BORN TO LABOUR

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By the same author

Vismajani — Play
Wayfarer — Prose - poems
In Ceylon's Tea Garden — Poem
The Borderland — Novel

BORN TO LABOUR

C. V. VELUPILLAI

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PREFACE

When, more than ten years ago, C. V. Velupillai first brought me these sketches for publication in the "Sunday Times," I was struck by the feeling he had put into them—a poet's feeling; the kind of feeling that at the point of communication wets the eyes and tingles the blood.

I had of course heard of C. V. earlier as the poet of the plantations, the only one writing in English. He had also been a member of parliament. His career in politics was a digression from the course of his true genius which was to give voice to a vision of his people's sufferings and their alienation. It is a vision that suffuses everything he writes with a flash of poetry.

It is my belief that poetry is not merely what a poet sets down in a particular word-pattern, or sings to a particular tune. As in C. V.'s case, it is a fever he has to work out of his system, a throb of blood calling to blood in the veins of humanity. In the widest sense, I suppose, one can live a poem as well as write it. The lives of the people C. V. is always writing about are prose-poems even if they are sad songs of the toilers. So are these sketches. They tell of the lives of his own people. Had he written these sketches in their own tongue, I am sure they could have been set to the music of their beloved *nagasuram* without changing a syllable.

What are these people really like who live in the "leafy grey" limbo of the plantations? The adjectival colour is not mine: it is from the first of these sketches. It is a poet's phrase, vaguely reminiscent of a line from the great spokesman of the dispossessed, Bertolt Brecht:

"I see the world in a mellow light: it is God's excrement."
(Baal)

How close that line really is to the earthy fatalism of life on our tea estates. My own idea of that life was superficial though sympathetic, and chiefly confined to impressions

gathered on brief holidays in the tea country. It was the author of these sketches who deepened my insight into the half-lit world of leafy grey where leeches lurk in the dank grass.

Leeches thrive on blood. It is the law of nature and the plantation workers, children of nature, have known no other law. Their life-blood has been sucked by leeches of many kinds: big, white leeches, labour-gang leeches, money-lending leeches, political leeches, boutique leeches, by visa and passport leeches and now by citizenship leeches.

The fate of our indentured labour has been hard indeed. Yet the brittle, uncertain lives of these ill-used folk have a grave beauty and dignity of their own. In that they are so much like the native peasant breed with its all-sustaining belief in sansara:

"Aiyo! aiyo! the way is rough and steep;
Aiyo! the thorns are sharp, the rivers deep;
But the night comes at last. So sleep, child, sleep."

Lives spent close to nature are never far from poetry. But because man is a political animal, he invariably spoils the poetry. I believe that it is when the animal ceases to be political that he fully becomes a man. I find it hard to understand politics and its assumption that power sprouts from the barrel of a gun. I distrust anything that denotes power: whether it is the divine right of kings, the sovereign right of parliaments, the ultimate right of bombs (or is it money?), the democratic right of the vote or even the right of ownership of slaves or tea.

I can't say that I care very much either for the uses to which power is put. It is power which suborns, coerces and ultimately denies people their simplest rights. I can't, for instance, think of anything more preposterous or less human than a modern Indian government—the earthly representative of Mother India—declaring that her sons and daughters in some foreign land are "stateless" people; in other words, people without rights.

This has been the traumatic experience of Ceylon's plantation workers of Indian origin — the subject of these sketches. Imagine the predicament of these nine hundred thousand orphans of politics, when, at the same time, the land which their indentured labour helped enrich also disowns them. The tea which they tended with their dark, gnarled hands continues to grow on the fertile slopes of the hill country. A blight uprooted the coffee they were first brought here to plant. They began again from scratch to grow tea.

Their children, and their children's children grew up with the tea on the replanted lands. They know every bush, every stone, every gully. As C. V. Velupillai has sung:

> "Nine hours a day,
> Seven times in a week;
> Thus their life-blood flowed,
> To fashion this land,
> A paradise for some."

They were the White Man's burden-bearers, the pack-mules of colonial commerce. They planted the coffee and then the tea. The big trunk roads and the rail tracks, which they helped to lay from the tea country down to the ports, have now become an integral part of the island's transport system.

Nobody in his senses, however xenophobic his view of history, would want to tear up tea bushes by their roots, dig up roads and railways, blast bridges and culverts on the score that they were raised with the labour of alien hands. Only man, then, nature's greatest resource, is expendable. He alone becomes unwanted. No one is willing to credit *him* with the capacity to have roots and foundations like trees or roads. Such is man's inhumanity to man. As for finer feelings like love and faith and kinship and piety, how could such specimens of sub-humanity afford them? This is the lot of all displaced people.

It is particularly true of our plantation workers of Indian origin. From warm-blood beings, they have become serial numbers in some petty official's book, a tattered cache of travel documents, a soiled ration card, a thumb-impression on a checkroll. More recently, under the Indo-Ceylon agreement, they have become tickets in a human lottery: a tragic lottery where the cherished prize is to be allowed to remain in peace for the rest of their lives, and lay their bones in the soil which their ancestral sweat has watered. The buttons which set the machinery of this strange drum of misfortune in motion are all under the fingers of obtuse officials. Who is to go and who is to remain has become an exercise in bureaucratic attrition.

It is easier for a guilty man to prove that he is innocent in the highest courts of the law than for some of these backward people to establish that they exist at all. Even the two names which plantation children often bear—one given by the estate dispenser simply to record another birth in the estate register and the other lovingly chosen by the parents have proved a source of confusion in establishing their identity.

It is hypocrisy to blame history for what is called the Indo-Ceylon problem. "We didn't bring the Indian workers here," says the self-righteous Ceylon politician today. Whereas his Indian counterpart equally piously intones, "Stateless people are not our responsibility." It is not history that is cruel; it is man, and his obsession with power; and that doesn't mean only the colonialist who brought this indentured labour from South India in the first place. It means you and me and them. It means a human relationship that has gone sour. We hear a great deal of talk about the threat of the D.M.K. (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) in Ceylon today. Isn't this because these people of Indian origin, who have laboured on our tea estates for several generations now, have never been absorbed into the permanent population of this country? Shouldn't we have a national guilt complex because they were never encouraged to consider themselves as citizens of the land of their adoption?

Wherever there is trouble and discontent, political vultures are bound to gather, and doutbless we shall see them feeding like brothers on the last crust of these wretched people.

What is the solution? Our political animal, like Mehitabel the Cat, leaves its unwanted kittens to drown in the water-butt which she has made their nursery. In the bizarre vocabulary of Nazism the final solution (endgultize Losung) was to exterminate six million human beings in gas chambers. The newest refinements include napalm and nerve poisons. We are shocked. And yet there are some among us who would push our unwanted 900,000 into the sea!

What is required to solve human problems is human understanding and sympathy. C. V. Velupillai's little book provides the essential basis for such understanding.

F de SILVA

27.9.69.

Offered to the men and women of the past, present and future of the tea country.

I record my gratitude to the Editors of the Sunday Times, Sunday Observer, and the Mail (Madras), in which these sketches were first published.

CONTENTS

A CHILD IS BORN

From the foothills of the central mountains to the Uva uplands spreads the tea country. Its vast panorama of rolling green is the home and the world of lakhs of plantation folk.

They live here segregated in the lines, far from village and town. Shrouded in their everyday life of "prune and pluck" in the leafy grey they have lost touch with the world outside. Their neighbours in the urban and rural areas, too, have no free access to their homes.

In spite of these limitations they preserve a life full of colour, rhythm and spice. Their emotions and ecstacies, their joys and sorrows, woven into a pattern of light and shade, manifest themselves in their social, religious and cultural activities.

Their social customs and practices, though essentially of the Hindus, differ from those of their co-religionists in Jaffna, Batticaloa or Trincomalee. These customs and ceremonies also vary according to their caste or the village in India from where they originally came some 150 years ago. Every event, be it birth, ear-boring, puberty, marriage, death or worship, has its appointed ceremonies.

A family unit of father, mother, two children and a grown-up daughter often occupies a line room, a living space of ten feet by twelve. Within this precious area all such events are celebrated.

The arrival of a child, as in all homes, is hailed as an auspicious event. When the first spark of life stirs in the mother's womb the news gets round. When the women gather at the spout or water tap they begin to gossip.

"Ai Muthamma!" says Meena. "I hear Panjali is *without bathing.*"

"Yes, poor thing. This is her first," the others say in unison.

In the meanwhile Panjali's husband, Arjunan, is found with an unshaven beard. A sign of celibacy normally observed by Hindus on estates when their wives are expecting or when they undertake a pilgrimage to Kataragama.

The men begin to talk and compliment Arjunan.

"I say, *machan,* I hear good news. Since when has sister been *without bathing?"*

"Since October, just two months."

Panjali gets special advice from her elders. They ask her to refrain from cutting such vegetables as cucumber and bittergourd, and also from sewing clothes. All this is meant to save the baby from hare-lip or twisted ears.

From the third month onwards Panjali is expected to report to the midwife. But she prefers to visit the Mariamman temple. Every Friday evening, bathed and in her wet clothes, she offers flowers and light at the temple. Though the law expects her to enter the maternity ward of the estate dispensary, Panjali and her relations decide to have the delivery at home.

As the first symptoms appear, Arjunan makes a beeline to the estate dispenser. He instructs the midwife to visit the scene. She finds a house full of wives, relations and even children. She dismisses them instantly and takes control of the situation.

At long last, behind the partition in a space of five feet by twelve, a new life is born into this world. Whatever the dispenser or the midwife may prescribe, the special variety of arrack, 'old stuff' and a medical preparation called *kayam* are quietly given to Panjali to get over the after-effects of childbirth.

Panjali and her little baby lie huddled together in a corner wrapped in a cumbly. A pot of fire regulates the

temperature in the room and incense is burnt at regular intervals. An old knife, or a piece of iron, or a wasted shoe lies near the threshold to keep away evil spirits.

No sooner has the child arrived than its paternal uncle, Nadesan, plants a few large mango branches in front of the line-room to indicate the birth of the child. The mango leaf is the symbol of wellbeing.

Arjunan, being a man of some substance, invites his relations and friends to celebrate the occasion. The central figure in the company is a middle-aged man commonly known as Uncle Palany. He is the custodian of the manners and customs of the community. Arjunan distributes sugar candy and *sarkarai* (powdered cane jaggery) under the directions of Uncle Palany. This ceremony is called the *distribution of sarkarai.*

Till the seventh day neighbours will not pass by the house. A kind of "untouchability" is observed. Only the relations move in and out of the house; others do not eat or drink in the house. On the seventh day Panjali gets her first medicated bath with a sprinkling of neem and *pawatta* leaves under cover of mango branches. On the seventh day the branches are removed.

The baby is not given a name immediately. For purposes of registration, the dispenser may give any name he likes, but the father gives a name after the seventh day. (The proud owners of two names in recent times have had to face serious civic disabilities under Ceylon's Citizenship laws).

After thirty days have passed, the pots, mats, pillows and sacks in the house are discarded. Arjunan replaces them with new ones. The room is whitewashed and the floor is treated with cowdung. There is a get-together of relations and friends for merry-making.

After the celebrations, Uncle Palany, as he is about to leave, says for everybody's benefit,

"From today the neighbours will accept *sa'it* from your house, and be ready to welcome them."

Panjali's brother, Nadesan, ties the cradle ropes to the loft and a strong saree serves as the cradle. Then without warning there comes a cry from the little mite —"Quva! Quva!."

Panjali, with her heart fluttering, delicately collects the baby, settles it in the cradle and gently rocks it. Her shy, tremulous voice breaks out in that time-worn cradle song:

Ari ra ro ra ra ro
Rari ra ro ra ra ro
When I rock your cradle,
The pillars move in rhythm
Our good brother,
Your eyes fold in slumber.

GOLDEN EARRINGS

The grand-uncles and elder cousins are famed for their banter in the tea plantations. It is a special art put to great advantage in the discussion of family matters.

Uncle Palany, noted as he is in this respect, meets Arjunan on an evening and broaches the subject in the usual manner.

"Do I hear that you are planning to invite me to a feast? It is a long time since I have had one at your house."

Arjunan knows too well that Uncle Palany never indulges in light talk. He is in a difficulty, but Uncle Palany comes to his aid.

"In these modern days people forget a lot of things. They have to be reminded of their duties and obligations. Why don't you bore your little girl's ears? It is time."

"Ah! Yes, uncle, yes. The girl is well past six. It has to be done immeditely after pay day."

"That won't do. Consult the *pandaram* and then fix up the proper time."

That night after dinner Arjunan and Panjali talk it over. As it is the first function to be celebrated in the family, Panjali wishes it to be grand but Arjunan wants it to be modest. A compromise is arrived at and three hundred rupees is budgeted. Part of this money has, of course, to be borrowed from the head kangany.

The *pandaram* names the 16th November as the auspicious day. In the meanwhile Arjunan uses the old

and the new forms of invitations. To the relation and friends on the estate he sends out a cousin to *keep the betel and arecanut,* the traditional invitation by betel. To those in distant places he sends out printed cards.

Well in advance of the ceremony there is spring-cleaning. The walls are polished with white clay, and intricate patterns of *kolam* in dull red and yellow are drawn on the walls. A small pandal of green branches and ferns is erected in front of the line room. Full grown banana trees complete with bunches flank the four corners and mango festoons are hung right round. A small dais of mud is built in the centre for the ceremony.

On the day of the function the dhoby gives the finishing touches with his multi-coloured cloth decorations. He spreads *mathu,* white linen to seat the guests. The goldsmith and the barber also come for the occasion.

The drummers, the band of *nagasuram,* the *oorumi* players and the *baja* party with their *tabla* and *harmonium* take up positions on one side of the pandal. Close behind the dais stand well-burnished brightly-lit lamps. Brass trays loaded with betel, arecanuts, plantain and small vessels filled with sandal paste and vermilion are assembled close to the lamps. Arjunan, his brother-in-law, Nadesan and their brothers receive the guests at the entrance.

Every family brings three measures of rice, vegetables and new cloth for the girl. This gift is known as *seer.* Someone writes down the names of the donors so that Arjunan can return the gifts on a grander scale when the occasion arises.

Now the ceremony draws near. The men get together and poke fun at the little girl. The boy cousins giggle in the corners. Uncle Palany takes control of the situation and directs operations. The women folk respect Uncle Palany, for has he not "done a hundred marriages in his lifetime?" Above all, he has the last word on the traditional customs and ceremonies.

Now he directs the drummers to play the auspicious measure known as the *molokku*. The drums and the *oorumi* raise a deafening pitch. The little girl, Janakee, is led out by her father to the dais. Panjali whispers a word of caution, "Lightly, please," and then she rubs her eyes.

"Don't bother, child. Your little girl is not made of candy. She might melt, eh? Now, now. don't keep rubbing your eyes." He turns to the men:

"Look here, maternal Uncle, Nadesan, don't behave like a bridegroom. Seat the girl on the dais. Apply holy ash and then turn to the east and do your job Ai! *pandaram* get your job ready."

With professional skill and a flourish the *pandaram* arranges the betel leaf, arecanut, plantains, camphor and joss sticks at the base of the lamps. He then breaks the coconuts and lights the camphor on the tray with the holy ash. He offers the lights in dedication to the ringing of bells. At this stage Uncle Palany gives the signal to maternal uncle Nadesan. Arjunan and his first cousin playfully hold Janakee. Nadesan in a split second pricks the ears with a set of specially made earrings, and the goldsmith who stands at hand completes the job.

The little girl cries out: "Aiyo, Amma!"

"You little imp! Don't cry 'Aiyo' ", shouts Uncle Palany. "You drummers and *nagasuram* men, why are you looking on?"

Suddenly there is a rent and clamour of music. It drowns the child's wailing. The cousins clap their hands and pour out a peal of laughter. Panjali with a tear in her eye and a smile on her lips takes little Janakee into the room.

"Arjunan, get the food ready," hints Uncle Palany.

Mats are spread out along the wall in the verandah and men go in and out of the room clearing their throats, probably after a "peg".

Again Uncle Palany's stentorian voice is heard.

"Men from the house of the *sammanthi* and *pangali*", (brothers-in-law and first cousins) take your places. Do not wait for ceremony. This is your house."

According to order of relationship they sit down. A man goes spreading the plantain leaf, another man with a tray of curries starts serving fast followed by the rice. And the feast goes on for over an hour.

The *pandaram*, goldsmith, dhoby and barber get their share in cash and kind.

After dinner the men re-assemble in the pandal to collect donations known as *moi*. Uncle Palany initiates the *moi* contributions. The *sammanthi* and the *pangali* donate at least Rs. 51 or Rs. 21 each.

Uncle Palany announces it in a sing-song style so that everyone present hears it. If the traditional order is not strictly followed, there would be a loud protest by the injured party.

"Did you see that elders? Well, I am not a big man. I suppose Uncle Palany did not notice it."

"My dear *thambi*", says Uncle Palany with irresistable charm, "I am watching your interest very carefully. It is a small slip at a little girl's function. Please do not take it to heart. After all, it is our business—yours and mine."

Uncle Palany then proceeds to rectify the error in a ringing voice, "*moi*—Rs. 11 by *pangali* Ramiah, *pangali* Ramiah!"

The donations come in according to order of relationship. The names of the donors are written down as usual. Uncle Palany supervises the entire proceedings. The betel-tray goes round several times.

It is well after midnight when the guests disperse.

COMING OF AGE

The modern trends on the estate disturb Uncle Palany very much.

"The cursed cinema has made inroads into our cherished traditions and customs", he thinks. "One day our children and their children will turn out to be cattle."

Aimlessly he walks down the row of lines and at last enters Arjunan's verandah. He is readily welcomed there. Janakee as directed by her mother, Panjali, brings a tray of betel, arecanuts and lime. Janakee is just twelve, fair of complexion, with chiselled features, cluster of dark brown hair, a pair of scissor-like mischievous eyes—dressed in a green skirt and red jacket.

Uncle Palany catches hold of her hand and says:

"My little granny, how you have grown, dear pet!"

He pinches her cheeks and dismisses her.

"Girls grow up like creepers," he thinks aloud and then suddenly bursts upon Arjunan and Panjali.

"Panjali, come here. What has happened to you people? What has come over you? You are the mother of two children!"

Panjali stands leaning in the doorway, trampling her right toe with her left heel.

"Your daughter is growing fast and you give her coloured clothes. It is bad for Arjunan and your brother."

Uncle Palany takes a handful of betel leaves and departs abruptly.

Promptly Janakee is forced into a white saree with red border known as *kambi salai* which has to be worn by a girl till she attains age.

One evening Panjali returns from the field to find a bevy of women crowded near her line room. At once she knows that Uncle Palany has saved her in time. She goes breaking through the crowd, embraces Janakee and sheds a tear or two.

"I knew that one day you will cut my throat, my darling."

"You can't have your daughter always under your protecting arms. When the time comes she has to leave your house. That's what you did to your mother", chides an elder cousin.

To be on the correct side of good omens Panjali asks anxious questions,

"Who saw her first?"

"I", says Letchimi, a married woman with children.

"Very good. What time was it?"

"About one o'clock."

"Where was the child?"

"Near your garden."

"I suppose you have done what was necessary."

"Of course! I covered her head; gave her green leaves to hold and brought her home. Her father has already asked the *pandaram* whether the time is good."

"What did he say?"

"It is very good, Panjali."

After these preliminaries Panjali sends for the dhoby's wife and then invites her cousins to draw seven pots of water for the *water pouring* ceremony. Nadesan,

Arjunan's brother-in-law, along with his cousins erects a *green hut* near the verandah to accommodate Janakee for the next thirty days.

The water-pouring ceremony is brief. The women make a ring round Janakee and the seven pots of water are poured down on her one after the other to the beating of the tom-tom. The dhoby's wife and the mother lead the girl into the hut, change her clothes and light a coconut oil lamp for Janakee to worship.

For thirty days Janakee gets special food from the houses of her maternal uncle and paternal aunt. They regularly supply raw eggs, gingelly oil, *ulundu*, oil cakes and *kali*, a kind of pasty preparation out of rice flour.

The dhoby's wife calls at the hut every morning to change the linen. On the third day, ninth day and the fifteenth day, the dhoby and his wife perform the ceremony called *dhoby coil*. They bring Janakee out of the hut, make her stand on a clean white cloth and put round her neck a kind of creeper called *dhoby coil* and take it in descending order by her feet. This is repeated three times on every occasion.

During this period Janakee's aunts sleep with her in the hut while the father and another grand-uncle keep vigil in the verandah.

The *sadangu* ceremony takes place on the thirty-first day according to custom. Under the direction of Uncle Palany a large pandal of palms, plantain trees, ferns and creepers complete with cloth decorations and mango festoons, is erected. A mud dais stands in the centre painted with white *kolam* and auspicious symbols. A brass lamp with five wicks burns brightly. A *sembu* containing saffron water holds a coconut with vermilion dots on it and three betel leaves are inserted right round the coconut. This is called the *kumbam* to perform the *santhi* ceremony to banish all evil.

According to plan the musicians, drummers and *nagasuram* players take up positions outside the pandal. As the guests arrive with the *seer,* the musicians go half way to meet them and bring them to the pandal to the accompaniment of music. This is known as *advance welcome.* This procedure goes on till all the relations arrive.

At the right moment Uncle Palany appears on the scene.

Where are the ladies from the *samanthi* house and *pangali* house."

"We are ready," say the elder women.

"Then go ahead with your business. We have only the eating and the drinking to do."

The dhoby and his wife begin to perform the *dhoby coil* ceremony within the hut. On this occasion the coil is placed round the feet and taken away by the head in ascending order. After this Janakee is received into the house.

Janakee, now dressed in silk saree and jacket with a flower in her hair, lucky mark on her forehead, gold ornaments in her ears and hands, is brought to the dais by her aunts and mother. The men stand at a respectful distance while the women from the *sammanthi* house play a prominent role. They seat Janakee on the dais facing the east. The aunt performs *santhi* by circling the *kumbam (sembu* with the coconut) round Janakee's head three times and places it near the lamp.

"Now, it is time", says another aunt, "You males start your job."

Uncle Palany now addresses the assembly:

"Elders, do we have your permission to garland the *new woman?"*

"Of course, yes," say the women.

"Ai, maternal uncle, Nadesan, where is your garland?"

Nadesan brings before the gathering a large jasmine garland in a tray. Uncle Palany and he hold it aloft for the blessing of the elders. Finally Nadesan goes before Janakee, the *new woman,* takes the garland in his hands and looks round with respect and pride and then asks the women,

"May I begin? I am the maternal uncle."

"Go ahead. Don't we know who you are!"

Everybody laughs.

"You are correct, my man", approves Uncle Palany.

The garland gracefully falls round Janakee's neck. The musicians play the *mulakku.* And in a strict order of relationship Janakee is garlanded. At last the maternal aunt, Nadesan's wife, leads her away into the house. Thus ends the *sadangu* ceremony.

The feasting is grand. Rice with four vegetables, mutton and chicken and liquor are freely served. Arjunan and his brothers wait on the guests, and remove the leaves after they have eaten.

Round about midnight begin the *moi* contributions. And Uncle Palany adroitly hints:

"You see, people from the *sammanthi* and *pangali* houses, this is the second function in Arjuman's house." Before Uncle Palany could have finished Nadesan says:

"Yes, Uncle Palany, my brother-in-law is a good man. I knew it before my sister set up his house. I offer a *moi* of Rs. 101 for my niece."

"Brother Nadesan, I come after you. I also give a *moi* of Rs. 101 for my niece."

And so it goes on till the early hours of the dawn.

HAPPY TIDINGS

Five years have passed since Janakee came of age. She has now grown into a vivacious, full-bosomed wench. Arjunan seldom speaks to Janakee, but in that affectionate aloofness there is a deep and abiding understanding. He thinks of her as his "little mother". Panjali treats her as a sister but takes pride in calling her "daughter". True to the old saying "bring up girls folded in the palm," Panjali is ever-watchful. Her eyes follow Janakee's steps all day long, in and out of the house.

One evening Nadesan and his wife, Amirtham, turn up followed by Uncle Palany. Arjunan, who knows the import of this visit, goes out to the compound and greets them:

"Uncle Palany, *machan,* sister! Come, come. Here Panjali! Your brother and sister-in-law have come with Uncle Palany."

Panjali comes out and salutes them. She conducts Amirtham into the house while the men sit out in the verandah and chat.

At the appropriate moment Uncle Palany clears his throat to indicate that he has something very important to say. The younger men respectfully look at him.

"Arjunan, your nephew Alagesan (Nadesan's son) has grown into a man. We cannot allow him to run round long. His maternal uncle, Ramu, is keen to have him tied up."

"*Machan,* we have come to ask for a bride from your house." says Nadesan.

"Yes, brother", joins Amirtham from within, "brother Ramu asked me to come."

"My! What great ceremonies. The girl belongs to your house. Take her away even today," says Panjali.

"Not so easy, Panjali!" retorts Uncle Palany, "They have come here to name the day for the *parisam* (engagement) and tomorrow is a good day, they say."

"Let it be so, Uncle Palany. She must go to where she belongs."

After a chew of betel Nadesan and Amirtham take leave. Uncle Palany stays behind to advise the young parents.

"Well, Arjunan, you have spoken well. Tomorrow evening they will come at the auspicious hour. Prepare some good food and get a nice saree for Amirtham. Tell Janakee to attend on her very carefully. You hear me, Panjali?"

"Yes, Uncle."

"By the way, Nadesan wants to bear part of the marriage expenses" says Uncle Palany, "What have you to say?"

"No uncle. Not even if I am a pauper."

"Why shouldn't my brother spend for my child?" demands Panjali.

"Woman", flares up Arjunan, "for whose house are you holding a brief? Your father's house or my father's house? Your father never accepted a cent from us. I remember that and he was correct."

"Uncle, in these matters this man always speaks with a sting. If my brother wants to spend for my child—"

"Now, now!" chides Uncle Palany, "that is how our ancients decided it. You have come to preserve the rights of this house. Arjunan now gets the opportunity to return what he got from your father's house."

After a while Uncle Palany and Arjunan go out together to make the necessary purchases for the morrow.

Next evening Uncle Palany comes to Arjunan's house on special invitation. Arjunan and Uncle Palany await the arrival of Nadesan and party. Panjali lights the brass lamp (brought from her father's house) in their home of ten feet by twelve. Janakee, dressed in a yellow saree and red jacket, tries to keep behind the partition.

Before sundown Nadesan, his wife, Amirtham and her brother, Ramu and a child arrive with the *parisam* in two large trays. Since three persons are considered inauspicious the child is added to the company. And the *parisam* consists of a coarse white saree known as *koorai sali,* five hundred betel leaves, arecanuts, nine coconuts and plantains. The maternal uncle Ramu first greets Uncle Palany and the others exchange greetings. Panjali takes Amirtham into the house. The brightly-lit lamp greets them. Janakee touches Amirtham's feet and salutes her.

After dinner under the direction of Uncle Palany the *parisam* is assembled before the lamp. Incense burns in a tray. Janakee is made to sit cross-legged in front of the lamp and Nadesan applies holy ash on her forehead and names her as the bride for Alagesan. Janakee's parents stand behind her to indicate that they accept the offer.

"Nadesan, name the *moortham,* the date and time for the marriage", adds Uncle Palany.

"The eleventh day of January, the only auspicious day in the next two months," says Ramu.

"Have you seen the *porutham* (agreement in the horoscopes).

"Yes, *porutham* is very good. They are meant for each other. As maternal uncle I have done my duty. Now it is for you, our elder, to guide us."

"Very good. The *moortham* is on the 11th day of January. Are you all agreed?"

"Of course! Yes, yes."

"Send out the invitations early. There is lots of time for everything. The only hitch is about the accommodation. For three generations we have done our marriages in this rat-hole of ten feet by twelve. Well, I will get permission from the dispenser dorai to put up a big pandal", says Uncle Palany.

"Uncle, now we must leave before the dark hour".

"Yes. You must get moving. Janakee, come. Send off your uncles and aunty. Hereafter they will be your father and mother."

Janakee offers a tray containing a silk saree, betel and arecanuts to Amirtham and salutes her. Amirtham accepts the gift and in return applies holy ash on Janakee's forehead and blesses her.

"May you have many children and make your home happy and large."

At this stage Uncle Palany asks the women:

"What about the *nalungu feast?*"

"The mothers on either side can inform the relations", says Ramu. They worship the lamp and take leave.

In the days preceeding the marriage, over ten *nalungu* feasts are given to the young couple. Alagesan and Janakee are taken out by their paternal aunts and other close relations and fed.

One afternoon when Arjunan and Panjali are seated in the verandah, Alagesan is taken along the opposite line by a relation for *nalungu*. Panjali quitely hints to Janakee:

"Don't come out. Someone is on his way to *nalungu*."

Just then, Uncle Palany's brother, Muthiah, the noted joker on the estate, sings an old folk melody:

The bull is a black bull,
Mirror-shining young bull
Fresh with brand marks;
It roams round at noontide hours.

There is loud laughter from both sides of the lines. Arjunan pretends not to hear anything. But Panjali says: "Poor boy".

Janakee is silent withi..

ALAGESAN TAKES A BRIDE

By the month of January a beautiful pandal springs up before Arjunan's line room. In every respect it resembles the *sadangu* pandal but it is larger, sufficient to accommodate a hundred persons. Within the pandal in the centre stands a square mud dais called *manavarai* (seat of marriage) gaily painted with *kolam.*

Close on its right stands the *moortha kal* of bo, banyan and bamboo saplings planted together. It symbolises procreation, longevity and prosperity. On its left stands *arasani,* the life force—seven pots in pyramid form. The first pot at the base contains water—the life-giver; the second contains rice—the sustainer; the third one contains salt—the leavener; the fourth contains nine different pulses dedicated to the nine planets *(nava grahas).* The next three are left empty for the Trinity, namely Shiva, Brahma and Rudra.

Right in front of the *manavarai* rises the *omakundam*—a deep hearth to make offerings to the *navagrahas.* The *kumbam,* the sembu with three betel leaves and the coconut poised on it, stands within close reach of the *omakundam.* The *arathi,* an old type brass plate filled with saffron water and torn leaves of betel is kept close to the *kumbam.* Five brass lamps burn on the western side of the *manavarai.* Trays full of betel leaves, arecanuts, raw rice and plantain leaves are assembled in front of the *omakundam* where the priest performs his tedious ceremonies. At the entrance to the *pandal,* a grinding stone is kept on purpose.

The atmosphere is one of gaiety and merriment. In addition to the music of the *nagasuram,* the call of giant brass oboes and beat of the big drum, the loudspeaker blares away. Uncle Palany abhors this machine singer as much as the loud laughter and giggle of the young men and women.

Today Uncle Palany appears in his best, that too in keeping with tradition. He wears a silk verty and red shawl around his waist. A thick layer of sandal paste makes the pattern of the Trinity on his hairy chest. A flaming red dot gleams on his forehead. His handle-bar moustache with streaks of silver gives poise to his personality.

On occasions like this Uncle Palany has a way of talking from the base of his throat, and everybody is made aware of his authority.

Relations of both houses from far and near, come in a regular stream. The women draped in silk, their limbs tinkling with ornaments and flowers in their hair, follow their family heads in Indian file bearing trays of *seer*.

A select group of elder relations of the bride's house, assigned to welcome guests, go half way with music and drum, meet the arrivals and conduct them with pomp and ceremony to the pandal.

A special emissary brings the news that the bridegroom's party has come within "calling distance."

"Let us go and give them welcome," says Uncle Palany.

There is a sudden beat of drums and call of flutes which literally announces the arrival of the bridegroom.

While Arjunan and close of kin remain in the pandal, a select group of elders and young men headed by Uncle Palany sets out to meet the bridegroom's party.

This ceremonial meeting known as *advance welcome* is an all clear. The greeting of the two houses is brief. And Uncle Palany spearheads both groups in a stately guard-of-honour. The bridegroom's party is led by Nadesan, his brothers, cousins and their wives. Immediately behind them comes the central figure, the bridegroom—a young fellow of twenty-three. He is tall

well set and bronze brown, dressed in a silk vesty and a shawl thrown over his ample shoulders. On his right wrist he wears a saffron dyed thread called *kappu* to mark his identity. A first cousin of Janakee plays the bestman for Alagesan.

No sooner is the party received at the pandal than Uncle Palany issues the first order:

"Take the bridegroom to the temple of Ganesh, break the coconut and bring him back immediately."

A small batch of males sets out on the mission with Alagesan.

In the meanwhile the priest keeps the *omakundam* burning with nine different kinds of twigs and pulses, incense and ghee to the chanting of *mantras.*

The suspense is broken as Alagesan is brought back from the temple.

"Bring up the bride to the *manavarai,*" orders Uncle Palany. Amirtham and Panjali promptly lead Janakee to the dais. Sellam, the bride's maid, helps her to take her seat. Then Alagesan is directed to take his seat beside her. The priest performs the *santhi.* He makes circles round the heads of the bride and bridegroom with the trays of incense and camphor, and chants *mantras.* After this brief ritual Alagesan and Janakee are taken into the room. One of the *seer* trays is taken along with them.

Now Uncle Palany prepares for the final act. After saluting the assembly he uncovers the *seer* tray containing the *thali.* The goldsmith, who stands close to him, very ceremoniously takes the *thali* with the cord, places it on the *kumbam* and salutes the east. At this moment Alagesan and Janakee return dressed in silk. Janakee wears the saree, jacket, jewellery and flowers provided by Nadesan. To the chanting of *mantras.* Alagesan and Janakee sit side by side on the *manavarai.*

There is a sudden burst of music.

"Shall we begin the dedication ceremony?" asks Uncle Palany.

"Very well", assents the priest.

As directed by Uncle Palany the long saffron-dyed cord put round the waist of Janakee, is given to Arjunan. With both ends of the cord in his hands he stands before Nadesan, and Nadesan faces him with open plams. The priest asks for their fathers' names.

They reply: "Kandan" and "Murugan."

The priest directs the father of the bride, Arjunan, to repeat the words:

"I, Arjunan, son of Kandan, call upon Mother earth and heaven, the sun and the moon and the gods to bear witness that I dedicate my child, Janakee, unto the house of my brother-in-law, Nadesan, son of Murugan. as the wife of his son, Alagesan."

Arjunan then places both ends of the cord in the open palms of Nadesan and sprinkles sacred water three times. Nadesan places the cord beside Alagesan. Thus Janakee is accepted as the wife of Alagesan.

The priest then hands the *kumbam* with the *thali* on it to Ramu—the maternal uncle of the bridegroom, for the touch of approval. He blesses it and passes it on to Uncle Palany. He takes it round for the blessing of the elders and brings it back to Arjunan, Nadesan and their wives for the final blessing.

"Now the *thali* has to be tied," directs the priest. "Put the three knots properly. May all the Devas bless you", says Uncle Palany, both his hands raised above his head in salutation towards the east.

Alagesan takes the *thali*, put the cord round Janakee's neck and ties the three knots. Janakee sits, her head bent in modesty.

"Uncles and elders, come forward and garland the young folk," calls out Uncle Palany.

The elders walk up to the *manavarai,* they take a handful of raw rice mixed with saffron from the tray and touch the heads of the bride and bridegroom, their shoulders and their knees and finally put the rice on their laps. Thereafter the uncles, elders and close relations garland the couple. Alagesan and Janakee rise and salute the assembly. Uncle Palany leads them to the entrance of the pandal, where the grinding stone lies.

"Janakee, keep your left foot on the stone," directs Uncle Palany, "This is Ahalikai, the unfaithful wife of Gowthamia turned to stone. Remember that." He then points to a bright star in the sky. "Now look at that star. It is Arunthathi, the constant one that adorns the skies. Remember that too."

The wife and the husband return to the *manavarai* to break their fast. The bestman and the bridesmaid hold a cloth round the young couple. Alagesan makes a clumsy effort to feed Janakee with fruits and milk. Janakee is too shy to respond.

"Your boy has been starving the whole day. Feed him well, my dear," teases uncle Muthiah.

As a final act the wife and husband are made to play queer games such as taking the arecanut cutter from a narrow necked pot or both struggling to grab a single coconut. Finally the elder women perform the *arathi,* making circles round their heads to ward off the effects of *evil eye.*

The proceedings come to a close with heavy feasting and the *moi* contributions.

Alagesan stays at the bride's house for three days. On the third day the water throwing ceremony known as *saffron water dancing* takes place. The bride and bridegroom with their cousins divide themselves into

two groups on either side of the pandal and throw saffron water at each other. All the other cousins join in this free-for-all.

On the third day the pandal is dismantled and thrown into the river. Janakee and her husband go to their new home. She gets a complete outfit of clothes, brass pots, lamp, mats, pillows, coconut scraper, and other utensils.

After three days' stay in their home. Janakee and Alagesan pay the first visit to Janakee's old home. This visit is known as *maruvali*—the return journey. During their stay here the bestman and the bridesmaid use all their ingenuity to induce the couple to talk to each other.

After a grand feast and the worship of the family deity they set out. This journey back to their home is known as *thani vali*—the lonely way.

Uncle Palany puts a heavy tray on Janakee's head. She knows the meaning of this act and pleads:

"Please granduncle, don't do this to me. I would rather fall on the road than call him to help me!"

"There is no choice, my dear. What can I do?"

"Little brother, you are the father and mother of my child," cries Panjali with tears of joy and sorrow.

"Look after your wife", joins in Arjunan.

The young couple set out. Alagesan goes well ahead of Janakee. Before they could have done a mile Janakee feels the heavy weight on her head. She timidly calls out:

"Here, come and take this. My head is burning."

"Is it very heavy?" asks Alagesan.

Janakee looks aside.

Thus the first words are spoken on their 'lonely way' to life.

WHEN DEATH COMES

One evening as Uncle Palany sits in his compound ruminating over the recent happenings on the estate he sees the dispenser come out of Sithambaram Kangany's line room. The dispenser looks disturbed and sad. Uncle Palany goes to him direct.

"Salaam! Dorai. Please do all you can to make Sithambaram Kangany well," pleads Uncle Palany.

"All the doctors in Ceylon can't help him now, Palany."

"Please don't say that, sir. He is as old as myself He has an unmarried daughter."

"I know, Palany. But how could one help in these things?"

The dispenser goes on his way. Uncle Palany goes to Sithambaram Kangany's line room. He sees Sinthamani, his daughter, all her hair loose on her shoulders. She holds her stomach with her hands and gives vent to muffled cries.

"My father, my father! Why are you leaving me? Do you know that you are everything to me in this world? When you are no more whom shall I call 'father'? Where shall I turn, my father?"

Uncle Palany, unable to bear this pathetic sight, goes into the room. Sithambaram Kangany lies on a camp cot. He is covered with a cumbly up to his shoulders. His body looks a shadow under the covering. His face wears a completely worn-out look. His temples have fallen out of joint; the eyes are dazed. He breathes heavily—a laboured, uneven breathing. His wife, Rakkie, sits on the floor with her head held in her hands. Now and then she clears her throat and nose and wipes her wet eyes.

Uncle Palany knows that when death comes, it is not like the long sleep of winter. But it strikes deep and hard with the intensity of the thunder-bolt. He feels that the relations must prepare themselves to receive the full measure of grief and pour it out. He takes Sithambaram's son aside and speaks to him.

"Arumugam, I need not say anything. You know it".

"Yes, uncle, I know it. I know it. My heart won't believe it. My father is not old."

"There is no hope. Do you hear me, my son?"
"Yes, uncle."

"Be brave. Men can't cry for mere shame. Now pull yourself up and set an example. As the eldest son you have to pay your last debt. Have three coconuts broken and laid by his head. Let three wicks burn bright and low in the brass lamp by his head right through the night. Get Muthusamy to read out the *vykuntha ammanai* (religious song read out at the death-bed).

Within a few minutes these proceedings start. As Muthusamy chants the first few lines from the *vykuntha ammanai* Rakkie beats her breast and runs out crying:

"Aiyo samy! aiyo samy! Why have you put earth in my mouth?"

She sees Arumugam in the verandah with other relations. She embraces him.

"My son, aiyo my son! What is happening to our father?"

"Be calm, mother. Let him not hear you weeping. Don't hurt him at this hour."

"If I can weep the whole estate will be flooded. Yes, flooded, my son."

Uncle Palany comes out on tiptoe and frowns on Rakkie.

"Wretched woman, be quiet for a while. You can cry out your heart in a little while. We won't stop you".

"Yes, my masters. I am a wretched woman."

A voice from within calls out:

"Uncle Palany, come soon."

He goes in to find Sithambaram sinking.

"What a man you were! What a splendid man! Well, all of us must go your way. Better you go early. Children, Arumugam, Sinthamani, Rakkie! Come close to your father. Pour a little milk before he goes away".

Arumugam and Sinthamani pour a little milk in the mouth of the dying man. Sithambaram Kangany opens his eyes, looks at his daughter for a fleeting moment. With great effort he takes her hand and places it in the hand of Arumugam. Rakkie looks on dumb-founded on this moving scene. Suddenly Sithambaram speaks:

"Rakkie, my children! God bless you. Brother Palany —my children!"

His voice cracks. His eyes close. Tears trickle down from the closed lids.

The women folk sit round the dead and commence their lament. They wring out from their hearts' core the pathetic *opparie* wet with their tears.

Under the direction of Uncle Palany the close relations cover the eyes and mouth of Sithambaram Kangany with betel and saffron paste and tie them in a slip of white cloth. A messenger is sent out with uncovered head to give the sad news to relations and friends. The tom-tom throbs out the dreadful sound throughout the night. One of the tom-tom beaters sings the *navaratna opparie.*

There is no cooking or eating in the house. Only betel is served round.

Uncle Palany with a group of relations takes his stand in the compound to receive the relations and sympathisers. They stand out in a row with open palms. The visitors go touching the open palms and salute in silence. Their women folk bring *kodi*, a piece of new cloth and rice and oil in a brass plate for the dead. They join the lament with the other women.

Uncle Palany directs the near relations and the dhoby to build the *thare* or *padai* to carry away the dead. It is a palanquin turned out of bamboo and decorated with coloured paper and flowers.

Sithambaram gets his bath and dressed in his wedding clothes gets ready for the last journey. All the females come out beating their breasts and chant the *opparie*. This part of the lament is known as *beating the breast.*

"At the time of parting there shall be no weeping. Stop the women!" orders Uncle Palany, "Arumugam, you carry the headside, the other relations take the feet and lower the body into the coffin. Before the lid is nailed take your last look, all of you."

Sinnthamani throws herself on the coffin and cries. Rakkie rushes about like a mad woman and asks her son:

"Why are you taking away our father? I won't allow it." Now Uncle Palany intervenes.

"Close up the lid, man. Arumugam, take your mother in. Now put the *thare* and get moving quickly. Hurry up!"

To the dreadful rhythm of the tom-tom Sithambaram Kangany's body leaves for the field where the dead are buried. The tom-tom beaters head the procession followed by men and women mourners. *Pori* is thrown right along the way.

When the procession reaches midway between the house and the burial ground known as *padai mathi* at the cross-roads, Uncle Palany orders the women to

be sent home. The position of the *thare* is reversed and the journey is resumed only with the men.

When the cortege reaches the grave, the *thare* is lowered. Uncle Palany takes up position on the eastern side of the grave and directs operations.

"Now then, the owners of the body come forward. Quick. Take the coffin out of the *thare*. Ask the dhoby and barber to finish their job".

The coffin is taken out. The dhoby changes the clothes of Sithambaram while the barber removes the ornaments such as ear-rings, rings, the bangle on the right hand and the silver waist cord. The coffin is then closed and lowered into the grave. Arumugam, the eldest son, puts the first handful of earth and others follow suit.

"Arumugam, have your head shaved and fetch a pot of water for *breaking the pot*," directs Uncle Palany.

In a matter of minutes Arumugam comes with a pot of water on his shaven head. Uncle Palany leads him round the grave. When Arumugam makes a complete round an eyelet is made in the pot for the water to pour onto the grave. Three such rounds are made and the pot gets an eye for every round.

After this brief ceremony is over the dhoby spreads the *mathu* (white cloth) at the cross-roads. The men assemble and take their seat in order of relationship.

Uncle Palany announces: "Now we begin the *kattai moi* let us be quick about it".

Katta moi is the contribution of 25 cts. per head to meet the wages of the barber, dhoby, the tom-tom beaters and the grave-diggers.

The contributions are received in grim silence and paid out to the men concerned. Immediately they disperse.

After a quick bath and change of clothes the men go home. Arumugam is escorted home by Uncle Palany.

At the entrance to the house they get a pinch of ash and water in a *sembu*. They mix it in their right palms, sprinkle it over their heads and enter the house. A lighted lamp greets them. Arumugam's mother, Rakkie and Sinthamani lament for a while and stop.

On the thirtieth day the *karumathi* is observed. Old pots and pans are discarded and replaced with new ones. Mats and pillows too are changed. The house undergoes a complete cleaning.

After sundown when the lamp is lit the relations gather in the verandah of Sithambaram Kangany's line room. Uncle Palany arrives just in time and gets his seat of honour.

"People from the houses of the *pangali* and the *sammanthi* take your place. Let us get on with the anointing of the oil."

With a loin cloth Arumugam sits at the head of a row of maternal and paternal uncles and cousins and an elder goes along rubbing oil on their heads. At the end of it the men bathe, change and reassemble to see the *padaithal*, the offerings to the spirit of Sithambaram. His belongings are spread along with a serving of rice, curry and an open bottle of arrack at the spot where he breathed his last. Rakkie, Sinthamani and Arumugam light the brass lamp and offer prayers.

A sober feast begins at 9 p.m. Liquor and chicken are served. At the end of this ceremonial eating, the turban ceremony takes place. The brothers-in-law and the cousins tie the turban on Arumugam and his cousins tie it on the cousins from the house of the *sammanthi* —the house of his mother.

For one full year there will be no marriage or merry-making in the house. No Pongal, Deepavali or temple festival comes to this house. But Uncle Palany is hopeful. He thinks that life is inseparable from death. After death there will be life again. As he is about to leave the house he remembers the pitiful words of Sinthamani:

"To whom shall I turn, my father!"

Her placid face with the marks of sorrow stands before him. He pauses for a while and tells her softly:

"My child, God is there to protect you. It is not for me to say anything now. By next year there will be light in this house."

A SAGA IN SONGS

It was in the brief yet exciting days of coffee in 1825 that labour was first recruited from South India under the indenture system.

After the coffee crash tea was introduced on a wide scale. Its cultivation required a resident labour force. As the Sinhalese, whether of the low country or of the hills, were unwilling to engage themselves in this task, once more labour had to be recruited from India.

These recruits had to trek through hundreds of miles from various parts of South India to reach the coast and, thereafter, were brought in primitive vessels to the ports of North Ceylon. They walked several more miles through arid territory, jungle and swamp to reach the central hills to open the plantations.

Around their journey and the hardships they faced as pioneers has grown a collection of songs. These relate to their work, their aspirations, their emotional life, their festivals and their ceremonies.

These songs, sung in the traditional style of their classics, reveal the sensitivity of their minds which for centuries had been nourished by their ancient legends and myths, *puranas* and epics. So much so that their experience in a new country gave birth to expressions that are both rich in cadence and imagination.

Among them are songs that recount the various phases of the growth and development of the plantation industry. The conception of the individual events and the series as a whole unfold a saga throbbing with life. Strangely enough, the poet's vision or voice had not been influenced by the forces that fashioned a community of "Masters and Servants."

We have vivid pictures of the superintendent and his assistant, commonly known as peria dorai and sinna dorai, the head kangany and his agent, the recruiter. They seem to step out of the shadowy past to bring to us surprising glimpses of life as it was over a hundred years ago among the coffee plantations and the hectic activity of the tea period.

Of these the most picturesque personality was the recruiter. He made frequent journeys from the estate to the coast to bring in new labour. By temperament he might have been a gambler, a petty careerist with streaks of the roving Don Juan in his blood. His amours and exploits in the course of his wanderings inspired many a memorable song.

O Karuppaie of Kandi
My Meenatchi of Gampola,
Beloved Ramaie of Otha-kadai,
It's your love I cherish forever.

This song throws some light on his movements. During his long journeys to and from the mainland, he found rest and comfort in the eating houses run by these noted ladies and cultivated their love. In those days Kandy and Gampola were strategic points on the immigrants' route that provided them shelter and food after their weary march from Kurunegala. Probably this recruiter worked for a head kangany in the Dickoya-Dimbula region.

In his campaign at Coast, he obviously relied on methods that were visibly harmless. He besported himself in his black coat, red turban and dyed verty at the village square and market place where women gathered. He spoke to them of his happy days in *Kandi seemai*, the land that flowed with milk and honey. He enticed them with tales of peace and plenty and of how 'coconut and Maldive fish grew under the tea bush'. Probably, the conditions of *Kandi seemai* were not altogether unknown to them.

Speak not of Kandi to me;
Nor repeat its name.
For in that casteless Kandi
The cobbler is the kangany.

Ceylon was better known to the South Indians as *Kandi* because Tamil devotional literature on Kataragama and Sri Pada referred to Ceylon as Kandi. Later the Kings of Tanjore called the hill capital—Kandi (Kandy).

Much to the chagrin of the Recruiter, there were other tales current among the women,

Of leeches that suck the blood
Of sharp-toothed tumbling stumps
Strewn along the pitiless trek
You can see in Kandi.

These setbacks in no way hampered his ultimate success. By methods of persuasion, cajolery and commission he gathered his quota of men, women and children and brought them to the ports of Thondi, Thattaparai and Tuticorin. They were bundled into cargo boats and put out to sea 'when the wind was favourable'. The miserable conditions on board these vessels broke their endurance. Sea-sickness, starvation and disease paled before the major misfortunes they faced. Very often the boats were caught in the monsoon and suffered heavy reverses.

The hapless creatures who escaped the perils at sea landed at Thonda-mannar, Paysale, Bangale and Mannar in North Ceylon to tell their tale of woe:

The Northern storm strikes
The wild wind shrieks
The spray beats madly
On the ship we came together.

For months, they travelled on the marshy land and jungle track through Anuradhapura to the central hills. The rest camps and first aid posts established on the

route were totally inadequate to render timely succour to the weary and the broken.

The songs that depicted the hazards of their journey, of their privation and suffering, of the thousands that perished on the pitiless trek, had been lost with the older generation. However, here is a couplet from a ballad that records the clearing of the jungle. While the party of armed men and tom-tom beaters kept guard over the workers, the operations proceeded.

The wild boar and leopard
Died in the forest fire.

It was not only the wild animals and the forest that perished in the general destruction, but there was a heavy toll of human life.

In yonder field
Strung with pegs
Where coffee plants sprout
I lost my beloved brother.

This little lament is typical of the grief common among the people of the early times. Perhaps every family had to offer its quota of sacrifice in the work place. For, the nature of the work in the initial stages entailed severe ordeals and disasters. Wherever men came to grief, be it in the field or ravine, it bore the name of the individual or a name suggestive of the incident. So that today, estates and working fields in the hill country bear queer names, such as, "Dead-man's Field", "Horse Hill", and "Slippery Rock".

And so the coffee plant began to flourish on the blood and sweat of the planter and the worker; and covered the landscape with the fiery red of its beads.

The coloured saree on her hips,
On either side the coffee trees,
How her deft fingers plucked,
To fill her sack to the brim.

The coffee planter had no special privileges. He lived a hardy and thankless life. Apparently he slept with his boots on. It was the spirit of adventure and the animated idea of the "nation builder" that sustained him in a strange country, thousands of miles away from his dear ones.

His material conditions perhaps differed very slightly from those of his labour. His bungalow had very little to offer him in the way of comfort and ease. To keep himself active and fit he charged round the field at all hours of the day.

He drank his coffee
He got on his horse,
He took ten minutes
To round the fields.

According to another record, the dorai had to be content with a "six foot bungalow" with a mana grass roof and floor of unpolished earth. May be his furniture consisted of a camp cot and "what-not" but he could boast of a garden ten times bigger than his bungalow.

Six feet the bungalow
Sixty feet the garden;
The lucky one that waters the plants
Was born of my mother's womb.

The coffee from its slow beginnings reached its peak in 1869 and helped develop vast enterprises such as banking and trade, transport services and forwarding agencies. Small townships began to appear at various planting centres and brought the good things of life within the reach of the people.

The pioneers saw bright days. Prosperity and welbeing were seen in men's appearance and their surroundings.

O for the trouser and the coat,
The inner shirt and waist coat
The golden ring and silvered watch
O how they dazzle the eye!

The guava ripens
The jasmine blooms,
The sour-sop gleams
In the S.D's garden .

Such prosperity was not meant to last long. A fungus disease that appeared in the coffee plant in 1869 began to spread all over the plantations within a decade. It was too late when the planters bestirred themselves from their complacency. The crash came with all the force of a thunderbolt. It shook the very foundations of many a European company. The planter as well as the head kangany packed off to their native homes. It is said that many disappeared overnight leaving behind their property and belongings.

In that moment of crisis there were a few who refused to be defeated. Specially the lover, as he took leave of his beloved, found a ray of hope. His words were prophetic:

Do not grieve, my beloved,
Although I part from you
I shall come back
With the season's return.

Yes. The planter and kangany, the recruiter and worker returned to the scene of desolation with renewed strength. They laid out the fields and pegged up the hill sides to plant tea. The field supervisors goaded the men as they broke their spine, digging pits in the noonday heat.

I dug up the pits
Numbered out to me;
As I stood up
With a broken spine
The jobless kangany
He goaded me:
"Ai, dig on, dig on".

The conductor too did not spare the worker, whose job was to feed the plants with manure.

It was joy to work
Among fields of young tea
But the conductor aiya kicked me
Forced me carry the manure sacks.

The tea put forth the leaves of hope and spread its green where the coffee tree withered. And the prospect of intense tea culture opened new vistas of adventure to the British planter and the immigrants from India.

Once more the recruiter was on his beat. Although his functions were regulated by law, he gamely put up with all the irksome procedure and brought across large gangs of immigrants. They were grouped in sub gangs under family heads (known as sub-kangany or 'sillari' kangany) and those in turn formed a major gang with the head kangany as their chief. He was their guide, philosopher and friend, money-lender and shop-keeper; and the only link connecting them with the management. In fact, the worker found himself a virtual prisoner in this set-up of kangany and dorai. This feudal relationship manifests itself in the expression "our" used frequently in these songs.

Of all the dorais in the land
OUR dorai is the court dorai.
The court dorai is a tough man,
Get off the road, here he comes.

While this refers to the feudal relationship, there is evidence in this song that superintendents of estates functioned as magistrates, before law courts were established: and that a worker dared not walk on the road when the "master" came on his rounds.

Here is yet another example to portray the feudal flavour:

O bush, O tender leaf,
OUR sinna dorai's tea leaf
Gold tipped tea leaf,
Our sinna dorai has come!

The plucker was as much a part of the tea bush, the daughter of the soil, who tended the tea with care. And an expert plucker, wherever she was, became a legend.

At Katta-dorai-patti
The short wenches two,
They took their rows
Side by side and flew
As the sparrows do.

The regional expression and idiom used in this melody clearly indicate that the worker population at Katta-dorai-patti (Pundaluoya) came from Madura in South India. And the Kotmale valley probably was one of the earliest to have had its tea plucked to inspire a song.

The folk poet's record now passes from tea growing to its manufacture. The life tree had struck its root deep into the soil and grew in abundance. It was time to give up old methods of processing and a brand-new factory had to be set up complete with an engine. When the women were summoned to work in the sorting room, the news went round fast.

The factory has been built
The engine has been erected;
O young wenches come along
We'll sort out the leaf.

To those not privileged to enter the factory premises the poet painted an inside picture:

Sir, the engine is dancing,
Sir, the copper wheels are grinding,
Sir, the belts are running,
Sir, hide and see this wonder.

Under expert supervision the green leaf was withered, rolled, fired, sifted and graded and finally packed in air proof chests ready for despatch to foreign markets.

And with the march of time, the elephant cart, the pack bull and the bullock cart had made way for the locomotive. (Through the untiring efforts of the pioneer force, the main railway line was constructed). As the first train puffed its way up Nanu Oya to transport tea the event was noted in song:

Six trains, hundred frames
And fifty-six coaches
Are climbing up freely
Along the Neelagiri hill.

Life for the plantation folk amidst the leafy grey of the mountains, in spite of the pick and prune, had its bright spots too. The planter built the club and the race course, while the head kangany erected the temple for the worship of the workers. During the annual Pongal and Deepavali, the dorai set out on his hunting expeditions to the Mahaveli forests and Elk Plain at Nuwara Eliya. Ramasamy and Meenatchi, as the workers are called, celebrated the festivals with song and dance.

Men, women and children in festive mood gathered at the temple grounds or at the compound of the head kangany's quarters to make their first bow.

Draped in her multi-coloured saree, with flowers in her hair, betel's red on her lips, to the accompaniment of her anklets, the tea-maid sang and danced the *kummie* with her companions.

Sing out, you maidens, the tune of the kummie
I'll give you powdered jaggery for your tongue.
Saraswathie, our mother, bless my song
And dwell on my tongue as I sing.

After her obeisance to the Muse, she saluted her head kangany with all the respect due to the feudal chief. She flattered him, she praised him, with mock compliment put him on the dorai's horse and eventually demanded her wage:

Look maidens, the horse comes.
Now the horse comes bending.
On the horseback sits,
Our Sir, peria kangany,
Pray, ask him for our wages.

Under the indenture system, the head kangany collected the wages on behalf of the labour force in bulk and distributed small "advance cash" to heads of families. He paid wages in cash on festival days.

To stress their claim the tea-maidens did not present a budget or a begging bowl but adroitly referred to the conditions under which he and they worked.

The rain lashes with endless roar
The water from my cumbli drips;
How his golden earrings gleam!
But look at our tactful kangany aiya

This veiled hint at their cumblies and his golden earrings brings out the tragic humour inherent in the plantation set-up.

Generally these songs are "songs of simple and sorrowful things" that affected their lives.

By the river's fringe my contract—
It bristles with cootch grass.
By scraping the roots out all my days
My life has been cut short.

Thus life flowed on.

In the years that followed, the plantation folks with their kin in the urban areas, evolved themselves into a loosely-knit single community numbering about nine hundred thousand.

It was with the introduction of adult suffrage that the worker emerged from his barracks condition of life for a brief while. When a favourite candidate came round the estates to ask for his vote he proudly sang:

Look, he comes as a light
Set on the mountain height.

Strangely enough, the light went out as the storm of communal politics swept over the hills. Today over nine lakhs of these men and women form the stateless proletariat of Sri Lanka.

Long before the politician ever came on the estate scene, the folk poet with the vision of a seer, saw the future of his people in his own frustration.

I lost my dear country
With it my palm grove.
In this far famed Kandi
I lost my mother and home.

Thus ends the strivings of over a century, with a sad note for the people who gave their life-blood for this land. And the poet of the common folk rolled up his scroll in the late thirties.

OILE ATTAM

We are in the midst of a *Deepavali* scene in the hill country. Before us stand clusters of tin-roofed lines in festive mood. Festoons of mango leaves are strung across the doorways. Streamers of coloured paper, palms, ferns and wild flowers deck the frontage of the lines. Bright red patterns of *kolam* gleam on the walls.

After their noonday meal, men, women and children clad in their new clothes, gather in the verandahs, nooks and corners to witness the dancers as they come.

A troupe of *oile attam* dancers takes up position in the central compound. They are in the prime of their youth, between the ages of 20 and 25, dressed in *verty* and turbans, complete with coloured handkerchiefs in their right hands.

The men who provide the musical accompaniment to the dance stand in the background. The *annavi*, teacher, stands at an angle facing the audience and his troupe.

To the beat of the drum, the clang and call of the cymbals and flute the *annavi* sings the invocation to Sri Ganapathy, the First God, in a metallic bass. The dancers move to the rhythm with clock-like precision, spin on their heels, bow their salutation to Mother Earth and touch the ground.

The *annavi* then turns to the audience to offer an apology for his unlettered Muse:

I know no ola leaf nor the letters
Nor do I know the range of letters;
I know no song or learning
Nor the manifold tunes of songs.

The long-tressed palm leaf,
The blacksmith's style—

The bead-headed style of bards,
I have never touched
The green palm leaf, the elegant style
My ten fingers have never touched.

Now he draws himself to his full height, clears his throat, adjusts the folds of his turban and, more like a platoon commander surveying his troupe, sings in a fine timbre the chorus which is also an order.

Mix up the sandal paste in the silver bowl
Lightly anoint it on your brows,
Large as a silver coin mark the tilak there;
Deftly shape the folds of your turbans
And like one man, everyone of you
For oile dance adjust your line.

The troupe advances in its preliminary step to the song. No flaw could escape the eagle eye of the *annavi.* If he notices a member falter or lag behind, he sings out the correction:

Stand erect, my brothers, do not falter.
On the parallel stand at an arm's length.

Thereafter he renders the song of instruction for the execution of the first "measure" or step.

My peacocks, my brothers with rounded tilak!
Listen, I tell of the measures,
Let not your eyes go astray
Nor feel the touch of shame;
Let not your feet collide, my brothers
Nor your handkerchiefs scatter their folds,
Let not your body rub at another
Nor spill a drop of sweat on the soil;
Like one man, all of you
Strike out the first measure, I say.

The troupe steps out swift and firm with the right foot, taps out a double triangle, spins on its heels, flings up the right hands shooting out an array of colours: then retards and advances to finish the foot-work of the *first measure.*

The first measure is somewhat elementary, with limited steps and physical movement. But every successive *measure* is complex in footwork and the pattern of movement. The dance as a whole consists of thirty-two such *measures* with a distinct song for each.

Generally the annavi is aware of the ability and stamina of his troupe to withstand the strain of the dances. Invariably he stops at the sixteenth measure and orders a diversion. It is known as the *oile kummie* which has a striking similarity to the *kummie* dance performed by women.

Oile kummie has an element of "stand at ease" with easy elegant movements to relax and rest the limbs of the troupe.

Now the flute and the drum play a lilting music. The *annavi* begins his chorus, rather the guiding tune for the measure, in duet form with mock caressing voice.

There, beyond the tumid river, my swan
You tend your flock, my pea-hen.
If the flood overflows the banks
How could you come hither, my love?

The troupe now falls into a circle, bends down evenly clapping the hands, rises to its full height and turns outward and completes another hand clap, thus weaving an inward and outward design till the duet is completed.

The *annavi* now pauses in the midst of his first stanza and looks at the young women as if he expects a reply from them. But they huddle together and giggle He supplies the answer on their behalf.

I shall summon the carpenter, my lover
To build me a boat of soft wood
To carry me across the river
When the flood overflows the banks.

The duet proceeds building up an episode of young love in the green fields. There is teasing and taunting

between the lover and the loved one for an escape. But at last they merge into one.

If you rise up as a hawk
To capture me, my cousin,
I shall pierce the earth
And shoot out as blades of grass.

Pat comes the final reply:

If you pierce the earth, my swan
And grow as blades of grass
I shall become the celestial cow
To eat up every blade of grass.

Oile attam, just as the classical dances, is an expression of *anand*, joy, a dedication of man's finer emotions to nature, love and God.

THE KODANKI

The *kodanki*, otherwise known as *poosari*, is the counterpart of the light-reader and a close second to the soothsayer, a male sybil of the plantations.

He would be easily recognised by his prominent hair-style and personal trappings. He wears in the fashion of Shiva "a mountain of matted hair", a necklace of heavy beads, a thick layer of holy ash across his forehead and a vermilion dot as large as a coin. He flaunts a drooping moustache and a beard to indicate his pious turn of mind.

He favours the flowing saffron-coloured shirt or a second-hand military coat. He carries on his person the instruments of sacred commission and authority known as *guru and kolai* bestowed on him by his preceptor. They consist of the *udukku* (hand drum), twelve beads in a tiny bag, a heavy whip and a silver-tipped cane.

His speech, too, differs from the ordinary. He cultivates the jargon handed down to him by tradition. For example he would address you as "Sire" instead of "Sir". He would ostensibly avoid taking food anywhere and everywhere. He moves with restraint and aloofness, a conduct calculated to compel respect from his clients. So much so that his wife and children and even his superiors on the estate treat him with respect. He is a man of God, so to say.

The *kodanki* seldom goes about hawking his trade like the palm reader or the astrologer. If he has the "vision" his name travels far and wide in the plantation. And he gets regular bookings from known and unknown quarters.

When a young woman suddenly takes ill with "headache and fever", the head of the family engages the services of a reputed *kodanki* with the presentation of betel leaves.

On the appointed day the *kodanki* arrives at the home of the sick. It is invariably of an evening when all the members of the household and elders of the community are present.

They all gather in the verandah. The *kodanki,* dressed in a saffron dyed *verty* and fresh layers of holy ash across his breast and forehead, takes the seat assigned to him.

He sits cross-legged facing the east. Before him are assembled the *udukku,* the whip, the silver-tipped cane and the tiny bag containing twelve little beads. Incense burns in a brass vessel and a tray of betel with a silver rupee is offered as *techchenai,* an honorarium for his services.

His functions consist of three parts known as 'Call to the Gods', "Prediction" and "Winding up". Each of these is divided into convenient laps or pauses known as *mandu* to provide him rest.

He commences with the beads. He takes these from the tiny bag, shakes them well in his partly-closed right palm and throws them one by one on the ground till a silver-tipped one falls. He throws three such "hands"and proceeds to make deductions on the number of beads counted out. For each bead, from one to twelve, has a particular symbol and a parable attached to it. After this preliminary move he starts on the first lap of his 'Call to the Gods'. He appeals to his favourite deity through song offerings to the accompaniment of the *udukku.* His songs are his speciality. They refer to the dress, ornaments, image and prowess of his gods, couched in a language that is grand and rugged like passages from an epic poem. His voice is clear as a bell, clear and resonant with a far-reaching quality in it.

In the traditional style he makes his first obeisance to Hari and Shiva, the Two in One.

The Ultimate Word—
The utterance
Of Hari, Hari
I will not forget.
The final speech
Of Siva, Siva,
In my thoughts
I enshrine.

To Ganapathy

You, the First Born,
The beginning and the source
Venayaka, brother of Kanda,
To you I bow.

Next in order come his parents and teacher. His values are high and they are a sermon to his audience.

To Mother and Father

In days gone by, my mother
You sued for grace from God
To nourish me in your womb.
Through the live long day and night,
The sixty one turns of time.
You bore me, your bowels
Melting in anguished pain
With trembling thighs.
In you, I trust, my mother.
As I take my stand;
And you, too, my father,
You reared me
And gave me this stature
Pray, dwell in my thoughts
Articulate your mercy,
The truth in my speech.

To the Teacher

You bestowed on me
This ever green leaf,
The power to perceive
Matters beyond my sight.
In thy name, my Guru.
I take my seat
Before this assembly.

Now he invokes the favour of Saraswathie to lend him voice.

For the betel laid before you
I must render account.
For this betel offered to you
I must adduce the reason.

Let not my tongue falter,
Let not my voice diminish,
Let not the pages fumble,
Let not my pen slant.

Let not my words turn false,
Dwell on my thoughts
And lend my tongue
The echo of your voice.

In this strain the *kodanki* calls upon his deities to the beat of his little drum. The whole atmosphere gradually swells with emotion. He and his listeners are held captive by the song and *udukku.*

At the first sign of falling into a trance he intensifies the beat of the drum and turns to the God of Kataragama:

My Lord and Master!
In this desolate hour
I cry out to you;
My golden Vadi Velu
Come fleeting
On your peacock.

Lest my time runs out
I grind
Not the common silver
But the unalloyed gold
To paint your brow.
On your right sits Theivanai
On your left sits Valliammai
Pray, bless me
With a single glance.

From the movement of his body, the beat of the *udukku* and his agitated voice it is apparent that he has reached the stage of "Prediction". A respected elder of the assembly acts as the spokesman. He is entrusted with the task of testing the ability of the *kodanki*, whether he is genuine or a fake. So he poses a test known as *kuri* the target. This target may be the sun or the moon or a simple thing like the lime used in the kitchen, mutually agreed upon by the spokesman and another member of the assembly.

The *kodanki* who is a master-hand at his job, acquits himself with ease and grace. There is general recognition of his ability.

Now he would pause in his proceedings for rest and a chew of betel and a chat with the elders. Having thus established his reputation, he resumes his "Call" and on reaching the state of trance he resumes:

Will you dare to ask
Whose heavy sin,
Whose dark machination
Harries this house?
Would you dare ask me
To unravel the reason?

The elder then respectfully submits:

"Yes, Swamy."

The *kodanki* relates the circumstances that led to the illness of the young woman.

Listen then, my birdlings
Listen then, my children.
I see the fringe of a ravine
A platform of black stones.
In the midnight hour
When the ugly one vomits its poison
And sucks anew of the draught
Of the unearthly brew
To its dark, defiled fangs,
Our filly foal, our golden girl
Stepped out all alone
At that midnight hour.
At that changing cycle of time
Our Munian, that redoubtable lad
That untamed bull tiger
Returned from his nightly round.
Our little calf heard
Munian's whip crack
Thunder in the skies;
Then she shrank back in fear,
And the sparks from his dart
Struck terror in her blood
Till it ran cold and sick.

In this strain the *kodanki* with closed eyes, with emotion packed voice and beat of the *udukku* would relate, how the young woman dared to get out at the forbidden hour when Munian, the sentinel of the estate, set out from his abode from the platform of black stones in the ravine.

The elder then appeals to Sri Murugan to forgive the young woman and restore her to good health. With some reluctance the *kodanki* agrees to do the "needful" and pauses for rest before the winding up.

Just before he winds up he rolls up a few bundles packed with holy ash and instructs the elders to tie them at the four corners of the house to "cut off the evil spirit".

He then proceeds to submit a special petition to *Kali*, the Fearful One, to protect the distressed woman :

You of the terrible mien,
You, Gopalan's sister!
The serpent's coil, your cushion
Its outspread hood
The canopy over your head.
Your abode, the caved tamarind tree,
Your resort, the banyan bower,
Your tresses, dark winsomeness
Your body, gold's pure sheen,
Your brows, black's true lustre.
But is your heart of hard flint ?
Would it not melt in grace ?
A tender glance from you
Will banish all evil away.

The *kodanki* winds up with salutations to his teacher, his favourite deities, the gods of the eight directions and the sentinel gods of the estate.

KAMAN KOOTHU

Every year in the month of March when the moon is at its third digit, the throb of the tom-tom could be heard in many parts of the hill country.

It is a distinct rhythm, a two syllable stroke at four equal intervals summed up with a volume of rapid strokes.

These beats and pauses and the final summing up punctuate the song and dance of *kaman koothu*, an ancient folk ballet preserved still in the plantations.

Originally this ballet formed part of the harvest festival known as *indra vila* that ushered in a period of peace and plenty in South India. Although much of its early significance has been worn out by change and surroundings its religious flavour has a special appeal to the common people and has helped the very survival of the ballet.

Every March on the third digit of the moon, at the identical spot where *kaman* was burnt in the previous year, it is revived, as prescribed in the *kaman* prologue.

When the young moon grows,
To its third digit,
Sink a pit at the focal point
Where three roads meet.
Pour in the rare milk
Drawn from the first calved
With it deposit a silver coin;
The bo sapling and wild sugar cane
And mango branch tied together
In a cord of golden straw
Plant them—this mast of kaman.

The religious element in the ballet requires its chief participants, *Madan* and *Rathie*, to observe a special

code of conduct during the period *kaman* is performed. They are expected to sleep on the bare floor, break the fast once a day and practise strict control of the senses.

The highlights of the ballet are its song, dance and dress to the accompaniment of the tom-tom. The dance may be monotonous with unvaried footwork but it is kept lively by the changing moods of the songs and the virile beat of the tom-tom.

Madan is dressed in a yellow *verty* and tight fitting coloured shirt. His face is painted dark blue and eyes yellow. He wears a long wooden crown inlaid with imitation gems and tinsel and epaulettes of similar make. A *verty* twisted into a cord to its full length holds him round the waist.

Rathie wears a smaller crown and epaulettes and is dressed in a red silk saree and green jacket. Her face is painted bright yellow and her eyes are blue. She too is held by a cord round her waist.

The couple stand facing each other at a distance of ten feet. A veteran singer rolls out the songs for *Madan* and *Rathie* in duet form. To the beat of the tom-tom they dance in a semi circle held secure by the cords from a couple of strong hands. This hold round their waists is meant to restrict their movement if they get into a frenzy. From time to time a mirror is held before *Madan* to break the continued image of *Rathie* before his eyes.

The songs known as argument, "Lavani" and "Lament" relate the story as to how Shiva, the creator, falls into an endless flame trance and how its effects begin to shrivel up earth and heaven. The sage Narada and the god Indra foresee the danger and summon *Madan* to avert it.

On receipt of this critical call, *Madan* tells his beloved *Rathie* that he must leave immediately for Indra's court.

You, resplendent star of my skies,
Beloved Rathie, dearest consort of my soul!
Here is a summons of high import
And to Indra's court I must hasten.
The full meaning of this call
I shall learn and come fleeting to you;
Till then, O daughter-in-law of the blue bodied Mayan,
Keep with you this, your love's token,
The diamond image of myself
Wrought with the hands of love.

Madan is the son of Krishna and *Rathie,* the daughter of Shiva. Shiva and Krishna are said to be both in One — the Inseparable. Likewise *Madan* and *Rathie* merge into one as Love.

There can be no separation for them. When *Madan* tells her of his journey to Indra's court she wants to go with him, and the ilea of staying behind with a token of his love is rejected.

O son of the blue bodied One!
Heir to the moon crown.
O love's blazing seed —
Who illumes all space,
Renowned of all the worlds
You darling Lord of mine;
You speak to me
Of your diamond image
To soothe my fears.
If these hands of mine
Offer the scented betel
To your wit's fine image
Would it whisper in my ears
One word of your storied love?

These songs in "Argument" with the questions and answers, their parry and thrust abound in rich imagery and allusions and grow into festoons of lyrics.

Rathie, with the intuition of a woman, senses danger in his mission and persuades him to disclose the reason as to why his presence is so urgently required at Indra's court. *Madan* has to tell the truth :

He that cut asunder the root of the Asuras
And bestowed on us the creed of compassion,
He that took the form of the turtle
To save the world from its headlong flight
Now nears a solitude of lifeless air.
Will you then hold me back
With your tears and laments ?

Rathie is like a tree uprooted, her soul on fire. She weeps for her father and then for her *Madan*. Her saddest thoughts pour out in sweetest songs, wet with tears and grief. At last *Madan* tells her :

To save all life, is one life so dear ?
Dying we shall live as seed and flower
Through aeons yet to come.
Speak to me love, of your kindness a word
For the music of your speech heard
Would make even the garish noon
Soft and gentle as the silvered moon ;
O maiden of the spear-shaped eyes
In good cheer bid me fare peace.

Now *Rathie* knows for certain that her *Madan* will never come back. She struggles desperately to keep him back but in vain. No love however great could come between *Madan* and his duty. He departs from *Rathie* with a grief as immortal as his love.

This part of the ballet is performed from house to house and estate to estate for thirty days.

On the 30th day it enters the second stage. On the spot where *kaman's* mast is installed a hut of green rushes is erected and Shiva sits there in *tapas*.

On silent steps *Madan* approaches him with his bow of wild sugar cane strung with a cord of wild bees and

shoots at him the five flowery darts of Love. Rudely disturbed from his *tapas,* Shiva opens his central eye. Fire flashes. *Madan* is reduced to ashes. Shiva is stricken with grief.

To give reality to this scene a burning arrow is shot at an oil-soaked heap of twigs where *Madan* stands. As the fire sprouts out he disappears behind the smoke.

The last stage of the ballet is brief. It depicts widowed *Rathie* dancing alone to the weird throb of the tom-tom. Her lamentation relates her early days of love with *Madan* and their undimmed ecstacy.

For her:

> *"Life (was) like a dome of many coloured glass*
> *Stained with the white radiance of eternity*
> *Until death trample (d) it to fragments—"*

This final scene brings out forcibly the conflict of love, torn between life and death. Here life is made immortal by death and love more lasting than death by its broken ties. And sacrifice stands out as the supreme force sustaining life and love.

LOVE SONGS

The love songs of the hill country constitute the very heart and palpitation of youth. They are the most delicate and genuine testimony of human passions, bare and unspoiled as the stream from its fountains.

All that is erratic and voluptuous in nature form the underlying note in these melodies. In their directness of expression, in the revealing of male and female behaviour and above all in their poignant call, one cannot but be struck by the suggestion of the mystery that is latent in our flesh.

Youth in its ache like "the blood of a soul climbing the hard crag-teeth world" "frontest eyes in a timeless face". In that surprise it fumbles and blunders to find unfettered expression for its urge. In the process it defies the conventions of society to break into unashamed utterance. Hence these songs are considered erotic and forbidden within the hearing of parents and elders.

However, the folk poet relies on classical tradition for thought, form and content. He borrows much from the masters to meet the needs of each situation and episode and infuses the songs with his own genius. Often he is in the company of Kamban or Shelley to find a definition for love's philosophy in the movement of "tempest mating sea":

The sea rubs along the sea
And the fish rubs on its waters,
But when I rub against you
The world cannot bear it.

In Tamil love poetry, *kathal,* the classic poet speaks of the fascinating attributes of the female form as:

Have I the eyes to behold the beauty in front ?
Have I the eyes to scan the beauty behind ?

He only deals with the visual aspects of beauty and deplores the lack of a hundred eyes to appraise it to his heart's desire. But the unlettered bard visualizes the female form in a more subtle process.

I saw you among the row of trees
And smelt the scent of sandal paste;
I saw you at eventide
And smelt the aroma of leaves.

In the suggestion that the scent of sandal paste emanated from her neck and the regions of her breast and the aroma of the leaves came from her hair, there is perfect union of sight, smell and sense that evoke the ache of love.

This ache longs to find comfort in the union of the opposites. In that quest it is not roses all the way. The beloved is always there but beyond reach and all the more alluring for it.

O child of the upper line,
Charmer with pretty toe rings
Deep my desire to see you
But the barriers are many.

There is no drastic measure suggested to overcome the barriers. There is nicety in the approach to the problem. A kind of *thoothu; sandesaya* is employed to carry the lover's thought to the beloved :

I wrote on the ola leaf
And let it go on wings ;
I passed the code word
Through her nearest kin.
I sent the hint imprinted
On the small bordered saree.

These methods of *thoothu* fail to bring the desired result and the lover tries other mediums to contact the beloved. And in the courtly fashion of the heroes of

the classics he employs the running stream to convey his love to the loved one :

In the running waters of the stream
I immersed the sandal paste,
Do I know whether it reached
The brow of the fair maiden

This state of suspense is intensified. In that situation the lover's heart is likened to the melting quality of honey while the beloved herself is the honey.

You are as sweet as ripe plantain
Far sweeter than powdered jaggery,
O sweet honey drop on my left palm
I am melting because of you.

The beloved is silent in her misgivings. After all a woman cannot be cheap. Many a ship has to be launched before she is won. The unlettered bard takes no chance with such human situations. He plays on them with the adroitness of a master musician. After a series of manoeuvres the lover manages to get a response:

O son of my uncle,
O sweet jak pod !
O cardamom, O clove
What shall I call you

It is not customary to address the son of the maternal uncle by his name or even call him 'cousin' *(machan)*. It is always a coy and respectful "look here". But in this instance words have become too small to convey the depth of endearment. She turns him into a pod of ripe jak to be swallowed up wholesale or use him to spice the smell of her mouth.

However, the female has to be cautious. Complete surrender is not in her nature until some tangible assurance is given. True enough, she wants a male to be the intimate guest of her affections. But his outward attributes alone are not sufficient to deserve her love. Before she takes the final step she wants a pledge:

You who wear a shawl
Of 'red-wax' borders,
You who make me flutter;
Will you swear
You never will forsake me ?

This question has been posed throughout the ages by the female to the male. In the meeting of the male and the female the age old problems are there, and also the remedies. As love is eternal as it is elusive, one is not tired of hearing the obvious.

In stone I shall carve my pledge
Or in visible oath I shall give.
At the temple of Mariamman
I shall cross my shawl and swear.

This pledge need not culminate in *gandarva* marriage as in the classics. This is an act of assurance to be faithful in love to share her feelings in "sweet nothings" like brief meetings and the exchange of betel leaves.

Lord of my heart,
Who works among the bronze wheels.
If you want to have a chew
Please come out to ask me.

In Tamil society there is no provision for free love. It must find fulfilment in marriage. Marriage is not left to romance or the fancy of the lovers but the sanction of the community. In that context love cannot be blind to the wishes of the elders. If the requirements for a union are not satisfactory the female is sent *out of sight* to a distant place.

Out of this separation the folk poet wrings out more poignant songs. The old familiar things associated with the first flush of love come surging to her:

O revolving top
On the running stream !

Why, O why, I trusted you ?
To be broken in love.

Thus love is made to suffer. The tears shed make its root strike deep into the soil of their life.

This female who has spent a few months in separation returns home, probably by train. On her way she happens to pass through Peradeniya. A single palm in the jungle and a stream diverted into a huge pipe, recall to her how love first came to her. The ideas are put together in impressionist style.

At Peradeniya bridge
The stream fills the pipe ;
In the jungle, a lonely palm —
It's six months since I spoke to him.

Out of sight out of mind, may be relevant in an absence of six months. The female, as usual, has doubts about her lover. She fears that somebody might have stolen him from her:

My black pearl, my red pearl,
My pearl that grew by the sea :
My pearl that speaks English
I know not who caresses it now

The lover, on the other hand, is true to the pledge he carved on stone. But the chances of marriage are remote because of the unrelenting attitude of their parents. The lover has no alternative but to contemplate elopement to another estate where they could live as man and wife :

You who anoint your limbs with saffron
You who adorn your hair with flowers.
You who make the beautiful hair-do
I'll take you away to Thonga Thottam.

These are fair examples of the love songs of the hills. Generally they fall into the pattern of duets and *address and compliment* to the lover and the loved one.

The unique union of words, pun and subtle suggestions in these songs render translation very difficult.

THE GODS THAT NEVER FAIL

Do not live in a country

Where there is no temple.

This saying aptly defines the estate man's approach to God. There is no life for him apart from his temples. In simple faith he seeks God's "sermons in stones" and "tongues in trees" to mould his life. To him the call of the conch and the temple bell literally bring the blessing of God into his house. His earliest recollections too are linked with a shrine or a temple.

As his life began to stir in his mother's womb, she went to the shrine of Mariamman under the spreading margosa tree and sued for her grace so that her child might be born free from physical or mental deformity. She lit earthen lamps at the wayside shrine of Shri Ganapathy to protect her and her baby from the trials ahead.

A month after his birth she gathered him in her arms and went to the shrine of Mother Marie to make her first obeisance. She placed him at the foot of her image and offered wild flowers for a thanksgiving.

On auspicious days she bathed him and dressed him in clean clothes and took him to the temple. He watched her pray with poised hands before the image. The beat of the *seygandy* (thick round brass plate) and the blare of the conch and the smell of joss and incense evoked a strange feeling of protection in his little being. On their way home she told him that it was the grace of Marie and the Lord of Kathirkamam that brought him into this world.

So the child grew up generation after generation to look upon the temple as his refuge from where he derived his strength to live free from disease and evil.

He held the temple in awesome reverence and dared not pass its premises when he was unclean in body. He chose the temple to learn his first letters, to sing his devotional songs and used it as a forum to render justice

Thus the need for God's protection in birth, in life and in work finds expression in the number of temples and shrines that abound on the estates. And every family is bequeathed with a deity. The popular family gods are Nondi Appachi, Iyanar, Sangeli Karuppu and Madasamy. These gods may have been mortals in the dim past noted for their valour and qualities of head and heart. Or they may have been family heads venerated for ages and later elevated to god-head.

They are given places of abode away from unclean contact, invariably in the vegetable garden or a quiet spot by a stream. Generally the head of the family offered worship at the shrine. It may be a mere show of camphor light or incense on Tuesday or Friday, or in "times of trouble" when a vow had to be taken.

The main function of the deity is to promote the welfare of the family and keep a wary eye on its members. He is expected to warn the family of impending mishaps, ill-health or the influence of evil spirits through the agency of dogs, cats, goats, crows and lizards. From the strange behaviour of these creatures and the weird sounds they make the elders read what they portend and caution the others.

The Sentinel Gods like Muniandy, Sendakatti and Madasamy are expected to guard over the boundary of the estate so that the community can live free from the raid of evil spirits and demons. And they are assigned suitable abodes on top of a hill or a rock cave or a huge tree marked by a white flag. Muniandy and Sendakattie get a triangular-shaped crude stone for their image while Madasmy is given a big four-foot mud pillar tapering towards the head.

The field workers, especially the pruners, have their patron saint. He may be Sendakattie, Muniandy or even a pruning god called Kavvathu Samy. At the commencement or at the end of the pruning season a *padayal* (offering of food) is given to him.

The women too have their share of worship in the field. During the tipping season (which has the same meaning as re-planting) on the first day of work, pooja is offered to Mariamman or Pathiniamman whose image of cone-shaped stone will get a string of black beads and a vermillion dot.

On behalf of the young pluckers a mother "blessed with children" will offer the pooja with the usual betel, coconut, plantain and raw rice mixed with roasted gram and jaggery powder. After the show of incense and camphor light, they invite the kangany to distribute the holy ash, because it is an unwritten law that a male should perform this task.

Another popular field god is Vanathu Sinnapper (St. Anthony) worshipped both by Catholics and Hindus. His open chapel with its simple cross on a mud alter may be seen by a stream in an outlying field or in a patch of jungle where the estate ends. On Christmas and festival days candles and incense are offered at his chapel.

The Rothai Muni is the sentinel of the factory. In the coffee days he had been the patron saint of the water wheel and has now been transferred to the Ruston engine. He is expected to give protection to the men who work in the lofts, at rollers and sifters and under the shafts and belts.

The Rothai Muni's statue is higher than those of the sentinel gods like Muniandy and Sendakattie and he gets regular poojas on Tuesdays and Fridays. The engine driver, whatever his religion or race, officiates as *pandaram*.

There is the big temple, an ornately-built structure, overlooking the quarters of the workers. It may be de-

dicated to Shri Ganapathy, the "first god", Sivan, Kathiresan, or Mariamman. Whatever god is enshrined there Ganesh and his bandicoot get the place of honour. In the inner sanctum known as *moolasthanam* Pathiresan, or Mariamman. Whatever god is enshrined Parvathi, occupy the central seats. The self same Parvathi as Mariamman or Pathiniamman maybe in the same row.

The *pandaram* or the *poosari,* as the priest is called, looks after the temple. He offers regular poojas twice a day and conducts special ones on auspicious days. For such poojas he cooks spiced rice, prepares flavoured gram and offers them with the usual camphor and incense. At the end of the pooja these are distributed with the holy ash, coconut and betel as *parasatham* to the devotees.

Once a year the season of worship comes to the Big Temples all over the estates. It is known by distinct names in different regions. In the Uva it is *adi poosai* celebrated at the same time as the Esala Perahera and *adi vel* in Colombo. It is all part of Murugan worship which originated from Colombo in the early coffee days. In the month of July, during the Esala, a full scale *thiruvilla* (holy festival) started in the Chettiars' headquarters in Chekku Street and later the Vel cart, the chariot of Murugan, was taken along the mail coach road to Haldumulla. Thereafter, the Vel (weapon of war) was taken to the estate temples for dharsan, and finally it reached Kataragama.

Due to an epidemic of small pox in the central region, the *adi vel* was confined to Colombo and the *adi poosai* was separated from the main celebrations and evolved into what it is today.

In the Central Province the holy festival is known as *thiruvilla* or *poosai,* a corruption of *pooja.* It is celebrated with great gusto for a week. And there is regular spring-cleaning of houses, shrines and temples

and the pudchase of textiles and "good food" for the occation. The celebrations commence with the "installing of the flag", *(kodi attram)*, water cutting ceremony, *(neer vettu)*, then poojas in the temples; and ends with the procession of *karagam* and from house to house.

During this *thiruvilla,* the family deities, sentinel gods, field and factory goods get their share of offerings. The "big gods" in the ornate temple may fall on evil days due to trade union politics. But the gods without a roof over their heads are always close to man and nature, and their many shrines enable the common folk to work and live with a certain sense of physical and moral well-being because the gods their forefathers gave them never fail.

HABITATION AND A NAME

On the walls of the conference room of the Labour Department in Colombo three photographs hang in a row. The first one portrays a mud hut with a *mana* grass roof; the second one, a crude stone structure with a tin roof and the third, a cottage type line. They mark the advances made in line construction on estates. Strangely enough they are also identical with the progress made by their occupants.

Old Karuppan's son, Kathan, lived in the mud hut with his family. He wore the *verty* well above his ankles and a little below his knees as a mark of respect to his head kangany and the dorai. He wore no shirt to hide his humility but a scantf turban of *kambi lenju*, a yard of coarse white cloth with red borders.

Whenever he spoke to the head kangany or the dorai he brought down his turban and held it under his arm. For had he not heard that dorai had bashed his grandfather's face and kicked his back for raising his voice?

After all Kathan was still the property of the head kangany. Although the "tundu system" was abolished some time ago, he had no mind of his own or any say in his own affairs. His head kangany thought for him. He knew what was good for Kathan. From his little shop he sold him the good things of life. True to the old estate saying the head kangany charged "two rupees for cumbly and another two rupees for the same black cumbly".

In the words of the dorai, "Kanthan was a good cooly". He had the stamina of an ox and the strength of the bull fighter. In the pruning field he acquitted himself very well. He pruned not less than 350 bushes for a day's *name*. When dorai went on his hunting

trips to the Mahaveli jungles Kathan too went. If by some mischance the wild boar escaped from the dorai's "aim" Kathan tackled the beast with his bare hands.

When Kathan left for the coast on a brief visit he wept like a child for the ties he left behind because "God alone knows the return of the man who goes to the coast" (estate saying). However, he begged of his chief to have his hut safe for his return.

Kathan's nephew, Ramasamy, had to bide his time to take up abode in the rugged stone line. He was favoured with a more liberal space of 10 X 12 ft. Meenatchi cooked his rice and curry in the evenings and served him a strong brew of "dust" tea in the mornings.

Though Ramasamy bought his provisions on a "pass book" at mudalali's shop he was very attached to his head kangany. The first produce from his home garden was dedicated to his chief. When his daughter came of age or son got married they were led to the big house to pay their first obeisance.

Unlike his grand-uncles, Ramsamy had improved his personal looks. He wore a ready-made "pepperel drill" shirt, a pair of small gold earrings and a slender silver bangle on his left wrist. On rare occasions he flaunted a black coat and an old umbrella.

Ramasamy's chief recreation was an annual visit to the *nadagam* staged by a travelling troupe. He trudged many miles with his friends to see an "actual woman" on the stage. On festival nights he too staged Harischandra, Kovalan, Marudai Veeran and Otta Nadagam. Here again the head kangany was the presiding deity.

By now his head kangany had formed his own sangam and Ramasamy was a part of it. If he was foolish enough to write about his 'ills' to the Indian Agent in Kandy, the grievance was removed by the prompt dismissal of Ramasamy from the estate.

It was at that moment of crisis that 'Samy', as the late Natasa Iyer was called, challenged the head kangany and the Dorai. He said that Ramasamy was not a cooly but a labourer and was entitled to a labour union. "Samy" described the head kangany as a "tiger" and an exploiter and asked Ramasamy to protest against the payment of "pence cash" to his chief.

"Samy" recreated Ramasamy in the very image of his master. He put on him a white turban, a black coat; gave him an umbrella and a walking stick and sent him to demolish his God. Thus Ramasamy entered into a life-long feud with his so called "benefactor". Yet he was a 'half and a half' creature. He swung like a pendulum between the sangam leader and his head kangany.

Ramasamy's young nephew had two names, a check roll name and a name he gave himself. On the check roll he was Nagamuthu but he called himself Nagalingam. The kanakapulle (K.P.) out of sheer spite called him Nagan. It strongly reminded Nagalingam of the old estate saying, "What wife for a cooly", and this cooly was not even entitled to a nice name.

Nagalingam was of the khaddar era. He wore a *jibba*, a long shirt, a *verty* to cover his heels; cropped his hair and on the sly, wore a pair of sandals. Nagalingam favoured the Elephant cigarette and ran a monthly tea account in mudalali's shop.

With some difficulty he read the newspapers at the local barber saloon and listened to the other "happenings" in the country. He visited the cinema after the pay day. He was really taken up by the songs of Kittappa Bagavadar and often imitated him to the delight of his dark-eyed cousins in jackets and *doria* saree, the first soft saree to invade the estate, some twenty-five years ago.

When the cottage type line sprang up Nagalingam was a mature man. He called his son, Pathmanathan, whose manners and conduct were different from those of the father. For Pathmanathan wore a pair of khaki shorts for the field; replaced the cumbly with a colourful plastic.

When he went to town he preferred a well-tailored shirt to the old-fashioned *jibba,* a soft *verty* or a good sarong. Handkerchief, fountain pen, wrist watch and a popular make of slippers enhanced his personality.

He read the daily papers and also a couple of magazines bought from the cigar shop, and regularly listened to the radio. On a Sunday he attended a mass meeting to listen to his 'big leader'. On a Wednesday he checked up the report of the meeting in the papers. If he found it to be inaccurate, he chuckled loud.

It is true that Pathmanathan has not gone very much beyond the walls of the estate. However, for his age he has gone a considerable distance on his rationalist road. He has turned away from animal sacrifice and ritual marriage. He has formed his own views about his father's khaddar shirt, the dorai, the staff and his leaders. He has stood up against the slang used on him in factory and field; he has given up the habit of salaaming all and sundry on the estate and even given a bit of his mind to his union head in the District Office.

Not so long ago Pathmanathan and his friends put on boards the first political satire, "The Stateless", on an estate at the foot of Sri Pada and roundly criticised the estate set-up and decried the Citizenship Act.

Indeed it has been a very long way from the mud hut to the cottage type line and a political satire.

PERIYA DORAI

P.D., or periya dorai, to give its full Tamil form, stands for big prince. It was a power symbol, a cross between title and status, conferred on the group manager by Ramasamy and readily accepted into the estate vocabulary.

P.D. meant so much in the old days and conveyed the glitter and authority only associated with the sceptre and throne. Like the rajah of old, P.D. was law and law-giver and his puissance was all pervading. His name without his presence and his presence without speech inspired awe.

P.D. lived and breathed differently, he spoke and walked differently from any other mortal on the group. He maintained the traditions of a hundred periya dorais before him and lived in a manner for future generations of his clan to emulate.

His dominions consisted of "divisions" and "sub-divisions" in charge of sinna dorais and conductors. It was a complicated set-up with a head office, divisional offices, a couple of factories, dispensary, power house, rice stores, nursery, transport, construction and maintenance services, all handled by trusted experts.

Be it in the factory or field, everything operated in his name and as a rare offering to his person. In the factory the chief tea maker and his assistants prefaced their instructions with "It's dorai's work, men. Do it well".

In the field, the kanganies told the women — "You there! Be careful. Don't ruin dorai's work. I'll chase you away to the lines".

In the pruning field the old kangany's note was more telling—"The son of dorai wants you to work like a man. You hear that, you lazy hogs?"

The S.Ds, conductor and head kanganies spoke a different language but the meaning remained the same.

"S.D. will come round tomorrow. If anything is wrong with your work, you will have to pay through your nose."

P.D. had special field days in the week. On the day of his visit to a particular division, the old man who kept the bridle-path clean was more brisk than on other days. The kanganies and the conductors took the hint from him.

When the P.D. came on his "rounds" no special courier ran ahead of him to announce his arrival. Nature itself spoke forth. A strong aroma of the finest tobacco from his briar came floating in the morning air.

Immediately the kangany sounded the warning :

"Ai, you people there, look about you and do your job."

The conductor and even the S.D. took up position.

A pack of sleek brown and white dogs, with flaming tongues lolling out, ran along the bridle-path. Fast behind them came the thud of the horse and then the animal itself shot into view with P.D. poised in its saddle. The rear was brought up by kudiraikara Savarimuthu, a strapper of a man in P.D's old breeches and hunting coat and with an imposing red turban.

The P.D's horse knew the exact spot where it should stop. Be it in the plucking field or pruning field there was a wide berth on the road where P.D. paused in his career to survey the fields and check the progress.

The S.D., conductor or chief K.P. ran up to him.

"Good morning, sir."

"Morning, how is your work?"

"Very well, sir."

"Keeping to the estimates."

"Very well, sir."

"And the rounds."

"Very well, sir."

By now the pack of dogs were among the tea. Out of sheer respect for authority, the K.P's huge dog had disappeared into the tea, with its tail tucked between his hind legs. P.D. who noticed it did not want the person of his dogs to be sullied by the contact of the lesser breed. So he called out in that strange bass voice which could only belong to a P.D. and his ancestors. The P.Ds of a hundred years. "Come along, dogs".

This was also a signal to go. Because authority should not grow cold or irksome. The dogs promptly came back to the bridle-path and the horse wheeled round. There was a sigh of relief in the field. However, at this crucial moment the conductor or chief K.P. tried to get in a word with P.D. merely to enhance his prestige in the eyes of his labour.

A pair of steel grey eyes from under the double terrai (a broad brimmed felt hat) held the subordinate in an unrelenting gaze. It was a moment of trial for the creature who stood below P.D. He did not hear anything nor did he speak. Off he went — the horse and pack dogs to another field — leaving behind a thoroughly disorganised conductor or K.P. With the back of his hand the poor blighter wiped the beads of perspiration from his forehead.

The P.D. did not undertake the cumbersome task of visiting all the fields in the division. From his point of view it was superflous. He was certain in his mind that the news of his visit would have had the desired effect in all the other fields. So he took an unchartered route to the factory, much before the scheduled time.

Nobody on the estate crossed P.D's path. The right of way belonged to his horse. He rode straight, like Sir Galahad in quest of the Holy Grail.

The labourers returning from the *kaddies*, factory or field, shot into the drains.

They were 200% sure that P.D. did not care to look at them. Moreover, P.D. knew that on an estate with a working population of 4,000 souls many things might happen. A guy might pinch a pound of tea from the sifting room or a couple of planks from the shed. They may have been on the person of any blighter who ducked into the drain. P.D. did not bother to take away his eyes from the horizon. He never bent down to look at little things. The "blind eye" and the "deaf ear" helped to maintain his dignity.

P.D's car had come to the factory grounds well in time. Although the tea maker expected "master" at the "appointed hour" he had placed an eagle-eyed loft-man at the 4th storey of the factory to be on the look out. He had espied P.D. The news was immediately re layed to the tea maker, and the whole place was electrified. The engine, wheels and rollers had assumed the motion of expectation.

Now Savarimuthu landed himself at the grounds, panting and puffing. The driver quickly got out of the car. Just then the pack of dogs poured in and yelled at the driver to be taken into the car. P.D's mare neighed as it galloped into the grounds. Savarimuthu ran up and held the animal. P.D. jumped down and made direct for the factory office.

The tea maker was there in his khaki kit, his shirt sleeves rolled up, as busy as ever.

"Good morning, sir," he bowed.

"Morning, tea maker. Got the samples?"

"Very well, sir."

On the oblong table stood two rows of can-shaped tea cups, half filled with "precious" liquid in various shades of orange and gold. P.D. scanned them with a critical eye; then placed one foot on the chair and his right hand went for the cups with measured grace. The tea maker stood behind him with folded hands.

P.D. began to taste the tea.....Sip.....Sip.....Now Slow.....Pause.....Sip.....Steady..... Prolonged ..... This process of sipping went on for nearly twenty minutes without a word. The tea maker was being charged with a strange tremor akin to an oncoming earthquake.

At last the words came.

"The B.O.P. not too good. What is wrong here?"

The tea maker fumbled a few words meant to explain the lack of quality in the B.O.P. P.D. listened with half-closed eyes.

"Right you are."

The tea maker stopped with a jolt.

"Where are you withering the young leaf?"

"Sir, 3 and 4 lofts."

"Well, come along."

In five minutes P.D. was in No. 3 loft.

"Tea maker, your assistant."

Ten feet away stood a young man of twenty-five clad in khaki kit, a pencil stuck behind his right ear. He came two steps forward as the tea maker left them. P.D. spoke to the assistant in monosyllables as his ears were not yet ripe to receive the benefit of full sentences.

"Assistant, field glasses."

It was produced instantly. P.D. looked through it at the far-flung fields he did not mean to visit that day. He was able to locate his assistants, the conductors and the labour in the different sections of the fields.

He was satisfied.

"Assistant."

He handed him the field glass and went down the stairs. He never looked behind for anything. If anything was left behind, it went after him.

P.D. got into the car that stood ready. It sped along the white gravelled road through the fields to the big bungalow three miles away. From his seat of vantage he looked out, taking in everything on the run. For a radius of three miles his aura shot out visible shafts of authority on all creatures who saw him from inclines and hollows.

P. D. lived away from the "labouring swains" in a seclusion all its own. His bungalow, like his personality, stood on a hill top towering above the habitats of ordinary mortals. Its surroundings and soil were a part of England. Graceful trees stood in state like a guard-of-honour and a carpet of blue grass spread its softness right round the bungalow. There were huge clumps of yellow bamboos by the tennis court, rock and fern gardens adjacent to the swimming pool, festoons of flowering creepers hung round the summer houses; clusters of orchids stood in crates by the windows. Everything had a touch of a gilded dream.

P. D's personal life within this many-roomed mansion called the big bungalow was shrouded in semi-judicious aloofness. However, it was whispered that peria doraisani took care of him. There was a belief that she was more than a female, endowed with a subtle power to lead P. D. by a silken cord round the bungalow. And she had a knack of keeping the domestic staff not on pins but on spikes.

Her staff consisted of a butler, cook, second servants, house cooly, gardeners, horse-keeper, cattle-keeper, kennel men, meat box man, driver and clea-

ner. And under the immediate supervision and control of peria doraisani, P.D's life flowed on in smooth circles.

P.Ds had special days, always as arranged by peria doraisani for his pets and hobby. And he was permitted to see the children twice a day and pat them on their cheeks or watch them from a distance as they rode the pony or the swing. In any case he was not entitled to show much emotion in matters domestic.

P. D's office and its function need mention. The office was constructed to be a part but not of the bungalow, demarcated by a passage for the use of the P.D. His room opened out to the head clerk's room behind which the General Office operated.

It was the very nerve centre, the control panel of the entire group and the head clerk its main operator. He was ever-wary, ever-hardworking, ever-ruthless, a repository of information—a ready reckoner on the right side of P.D.

P. D.'s labour day that came once a fortnight was indeed the day of durbar. The S.D's, the staff and the head kanganies were summoned to his presence in two laps. The S.D's were the first in precedence. The staff and the head kanganies followed according to rule. These native chiefs, it was said, were fortified by highly-potent *mantrams*—to catch the eye and draw the heart of P.D. They carried the talisman close to the skin on the waist, but it was generally believed that the head clerk's one acted as a cow-catcher and warded off the effects of the others.

Usually the durbar lasted just an hour. Within those sixty minutes many matters, including the purchase of cumblies for the monsoon, textiles, food grains and cash work and contracts were brought to the notice and got the sanction of P.D. and left in the safe hands of the head clerk, to be taken up at the appropriate time.

As was the custom, once in six months the P.D. went into the "wilderness", on his hunting expedition. Weeks ahead preparation was made. Nothing was left to chance. Everything was departmentalised and entrusted to a seasoned head. And this caravan of stores, cooks, trackers, and kennel men preceded P.D., who invariably set out two days later with a pack of hounds in the company of fellow P.Ds. Peria doraisani gave him a big hug and cooed after him, "Have a good time. Bye-bye.' P. D. merely waved and bolted into the hunting waggon.

While the P.Ds were in Yala or the Mahaveli jungles chasing the wild creatures, peria doraisanies dutifully met at the local club and scanned the "progress report" sent by their men. And with relish compared notes as to how they had run the P.Ds in the last quarter.

Occasionally peria doraisani preferred the bungalow to the Queen's Hotel or the club for the New Year gala. It turned out to be an event in the bungalow; the talk of the estate and something special to her friends. Immediately after X'mas every bit of space in the bungalow was "acquired" to cope with the requirements of the hour when the "old" passed away and the "new" entered. Cases of food and drinks and the invitable turkey arrived by special transport. It was said that peria doraisani spun like a top giving instructions to put things in the right place.

On the eve of the New year the big bungalow reeled with activity. The kitchen was a grinding-mill turning out edibles and delicacies of all sorts and the aroma rising from the pans filled the air round the bungalow. Peria doraisani had a couple of young S.Ds ever on the hop to "do this and that".

By 7 p.m., P.Ds. peria doraisanies, S.Ds and their daraisanies arrived in regular batches. To everyone of them peria doraisani had a word of compliment. Like water that finds its own level P.Ds and peria dorai-

sanies stuck together while S.Ds and their folk kept to their rigid code of conduct and the S.Ds did all the things S.Ds should do. The P.D. and the domestic staff sweated out their job, peria doraisani, with an invisible baton in her hand, conducted the affairs to the envy of other peria doraisanies. They danced away the old year, eating and drinking. There was food to eat and food to throw away. There were drinks to serve and drinks to drink. The S.Ds who were now in their best element, began to sing "MY ANNIE IS SO FAIR" and "HE'S A JOLLY FOOD FELLOW." And so the New Year was ushered in amidst the odour of sweat and smell of roasted turkey.

One resourceful S.D., however, hailed it from his bed on the garage roof.

The big ones on the estate, prominent members of the staff and the chief head kanganies were entitled to offer greetings and gifts to peria doraisani. They had their own way of arranging audience of her and came by special route to peria doraisani's porch to pay her homage. Like a Prince Consort, P.D. stood beside her in silence till the "ceremony" was over.

P.D. was a "jack of all trades" and a master of a good many. To soothe his nerves he tried his hand at fishing in the placid waters of Nuwara Eliya. When he went away with peria doraisani for this "sort of fishing" his senior assistant took over the reins. He was described as a "tough man"—a "hard nut to crack" etc. As much as the head clerk and other staff tried to keep clear of his way, he caught and fried them without oil, as the saying went. The P.D. arrived in time to save everybody.

The seasons came and went. P.D. too had to take his turn with them. He had to accept a promotion to the company office in Colombo or a transfer to a bigger group.

Long before this change came there was something strange and uncanny in the air. The *professional bird*, the oil-omened little thing that lived on a lonely tree on the cliff made its eerie call at ungodly hours and the horse-keeper's dog suddenly began to howl. There were other signs that did not bode good.

At last it was learnt that P.D. was to quit on a promotion to the company office in Colombo. The estate was shocked to receive this news. The head clerk, the head tea maker and the head kanganies went about their duties with sad faces. Some openly shed tears at the impending separation from their master. But P.D., as usual, looked at these things with detachment.

A week before his departure a farewell function was held in the factory grounds. The S.Ds, the members of the staff and the head kanganies assembled there to express their gratitude to P.D. for the protection he had given them.

The highlights of this function were a massive address, read and presented by the head clerk, and the group photograph. The P.D. and peria doraisani occupied the centre of the group with garlands round their necks.

The P.D. went. Yet another P.D. came.

"The King is dead!

"Long live the King."

After all, the P.D. was the chosen Ruler in the Planters' Raj.

MOTHER OF THE CRECHE

The creche stood on the hillock, away from the lines. It was a skeleton of a structure with two cavity-like rooms, turned out of wornout material collected from dismantled lines. It had the look of a marooned craft that refused to sink.

One day, old Ramaie took her abode in the smaller room. She brought with her all her earthly possessions: a small packing case, pots and pans, an old mat and a bottle-lamp. She kept the box in one corner and in the other assembled the pots and pans and built the fireplace near the window.

There was a touch of gladness, an expression of relief, on the folds of her ageing face. Her eyes like little flames danced in the niches of their deep sockets. Though she was bent and feeble, her eager movements showed her desire to live in a house all her own.

The day was all too brief. She cooked her simple meal of rice and curry and ate it by the fireside in silence. Although she felt secure from the wind and rain, there was no human voice, the cry of a baby or the call of a mother to cheer her.

When night gathered, the creche assumed an erie look. It was a spectre, shrivelled up in the deepening gloom. The wind whined through the roof and life fluttered within. Ramaie slept on the worn mat, a lonely creature far from her kin.

When morning came mothers trooped in with their children. They left them in the care of Ramaie and went to their work. She closed the main door and left the big children on the floor to play. She placed the toddlers in cradles and rocked them one after the other. It was

a tough job for her age. Her joints began to ache and she felt weak in her knees. Then she sat down and pulled the cradles by means of a rope.

To quiten them she sang an old cradle song in a half-broken voice. She had not sung it for many, many years.

It awoke strange emotions deep in her being. A sadness that could not sigh, a pain that could not cry. Her voice echoed in that old building. There was a kind of affinity in the old mother's heart and the vacant space in the shed.

When she felt tired she sat down passively. The kids then had their own way. They played, they shouted, they fought and fell over each other and cried. She did her best to hush them.

When mothers came to feed them at noon, Ramaie ate her food and had a cup of plain tea. Very often she longed to eat a piece of dry fish or sweetmeat. She could not afford it. She felt ashamed to ask for such a thing.

The mothers came in the evening and took away their children. When they were gone an unspeakable loneliness came over the creche. She could not bear the silence. And as night approached she longed to hear human voices even if they were harsh.

Occasionally when her grandsons passed by the creche at night they called out to her, "Granny", and passed on. She hoped that they would come into her house, sit by the fire-side and talk to her. But that never happened. At such moments she felt a heavy weight crush her breast. Now nobody wanted her!

On one such night the lamp burnt feebly on the wall. The window was opened. She sat chewing betel after her dinner. Through the window the moonlight fell on her face. The wind sighed over the shed. Ramaie looked at the moon. She too sighed. Unconsciously she mur-

mured, "O my father!" Was it meant for her God or her long-forgotten father or even her son? Nobody could say. Now they were all far away, even her God.

How often in the past she had looked at the moon. Fifty years ago when love was in its first bloom, together with her husband, from the verandah of her first home, she had looked at the glowing moon. After a year with her little baby in her arms, she looked at the moon to find meaning for her unknown joy. In later years when her grandchildren played in the moonlight, she looked at the self-same moon, her heart filling to the brim.

But today? There was a gnawing pain in her bowels, an ache in her throat like the choking gasp of one drowning.

She wanted to forget her dead husband, her children who left her after their marriage; above all her grandchildren and the clasp of their tiny cool hands round her neck! She wanted to forget everything, everything but this moon through the window!

At last she got up and went to the window. Even as in her youth she smiled at the moon, nodding her head. She felt her joys and sorrows mixed up there. She folded her palms in salutation to the moon, that white light in the infinity of space. Her body trembled. Tears stirred in her eyes. She closed the window and retired, her face wet with tears.

The bottle-lamp on the wall flickered. The old mother lay in a crumbled heap in the corner.

The wind sighed outside.

NO STATE, NO DOG

The day ended all too soon for Muthiah. It was his last day in the sifting-room in the factory. To go away from here and never return, it was something impossible, inconceivable. Fifteen years of his young life had been counted away by the turn of the wheels. The handles on the side door to the sifting-room had been worn out by the constant touch of his hands. He came to the sifter when he was only fifteen. Since then the factory had been his world and work his life.

It was only three months ago, just before he went on his pilgrimage to Madura, the whole atmosphere had jarred on his nerves. The ceaseless rumbling of the wheels and the sifter with its dull monotony depressed him. It meant more sweat and longer hours. But today there was a strange rhythm in the movement. It was bound-up with his pulse beats. Till the men and women went out one by one, Muthiah lingered behind to have a last look.

The sifting-room, so drab and bare, suddenly came to life. The smell of dust and fresh tea, the silent wheels on the shaft, potent with power, struggling in his breast to be released into motion. Fifteen years of his life had been made up of the rat, tat, tat of the sifter and the rumbling of the wheels.

"Tomorrow," he thought, "somebody else will take my place. Then the bustle in the sifting-room will go on as if nothing had happened. Everything will be in its place; only I will not be here. How strange is the order of life. After all, nobody is irreplaceable".

With deep regret, as if he had left behind a part of his being, Muthiah came out of the factory to the open road. Yes, the open road without a morrow, without a

future. He joined the crowd of men and women who were returning home after their day's work. Unconsciously he felt that he had lost caste with them. That old familiar scene was a desert to him now.

Many an old scene flitted across his mind. He thought of the first day he went to Colombo to get his travel papers. He remembered the inquiry desk at the Immigration Office.

And that heavily-built man with a bull neck, with a menacing glint in his eyes. He thought of him as a wild creature caught in a net. He thought of the second day he went to this officer to renew his T.R.P. This officer growled at him. The other mortals who had come there shrank before his sight. Muthiah handed his papers and waited.

"Your T.R.P. cannot be renewed", grunted Bull Neck, "Clear out."

"Sir", faltered Muthiah, "I only went on a pilgrimage to Madura. I was born and bred on an estate here."

"Yes," sneered Bull Neck, "every beggar is now a Ceylonese, eh? If you have nothing to do, go home and do it."

"Go home and do it," reflected Muthiah. "What an uncouth way of speaking. Why are these officers so nasty? Even the Citizenship Officer was nasty to me. He had the vulgarity to ask me whether my mother was married to my father."

The scene shifted. He recalled his mother. That ever-loving, tender face; those dark liquid eyes and her sad smile. An ineffable pain shot out from his heart and spread all over his limbs. How vividly he remembered the day of her death. How he had cried till his eyes ran dry. Even as she laboured to breathe her last, she spoke to him in the usual way.

"Muthiah, my son, do not think of me. You are too young to waste your life thinking of me. I shall always

be with you." After a pause. "Look after yourself and our little Sooty. Your father brought her into this house."

In the old days Sooty was a full-blooded little thing. Tiny sparks shimmered on her coat that clung so close to her supple body. The way she used to draw her ears back and wag her tail, moving her trunk from side to side, was a sight he could never forget. Since his mother's death Sooty was very close to him. Yes, a mother's parting gift, the little shred left behind from their torn ties.

Now that Muthiah had to leave his home, his uncle and aunt and above all his dog, he was dazed; his inside was like a demolished hut. He decided to give away Sooty to the factory watchman because his aunt did not take kindly to her. When Muthiah hinted that Raman wanted the dog, his aunt did not make the slightest sign of protest.

That was the thing he could not bear.

When Muthiah reached home everything was in readiness for his journey. His uncle had come home. His aunt had collected all his belongings in a cloth bag and kept it in a corner of his little room. Normally Muthiah never spoke much. And that day he was tongue-tied.

"Muthiah", said his uncle, "I know it is very, very hard for us and for you. We left the village during your grandfather's time. There may be some distant relation. Who knows? Have faith in God. God is the only protection for the destitute. Don't forget the papers."

"Yes, uncle. Yes, uncle," said Muthiah so many times as if those two words contained all that he wanted to say.

When the time for parting came, Muthiah collected his bag and gathered Sooty in his arms and took his leave in silence. As he walked across the field to the

factory watcher's house, Muthiah's forced departure was the talk of the workers in their line rooms. They thought of it as if he had been led to the slaughter house.

Sooty kept close to Muthiah. From time to time she nosed his face. She did not know that was their last journey together. He wondered why dogs were not required to get citizenship papers. Perhaps they too had some kind of paper. Otherwise their life would be in danger. He hoped that such a tragedy would not befall Sooty.

Muthiah saw Raman waiting for him. There was little time for talk.

"I shall lock her up in the little room," said Raman pointing to a small room behind the kitchen.

"She will get used to me in due course. Don't worry. I shall look after her."

"Yes, I know", said Muthiah moving towards the door. Sooty clung to him. He left her on the ground and called her into the room. She crouched. He coaxed. She refused to move and looked pitifully at him as if she was about to be beaten. He carried her, suddenly pushed her into the room and shut the door with a snap. The little creature desperately scratched the door and moaned. Without a word the men hurried along the road to the railway station. The evening was growing into night. The moaning of Sooty came from the distance and faded away like the cry of a child in the night. Muthiah felt as if it came from the grave of his mother. Yes, a handful of dust calling out to him from under the tea bushes.

At the railway station there was the usual clamour and activity. Muthiah went to the booking-office window and got his ticket to Trichy Junction. The last bell.

"Go in, Muthiah. Don't worry," Raman.

Muthiah passed through the gate. The train had pulled in by then. There was a disorderly crowd of men and women sobbing and crying. There was no one to cry for Muthiah. He got into a compartment and sat in a corner beside a young woman. He was too confused to notice anything. The train shrieked and rumbled out. Raman stood leaning against the gate, his hand on his chin. Muthiah looked out and saw him. The train gathered speed and rumbled on with a flat incessant rhythm. It tortured him, this rumbling of wheels! Yes, his very life had been on wheels. For the last time he peeped out and saw the light in the factory. The light in the factory, the wailing of women at the railway station and the cry of Sooty; they hammered on his brain. Suddenly Bull Neck of the Immigration Office grinned at him from the depths of the night. "I told him the truth that I went on a pilgrimage; today's is my longest", he thought.

The train sped on. He looked out again and saw the stars blink. Before this he never bothered to look at the stars. But tonight he did not know why he looked at them. The moaning of Sooty seemed to come from the stars and echo in him. The young woman had come close to him with the warmth of her body. He looked at her. A moment of distraction. The train sped on. The rumbling of wheels; the sifting room!

Next morning Sooty arrived at the old house, wet and mud-stained. Muthiah's aunt shouted out.

"Look at that wretched thing. She had run away."

Sooty ran up to Muhiah's aunt and put her paws on her only to be shouted at.

"Get out, you beast!"

Sooty came to the verandah and looked for her corner. It was occupied by the fowl cage.

"Get out, you slut!" came the harsh voice. The dog sat by the cage with outstretched paws. It looked for Muthiah. He never came out of the house. It did not know why.

The morning advanced. The people from the factory and the field came for their noonday meal. Little Sooty sat in the compound looking at the road. Muthiah's uncle came. She ran up to him, smelt his feet and wagged her tail. He stood there strangely moved. The dog whined and looked at his face.

The day wore away. It was growing dark. Sooty sat in the compound looking at the road.

THE HEAD KANGANY

The head kangany had been a significant part of the saga of the plantation industry. He was one in all and all in one—the focal point where diversity found its unity. He was the right-hand man of the dorai, the head and crown of his labour; a prosecutor, pleader and judge—all rolled into one.

There were head kanganies and head kanganies, like the clumsy farm horse and the sleek Derby winner. They never belonged to a class but a clan. The true chief had over a thousand head of labour.

He lived in his "wigwam" known as head kangany's residence with all the conveniences and paraphernalia of a chief. There were the audience hall-cum-office, shrine room, bedrooms, a *that side* for the females and the kitchen and bathrooms.

In his audience hall surrounded by his white turbaned kanakapulles black coated kanganies and elders with drooping moustaches, he received his visitors with a wave of his hand. Poets and singers, dancers and jugglers, paid him homage in song and dance. In those days, when newspapers were rare, he paid them well to carry his name across all barriers of communication.

On cold nights, in a reminiscent mood, he would recall for the benefit of his subordinates the exploits of bygone days. They were rambling tales like the procession of bullock carts on long dusty roads. In all these adventures the dorai was the central figure and he the right-hand man. He would end up with a chuckle. "Those were wonderful times and the doraimar were hard men but true as steel".

His official functions were varied and many-sided. He allocated the line rooms, issued the rice, saw to the turn-out of labour, attended the muster, went round

the field, at the pay table he received the wage from the dorai and handed it to the labourer. He looked after the sick, and presided over all the functions on the estate.

It was his pride to keep his labour intact within the boundaries of the estate and that, too, within his own division. He never permitted his labour to be trifled with by an outsider or allow them to be taken to the police station.

Let us take a few examples of how he dealt with human problems.

On a Sunday afternoon, probably after the pay day, there was a nasty row in the lines between Kathan and Muthan. While the fight was in progress, the head of the information service, the barber, brought full details of the incident to the chief. He expected a deputation to arrive before 10 p.m.

When Kathan came to the door of the audience hall with his complaint, he found the chief very busy, giving orders to his kanakapulles and kanganies. He made scathing remarks about the type of work done in the pruning and tipping fields. Moreover, the chief had such a "stony" face that Kanthan felt diffident to catch his eye. As he was about to retreat the deity called him—

"*Dai*, go to the kitchen, have your food and then get me the *pandaram*, quick."

So Kathan was not disappointed. He took his dinner in a slow lingering way, tasting every curry, turning over in his mind every word of abuse hurled at him by Muthan. The good food took away much of the feeling that riled him. He then proceeded to deliver the message to the *pandaram*. On their way back he briefed him, gave a graphic account of all that transpired in the lines and begged him to put his case before the chief. The *pandaram* promised to do his best. Kathan went home satisfied.

Nothing happened for a week. When Kathan came again to the audience hall he found the chief to be in a very communicative mood. He asked him to sit down on the mat and ordered the servant boy to give him the book of *vana vasam* — an episode from the Maha Bharatha. Kathan read the book in a sing-song style till late in the night.

In short, the chief did not give Kathan an opportunity to open his mouth. Weeks and months passed. Time, the great healer had stepped in. On a festival day Kathan and Muthan forgot their differences over a bottle of *old stuff* and dismissed the whole thing as a bad dream.

That very evening the chief sent for Kathan and Muthan. They crept in one after the other, scratching their heads.

"Well," thundered the chief, "I hear there was a big row in the lines?"

"That was some time ago, Samy," meekly submitted Muthan.

"By your father, man! I am here on this blasted place. I should have been told".

"I came, Aiyah," simpered Kathan.

"You came! Did you?"

"When snake bites snake there is no poison", suggested an elder.

"Snake-bites? I want no nonsense in the lines. You hear that, you fools?"

He glared at them grinding his teeth. Then he softened suddenly—

"Do relations behave like that? Go away."

The two men went away scratching their heads.

On another occasion when Palaniandy made bold to pinch a little tea at the factory the matter was promptly reported to the dorai. The chief was summoned to the office.

On his arrival there he found the dorai seated at his table with a red face. Palaniandy stood shivering under a tree outside. It was an evil day for him. Everybody expected the dorai to sack him on the spot.

But suddenly there was an explosion that jolted the dorai in his seat.

"You swine, you dirty swine! Dare you touch our own tea?" the chief spat out fire, raising his walking stick.

"Take this, you mean thief!"

The huge walking stick went up and down many times but somehow missed Palaniandy's head by half an inch.

Aio, Samy! Aio Samy!" squealed Palaniandy darting from side to side.

The dorai was satisfied, but upset by this assault.

"For God's sake leave that man alone and come in here, head kangany", called the superintendent.

The chief went into the office panting.

"I don't want a thief on your estate, sir."

"That's enough. clerk, ask that fellow to clear out", said dorai.

The assault on Palaniandy was the subject of discussion for many a day at the shaving spot. Indeed it was a narrow shave.

It must be said to the credit of the head kangany that he invented this kind of "radio play" long before the BBC.

On a pay day the chief went home with a bag full of crisp notes and silver. There were a dozen men hanging around for the favour of loans. Among them was Maiandy, the veteran slacker. The chief gave him a stare that made him melt. But Maiandy was not to be put off easily. He held his ground, his *verty* tucked up respectfully. But he could not catch the eye of the chief.

For days together he was there at the exact hour. One day the chief was forced to ask—

"Why are you waiting here, Maiandy?"

"Sir, I want a loan."

The chief did not seem to hear him nor was there any direct reply. Instead he asked him to go to the vegetable garden and lend a hand to the gardener. Thus for days Maiandy was kept busy in the garden.

One day the chief called him and talked about various matters and complimented him on the good work he had done in the garden. At the end of it all Maiandy had his own request to make.

"Sir, I want a loan of Rs. 150."

Promptly the chief gave him a chit to the *kadai*.

On his way Maiandy read and re-read the note. He was satisfied that the figure was Rs. 150. But the *Mudalali* gave him Rs. 45 and asked him to clear out.

"Give me another Rs. 25", pleaded Maiandy.

After a long wait he was given Rs. 5 and was asked not to sight that place again.

Who knows what arrangement there was between the chief and the mudalali. Above all, Maiandy never returned a loan.

The head kangany was the first union leader on the estate and last of a clan that refused to be killed before his time.

THE PANDARAM

True to tradition a *pandaram* is a *pandaram* throughout the ages. It must surely have been said of him: "Men may come and men may go" but the *pandaram* goes on forever, unchanged amidst all changes.

He is the visible link between God and man, and he knows the working of their minds so intimately that he does the right thing at the right moment.

Then, in the old days, when the head kangany was all powerful, the *pandaram* thrived on his patronage. He was as close to him as he was to the deity in the temple.

He kept the temple religiously clean, polished and preened the images and offered *pooja* three times on Tuesdays and Fridays. He tended the flower plants in the back garden, gathered flowers and wove them into garlands for the Gods.

At sundown, after the evening *pooja* he made his way to the house of the head kangany.

If the chief looked peeved as the result of a "telling off" by the dorai, he would offer the *prasatham* (holy ash and flower petals) specially brought for the purpose from *amman's* altar. This acted as a balm. On the other hand, if the chief seemed tired after the day's work and was inclined to be in a mood to listen to something soothing, the *pandaram* read a chapter from *Thiru velaiadal puranam* (History of Miracles) from where it was left over on the previous occasion. But if he was in a mood for gossip, at which our devotee was a master-hand, he would commit the chief to utter the first word so that he might add the last.

"Do you see Andy these days?"

"Very difficult, sir", said the *pandaram*. "He is too busy these days. Rather grown up for his size. Now he does not care to know that there are big people on the estate. He has now a way of speech and manner of walk. He does not go to ordinary houses or visit any of his old friends. He speaks to no common man but the sinna dorai".

"I see. The fellow is getting horns!"

"That is because of a little money he has made."

And so the gossip proceeded. Before it reached saturation point the *pandaram* obtained from the chief a chit to the *kadai* for a fresh supply of provisions, foodstuffs and textiles.

When the chief or a member of his family fell ill, he performed special *pooja* with great gusto to dispel the evil effect of Saturn. He evinced great interest in their wellbeing, so that it could be seen and heard.

The workers on the estate, of course, knew that the *pandaram* had the ear of the chief and often sought his help to get a favour from the "big house". As a matter of give and take, they gave him fresh vegetables and milk. Milk, according to the *pandaram*, was essential for the *pooja*.

Now, the *pandaram* changes step to be in tune with the times. The Union leader is the modern version of the *head kangany* on the estate. It is, therefore, in the interest of the *pandaram* to identify himself with the new force.

The *pandaram* and his wife, in these days of factions, keep to the middle path. They do not belong to any union. However, he makes it a point to tell the prospective leader, "Do not worry about our membership cards. We are only two. Much will come to you by the grace of God. Who knows His ways?"

In the evenings, when the young men assemble at the temple to rehearse the *pajana* (religious songs), the *pandaram* cheers them. He commends their singing.

"It is a long time since I have heard such good singing. After all, good singers do not come from *semai* (London)". He then suddenly asks for the prospective leader.

"Won't Ramiah come for this singing? He has such a wrongful voice." If the response is good, he will continue.

"A good man and a clever man, too. He sings and speaks well. By the way, he gave me this notice to be put up at the temple. I think it is meant to be read by you all."

Very adroitly he hands them a notice that requests them to join the union sponsored by Ramiah.

"In these days you must join a *sangam*. Ramiah knows these things much better than any man on the estate. He is a good man. Nobody has said an evil word about him."

Thus our *pandaram* gives his blessing to the membership campaign in his own humble yet inimitable style. If the required majority joins Ramiah, he openly canvasses for him and induces his wife to join.

If the conductor or the *kanakapulle* asks him about happenings on the estate he would tell them.

"Everything happens for the good, sir. The young and the old all favour Ramiah. I am everybody's man. I have to blow with the winds, the way the estate goes".

On the day of the meeting, the *pandaram* makes himself useful. With his own hands he weaves the white garlands for the big leaders and even gets into his hands the necessary funds for *pooja* and refreshments. At the function his go-ahead movements give the impression that he is the man behind everything.

Before Ramiah is elected leader, he calls him *thalaivar*. It is hinted that the Gods are in his favour

He would tell the big leaders from the union headquarters, "Ramiah is the ideal man."

In these days of union rivalry, the importance of the *pandaram* and the dangers to which he is exposed are many. If a *pandaram* is useful, a union backs him. Otherwise, the union presses for his removal. But so far no union has been able to put forward a cast-iron case against a *pandaram*. Labour Officers often find him to be "meek and gentle."

If there is a conference or an inquiry over a temple dispute, the *pandaram* turns out in his immaculate *verty* and shawl with the inevitable holy ash and sandal paste *pottu* on his brow. His delicate hands come together in salutation. His utter humility removes the very germ of suspicion. Any action against this man of god is unthinkable.

When the inquiry is over, the *pandaram* goes back to the temple. Once more he sits cross-legged at the *mandapam* (prayer hall) and starts weaving garlands, and along with them his plans for the morrow.

Perhaps this is the reason why unions are after the *pandaram*. After all, they know that the *pandaram* is the closest to God.

MANIKKAM

Manikkam was one in a thousand—a rare specimen of a man. An unforgettable character.

The clothes he wore, the way he carried himself, the felicity with which he rolled out words of comment and criticism bespoke his wisdom.

He was the one man who discovered the world in him and the world reflected itself in his changing moods and temper.

At the time I knew Manikkam he had reached his mid-thirties. Short of stature, agile, slightly dark of skin, charged with the toughness of a rugger ball. He wore his *verty* a little above his ankles as a mark of respect to his elders. His shirt reached down to his knees to indicate his maturing years. In his indifference to personal appearance he never closed his shirt front. All the same, there were five silver studs strung together on a black string. They harmonised with his betel-stained teeth, and the moustache which had a way of curving down at its ends where the mouth began. On one side of it there was a small ball of tobacco that helped the steady flow of speech.

Manikkam lived with his wife in a corner room in an old-type single line. It had a wide compound in front and on either side of it there were double and single lines. He was never in the habit of prying into other people's affairs nor did he visit his neighbours and friends unless it was an "occasion."

On a Sunday afternoon he would sit on the floor of his verandah, the betel-box and the arecanut cutter assembled before him. It was an indication, an invitation to light banter. He had what occultists call an "aura" or personal magnetism. It drew other fellow beings to him.

Invariably it was a man of his age or a young blighter that called on him. Once he commenced to talk the numbers increased, and that depended on the nature of his topic. He was never given to gossip but spoke of things within and without the estate.

To a gathering of young blighters he would say: "There is no world without a woman. The woman is at the bottom of everything. Don't run away with the idea that I am referring to your own affairs. Affairs we all have, and I suppose it must be within reasonable limits. What I mean is—in the larger sense of the word —the woman is at the bottom of everything. To start with, there is the mother; then the girl you are after; the wife comes later. It does not end with her. Close behind her comes the dreadful mother-in-law to pry into your affairs. The sister-in-law carries tales to your wife. Other women don't leave you alone. Yes, the blooming woman is the cause of everything."

Manikkam paused here for effect and then proceeded—

"Now, look at my wife. She has looks, full of nose and eyes, her tongue as sharp as a pruning knife. No wonder most of you chaps like to look at her."

"Now don't try to drag me into your talk", came a silky voice from within.

"There you are! You heard that voice. I said that it was not her fault. She is made that way to be looked at. The moment you and I refuse to look at a woman there is the end of the world."

As this peroration reached an animated stage the young thing next door peeped over the partition wall and Manikkam was not slow to observe it. So he added a little "ginger" to the discourse.

"You know in pictures we see our Gods with their wives. There is the God of Kathirkamam on his peacock with Valliammai and Theivanai on either side. But

there is Thropathi (Draupadi) the *pathini* (virgin) born for the Pandavars. Yes, all women are born *pathini* but ....." Without completing the sentence he laughed loud. It cut the young thing dead. She retreated to her line room.

Manikkam had other diversions that gave an insight into his character.

On a week-day after work, he would peep in at the head kangany's quarters, to find out what was going on in the world. When his time was up to go home he took the short cut to his line through the fence. He would catapult down the steps with a song on his lips. His songs, as a rule, were satirical in content. He gave them a sort of Manikkam twist. If he happened to meet anyone on the way, he would greet him suitably with a *thambi* or *machann*. In those two words he packed half-a-dozen meanings and they hinted at some uncanny secret of the individual.

Of course Manikam was by no means popular. He was not unpopular either and the estate without him would have been very drab. His name had travelled beyond the boundaries of the estate, because he stood for the weak and challenged the bully. In those days when authority was a terror, he treated it with a respectable nonchalance that baffled other mortals.

He measured every man with a different yard stick. He was the common factor. He made no distinction between the dorai and the *aiyahs*, the elders and the *podians*. However, he feared one man and that was the chief, the head kangany. He addressed him as Appoo, corrupted from Appa, which means father. In his presence Manikkam tucked up his *verty*, bent his spine, and inclined his bushy head as a mark of humility. All the same, there was a smile at the end of his lips guarded by his drooping moustache.

If Manikkam met the chief on the way, he stood aside as in a "guard of honour" till the Big Man passed.

And at the big house Manikkam sat on the bare floor, cross-legged and spoke in monosyllables. The word *appoo* was used as assent and answer, question and reply, and he would turn his ear in the direction from where the words of the chief came.

In short, the chief had full control over this paragon On the other hand, Manikkam controlled the events on the estate.

ONE OF THE MANY

Bent and old, the dilapidated little man sat there by the wayside. Beside him lay a tin mug for a begging bowl and a staff for support. In front of him the river flowed on, and behind him the tea spread its green over the mountainside. The old man was one with them, lost in his surroundings.

I wondered what his antecedents were. What he may have looked like in his youth. Whether he had any family ties or even a verandah to give him shelter at night. For all purposes, the past seemed to have forsaken him and the future frowned at him. He sat there between the two, by the wayside, like a deserted house in the process of decay.

This forlorn picture followed me to my office.

The morning wore away. The afternoon became sultry and heavy with activity. People passed by my window casting shadows into my room. One such shadow lingered. I looked out to find the old man standing with outstretched hands.

He had none of the jargon of the professional beggar. His silence spoke a hundred words. I offered him a five-cent coin.

"May you be well," blessed the old man.

In the meanwhile others followed me. This gesture gladdened him.

"May you live well", he repeated, "for two days I can now rest my limbs."

This remark intrigued me. So he had his days of begging and of rest.

The sun was bright outside after days of rain. I could not resist it. I went out into the backyard. The old man

had seated himself, leaning against the garage wall with that unconcerned look about him. There was something dispassionate and stern in that aged face.

A couple of dogs were snarling at each other, as they dug into the dustbin close to him. Plantain leaves lay scattered. The stale smell of rotten food filled the air. Flies swarmed.

I have seen beggars ransacking dust-bins while dogs in their innate respect for man, gave way. Even in this respect the old man was unique. He kept aloof with a strange smile. Pride stiffened his sagging body.

"Have you not eaten anything?" I asked him.

"I do not feel like eating, sir. I took a late meal this morning."

"Are you from an estate?"

"Yes, sir."

"Surely, you must be having relations?"

"I have, sir. I have two sons and a daughter and grandchildren, too."

"Why don't you live with them?"

Pause.

"Why should I be a drag on them, sir? I have never beenn that and I never will be."

"In your old age you must have a place to rest", I suggested.

"My sons and daughter live across the river. Our estate is Sinna-thottam. During the day I go round and by night fall I get back to the Mariamman temple there."

"How long have you been on Sinna-thottam?"

"Since my birth, sir. My father struck the pegs for tea planting. I grew with the tea on the estate. I know every bush, every tree and every ravine."

He said those words with pride.

"I suppose, you get a pension from the estate."

"Yes, sir. Our dorai gives me Rs. 15 a month."

"Have you not asked for an increase?"

"I have, sir. But dorai says that the estate cannot afford it".

"Really!"

"Yes, sir. All my days I toiled for the estate. Before me, my father toiled in sun and rain, early and late. He died working for the estate. They did not give him anything and he used to say—

"White man's favour is like lime on the wall."

He paused and then proceeded—

"Oh? how much I had worked for the estate. They told me I was an honest worker and honest I was. When old age crept on me they threw me out like a piece of husk."

"What about your wife? Does she live on Sinnathottam?"

A shadow came over the old man's face. He paused.

"She is dead and gone, sir. If she were alive I would not go begging."

"Did she die young?"

"No, sir. She died somewhat old. A very good woman she was, sir. A very kind woman. All our life we never had a quarrel. She never looked at another man's face and I never set eyes on any other woman".

"You were a happy couple then."

"Yes, sir."

"Perhaps she was related to you?"

"My cousin, sir. The daughter of my father's sister. Poongavanam—that was her name. Poongavanam," he repeated closing his eyes.

"My evil dafs came after she left me."

It was a poignant theme. So I changed it.

"What's your name, old one?"

"Sivasamy, sir."

"Well, Sivasamy, have you no intention of going to India?"

"What have I got there, samy? And what could I do in a strange place?"

"So, you would live on Sinna-thottam to the end of your days?"

"Yes, sir. My father and mother lived and died there. I grew up there and married. All my children were born there. I laid my wife there under the tea. Poongavanam lies there in No. 7 field close to my father and mother. One day, after I have closed my eyes, my boys would lay me there close to them. I have not much to live for".

Sivasamy's voice trembled and broke. I myself felt disturbed and sad. After all, this is the fate of Sivasamy and his like. How many such men might have taken to the road and how many more will. Yes, the men and women born to labour.

TIME FOR HEALING

The monsoon had come. It rained incessantly, morning, noon and night. The smell of wet leaves and damp earth lurked in his nose. The clamour of the monsoon always stirred him. Work in his union office, for days together, had become slack. And the monotony was unbearable.

Rajan looked out of the window. The sky was murky. Giant cobweb-like clouds settled in the pockets of the mountain. Altogether a sullen landscape. There was a whip-crack in the skies and another lash of rain.

At last someone had come into his outer office. His clerk's voice mechanically rang out.

"From New Valley, sir," came a rounded, soft reply.

The ring in her voice almost suggested her age. Rajan thought that she must be in her mid-twenties. A rich voice, fine in its texture. But it held an undertone of pain.

"Have you brought a letter from your leader?" asked the clerk.

"I did not know that, sir. People on the estate told me to go to the *sangam* and I came."

"You should have brought a letter", the clerk repeated.

"I didn't know that", the voice faltered, "my ill-luck dogs me wherever I go."

What anguish in that voice, so strange and so compelling. Yes, like the voice that calls for help from the depths of the night. Rajan called out to his clerk, "Send her in".

A figure, of medium height wrapped in a cumbly from head to foot, came in. A pale face, well moulded, shapely nose, dark, deep eyes, like disturbed pools. Again that pain and silent suffering in them.

Rajan wondered. What could be wrong with so young a woman? She must have lost her husband or perhaps it was a recent sorrow.

She had come in the pouring rain. Water dripped from her cumbly. She shivered in her wet clothes.

"Take off your cumbly and sit down," he said.

Again that sad look on her face.

"I can't use my right hand, sir. It is burnt."

Out of the folds of her cumbly emerged a bandaged stump. Timidly she held it over his table. A shapeless deformity wrapped in white rag from her forearm. She must have lost her fingers, he imagined. Deep raw scars rose from beneath her bandage.

Something unnerved him. A numb chill crept along his spine. His right hand remained motionless for a while. For years nothing more poignant had touched him so deeply as the withered hand of this woman.

The rain came down heavily. The wind moaned through the trees behind his office. Through the window torn leaves strayed inside. The smell of wet earth and those dark pitiful eyes!

Rajan hated to detain her any longer. He proceeded to take down her complaint. Briefly she told him that her name was Paravathi and that she lived with her widowed mother in New Valley estate. Three years ago she had married Raman from the adjoining estate. Since there was no male at the head of the family, her mother accepted him into their household.

She and her husband lived with her mother and younger sister. Here she stumbled over her words, recovered in a confused way, and proceeded.

"I was very sick after child-birth. My mother left me alone in the lines and went to work. I was lying close to the fire-place worn-out and tired. My blanket caught fire and burnt my right hand. The timely arrival of my mother saved me. I can't use my hand and the dorai has refused me work. It is very hard for my mother to support me in her old age."

"What about your husband?" asked Rajan.

Parvathi bent her head. Tears fell on the wet floor. It seemed as if her heart would break under the violent fit of her sobs.

"Any accident?"

"No, Samy. He went away with my sister. Not his fault. We all lived in one room. Fire and cotton can't be safe together. I pray that they may be well. I want only work to help my mother."

Rajan promised to do his best for her and asked her to go home.

The pathetic ring in her voice, her dark disturbed eyes and the tragic tale of her life pursued Rajan all day long. That night rain came down in torrents. He pulled the blanket over him and suddenly thought of Parvathi's crippled hand behind the folds of her cumbly.

Two years later Rajan's election rounds brought him to a polling booth at Norwood. A large concourse of people filled the road. It was like a festival. From amidst the crowd came Parwathi with the inevitable cloak-like thing thrown over her shoulders.

She held a sprightly little girl of four in her left hand. As she recognized Rajan she lifted her hand in salutation. Two years appeared to have taken away much of the grief and suffering from her eyes.

"Is this your child?" he asked her, eager to know something of her position.

"It is my sister's daughter, sir." Then she corrected herself—"Our child, my husband and I are very fond of her."

And so the obvious had happened.

"I am glad to hear of it", said Rajan thoughtfully. "Did you come here to vote?"

"Yes, sir, I gave my vote to our *sangam*."

Pride spread over her face. Those dark eyes sparkled for a while. For a moment she forgot the child beside her and her crippled hand.

Rajan stood there deeply moved. The crippled and inarticulate, he thought, had yet the strength to preserve human dignity. The scars on her hand reminded him that Parvathi had had her time of pain and also her time of healing.

The rains came and went. And so did the elections. Parvathi sat by her fireside wondering why nobody came from her *sangam* to ask for her vote. There was no excited crowd to draw her heart away. There was nothing to bring light to her face.

The smell of wet earth filled her nose. The wind moaned through the trees behind her line. Parvathi sat there in silence unable to bear the monotony outside.

MANIKKAM FOSTERS LOVE

In Manikkam's time love among the tea was taboo. Any young Lothario who dared to breach the wall that fortified plantation society had to pay heavily before the *panjayet*. And *panjayet* men never stopped at anything to slake their sadistic thirst. They waited hawk-like to pounce not only on the unwary victims but their entire family. The *panjayet* stood for organised terror and Manikkam met the *panjayet* men at their own level or used the name of the *panjayet* to mollify the "righteous" and the prude.

Let us recall one episode.

Ragavan, son of Veera Kumaran of the centre line, on his 21st year resembled a statue that had come tearing out of solid brown stone. It was rumoured that he had the love-light when his eyes turned towards his maternal uncle's daughter, Parvathi.

The entire estate including Manikkam looked forward to this happy day "in the near future". Ragavan's parents took it for granted that one day Parvathi would come into their household to bear their grandchildren. But Parvathi's father, Sinna Palani kangany, had other plans. He had secretly picked on a young assistant kanakapulle in the neighbouring estate. That bright-eyed young man called at Sinna Palani's house one Sunday evening. And the intentions of Sinna Palani became all too clear to Ragavan and his people.

That fateful evening when Manikkam happened to see Ragavan he hinted,

"*Thambi* there is a white bull round here. Be careful of your heifer."

When Ragavan reached home he found his parents in kusu-kusu conference.

"Ragava, don't step into that man's house", his father cautioned him.

"Why do you say that? My son has every right to go to my brother's house," retorted his mother.

"Shut up, woman! Your brother is a cut-throat. I rue the day that I married a woman of his father's house."

"You people don't fight. I won't go there", said Ragavan and went direct to Manikkam for guidance.

Next morning Ragavan was missing from his house. His mother began to rave and rant as if she were on fire. "Aio Ragava! My Ragava!!" she kept shouting. "Let him go to hell, woman", shouted Veera Kumaran, "May a thunder bolt strike the man who ruined my son."

"You wicked sinner, do not curse", shouted back his wife.

Just then arose confused cries from Sinna Palani's house that Parvathi was missing. Now it became an accomplished fact that the couple had eloped.

And Manikkam sat in his verandah gleefully singing:

It's the song of Sandanam
O Ponnamma,
It's the song of Sandanam
O Ponnamma,
It's the public thoroughfare
O Ponnamma,
You can board the train if you go
O Ponnamma,

His jubilation was shared by all young men on the estate. People gathered in nooks and corners to discuss the event and its cause. There was weeping and wailing among the women in the houses of Ragavan

and Parvathi. Sinna Palani kangany was found running round the lines with a pruning knife in his hand. Manikkam who had made many lilting repetitions of his song, now called out:

"Oi, kangany *machan!* Don't try to go to the gallows"

"Oi, don't talk. I have gone mad."

"Yes, Oi, I knew that you had gone mad for some time. I am telling you. Go to the chief at once. There is a *panjayet* on the estate. Remember what your daughter has done. You have brought disgrace on the estate. Don't caper and dance there."

Sinna Palani stopped short in his wild career and went humbly to the chief and complained.

"Bring your daughter and nephew, Sinna Palani", said the Chief. When Ragavan's father with his wife came, he said:

"Bring your niece and your son. This is a family dispute and you people are responsible for the two workers I have lost".

The men went home beaten.

One evening Manikkam returned from the village, after a drink of toddy, with a song on his lips.

The machan who went away, he came back
He came back with the smell of flowers.
The machan who went away, he came back
He came back with the smell of flowers.

He sang it with a peculiar caress in his voice and ran up the steps to the chief's quarters.

"What Manikkam? inquired the Big Man.

"I have got them, *appoo*."

"What have you got, Manikkam?"

"*Appoo*, they were in the Chetty Thottam in the

village. Tonight they will come here."

"You are a devil of a fellow. I knew it."

"The *panjayet*, *Appoo*."

"Don't be in a hurry. Let them first settle down".

Manikkam returned to his verandah and sat there expecting something to happen. By 7 p.m. Ragavan came down the steps with his head covered and greeted Manikkam.

Come, come, *thambi*. Where have you been all these days? How was life? Hei, there!" he called out to his wife, "Make a cup of tea with lot of milk and sugar for *thambi*. Sit here, Ragava, I'll have a word with your good uncle and come".

Before he could have stepped out of the house Sinna Palani came running there.

"Oi, Manikkam *machan*, your niece has come back".

"Very good. Let us call the *panjayet*. You disgraced the estate and all of us."

"Aio. *machan!* Let the past be past. I have suffered enough for my folly".

"Don't say that. Only now the time has come for you to pay for your folly."

"That poor thing belonged to this sinner (Ragavan). Everybody knew that they were to be married. Why did he take her away?"

"Now, now, stop bluffing. You were after big people. This poor boy was not good enough for your sugar candy."

"Now, we can marry them. Come, *machan*, let's go and see my sister."

"O, I see. You want to make the best of the stale rice. Let the *panjayet* decide it. Let me have the pleasure of seeing you fall a hundred times at their feet. You wear a black coat and carry an umbrella, eh? You want a kanakapulle for a son-in-law."

"Were you not born with sisters *machan*, have you no heart to punish an old man?"

"Now, tell me, where is your sugar candy that took this boy away?"

"At home".

"Fine story, *machan*. Very fine story. Now take your nephew to your sugar candy. *Thambi*, Ragava. Go, go. I don't want any of you people's stench here."

Without a word Sinna Palani took Ragavan home.

A week later Manikkam appeared before the chief with Sinna Palani Kangany.

"Aiyah, my daughter and nephew have come back."

"Yes, Sinna Palani. What do you want?"

"A *panjayet, Appoo*", interposed Manikkam.

"Aio Samy. My daughter was meant for him".

"Then why did they run away from the estate?"

"*Appoo*, she did not like the kanakapulle."

"Now my daughter and my nephew have become wife and husband", suggested Sinna Palani meekly.

"Where is the *thali* (symbol of wifehood) *machan* Let us have a look at the *thali*."

"You are right, Manikkam", said the chief. "Any young fellow can bolt with a girl and come back here as husband and wife. There must be an end to this kind of nonsense."

"You are our father", pleaded Sinna Palani. "Give my daughter the charity of a *thali*".

Yes, *appoo*. The young people must ask it in the proper way."

"Daughter, Parvathie", called out Sinna Palani, "*Thambi*, come and fall at aiyah's feet and ask for his blessing."

From the crowd that stood behind the fence, came out two figures with their heads covered.

"Come, come my birdlings. Come, my sugar candy! Had a nice time without the *thali*. Now fall at *appoo's* feet and ask your *thali*."

"There is no need to fall at my feet, you little fools. Go away to your lines. I can't easily dismiss the *panjayet*. Sinna Palani, I want order on this estate, you hear me, Palani?"

"Yes, Samy. My grandfather came to your father as a *kadan al* (indentured labourer). Please tell me a good word, aiyah. My people have never come before a *panjayet*".

"Very well then, Sinna Palani. When do you propose to have them married?"

"Next month, aiyah."

"You may go now, Sinna Palani; *dai*, Manikkam, take them away".

"*Appoo*".

"I said—take them away!" thundered the chief.

"Yes, *Appoo*."

The crowd trickled out.

Manikkam jauntily walked at the head of the crowd with a big torch in his hand. He had a special song for the occasion—

The machan who went away he came back,
He came back with the smell of flowers,
The machan who went away he came back,
He came back with his span cloth.

VEERAPPEN—THE LADIES' TAILOR

At the estate office. The Superintendent is seated at his table. The chief clerk stands close behind him. Outside the open window a dozen workers have assembled to seek redress for their grievances. Sathappen, a middle-aged man, approaches the Superintendent.

"Salaam dorakalay."

"Salaam! What do you want, Sathappen? Have you come here again with your old story?"

"Yes, sir. What am I to do? I have three extra mouths to feed. It is not good, sir, to keep a growing lad idle in the lines."

"I know all that Sathappen. I told you once before that there will be no vacancy for the next six months. This estate is only 700 acres, and there are over 1,000 working labourers. It's impossible now."

The chief clerk meekly suggests: "Last month sir, we registered 25 young persons—12 from one sangam and 13 from another."

"That's the point, Sathappen. I dare not do anything in this blasted place. The moment I take on your son, there would be a devil of a row from the other union".

"Nobody can question dorai."

"Oh, don't you say that. Your union doraimar write me nasty letters. Ask your son to get a job elsewhere".

"Aio, samy! he has no citizenship. He can't get a job outside".

"He was born here, wasn't he?"

"Yes, doraikalai".

The clerk intervenes, "Sir, this man's son, Veerappen, is doing some kind of tailoring in the lines....."

"Oh, a ladies' tailor, the young blighter, eh?" After a pause.

"I remember something about a tailor. I have it on the tip of my tongue. Do you remember, clerk?"

"Yes, sir. You know, sir, Sannasi came here with a complaint that Veerappen cast remarks at his daughter, Samuthiram, when she went to get her jacket."

The Superintendent becomes severe:

"I know that case now. Your son is sitting in my lines and creating work for me, Sathappen. Because of these loafers I have no peace. This is a hell hole. The next time he plays the fool with Sannasi's daughter I push you out of the estate. I don't care how long you have been here. You go away now. Come along, the next man".

As Sathappen turns to go without looking at the chief clerk, he says aloud:

"I have not done harm to anybody. Why are they putting sand in my mouth!"

"Did he say something about mouth?"

"Yes, sir. About his mouth."

"Did he say it is foul?"

No. 10 line. In the last room verandah, Veerappen, a young fellow of twenty dressed in a striped sarong and a well-ironed shirt; a handkerchief around his neck, sits at his machine. The machine hums: er.....er .....er.....erram. Yes, at every round it ends up with "erram". It seems to suggest her name "SAMUTHIRAM".

"What a girl", he repeats to himself. "How she has et me down. Yet she spends half the time sporting ierself in the verandah. But why?"

He looks up and finds Samuthiram leaning against the verandah doorway, her back turned towards him.

"A rounded plump body", he thinks. "She pretends not be aware of me or the hum of my machine."

Samuthiram's thoughts too keep humming with the machine.

"The style of a jobless man, a tailor! Pooh!"

At this moment Veerappen's mother comes out with a chatty full of water and throws it out with a splash. She notices Samuthiram standing there and spits out with a big "thooo". As if she has been hit by an invisible hand, Samuthiram abruptly goes into the line room.

Sathappen and his wife Palaniaie talk in undertones in their line room.

"Dorai was not bad. That clerk *aiyah* upset everything. What do you think? If there is any more trouble about Sannasi's daughter, the dorai said, he would turn us out of the estate."

"My son is not a cad. It is that wench. Now I saw her loitering about in the verandah. Don't I know their kind?"

"We must mind our business."

"You mean to say that my son went into their house?"

Veerappen slows down the machine and listens.

"It's not your son's fault, you say. But that complaint to the dorai upset everything."

"It is that wench. She came making eyes and mouth at my son."

"I told this useless fellow not to do this loafers' job".

"What is the other job you have found for him? You are talking so big."

"Not a case of talking big, woman. Now the dorai himself knows that your son is playing the fool in the lines."

"Yes. He is no worse than any other young fellow on the estate."

"Please stop shouting without putting up the whole line."

Veerappen closes the machine quietly and goes to the temple where other young men assemble for a chat in the evenings. He meets Sivalingam, another tailor. He tells him in the course of their conversation what the union man said.

"For every thousand workers there are a hundred and fifty unregistered persons all over the estate. In the enxt few years it will be worse."

"Then what do we do? We all become tailors, draw sand for the masons or weed contracts on Sundays at half pay!"

"We must go in search of jobs."

"Yes, my friend. They are waiting with open arms to receive you!"

It is a dark night. The railway station. At the booking-office window there are people waiting for tickets. Palaniandy kangany, who was at the estate office that morning, sees Veerappen. He makes out the young man's intentions.

"Where are you going, Veerappen?"

Silence.

"I know you are leaving home", says Palaniappen kangany "and I know the reasons too. You are a good boy born of good parents. This is not a wise thing to do. Outside our estate you will be lost. The police might take you for a *kallathoni* and put you in jail or even might deport you. Well, does your father know that you are going away?"

"No," says the tongue-tied Veerappen.

"The best thing for you is to go home. That is the safest place for you. Don't give a thought to what they say about that girl. Nobody is a saint. Don't keep staring at the ground. Take an old man's advice and go home."

It is a hopeless moment for Veerappen. He curses his fate: "The estate will not accept me and in the world outside there is no place for me to go. What a life!"

Like a beaten animal he goes through the darkness back to his father's house.

IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

Mr. Thandapany firmly believed that it was the duty of society to sustain him. Without him, society could never go in the right direction. He therefore took upon himself the task of establishing a *madam* (pilgrim's rest) at Kataragama. He selected a number of well-to-do head kanganies in the Central and Uva provinces as his sponsors. Their houses served as his rest houses and a fraction of their earnings went towards his building fund.

He chose his clothes with discrimination to suit his profession. He adopted a hair style to fit the nature of his wanderings. His snuff-coloured kadar *jibba,* (long shirt) defied the dust and grime. His heavy pair of sandles withstood his rugged journeyings. He carried a small tin suitcase and an umbrella. He completed his ensemble with a green shawl flung across his shoulders.

Nobody ever knew from where he came or what his antecedents were. He was a book of mystery. He had a keen sense of the popular seasons, the seasons of pilgrimage to Kataragama and Adam's Peak; the season for the *samy kumbudu* and the seasons of flush (heavy crop) when money was in circulation.

One afternoon he found himself at the residence of a favourite head kangany in time for lunch. After the usual greetings the head kangany asked him whether he was on his way to Kataragama and how his building project was progressing. Mr. Thandapani told him that it would take another two years to complete it and he proposed to invite the Agent to the Government of India himself for the opening ceremony.

"For this year I have a collection of songs on Kataragama. The proceeds of the sale would go to the building fund." So he said.

The servant boy announced that lunch was ready. On his way Mr. Thandapani quietly hinted that a little fresh ghee would help settle his stomach. The servant boy assured him that all his requirements like ghee, pickle, butter milk, dhal, pepper soup and mutton were there. With apparent satisfaction he got down to the job of eating. After lunch he took up his position in the porch and sucked his cigar with great relish.

The head kangany asked him whether he was in a hurry to go.

"I am somewhat in a hurry, sir, but I do not wish to hurry you."

"Then we shall meet tonight to hear your song".

As the host was about to leave, Mr. Thandapani said by way of compliment: "That White Masters must pay you in gold, sir. Without people like you how can they run these vast estates? When I see these unending green bushes, I often think that Shri Rama sent you here to create this beautiful garden that gives the gold. Ha! Ha! it is wonderful."

The head kangany was flattered. He instructed the servant boys to look after Mr. Thandapani.

By six in the evening he was ready, bathed and groomed in his freshly washed clothes. The head kangany and the male inmates assembled in the office-cum-sitting room to listen to Mr. Thandapani's song recital. With a great flourish he brought out the manuscript from the weather-beaten suit-case. He settled himself snugly on the sofa and sang in a guttural voice. After a little while coffee was brought round. He sipped it delicately in a lingering way and started again.

The recital went on till dinner time. After a very satisfactory dinner and undisturbed sleep he got up the following morning. For breakfast he wolfed down two trays of good food with a tumbler of milk coffee and left with a donation of Rs. 15/- bound for the neighbouring estate three miles away to be in time for

lunch. Thus his life moved on like a placid stream, until one day the plantations were shaken up by trade unions.

1940.

Now the Gods of Kataragama and Adam's Peak had changed their abode. He found them in the trade union office. The District President found Mr. Thandapani's wide knowledge of estates and estate personalities useful. Moreover he would serve as a personal propagandist —to sing his praise wherever he went. Such a propagandist was necessary for a rising leader.

On the day when the big leader came from Colombo to address a mass meeting, Mr. Thandapani accompanied them. He was introduced to the chief as an able propagandist by the district heads.

After the clamour and din of welcome, just before the big leader was about to speak, Mr. Thandapani asked for permission to sing a song. He was introduced to the people as a great singer and a servant of the labouring masses. Much to the surprise of the district heads and the pleasure of the big chief he started off:

"This, our ever victorious sangam
And our leader, the mighty jaguar.
The mountain pard ....."

At the end of it there was loud cheer and clapping of hands. The big leader sat immobile in his seat and clasped his hands in modesty.

On the return journey Mr. Thandapani was sounded whether he would take up a job in the union. He reluctantly accepted the job of a roving representative on the basis of an undefined allowance. He never sat down to any hard work because it made one stale. Today he would be in one district and tomorrow in another, and for a change he would do a little "harmless scouting" for one of the big leaders.

Whenever possible Mr. Thandapani had his morning tea, lunch and dinner with the District Chief. If he were slightly late Mr. Thandapani would chide him—

"Sir, if you really wish to serve the people, you must look after youth health. There is a time for everything, and food must never be neglected."

On a Sunday when members turned up in large numbers, he took upon himself the job of advising everybody. He would deal with three cases in one breath.

"This is a theft case," he would say, "cooked up by that rascal, Palaniandy kangany to break our *sangam*. Do I not know the man? He has a *kaday* on the estate and falsifies accounts and swindles the poor labourers." Turning to the clerk he would suggest—

"Please ring up the Police."

Referring to the next one he would say:

"This is a dismal case, sir, clerk, please take down the story in full. Our President will attend to it. Is there a case he can't tackle?"

The minor officials in the office would smart under this endless babble, but what could they tell a man who had the ear of their President?

Now Mr. Thandapani would come to the last case. "As for this family dispute, we must go to the estate and fix it up. Look here, Ramiah, we will come there next week. I will bring our President. Now, you must pay the car hire."

He would round off the day with a membership drive to a nearby estate. Together with the district head he went to his favourite head kangany friend. His old friend was surprised to find the social worker in the garb of a union man.

"Ah, now you are in the *sangam*?"

"Yes, sir. You would always find me good."

He canvassed him to enrol his labourers in the union and quietly hinted that a good dinner be served for mutual benefit. After dinner when they were about to leave, Mr. Thandapani got himself excused and stayed behind.

Before he retired to bed he assured his head kangany friend that his interests were in safe hands. There was no need to entertain any fear about transfer to the estate gang.

When the morning came Mr. Thandapani left with gifts in cash and kind.

After all, the trade union movement that shook the plantations did not shake him so much. To Mr. Thandapani life was like an ever-brimming river.

THE PENSIONER

Kandasamy, the pensioner, sits leaning against the verandah wall. He is a heavy-boned man of brown complexion in his mid-sixties. He has a greying beard with streaks of black in it like his drooping moustache. He wears an old *verty* turning brown with dirt and dust. The upper part of the body is covered with a blanket. Its original black and green stripes have now become a complete black.

For him another day has begun. Time hangs rather heavy on him. In spite of the incessant jabber of children and the sharp flow of water hissing from the taps, there is a deep silence in his heart. It is like a dead weight on the centre of his being. He sits there with half-closed eyes watching the movement of children They mean nothing to him. After all, what does new life hold for him? Just growth, drudgery and decay!

By 10 o'clock Muthan, the line sweeper, comes on his rounds. He starts his work from one end of the line. When he nears Kandasamy's line room as usual he asks him:

"Elder, how are you today?"

"How am I today? No better than yesterday. A little worse perhaps. The pain in the joint bothers me at night. The cough also upsets me. What is worse, it upsets others."

"Before you go to bed apply a little turpentine. Rub it hard on the joints. It should help. As for the cough, I'll get you something from the 'medicine man'."

"Yes. The medicine man indeed! He has one yellow mixture for all diseases. In our young days we used to call it *sarva sanjeevi*, the panacea. Now the young fellows call it 'the hot water medicine.'

"Brother, what medicine for me now! Old age is creeping into me. "There is no medicine for that kind of thing."

"Don't say that. There is no old age for the white man. He gets married at seventy."

"It depends on what food he eats and how he lives. What is the food I eat? Just dry rice and cabbage—morning, noon, and night."

"That's true", agrees Muthan, "but you must eat something to keep up your body."

"What could one do with twelve rupees?"

Just then dogs bark in the upper lines. The dogs lying on the dirt heap in the compound take up the refrain and run round the lines. Children come down the by-path shouting in a singsong voice.

"Dorai! Dorai! Dorai!"

"The dorai has come to the lines, Muthan. You get along with your work."

In a little while the Manager comes striding up with his assistant. A steady, tall, well-built man in his late sixties. Kandasamy comes out to the compound and salutes him.

"Salaam, perïa dorai."

"Salaam, Kandasamy. You are getting old, aren't you?"

"Yes, dorai, I am getting old without work."

"The doctor says that you cannot work."

"Dorai, there is strength still in these arms. Please give me a trial, sir."

"That's not possible, Kandasamy. You have got this wrong notion into your head. Or somebody has put it into your head. Lots of boys and girls are growing up. I have to find work for them. Old people like you must make room for the young."

"True, dorai. But older men than I are still working."

"That's not correct. I have checked on that."

"Dorai, I have worked for you all my life. I have pruned, cut drains and forked better than any other man in this group. Look at my state now. Please look at my hands. It has been over a year since I worked. The corns are still fresh. Dorai give me something to live on. What could I do with twelve rupees?"

"Your son and daughter must look after you now. You brought them up well."

"Dorai, I brought them up to take my place. Yes, to work for you. I don't want to be a burden tothem."

"Can't you pick up some job in the kadais, Kandasamy?"

"Peria dorai, all my life I have worked on a white man's estate. In my last days I'll not go to the kadais."

Kandasamy steadies himself to his full height and the Manager and his assistant gaze at him in pride.

"Proud old devil! There's blood in his body."

"Yes, sir. He's the last of the old type."

"Yes, I am glad. At least there's one fellow left in this rotten hole. Well, Kandasamy, I'll write to the Company about your pension and let you know soon."

"You are my dorai. I worked for you."

"Yes, I am glad. At least there's one fellow left in in London. I must write to him and get his permission"

The Manager and his assistant go on their rounds.

"The dorai in London", mutters Kandasamy as he goes back to the verandah and reclines on the fowl coop. This encounter with the Manager leaves him in a state of mild agitation. Yet he feels glad that at last he spoke out his mind. It has unburdened the weight

that oppressed him so long. But what is the use? He could not even get a promise of relief. There's nothing the Manager cannot do if he wants.

Why should he say. "You and I work for a dorai in London?"

All these years he worked for the dorai whom he knew. But now to be told that he has wasted his life for an unknown man, is something that he could not be reconciled with. A feeling of frustration and self-pity creeps over him. A man like Kandasamy could not cry.

He has never felt so helpless in all his life. His mind refuses to function. An emptiness fills his limbs. He lies on the fowl coop for a long time in a state between sleep and wakefulness.

It is close upon 6 p.m. The women are returning home with their empty baskets after their day's work. His daughter and daughter-in-law have just come into the verandah. His daughter asks him whether he has eaten his midday meal. He says: "No".

The women folk get busy and start cooking for the night.

There is activity all round. Scrubbing and washing at the water tap. The voices of women. The shouting and calling of children. Bare-bodied men moving in and out of the verandahs.

The fowls and dogs come home and settle in their corners.

Night gathers around. Lights come out. Every room in the row of lines is warm and snug but sooty. Kandasamy's daughter lets down the jute-hessian hangings on either side of the verandah to give him protection from wind and rain. Then she puts a bottle lamp on the wall and spreads a cumbly on the fowl coop for him to sleep. His son returns from the factory by 8 p.m. Before he goes into the room he peeps into the jute-hessian and calls out:

"Father!"

"Why are you late, son?"

"The last bag came late."

"Well. go in and have youd dinner."

Kangany's dinner is reserved in the verandah as usual. He eats quietly, pausing at every handful. After dinner he sits chewing betel. The lines are steeped in ghost-like silence. Kandasamy retires to bed. A strong wind beats against the jute-hessian and rain comes down with regular drumming on the roof. The sound of the rain and the smell of wet earth stir his heart. Old memories from the shadows. Somewhere from the deeps of the night his past comes before him. He sees himself as he was thirty years ago. He was a sturdy, young pruner in khaki shorts, a white banian and a red belt round his waist. By one o'clock he would complete his task of pruning 250 bushes of tea and make a bee-line to the weighing shed to meet his wife. There would be Kamalam like a dark filly waiting for his arrival.

"You have not gone home yet?"

"I weighed up a little while ago."

"Then let's go home. You have to get back in time."

Right along the way they would talk in undertones as if they were a newly-married couple. When they reached home, after a wash, they would sit side by side on low benches by the hearth and eat their food. Kandasamy would sit so close to her that they would feel the warmth of their bodies run into each other.

That was life. They lived in the warmth of each other. And when the children arrived, there were other loves to share. By a strange process Kamalam had become the head of the house. He was just the "father" and he loved to carry out the buildings of the "mother." Whole evenings till they retired to bed or the whole of Sundays he would be at home.

There would be just an occasional. "Yes" or "No" All the same he would feel the warmth of her body close to his, delicious well-being, an intimacy beyond words.

Ten years ago when the fever rocked the estate he had his major misfortune. His son and then his daughter went down with the deadly fever. Kamalam looked after them night and day, without food, without rest and without sleep. When the fever struck her she had little strength left to resist. From this dim procession that has gone into the dark emerges the face of Kamalam as he had seen it in his early youth. Kandasamy turns in his bed to divert his thoughts. It is a weary, weary night. He hears the factory watchman's gong go on one after another...11...12...1...2 and fade away in the void of the night. At last a heavy drowsiness settles over his eyes. He falls asleep.

The night passes on. The silence of the dawn is broken by the call of the tom-tom. Kandasamy jumps out of his bed, to realize that he has nothing to do at the muster.

Another day begins. His mind mechanically turns to the dorai in London.

MANIKKAM SAVES A SITUATION

In the insufferable monotony that overhung the lines Manikkam sensed a dark foreboding. It was a sixth sense nature bestowed on him. On such occasions he expected something drastic to happen.

Indeed it did happen.

By 11 a.m. that Sunday morning there came the raucous wailing of old women from behind the double line on his left. As usual Manikkam did not rush to the scene but waited in his verandah. For, such incidents had a tendency to travel faster than his own imagination. He saw men and women from other lines converge to the double line from where the commotion emerged. In that medley of voices he was able to discern two words distinctly—

"Grandfather Murugan! Grandfather Murugan!"

"Ah, has he gone!" mumbled Manikkam.

Murugan was a broken down old man of seventy. He lived with his son on the rear side of the double line. For some time past he was ailing, and the estate medical orderly—*marundu karan*—had supplied him with coloured mixtures. Therefore Manikkam was not far wrong when he concluded that the old man "was gone". But why this undue commotion when death comes to take away the agony of lingering on the brink of the grave?

A couple of young blighters came running to Manikkam. They spoke all at once in extreme agitation.

"Brother, brother, old man Murugan died while he was eating rice."

"What nonsense! How can food become poison?"

"He got chocked."

"Then it is peace for him hell for us."

Yes. A sudden death on an estate in those times, and even now, unbalanced its tranquility. There was something dark and ominous in its arrival like an earthquake. It shook up the entire estate community. Women and children went behind closed doors. For they felt that the dead man's ghost stalked the place in broad daylight. In addition to that the deceased had to be "cut up". That was the word for it and it had the same import as carving up a live human being.

It had other ordeals too. For a week old men would have to sit up till late in the night reciting stanzas from holy books to keep the tortured spirit at bay.

It now occurred to Manikkam that all that turmoil and pother had to be avoided at any cost. So he urged a few elders and the estate barber to bear the evil tidings of the chief, the master of such situations. He received the deputation and listened to every word of the story in its varying details and paused in the track of his thoughts.

"Very well," he said, "send me Manikkam immediately."

In the next fifteen minutes Manikkam stood before the chief with folded hands and his bushy head inclined to a side.

"*Appoo*, you called me."

"Yes. You know what has happened in the lines?"

"Yes *appoo*."

"What are you fellows going to do?"

"Burry him, *appoo*."

"That is not so easy! If you bury him now you may have to dig him up again if the news gets round".

"*Appoo,* then send me to the *dakku-dorai* (dispenser)."

"What would you tell him, Manikkam?"

"I'll bring him here, *appoo.*"

"Very well. Hold your tongue. I don't want old Murugan to be cut up and defiled. You understand?"

Armed with the blessings of the chief, Manikkam made a bee-line to the estate dispensary.

After the day's round the dispenser sat in the compounding room making up mixtures. As Manikkam's shadow fell across the room the dispenser looked up.

"What do you want, Manikkam?"

He did not reply at once. With a wry face he violently scratched his head.

"Well, what do you want, Manikkam?"

"*Dorai,* what was the medicine you gave to my grandfather?"

"Why Manikkam? Who is your grandfather?"

"Old Murugan, *aiyah.*"

"Why do you want to know that?"

"Aio *samy,* after taking some medicine from the *marundu karan* he got hiccups and died".

"I have no time for jokes. Tell me the truth."

"I am telling you the truth, *samy.* For some time he was suffering from fever and he took coloured medicine from *marundu karan.* That gave him the hiccups. But sir, please tell me when a man becomes too old for any medicine to they give him... I mean something ..... something.....to.....put ..... an...e...n...d... I mean stop..."

Manikkam paused and scratched his head. The dispenser knew what he was driving at.

"Don't talk rot, Manikkam."

Now the dispenser was able to gauge the trend of the talk in the lines. It disturbed him.

"Wasn't Murugan very old?"

"Yes, dorai. About seventy or more."

"At seventy a man must die, Manikkam."

"Not after taking medicine, dorai. We must find out the cause."

"You mean, cut him up?"

"Yes, dorai."

"Manikkam, you leave that to me. Now let me go and see the old man."

When the dispenser arrived at the house of death he found old Murugan's body stretched on the floor and covered with a tattered blanket. The old women were seated round crying their lament. At the appearance of the dispenser the crying and wailing stopped abruptly. After a brief survey of the body he proceeded to the head kangany's quarters.

The chief greeted the medical man with infinite calm.

"I lost old Murugan, doctor," he said sadly.

Although this observation did not mean anything the dispenser inferred that Murugan died after he had taken his mixture.

"It's old age, chief," he assured him.

"But people say that he was hale and hearty till yesterday."

"In old age it comes all too suddenly. But Manikkam has a funny notion in his head and it is not good."

The head kangany was taken aback by this piece of information. But he was not unaware of Manikkam's ingenuity on such occasions...And Manikkam stood at a distance away from the window scratching his head in deep thought.

"*Dai,* Manikkam!"

"*Appoo.*"

"What did you tell dorai?"

I have heard that *dakku dorimar* give a kind of medicine to old people when they can't be cured."

"What a fool you are Manikkam! I thought that you had some sense in your blasted head. Don't go about talking like that."

"*Appoo,* I only asked my wife whether this could have happened to my grandfather."

"Shut up. Don't breathe!"

"*Appoo.*"

"It is a dangerous talk, chief. Someone might set the ball rolling and all of us would be in a mess."

"Very true", said the chief with calculated ease.

"But when a man dies of old age, why worry?"

"Shall we burry him, *appoo?*"

"Go and bury him. But no talk in the lines," said the dispenser.

"Manikkam, shut your mouth and just do as the doctor dorai has told you."

Manikkam ran down the steps to the lines leaving the "big men" in the midst of their discussion.

"It is a good thing that we decided this way", said the chief. "As you said, people are likely to talk."

"Yes, chief. Cutting up a man is a terrible business

The whole place would be turned upside down for nothing."

"Yes. It would be a reflection on you and me."

"Yes. Isn't Manikkam a big talker, chief?"

"I'll look after that."

The dispenser left thoroughly satisfied with the assurance given to him by the chief.

The tom-tom boomed its tragic beat before old Murugan's house. Amidst weeping and crying and the singing of laments he was borne away in a decorated coffin to his last resting place among the tea.

That night when the chief sent for him, Manikkam was seated by the fire close beside his wife.

"*Thambi*", he told the messenger, "tell *appoo* that I am not too well to come there. First thing in the morning I will be there."

"You look all right. "Why not come brother?"

"Here, *thambi,* I have taken a little *thanni* (water which in this instance meant arrack). You say, I am ill and our chief will know."

The messenger departed.

Manikkam sat smiling to himself elated by his own success. Its secret he would not even share with his wife.

NAINAPPEN GOES TO COAST

It was an old type line, ten rooms in the row with a common verandah. Its tarred roof, its crude stone walls and the tiny windows at the back, presented a drab, miserable look. Some said it was haunted.

Most of its occupants were well past forty. The notables among them were the *kodanki,* the factory watcher, the basket weaver and Nainappen kangany. With the exception of the basket weaver and the factory watcher, everyone went out to work early and came home at sundown. They behaved like passengers in an express train. They looked upon each other with indifference and shocking aloofness.

The basket weaver sat on the pavement in front of his verandah and made his baskets humming an outdated tune through his nose to keep off the stench from the drain. His heart and soul went into the empty baskets which sustained him. The factory watcher, on the other hand, snored on the camp cot till 5 p.m. The *kodanki,* however, chose the night for his pastime. He beat on his *udukku* (hand drum) and sang in a haunting voice the ballad of *Kathavirayan.*

Of all these strange folk Nainappen was unique. He lived much to himself with his wife. He was close upon sixty. He wore a brown army coat, a red turban, a thin drooping moustache and a pair of lean earrings with dull, red stones. His *verty* was a span above his ankles and it enjoyed an endless lease of life, did that white *verty!*

His wife, Karuppaie was well past forty. A tall, gaunt woman with a nasty temper and weakness for red sarees. Nainappen never figured in any argument or quarrel at home or in the field. He knew how to

keep out of "trouble." If there was an uproar in the house he would say:

"Get along, you useless woman," and go on with his work.

Every Sunday he weeded his contract. He took five boys "just to assist him", as he called it. At 2 p.m. he gave each of them five rusks and clear, cool water from the nearby stream for lunch. At 5 p.m. he gave them five ten-cent bits. Because five was his fadic number.

One day his daughter and son-in-law were his guests. If they continued to stay for two more days, he thought, the family budget might get upset. Therefore he planned to take his son-in-law to his weeding contract "just for a look."

He began to sharpen the weeding scrapers. He held them against a large piece of iron and hit the edges with a hammer in a deliberate, calculated way. The strokes fell "kling! kling!! kling!!!" But all the while he was thinking of the betel leaves in the little tin box. On the previous night he had chewed only one. Between his wife, daughter and son-in-law probably twelve leaves might have gone by now. He then remembered the solitary cigar left over from the bundle he bought a month ago. He kept it for an emergency. It served as an emergency exit in times of accident.

It was almost time to go to the weeding contract. With all the respect due to his son-in-law he called him out, "*thambi* shall we go towards the field."

His son-in-law came out and his daughter also volunteered to go with them. At the end of the day Nainappen felt very happy. After all, his kith and kin must come. A couple of betel leaves would not matter.

They had lunch at 6 p.m. to economise on the dinner. Nainappen noticed that the dry fish had been cut in unequal pieces, big and small. It was criminal waste. He made it known to his wife in his own way.

"What woman, the pieces are too big for the mouth!"

The daughter knew the father better.

"Mother, you still don't know that father's teeth are getting shaky! Serve the big pieces to your son-in-law."

Then Nainappen rounded it off with his own philosophy.

"To much of anything is good for nothing."

The previous month when Nainappen bought the provisions, he held out the dry fish against the light and checked its true size and thickness; yes, its thickness. He knew how many pieces it contained. It would last a month. That was his mental calculation.

Thus Nainappen had measured out his life in dry fish pieces and saved a couple of thousands. He never for a moment thought that he was robbing himself and his good wife. He took all precautions to see that nothing should happen to encroach on his savings. He never kept company with anyone. He never went on a pilgrimage. He never took a meal or a drink from a relation.

In his sixtieth year the estate retired him on pension and directed him to collect it at coast to make sure that he was safely away in his village!

Nainappen collected his personal belongings in an old trunk and set out. Nobody cared to accompany him to the railway station to wish him godspeed. Nainappen was sad. His wife was weeping. There was no one to comfort her or share his grief. After all, they had lived their life in that line room for the last forty years. That separation was unbearable.

One evening, a month later, his daughter from the neighbouring estate came rushing, beating on her breast and banged her head on the closed door of the empty house and cried.

"What thunderbolt has struck
Our courtyard, my father!
My hands cannot gather
Your breath blown in the wind.
Speak to me a word, my father
...From your deserted house."

Yes. Nainappen was dead at coast.

THE NEW WEAPON

He punished himself to avenge society for the injustice it inflicted on him or his followers. The methods he employed had something of the moralist and martyr meant to hit the headlines in the newspapers or attract large crowds to the venue of his penance.

Over the question of ill-cooked food in the prisons he went on hunger strike and demonstrated to the world outside that he was fighting anti-social acts. If he was under-paid in the working place he got on a tree top and refused to come down until the Prime Minister came there to assure him relief.

If he was not sure of any redress by human hand or heart, with a letter on his person, he went up the tallest building and leapt to his doom and thus exposed the rotteness in society.

These methods belong to the man in the city. But his counterpart in the plantation employed a more subtle yet telling weapon.

Ramiah was the elected leader of the workers on Middleton Estate. It was his duty to look after their well-being and further their advancement. He was too conscious of his responsibilities and wished to do away with the "old" and usher in the "new".

From time to time he brought to the notice of the superintendent "the grievances of the people for early redress". The superintendent did not take prompt action as was expected of him. So Ramiah referred the matter to the District Office of his sangam. There too he met with undue delay because the matter was under correspondence.

However, a young spark on the estate chose to settle the dispute by direct action which resulted in the

"alleged assault" of the kanakapulle. The names of half a dozen "young fellows" unconnected with the episode were given to the Police by the victim. The "unfortunate men" were taken into police custody immediately "put into shape" and later released on bail. The police charged them for "intimidation, assault and unlawful assembly" and the superintendent suspended them from work pending the decision of the court.

According to Ramiah dual punishment for the same offence was a case of gross injustice.

It was at this stage that he decided to focus attention on the "injustice" prevailing on the estate. After very careful consideration, without a word of reference to his committee or his wife, he denied himself the services of the estate barber.

The first three weeks passed by unnoticed. In the fourth week there was the beginning of a beard. With it he developed a new code of conduct. He never asked for his food. He ate when it was given to him. He never spoke a harsh word to his wife nor did he pet his children. In the house where he lived, in the fields where he worked and in the temple where he conducted his meeting, he remained in agonised reserve. And his beard grew on like a menacing thunder cloud.

The people on the estate began to talk about his beard. His wife and children treated him with awesome respect. And the atmosphere at home grew tense.

"Our leader will not shave his beard until and unless our case is won," said the young men who were suspended from work. This news reached the ears of the superintendent.

On the labour day, when Ramiah went to the estate office, the Superintendent frowned at him:

"So, Ramiah, you want to figh e?"

"No *aiyah*. How can I fight dora

"Then why are you growing a beard?"

There was a painful silence.

"Very well," said the dorai, "you can fight me. I don't care two hoots for your beard. From today I'll not look at your face."

The Superintendent shut the window with a bang and ended the interview. Ramiah went home highly elated.

The incident spread like wild fire. The young women on the estate began to talk with respect about Ramiah's beard in the plucking field, the muster and spout. If the leader's wife came round they would hush their talk and look at her with solicitude. But the children on the estate were no respecters of persons. Whenever they saw Ramiah they sang out:

"Birds' nest! Birds' nest!"

The court case was lengthening and so was Ramiah's beard. In the meanwhile the Assistant Commissioner of Labour, summoned a conference to explore the possibilities of a settlement. He noticed Ramiah's beard and asked the union representative.

"Do people still favour the beard?"

"Sir", said the legal adviser to the management, "it is a challenge to my client. This man has proclaimed to the whole estate that he would not shave his beard until he wins the court case."

"If he loses the case?" interposed the Assistant Commissioner of Labour.

"That is the point, sir, said the union representative. "It is no challenge as is made out. It is a moral protest. Whether the case is won or lost, at the end of it all he would have it off."

"Oh, I see. It is meant to exert moral pressure."