berlin city, made it easy for the refugees to enter West Berlin by train directly from the East Berlin airport.

Although the city of West Berlin was situated in East Germany, it was governed by West Germany. Hence, once a person entered West Berlin city, he or she was eligible to apply for a West German refugee status.

Many of the Tamils submitted their applications for refugee status only in Tamil. Under these circumstances, the

officers investigating the details of the refugees, required immediately, the services of someone who knew both German and Tamil well. The German government, therefore, sought the part - time services of Veerasingam who was already working in the university. He undertook this work with great dedication, and as a means to channelise his affinities to Tamil. Whenever the Tamil refugees were victimised, he championed their cause and thus earned their respect.

One day, some of the refugees were caught by the West German officials while they were crossing the border. The law stipulated that they should be produced in a court of justice within twenty four hours. It was 10 p.m by the time the formalities and the translation of the relevant investigations were completed.

Veerasingam was thoroughly exhausted, as he had worked without a break the whole day. Hence he dozed off while travelling by the underground train.

"Brother, may I speak to you?"

He was roused by these words in Tamil.

When he opened his eyes, he saw Thavamani in front of him. She was Chinnarasa's wife. It was obvious from her appearance that she too was returning home, after a hard day's work.

When Chinnarasa first came to Berlin with his wife and two children, he had been subjected to interrogation by the authorities for his refugee status. Veerasingam had been the translator during that interrogation. Hence, he knew all the details about Chinnarasa's family, fully.



Chinnarasa had worked in a wholesale establishment in Colombo. His boss was his distant relative. Whenever he came home on vacation, he would go around strutting as if he were the boss. Thavamani had studied the Ayurveda system of medicine (as a kind of inheritance) from her father. Chinnarasa and Thavamani also happened to be distant relatives. So they got married and had two children.

It was at this time that the ethnic riots of 1983 rocked Colombo. The establishment where Chinnarasa worked, was razed to the ground. He went to his native place and with great difficulty managed to reach Berlin with his family.

The acquaintance between Veerasingam and Chinnarasa which began with their introduction during the interrogation, blossomed into friendship. Chinnarasa's family began to visit Veerasingam for obtaining various benefits such as medicare and social security allowance etc.,

Thavamani was now standing in front of Veerasingam... He pointed to the vacant seat opposite, and she sat down. Silence prevailed.

"Tell me... What's the matter? You must be returning from work". Veerasingam tried to start the conversation 'normally'.

"You're right. I'm working in an Italian restaurant. Only in the kitchen. My shoulders have worn off, washing vessels the whole day."

Veerasingam noticed that even as she spoke, her eyes were moist.

"I'll have to get down at the next station".

"I know..."

Veerasingham alighted at the next station. Quite unexpectedly, Thavamani also got down. He realised that she was longing to tell him something.

"Please tell me what you want to say. I'll help you as far as I can", he said, trying to make her feel at ease.

"Dear brother, my children will be hungry and waiting for me now. I have to go home and only then prepare something for them. I can't bear it any more. That's why I have decided to tell you everything and find a solution. I have thought over it for a long time". She began crying. Her tears touched his heart.

"What has happened, Thavamani? Where's Chinnarasa...? Don't cry..." said Veerasingham.

Still sobbing, Thavamani slowly removed the overcoat which she had worn for warmth. Scars of burns and lashes could be seen on her arms and neck.

Veerasingham raised his eyebrows.

"These are all external marks only. My husband doesn't go for work; he spends all the money received as 'dole' in drinking and then beats me and my children. Its because I can't bear to see the children starving, that I have been working in the Italian restaurant so late. My heart shudders to think of the state my home will be in, when I return. The children will be curled up in a corner, hungry. Things would be in a total mess. Fully drunk, my husband will give me a lecture. Even after I've cooked and served him dinner, he will not leave me alone. Its disgusting to talk about such things..."



"Shall I speak to Chinnarasa once?" Even before Veerasingam could finish his question, she interrupted agitatedly.

"For heaven's sake, don't let him know that I told you all this. He will not hesitate to kill me. Last night, my second son took a knife to wound his father because he could not tolerate the way he beat me. If that young boy can be so infuriated, how do you think I can live with this man along with my two sons?"

"You don't want me to talk to Chinnarasa. What then do you expect me to do?"

"Please make arrangements with the Social Security Office to obtain 'return' tickets for me and my sons to go to Sri Lanka. I've had enough in this foreign country. I rely only on you. Rather than remain in this hell, I prefer to go back home, practise Ayurveda and bring up my children".

It was pathetic to see Thavamani. And yet, it was a domestic problem. It couldn't be handled impulsively.

"Please give me two or three days' time. I'll see what I can do", said Veerasingam, walking away.

"Don't let us down, brother..." Her parting words continued to echo in his ears for a long time.

## IV

**R**onald kept his word. He came to the university to see Veerasingam, as promised. He was well - dressed and clean - shaven.

"Veera... how are you? Its a long time since we met" he said, hugging his friend.

"I'm fine, thank you. But what happened to you...? When did you acquire this addiction to the mini - quarter bottle? Monica was quite strict in the matter of drinking, wasn't she?" Veerasingam piled up his questions.

Ronald was silent for a while. Then, with a long sigh, he said, "Monica and the children have left me. As per this country's reckoning, I'm a 'homeless wretch'", with frustration.

Veerasingam was shocked. A twenty - year - old happy relationship. Domestic felicity that was unusual among German couples. How did such a family split asunder?

Ronald's wife loved luxury. When the two Germanys unified, the fashions and items of luxury from West Germany became freely available in East Germany also. Ronald's family which had all along led a disciplined and peaceful life under the socialist system, was swept off its feet by the new wave of capitalism which was characterised by an urge to make quick money.

Ronald resigned his job in the Forest Department and set up his own establishment dealing with the supply of timber for construction work. Having been brought up under socialistic conditions, he could not quite understand the nuances of capitalistic dealings.

Hoping that the next year would bring in the expected gains, he spent five years struggling to progress in the new trade. He failed miserably. At the end of five years, he lost his house, car and other assets trying to settle his bank dues, and found himself literally on the streets.



Monica could not digest this abysmal fall. The same Ronald, who, under the socialist system had appeared a hero to her, now seemed to be impotent and gullible (under the capitalist system). Both their sons left them to lead independent lives with their girl friends. Monica too, rented a house and lived there alone, leaving Ronald to fend for himself.

Separation from his family and the consequent disappointment and sorrow must have made Ronald an alcoholic.

Veerasingham took him to the university canteen. Their conversation continued at the dining table. "Is Monica now living with a new lover?" asked Veerasingham.

Ronald took out a small diary from his pocket. On a small piece of paper, he wrote down a telephone number from the diary and gave it to Veerasingham. "As far as I know she's still alone. My son once said that she was now working as an officer in charge of a Red Cross Hostel. It was he who gave me this phone number... My dear friend, talk to Monica once, if you can. I shall always welcome her with open arms" he said pathetically.

"I shall certainly speak to Monica. I would love to see both of you united" said Veerasingham.

## V

The door bell rang, early in the morning.

"Who would it be? At this time?" With these questions in his mind, Veerasingham opened the door.

Thavamani stood there, suitcase in hand, her sons on either side, with their faces steeped in sorrow. Her face was swollen, crying all night. Perhaps it may have been due to something else also. With cracked and blood - clotted lips, she could not even talk clearly.

"Come in..." said Veerasingam, opening the door wide.

As she bent down to lift the suitcase, several swellings could be seen on her head. On her nape, just below her right ear, could be seen a fresh burn mark.

Veerasingam could infer what must have taken place the previous night. Gnashing his teeth in fury, and wondering "Is this fellow a human being?", he went to the telephone and began to press the numbers. By the time he pressed the fourth digit, his wife came there. On seeing her, he regained his composure, stopped phoning and looked up.

"Instead of consoling the poor things, what are you upto now?" she asked. "Let Thavamani and the kids wash their faces and have coffee. We can discuss things later" she added, bringing the situation back to normal.

She took the guests to the bathroom, instructed them to wash their faces and returned to the drawing room.

"You thought of ringing up the police, didn't you?" she asked, smiling impishly. Veerasingam nodded his head like a doll.

"There is dosai batter in the fridge. I shall prepare sambar in a jiffy. They wouldn't have had anything last night".

"What do we do with them now?" asked Veerasingam hesitantly.



"After breakfast, we'll comfort them as best as we can, and take them to the Red Cross Office. I know one of the employees there, very well. They run a hostel close to the office only for wives who are tortured by their husbands. Men like Chinnarasa cannot go there and create a scene. That is the safest place for them... Instead of doing this... what will happen if you inform the police? They'll come and arrest Chinnarasa. Don't you know the drunkcards here? They'll spread a rumour that you are 'keeping' Chinnarasa's wife as your mistress here. Do you want that to happen?"

Veerasingham realised the practical wisdom implicit in his wife's words. It was 9 a.m when they finished their breakfast. The telephone rang. Veerasingham picked up the receiver. Chinnarasa was at the other end. "Have my wife and children come there, brother?" he asked calmly. His head must have cleared.

Veerasingham looked at Thavamani.

Inferring that the call was from Chinnarasa, Thavamani gestured to him not to reveal the truth, and folded her hands in prayer.

"What's wrong? Do you want any forms to be filled...? I shall certainly help you if necessary".

"My wife is not to be found here. She must have run away with her illicit lover early in the morning. Let the dirty bitch come back. I'll break her legs and make her sit in a corner permanently. Only because she can use her legs, she has run away".

The line was cut off. Chinnarasa must have banged the receiver down in his rage.

## VI

It was not difficult to have Thavamani and her children admitted into the hostel run by the Red Cross Society. Veerasingam understood that the president of the hostel performed his duties not only compassionately and dignifiedly but also sternly.

At the Red Cross Office too, Thavamani gave a declaration that if the government would provide her and her children return tickets to Sri Lanka, she was prepared to forgo her claim to the status of a refugee and go back home.

"You need not worry. Her husband cannot create any problem in this hostel... For the time being, I've put down your name as the guardian. Please contact the Social Welfare Office and make arrangements to obtain the tickets..." said the manager of the Hostel, giving his visiting card to Veerasingam.

Veerasingam remembered that Monica, Ronald's wife, was also working in one of the departments of the Red Cross Society. He thought he could get her exact address from the manager. His faith was not misplaced. The manager knew Monica very well. He not only gave Veerasingam the address of the branch (of the Red Cross Society) where she worked, but also told him to ring her up if necessary. When Veerasingam remained silent the manager himself rang up Monica.

Wondering what kind of reception he would get, Veerasingam entered her office room. But as soon as she



saw him, Monica rose from her seat, came towards him and calling him 'Uncle Veera' whole - heartedly, shook hands with him.

"When I got your call, I was quite surprised. How many years...? How did you get my phone number?" she asked, ushering him into the 'tea' room. Not knowing how to start the conversation, Veerasingam kept quiet.

"Tell me, Veera... How are you? How's your family?"

"I'm fine. My family too is quite well. I'm indeed very happy to see you after so many years".

"Same here. If you invite me, I'll be very happy to come to your house. I would like to taste the hot curry your wife specialises in", she spoke as of old.

"You should certainly come, Monica. I shall consult my wife and let you know a convenient date".

"Do you know...? I cannot come with Ronald..." she said, without batting an eyelid. Veerasingam did not wish to conceal his meeting with Ronald beyond this.

"I met Ronald recently. He had come to my University office". He recounted all that had taken place.

"He would have told you only that he had separated from Monica. He wouldn't have told you about his blunders..." She said, as she prepared coffee for both of them.

"No, Monica. He told me everything. When all is said and done, don't you have a share in his gains and losses?"

Without replying, she brought the coffee. Giving a cup to Veerasingam, she sat in front of him.

"It is a pity that we have to rake up the past, Veera. You know very well... How many years was he studying? I went to work and supported him and our children, so that he may study well... Why...?"

Veerasingam did not reply. She continued.

"This difficult patch is only for a short period, I thought. I believed that once he completed his studies, he would earn and provide me with the luxurious life that I longed to live... Now...?"

"There's no business totally free from loss; is there?"

"If he can't do business properly, he should have taken up a job, shouldn't he?" said Monica; and going to her office, she brought a document and gave it to him.

"Read this, Veera... Its a letter from the bank. They have sent it here because they don't know his address. You see how much he still owes the bank? If we were together, he will live only on my earnings. The bank will take away all that he earns. You tell me, Veera... Should I not have a life of my own? Why should I deceive myself living with that fool and suffer? The children have grown up. They have flown off to lead their own lives as they wish. Why should I spoil the rest of my life with Ronald?"

Monica took the coffee cups, placed them in the sink, returned and sat in front of Veerasingam. A long sigh followed.

"It is true. I was madly in love with Ronald when I was young. I married him without giving a thought to the future. This happened when I didn't know my own worth. I am still young and beautiful. Many men are willing to love me even now. But don't think I'll go astray. If I find a rich man who is



prepared to treat me lovingly and give me the respect that I deserve, I will not hesitate to live with him" concluded Monica.

Her stance was quite contrary to the traditions of the society in which Veerasingham was born and brought up. But he also realised that such an attitude was typical of Western culture.

"Whatever justifications you might offer, think of your twenty-year-old married life. Reconsider your decision, Monica" said Veerasingham hesitantly.

"I know all about the Indian marriage customs very well. That 'sentiment' will not work here. A woman has every right to live her own life as she likes, independently" said Monica, rising.

"Veera, don't think I am insulting you. I still consider you as my friend. I have plenty of work to do. The chapter of my life with Ronald belongs to the past. It cannot be rewritten.... The divorce papers are all ready. Since I do not know his permanent address, I have not been able to send them to him. If you have his address, please give it to me. My lawyer needs it".

Veerasingham got up. "Ronald says that there's a place for you in his heart still".

"I told you it is a closed chapter. Please don't talk about him again, Veera..."

Monica walked towards the door. Veerasingham followed her.

## VII

The news reached Veerasingam that, his wife and children having left him, Chinnarasa was going around threatening to take revenge on her and those who sheltered her. On the other hand, Thavamani who had taken refuge in the Red Cross Society, never failed to enquire, "Have you made arrangements to procure tickets for me and my children to return to Sri Lanka?" whenever she rang up Veerasingam.

Conveniently for him, one of his friends was working in the department of Social Security. He contacted him and got the tickets ready. The government felt that it was cheaper to provide the mother and children flight tickets to Sri Lanka, rather than give them their monthly 'refugee dole'. On this basis of 'economy' the tickets were sanctioned.

Veerasingam went to the Red Cross Hostel to inform Thavamani of the date of their departure. He also told her that she should be ready on the specified date and that the Red Cross officials would themselves escort her safely to the airport. Thavamani looked at him listlessly.

Veerasingam expected her to rejoice at the satisfactory outcome of his efforts. Instead, she appeared to be distressed. He realised that she wanted to say something, but couldn't do so.

"What's it, Thavamani...? The problem has been solved, hasn't it? Why do you hesitate...?"

"No, brother... I would like to see him once.. The children too keep crying for their father. Though a drunkard, he is my husband... my husband..." She lowered her head,



unable to continue. Understanding her predicament, Veerasingam remained silent.

"Its up to you, Thavamani, to decide. I will certainly be happy if you rejoin your husband and live happily..."

Veerasingam conveyed Thavamani's desire to the Red Cross official and returned home. Cancellation of tickets which are reserved, should be done before the date of the flight. If he were to inform the Social Service Department officials of Thavamani's decision, they would surely ask him, "Are you trying to fool us?" Veerasingam racked his brains, wondering how to solve this new problem.

"What's wrong...? asked his wife, as she sat beside him with a cup of coffee. "As soon as you left the Red Cross Society's office, Thavamani rang me up. I feel sorry for her".

"Is this a children's game, to keep changing your mind every now and then? What shall I tell the officials tomorrow to 'save' my face?" His wife kept silent till he cooled a bit and began to drink his coffee.

"Look here... If Thavamani returns to Sri Lanka now, do you know what people there will say? 'When we are longing to escape from here, this arrogant wretch has come back, that too without her husband'. It is a long time since you left Sri Lanka. You don't know the present situation there. What will she do in the midst of the ethnic conflict...?"

"In that case, let her take up a house here and live independently. I volunteered to help her only because I couldn't bear to see her being tortured by Chinnarasa everyday..." spluttered Veerasingam.

"In today's world, even if Chinnarasa allows Thavamani to live alone, will our community keep quiet? Won't tongues wag? Think carefully and calmly. You want Monica who says she doesn't want her husband, to unite with Ronald. On the other hand, Thavamani wants to live with her husband inspite of his ill-treating her. But you suggest that she take up a house here and stay by herself..."

"Don't try to generalise things..."

"That's exactly what I'm also saying. I'm not trying to justify Chinnarasa's shabby treatment of his wife. But, no matter how long you've lived in Germany, don't forget that our native cultural heritage is different... We do not have the courage to discard marital relationships. Just because you live in a foreign country, how can you think of nullifying our traditions and customs...? Poor Thavamani..."

Veerasingham's wife took the coffee cup and went to the kitchen. His wife's words transported him suddenly to his native village. How many pleasant evenings had he spent on the sea - shore there!

Veerasingham was lost in the thought of the several meanings that the horizon, seen from the sea-coast, contained.





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In his collection of short stories, he has given us glimpses of the various countries that he has visited, in his official capacity as a University Professor. These stories also offer us an insight into the working of the human mind, covering a wide spectrum, ranging from the extremely loving parent, to the indifferent spouse, or the callous son/daughter-in-law and so on. Without being moralistic, he allows us to judge for ourselves and come to our own conclusions.



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