Alagu Subramaniam

Closing Time and Other Stories

CLOSING TIME AND OTHER STORIES

by

ALAGU SUBRAMANIAM

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JAFFNA.
CEYLON.

THE AUTHOR

Late Samuel Alagusundram Subramaniam

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ALAGU SUBRAMANIAM is a Ceylon-born writer, a Barrister-at-law of the Honourable Society of Lincoln's and an Advocate of the Supreme Court of Ceylon. He was fortune in his long residence in England. It was a voluntary exile coupled with an intellectual journey. He was a promenent figure in London literary Circles and a spectacular personality at artists' gatherings, although he says of himself that he spent most of his time in the largest city in the World "reading, writing and walking and imagining" He was Co-editor of INDIAN WRITING, a quarterly journal published in England, and was Secretary of the London Branch of Indian Progressive Writers Association. His father was a judge in Ceylon, his grandfather was a literary personage and Alagu Subramaniam after his return to the Island has combined the dual professions of writer and barrister. He is married to a graduate teacher.

First Published in 1971

To

my wife

SELLAKANDU

PREFACE

FIFTEEN years ago there returned to this island a strange, charming man, a towering figure with a poetic mop of hair, fair skin and manicured hands. He carried with him an air of distinction but no swagger. True, he did not merge with his native Jaffna landscape, but he was no rebel. He quietly "belonged"—in a manner deeper than many of the tradition-bound Jaffna men themselves did.

The young man was a barrister-at-law and a writer and had had a long sojourn in England and the continent. He had the imprint of culture and good breeding and many heads turned appreciatively at him. for that was the post-independence bu pre-Mettananda era when such values were still respected.

He had the stamp of England and a strong smack of Bloomsbury, but there was absolutely no trace of a small-time accent, no sham, no pretence, no dilettantism. For Alagu Subramaniam—that was his name—was completely indigenous to his long finger tips,

You might wonder at the need for this prefatory delineation of the man. It is all necessary to explain a point.

Alagu Subramaniam has just published a collection of his short stories (The Big Girl: Universal Printers Ltd. Rs. 3/-) and every one of the 17 stories included in the selection are not only charming in different ways but have the same pleasurable authenticity of style that is the man. There is nothing pretentious about his stories. They are down to earth, honest etchings of life and cameos of people.

Alagu Subramaniam's stories are like good home made sandwiches. The fillings are cosily familiar themes, and his style of writing is as simple and uncomplicated as the good old bread. Whatever pepper and sauce there is judicially strewn, to help the readers digestion, but not harm his literary parate.

Alagu Subramaniam's chief virtue is that he never attempts too much—and God knows that is the biggest temptation a writer has to surmount. Padding too much and not knowing when to stop is a weakness common to both the literary tyro who wants to impress, and the cocksure veteran who takes his readers for granted.

Mercifully, Alagu Subramaniam is neither. For a man who had lived in the literary climate and hobnobbed with the giants in London, his output has not been prolific, but neither is there an affectation in his approach. All the stories in this book have been previously published in anthologies, periodicals, magazines and newspapers in various parts of the world. Some were broadcast in the Home and Overseas Services of the BBC.

One of the stories, The Mathematician even achieved distinction in a German translation, which was included in a volume published in Heidelberg entitled KURZ ERZAEHLT: DIE SCHOENSTEN GESCHICHTEN DER WELTLITERATUR (Briefly Told: The Finest Stories in World Literature).

Alagu Subramaniam's stories have earned encomiums from leading London critics, Sean O'Faolain in The Listener, J. Maclaren Rose in The Tribune (London), Walter Allen in Time and Tide, Olivia Manning in the Spectator (London).

He was co-editor of INDIAN WRITING, a quarterly journal published in England, and was Secretary of the London branch of the Indian Progressive Writers' Association.

Arjuna

in the Ceylon Daily Mirror.

SINGLE ROOM

Mohan arrived in England in the early spring and was taken straight to an english hostel in Lewisham, where his father wished him to board. The door was opened by a lady who smiled graciously at him and said: "Oh, you've come, splendid! Did you have a good crossing?"

"yes"

"splendid!"

Mohan observed that she was tall, broad shouldered and altogether a huge person. Her conversation was interspersed with heavy breathing, accompanied by the rise and fall of her bosom.

"You must be tired," she said. "You'd probably like a wash before high tea. You see, during week ends, we have dinner in the afternoons, high tea in the evening, and supper before retiring to bed. Now, let me introduce you to one of our men".

Mohan nodded.

"Here you are. This is Kenyon, and this Mohan. Is that right? Is that how you pronounce your name?".

Soon the gong was sounded and Mohan was led into a hall where tea was laid. The lady poured out the tea and the men took the cups from her and carried them to their seats. Mohan, however, sat indifferently at the table and the lady brought him his cup of tea.

"What have you come to read?" asked one of the residents.

"Law", Mohan replied "Is there anybody else here studying law?"

"Well, let me think" said the Englishmen. "Oh yes, there's John Mathews. He's the best person to give you advice on legal studies."

John is a West African who has just passed his finals. He has gone to town for meeting. He'll give you all the necessary help", assured Mrs. Barker, the lady superintendant.

"I would like to consult him", said Mohan, nervously fidgeting with a fork in front of him.

"Splendid", said Mr. Barker.

"After tea, she took Mohan round the building and showed him the cubicle she had assigned him.

"But I want a single room. I've always had a room to myself". The freshman pleaded.

"We have very few rooms" replied Mrs. Barker "most of the men sleep in cubicles and they are all satisfied with the accommodation provided"

"Still, I'd prefer a single room" said Mohan.

"We have also a common study and a large drawing room, both with blazing coal fires, but if you must really have a room all to yoursel, I could arrange that but not just yet."

"yes, a single room," replied Mohan.

"All right, the next vacancy is yours".

"I'll wait".

"Splendid" said Mrs. Barker.

The bell rang and the maid came upstairs and announced that a visitor for the new gentlemen had called.

"That's my cousin," Mohan said.

"Oh, your cubicle is not quite ready, you can use my office," Mrs. Barker said.

Mohan thanked her.

"Splendid", said Mrs. Barker.

"What sort of place is this, and who brought you here?" Mohan's cousin inquired.

" This place is run by a committee that calls itself the Brotherly Foundation, " Mohan replied. " It was recommended by a friend of my father. Anyhow, it doesn' t really matter who runs the place, so long as it is managed by English people, and the majority of residents are English. Culture is the keynote of this hostel. After all, I didn' t come to England merely to pass examinations and meet my countrymen. " Mohan' s cousin hid his amusement and embarrassment behind a false laugh.

In the morning John Mathews came to greet Mohan. " I' m glad to meet you," Mathews said.

" Please sit down, " Mohan beckoned from his bed.

" It' s nearly time for breakfast," Mathews said.

Mohan got up, washed hurriedly and dressed.

" I don' t like this cubicle " he told the African, " but Mrs Barker has promissed me the next vacancy. "

" We can talk about that later, " Mathews suggested, a broad thick-lipped smile displaying huge white teeth. " Hurry up, let's go down for breakfast. "

Some months later Mohan was alone in the study when Mathews rushed in excitedly and said, " Mohan, May I speek to you? "

" About what? "

" Listen, " said Mathews, " don't press for a room but be satisfied with what you' ve got. "

" Don't be, silly, " Mohan said, " I can't manage without a room. Anyhow, why are you interfering? Mrs. Barker has promised me the next vacancy. "

" I' m advising you as a friend, " John Mathews replied, " you' ll be wise not to press for a room ; for onething you' ll never get it ; for another, you' ll be putting Mrs. Barker into an embarrassing situation. "

" Nonsense, " Mohan said, " Do you mean to suggest that the lady is telling a lie ? "

" It's not a lie, but it' s another way of saying you can't have a room. It' s just politeness. "

" I don't believe it ", Mohan said. " This is the Brotherly Foundation. All men are brothers. "

" Do you realise, " asked John Mathews, getting close to Mohan and shaking his fist. " I' ve slept in the cubicle for the last three years There are very few rooms, man, and so many people waiting for them. True, this is the Brotherly Foundation. They are kind, that' s just the reason why they don't tell you to your face that you can't have a room."

The African left the study and Mohan, after meditating for a while, returned to his Justinian Mrs. Barker now came in with a letter for Mohan from home. His hands trembled as he opened the letter. He was nervous, lest it should contain bad news.

"Good news" asked Mrs. Barker.

"Splendid," said Mohan.

"Splendid," echoed Mrs. Barker

"I hope you're happy at the Foundation," Mrs. Barker said

"Quite," replied Mohan, "but I do need a room all to myself".

"The next vacancy is yours," said the lady superintendent.

"I'll wait."

"Splendid," said Mrs. Barker.

On another occasion, the Indian resident was talking on the greatness of his country's past civilization, when John Mathews, who had just returned from town, sauntered into the room.

"What's he lecturing on?" asked Mathews.

"The greatness of the Indian past," an Englishman said.

"Stop it, man, stop it," the African said. "We're tired of it. Your ancient culture!"

Mathews was ill at ease when Mohan talked of Hindu culture, especially when he insisted that it was five thousand years old, and with the deliberate intention of changing of the subject, the African asked; "What about your room, Mohan?"

"What about it?"

Well, there was a vacancy, and I thought you were going to get it."

The following day, after breakfast, Mohan went to the lady superintendent's office and said he had heard a room was vacant and wished to know, when he could move into it.

"I was going to speak to you about it," Mrs. Barke said.

"You see, Mohan, it's a large room with a small gas fire, and in the winter you'll find it very cold, it never gets really warm. I've given it to one of the hostellers who's used to our climate. I really considered you first but took this step in your interest."

"What should I do then?" Mohan asked sadly.

"The next vacancy is yours."

"I'll wait."

"Splendid." said Mrs. Barker.

A few months later, two more vacancies occurred and the lady superintendent assigned the rooms to others. She, however assured Mohan that next vacancy would be his. Mohan now waited for the arrival of his money from home, as his bills at the hostel were in arrears. The allowance reached on the third day of the following month. He went to the lady superintendent's office and settled his account by cheque.

"I shall be leaving you next month, Mrs. Barker," he said, his eyes fixed on the folded receipt in his hand. Mrs. Barker turned round in her revolving chair and mechanically rose.

"But why?" she asked, "and where are you going?"

"My cousin has arranged accommodation for me with a family in town, somewhere near my place of studies."

"I'm sorry, really I am sorry," she said. "And who's going to look after you? One has to be careful in London. It's a huge place, a world in itself. There are all kinds of people in it — good and bad, gay and sober, serious people who go to church and sinful ones who frequent pubs, men who earn their living the hard way and men who live by their wits, lads who turn day into night and night into day, women arrayed in spiritual radiance and women clad only in their birthday suits naked and unashamed."

Mohan giggled like a high school girl.

"It's no laughing matter". Mrs. Barker admonised him.

"Mohan, I hope you will meet the right type."

She sighed. He folded his receipt again.

"But the Foundation will pray for you," she said, "that's all it can do. The Foundation will pray for you."

Mohan stood before her like a mouse beside a mountain.

She gazed into his eyes. She took deep breaths. Her bosom rose and fell.

LOVELY DAY

"LOVELY Day," said Pat, waking me up one summer morning. I grunted, turned over on my side and went to sleep a gain.

'Silly boy," she said, and went into the kitchen. She soon calle dme for breakfast, saying: "Lovely Day"

I laughed into my coffee "Is it?" I asked.

"Don't you think so?"

"Perhaps, but it's always lovely where I come from."

"Must you be unpleasant first thing in the morning? It's only a greeting. Why don't you get used to it?"

"What do you want me to say?" I protested.

"Say 'Lovely Day'

Now it was Pat who laughed into her coffee and spilled it on her dressing-gown. "Don't you ever say 'Lovely Day'? she asked.

"No."

"What do you say then?"

"Nothing"

"What do yo do on a lovely day?"

"Same as on other days. It's always lovely."

Pat giggled and spilled her coffee again. "Go," she said, "go on your rounds"

Iooked back at Pat as I went to the bathroom. She was still laughing.

* * *

On my way to town, I stopped at a tobacconists to buy cigarettes. The woman at the counter said: "Lovely Day."

"Yes," I said, "but I want 20 cigarettes"

"You don't seem to believe it," she said, as she handed me the cigarettes and the change.

"I do," I replied. It's really lovely and warm, but I haven't yet got into the spirit of that greeting".

"Greeting? What do you mean—greeting?

I hurriedly left the shop.

Nobody greeted me at a small cafe where I went for a cup of coffee. I sat near the window, sipped my coffee and looked out. It was really a fine day. The sky was a lovely blue and the people on the pavements looked happy. But before I had finished my coffee it was raining.

The lovely day had studdenly turned into a miserable one It rained slowly and one felt it was going to be one of those long-drawn-out rainy days. There was a melancholy drone in the

air, dirty slush on the ground, and the wind was chilly. It was cold Everybody looked unhappy.

I COVERED my head with the newspaper and dashed in to Cohen's bookshop in Bloomsbury. It was a strange shop, with a quaint selection of books. I could spend hours looking round. But Cohen always grumbled.

"Bloomsbury is no longer a book centre". he would say. "They all go to Charing Cross Road now. Think of it, isn't awful, people going to Tottenham Road for books? Once upon a time, my boy, Bloomsbury was the place. Still it has a name. I'd rather sell a good book here than piles of rubbish there. Well, well, we'll, see... Hi, hi, hi!"

He would chuckle and often give me a slight discount on the marked price of his second-hand books.

I was so engrossed in a book that I didn't notice Cohen coming out of his office and peeping over my shoulder to look at the book I was reading.

"Good book, my boy," Cohen said.

"Oh, hello, Cohen," I said. "Lovely Day".

"Lovely day?" Cohen shouted. It's a horrible day! Simply awful! Look at that dreary rain. Ordinarily I don't get many customers here, and when it rains like this..." He threw up his hands in despair.

"Look at me," he said, pointing to his feet. "It was fine this morning and so I wore a pair of sandals. Now it's cold and my feet are frozen. Lovely Day eh, eh!".

"Don't take it to heart", I pacified him, "it was only a greeting?".

"Greeting? What a greeting on a day like this!".

I thought it wise to leave Cohen to brood over his misfourtunes alone, so I went to lunch. The Indian restaurant was empty, except for an American soldier in a corner who was eating curry and rice with only a fork. A gloomy little waiter welcomed me and showed me to another corner. I asked for the manager and was told he was asleep.

"He has been sleeping all morning, Sir," the waiter informed me. "Business bad, very bad."

MY food was served with unusual alacrity. As I ate the waiter stood at a distance and looked vaguely at the soldier, who was making rude remarks to himself about the food.

"Drunk', the waiter whispered to me as he passed "he's drunk".

The manager now appeared, rubbing his hands together, a picturesque figure in his turban, long-coat and tight trousers. He made a generous bow to his two customers.

"All right, Sir?"

"Yes", I said, "delicious curry".

"We always give the best menu, Sir", he said. Then he went up to the soldier and, rubbing his hands together, said: "Lovely Day, Sir."

'You bloody fool!" the soldier yelled, "Look outside. It's a lousy day!" He pushed the manager forcibly. The waiter intervened and pathetically said: "He has been sleeping all day, Sir."

"Sorry, chum." the soldier said. "And don't wear those tights again. I'd certainly like to see an American glamour girl in tights, but not your skinny, bandy legs."

The manager, hurt, crossed and stood near me, rubbing his hands, as if nothing had happened. Then he bent over me and whispered: "I only wanted to be nice. You know, Sri I'm always nice to my customers 'Lovely Day' is only a greating. Was I wrong, Sir?"

"No", I soothed him, "It's only a greeting." The rain poured down the windows of the restaurant.

A few minutes later, I stepped into the street. The sun was shining, the sky was clear and blue again, and it was warm. An old friend was hurrying towards me.

"Don't tell me," I forestalled him, as he approached. 'I know. It's a lovely day!"

SON OF A JUDGE

when the telegram from the Government reached the family, the mother was more excited than the father. He merely twirled his moustache and said, "Good, Good". But the little boy the youngest in the family, rolled on the ground to express his unbounded joy. He soon rose. ran round the compound, shouting: "I'm the son of a judge! Hei, key, the son of a judge!" He made holes in the fence, peeped through them and cried to his playmate," "I'm now the son of a judge, do you hear that, you miserable creatures? I'm the son of a judge!"

The telegram briefly stated that the head of the family, an advocate, had been appointed a high court judge. The mother almost instantaneously started to make preparations for her new station in life. She had now become the wife of a judge. Her prayers had matured, ripened, and God had heeded her wishes and ambitions.

The little boy was still at the fence, talking to the boys in the adjoining compound. "You low-born fellows," he warned them, "in furture mind your words and actions"

"Who are you?" they asked him teasingly. "I'm J. J., the son of judge."

"J. J.," they said. "That's a just initials. What's your real name? Nobody in the world has just intitials".

"I do," he said. "And they're J. J. That's all the name I've got."

His voice was resolute with the knowledge of his rightness and the neighbourhood lads had nothing to say. His father too was generally known by his initials, and the boy was proud of everything his father did or assumed.

The mother soon sent her brother, Uncle Nathan, to Colombo to buy a grand car. Uncle Nathan knew all about the make, intricacies and mechanisms of a car and was the exalted owner of the first motor car among his relatives in Jaffna. He was also reputed to be the strongest man in Ceylon, and a strong bold man was necessary to drive a car through jungles which were beset with stone-throwing rowdies, wild elephants and buffaloes which stubbernly blocked the road: Uncle Nathan could, with ease and equanimity, tackle them all. He was a hefty man with an iron build and wore a Kaiser-style moustache whose ends pointed menacingly upwards

A few days later a black limousine entered the gates of the new judge's house J. J. again rolled on the ground to express his joy. His pride was boundleas, naturally. His elder brother and sister had gone through the preliminary steps in life-the bullock-cart and horse carriage stages-and were now about to enter the car era. But lucky J. J. jumped straight into a limousine.

Uncle Nathan boasted of his strength and prowess and convinced his relatives that, but for him, the car would never have seen their doorstep. " I chased a number of thugs right into the jungle and hospitalised them," he said, twirling his moustache. " I broke the backs of a couple of buffaloes and twisted the trunk of an attacking wild elephant until its entire trunk slipped into my hands as if it had been surgically amputated. " His sister wept with admiration. Uncle Nathan tested some drivers and chose the best chauffeur for the Judge. The chosen driver smiled at his rise in status, opened his betel box and fixed himself a wad.

The family was now ready to leave for their new distination. But the elder brother was leathe to leave the Tamarind District where he was born and bred. However, after shedding some tears, he got into the car. The smart girls of the Tamarind School stood in a row as if they were presenting a guard of honour. The boys of the neighbourhood waved to J. J , shouting, " Son of a Judge! Son of a Judge!" As the car moved, the tamarind trees dropped their foliage and fruits on its hood and the branches swayed in the wind, bidding them farewell.

" Where's this place we're going to, Papa? I mean, what's the name of this place? "

" Jhelum, my son. They say there's Elephant Rock, a fine harbour, bays and creeks, and the mighty Indian Ocean. "

"Why are we going there, Papa?"

"To earn our living, son."

"Dont mislead him," the mother chided the head of the family. "Tell him the truth." And then she added, "We're going to Jhelum because your father is going to be a judge there. We're going to live in great pomp and glory We're going to have power, and you're going to be the son of a judge."

"Son of a judge!" cooed J. J. "I'm the son of a judge."

They soon reached Murgandy, a famous shrine. The driver stopped the car, got down and broke coconuts and burnt incense to appease the god. The driver smilled happilly as he was now confident that no accidents would be fall them. The god had been appeased. After drinking the milk of young coconuts, they resumed their journey.

They passed a procession. It consisted of several shirtless men, their chests and foreheads smeared with ashes, accompanying

a gaudy elephant. There were two bells attached the elephant's sides, and as the elephant walked, the bells swung back and forth, clanging solemnly. J. J. cried for the trunk of an elephant. His mother scolded him; "Keep quiet. Uncle Nathan is not here to pluck out the trunk from an elephant." But the boy was insistent, and the driver, to drivert his attention, pointed at some monkeys in the trees. The animals sat in groups, like people, picking each other's fleas Some of them snarled at the car as it moved slowly, or followed it angrily, swinging from tree to tree J. J. now wanted a monkey. The driver grinned, smelling of heat and coconut oil, and speeded the car.

The family watched as the limousine swept through crowed mud-hut villages where children jumped and waved from the alleys through endless fields of paddy on which men and women worked and boys played in irrigation channels.

At Sunset, when they head the Indian Ocean rear, they knew they had reached the town of Jhelum.

"What's this place we've come to Papa? I mean, what's the name of this place?

"Jhelum, my son In the distance you see the holy elephant Rock. On the left you see a lovely harbour. The rolling waves of the Indian Ocean are lashing at our car, and tiny bays and rivulets adorn our house."

As soon as they settled down in their new abode, the father searched for a good school for his son. The tamarind tree had brought them luck, and so the judge sought for a school under tamarind trees It was not difficult, for the Methodist missionaries had founded schools under such trees and named them Tamarind Schools And so J. J. joined one of such institutions in Jhelum.

The family revelled in the phantasmageria of wind and sea and wave. J. J. went about merrily and haughtily as the

"Son of a judge". The inspector of police and other policemen saluted the judge as he passed, but they did not do so to the boy He reported the grieveus omission to his father The next day the judge summoned the entire police force of Jhelum and warned them that they should pay their respects to his son too. From that day onwards the policemen clicked their heels and saluted J J. whenever and wherever they found him.

One evening J J came back from school and gleefully announced that he had been elected secretary of the J. Y. B. F C.

"What is J. Y B. F. C.?" his father asked.

"Jhelum Young Boys' Football Club."

"Good", his father said, "good".

"Papa." the boy said, "We're holding a grand function on the opening day, and Annan (elder brother) is going to be our chief guest. We're going to garland him."

"Good" his father said, "good."

"Papa," the boy said, "I want twenty five rupees, that's the subscription I've promised."

"Can't" his father said. "I can't" afford it. How much are the other boys giving?"

"Twenty five cents", J. J. replied added, "They all said I was the son of judge and should maintain my status. I won't go to school, Papa unless you give me twenty five rupees tomorrow morning."

"I won't," his father shouted. "You and your mother will ruin me in no time. It looks as if we've come here not to earn our living but to spend it. Oh, why did I leave the Tamarind District? Oh, the tamarind trees, where have you disappeared?"

J. J's elder sister now ran inside the house, brought a cane and said, "He deserves a good whipping, Papa"

The Judge took the cane and approached the boy. "I am going to whip you till your false notions of pomp, power and position vanish," he said. As the cane was about to alight on him, J. J ran to his mother, nestled between her legs and cried "Oh, my mother, oh, my mother, didn't you always say that I was the son of a judge? Didn't you always say that, mother? Didn't you mother, Didn't you?"

LAWYER

Everybody in the town where he practised his profession called him "Lawyer". Some said that it was really his surname, because his great-grandfather had been given the name by American missionaries at Jaffna College. Others regarded it as his nickname, because of the mode by which he earned his living. He himself had assumed the name with all legality, and signed legal documents as "Sankaran Lawyer".

His office was a partitioned room in a verandah, situated in Tower Street. When there was not enough space, or when the case was of some magnitude, he held consultations with his clients under the *margosa*-trees that provided plenty of shade to perspiring litigants.

Sankaran Lawyer's office paraphernalia consisted of a typewriter, foolscap paper, proxy forms, a table and a stool. His library included only two volumes: The Penal Code and The Civil Procedure Code. He wore a black coat, naturally, and dhoti.

One day, a client approached him, early in the morning.

"What happened?" Lawyer put him the routine question.

"My brother intimidated me some days ago with a *koduva* knife."

"I see, I see! Let me see the Summons."

He perused the Summons' sheet carefully and shook his head.

"You're a liar!" he reprimanded the fellow. "This says that it was *you* who intimidated your brother. I see, I see! You are on throat-cutting terms with your own brother. You are facing a serious charge. Are you ready to go to jail? I'll see that you get only six weeks instead of six months."

"How can I go to jail, Lawyer? I've a wife and three children," the man pleaded.

"It's a bad case. I'll do my best for you. Pay me one hundred rupees for expenses, not a cent less."

He soon collected part of the fees from the client, passed several *margosa*-trees, even going round some of them. All this time the poor litigant squatted in Lawyer's office, his blood-pressure rising at the thought of going to jail His eyes were closed and did not follow Sankaran's movements.

Soon, Lawyer reappeared, with a broad smile on his face. The throat-cutting client's blood-pressure returned to normal. "Everything's nicely arranged," Lawyer informed his victim. "You'll be free as a bird by this evening."

The client rose to go to the Courts.

"Wait!" said Lawyer. "What about the remainder of my fees?"

"Oh, I forgot!" replied the client. I really forgot!"

"But what about poor me? I have to eat, too. An empty rice bag cannot stand up."

The man dug into his dhoti and fished out a ten-rupee note from the region of his waist and handed it to Lawyer.

"This won't do!" Sankaran protested. "I have to take some things home, otherwise my wife will nag me all night."

"Please, Lawyer," the man begged, "this is all I have left! But, if I win the case, I'll borrow some money from my witnesses and give you a most fitting present. A kind of gift that will put you on top of the world."

Lawyer quickly visualised the nature of the present, and licked his lips with his betel-stained tongue.

No sooner had the client left than Lawyer turned to typing petitions and drafting private plaints. He was quite proficient in this. He was also adept at writing applications.

But Sankaran never entered the Court House. He transacted all his business from outside.

* * *

Soon a young woman, with long-lashed eyes, crept into the office. She looked around, furtively, to make sure no one was watching. She informed Lawyer that she needed an application drafted and typed. She told him that she was seeking a post as an attendant in a hospital.

"I'll make out a convincing draft for you," Sankaran said, "but you must pay me a good fee for drafting and typing."

The young woman confided in him that she hadn't a cent on her, but would pay him after getting the job.

"You're trying to fry rice-cakes in water, and not in oil," Lawyer said.

She flashed her long-lashed eyes at him.

Sankaran started to type, drafting the application with all the skill at his command. When it was perfect, he invited her to sign it.

"I can't write," she admitted, shyly.

"Then you'll have to affix your thumb impression"

He read the application out, aloud, to the young woman, seized her by the hand, and pressed her right thumb on to a small inkpad, pressed it again on the sheet of paper, and endorsed it as the woman's thumb impression.

"Everything's fine!" he assured her. "I'll see that you get a job as an attendant in K.K.S. Hospital. I know the bosses there. I'll use my influence with them. You're sure to get the job. Now, my fee..."

"I didnt bring any money," the woman repeated "But I'll pay you as soon as I get my first salary"

"That won't do," Sankaran said, folding the application and putting it into his pocket.

The woman flashed her unbelievable white teeth at him.

He winked at her, but she looked away from him. So he again demanded his fee.

"When I get my pay," she repeated.

He held her hand, pretending to erase the ink stains on it, and squeezed it.

She responded by gently tickling his palm.

"Fine!" he said. "That's fine! I'll see that you get the job, but you'll have to see me tonight. I must discuss the application and arrange with you about a date for the interview at K K.S. Hospital."

"When shall I see you?" she asked, meekly.

'Meet me near the Lighthouse at K.K.S. at seven tonight. And don't try to dodge me, if you really want the job.'

'All right' she smiled 'I'll see you near the Lighthouse.'

And she departed, looking around, guiltily.

'Fine!' Sankaran said to himself 'Everything's going fine!'

He had collected good fees in the morning—and now something else was in the offing. Then he thought of the gift his client had promised. Lawyer joined his palms together and prayed to the nearest deity that the man should be acquitted.

* * *

WHEN the evening sun hit him on the nape of his neck, Sankaran shut his office, made sure that the woman's application was in his pocket, and walked towards Grand Bazaar, to take his usual bus to K.K.S. As he walked briskly and surely to the bus stand, somebody called after him, in a loud and cheerful voice. It was his client of the morning. He had been acquitted, and he held a pint of arrack in his hand, which he happily presented to Lawyer.

Sankaran safely deposited the bottle in the pocket of his professional coat, then proceeded to a shop and bought a tumbler, which found its way into his other pocket. Now the prospect of a fine time was well assured, and he boarded a K.K.S.-bound bus.

Lawyer arrived at the Lighthouse and surveyed the scene. Three blackened stones in a corner indicated that some travellers had sojourned and lighted a fire there. But, tonight, the place was quiet as a graveyard. Not a soul was to be seen anywhere, and the place was bereft of all sound except for the slight murmur of the sea. Even the mighty waves of the Indian Ocean had stopped rolling and lashing.

Sankaran looked ahead and sighted a tiny shack. 'Fine!' he thought. Everything's most propitious!'

The woman kept her promise and arrived in time for her engagement. Sankaran repeatedly assured her that he would get her the job. He pulled out from his inside pocket the application and waved it in her face.

'See, I haven't forgotten,' he said.

And, in the dirty shack, the young woman permitted him to be unfaithful to his wife.

Outside, a horizon of dogs barked. Sankaran advised her to step on to a bus immediately. "Some people might come," he warned. 'You never know.'

'Not to do this' she remarked, and laughed.

* * *

As soon as she was gone Lawyer went and sat under the Lighthouse, took out the tumbler from his pocket and started to sip the arrack. Soon, he was pleased with himself and loved all human beings most of all his wife.

When Sankaran finally rose from the beach, he was brimful of generosity, and he went home and gave a good slice of the day's earnings to his wife.

In the morning Lawyer had a refreshing bath in the sea. 'Sweet relief!' he said to himself, as he felt the 'hangover' from the previous night drop away.

When he walked along Tower Street, an hour later, he saw a crowd standing near his office.

Fine!' he thought. 'Lots of cases, applications and petitio - ! A good day behind me, a better day in store!'

A smile of satisfaction on his face pushed the corners of his mouth upwards. He fumbled for the keys in his pocket, eventually found them, and went to open the door of his office. But, to his utter surprise, a Police Inspector barred the way.

'You can't go in,' he said. 'You must either give up this profession or come with me to the Police Station.'

'I have a wife and children to support,' Sankaran pleaded.

'Lawyer!' said the Inspector. 'I'm taking a lenient view of the matter and offering you a chance to turn over a new leaf. You fleeced a poor client. If that is not cheating, what is? What is your defence?'

Sankaran's mind was seized with fear. He felt dizzy and fuddled. His landlord now stepped forward 'You must quit my premises immediately!' he thundered. 'And who was that woman you had here yesterday? We know everything. My place is for respectable people. It's not a whore-house'

The Inspector added: 'Didn't you know, Lawyer, that in this town, everybody knows everything that is happening? People here mind other people's business more than their own.'

'May I remove my typewriter,' Sankaran begged, remorsefully

Certainly,' agreed the Inspector. 'It's the means by which you earn your living. Nobody can take it away from you.'

Sankaran removed his typewriter. His hands began to tremble, and the machine made a clicking noise. He carried the typewriter, pushing his way through the crowd, nervously, and proceeded to the nearest pawn-broker. And, in the distance, barked a horizon of dogs.

CLOSING TIME

He was standing near the heater reading a book. Sometimes he leaned against the radiator; at other times he patted it with his palm. All the while he was absorbed either with himself or with the book. When he had had enough warmth, he moved to the bar and bought a drink. He took a sip of the beer, then started to read again. An American soldier leaned across and said to him: "What are you reading?"

'Hemingway,' he said.

'He has written about your country,' the American said.

'Which is that?'

'Spain.'

'I'm not Spanish.'

'South American?'

'No.'

'Italian?'

'No.'

'Greek?'

'No.'

'Mexican?'

'No.'

'What the devil are you?'

'I'm a Hindu.'

'I've never met a Hindu before,' the American said excitedly. 'shake it, chum.' He gripped the Indian's hand firmly. The eyes of the Hindu contracted in slight pain; he withdrew his hand limply.

'Have a drink.'

'Beer please.'

'Have a short.'

'No, thank you.'

The American bought pints for everybody. There were others with him. They were all English, but the introductions were informal and took place amidst mouthfuls of beer.

'I like Hindus.'

'That's nice of you'.

'I mean it. Don't be silly. You're misconstruing me,' the American said. One of the Englishmen said something kind and patronising. The Hindu ignored everything and looked away from the party.

'We are all sympathetic to India,' the American said. 'Wonderful people. They should be free. All Americans are for Indian freedom.'

'I know that,' the Hindu said.

The party somehow disentangled itself now, not completely but in the sort of way that happens in pubs. The American and the Indian were left alone together. They looked at each

other, then at their nearly-empty glasses. The Hindu called for more drinks. He looked over the intervening shoulders for the rest of the party.

'Don't mind about the others,' the American said.

'What about drinks for them?'

'They're all right.'

More people came into the pup. It was crowded. The customers jostled one another. The American's English friends reappeared and the party exchanged more drinks. The Indian often stood on tiptoe and looked over the heads towards the door. His eyes eagerly sought something. I wondered what. Now and again he turned round and looked at the radiator.

It was unusually cold, but the landlord insisted on having the door open. I made unsuccessful attempts at getting it shut. To most of the customers, what came in through the door was fresh air. But at the point where I stood, it was draughty. I made my way to the radiator.

* * *

He was there patting the heater as before. He looked back and smiled at me.

'My name is Mohan,' he said.

'I'm Markand,' I said, 'Hari Markand. You can call me Hari.'

I put my foot against the radiator.

'Isn't it very cold?'

'Terribly.'

'They say it is the coldest winter for fifty years.

'I believe it,' I said. "I felt awful over there, near the draughts.'

'Are you feeling better now?'

'Much better. Thank you.'

'Heat,' he said almost hugging the top of the radiator, 'we need it, lots of it.'

'One mustn't overdo it,' I said.

'What do you mean?'

'I heard some Indian soldiers died in the heat-wave last summer, somewhere in North Africa.'

'Extraordinary,' he said. Then he craned his neck and looked for somebody.

'Are you looking for your friends?'

'No.'

The party had dispersed. The American had found a new companion.

'Your American is very sociable,' I said.

'You mean he's a bully.'

I laughed. 'That's one way of putting it,' I said. 'I thought he bullied you.'

'No, he didn't. He's all right. They are all all right. Everybody is all right. He means well. He's a nice fellow.'

He took out his nail-file and started on his nails, then he raised his eyebrows, shook his head, rapped his knuckles on the radiator and made a number of nervous gestures.

'I didn't say he was a bully. It was you...' I explained.

'That's enough,' he said. 'Don't bully me. Leave me alone. I'm thinking.'

Before he I told him that I was really a Barrister but sold Books merely as a temporary measure.

We were silent for a while, then I bought two beers.

'I'm sorry," he said. "I get like that sometimes.'

'Never mind,' I said. 'Forget it.'

'What do you do?'

'I run a bookshop.'

'That's interesting. Where?'

"Bloomsbury."

'That's even more interesting. I must come and see you.'

'I shall be delighted. I don't have to ask you what you are.'

'What?'

'You're a writer."

'Yes, I do write, How did you know?'

'It's obvious.'

He did not seem to like the remark. He looked at his shoes, adjusted his tie and pushed his hair back. He smiled.

'There's something about you that suggests you're a writer,' I said. 'I can't exactly say what.'

'It's the hair,' he said.

"Perhaps.'

'I've always had long hair," he explained. 'It's not a pose. Matter of habit.'

'I never suggested it was a pose,' I said.

'No. People generally do. They have funny ideas about long hair. One must do what one likes. People are bullies.'

'Why bother about them?' I said.

'Habit,' he said. 'Everything is a matter of habit. Even pose can became a habit.' Mohan looked worried, somewhat annoyed. He had the look of a man who was fleeing from something.

'Let's go for lunch,' I said.

'Have another drink,' he said.

'No more,' I said. 'I've had enough. Let's have lunch.'

'I hate eating,' he said. 'Not really, but I don't want to eat before closing time.'

'Another habit?'

'Perhaps.' He laughed.

* * *

MOHAN bought two pints of beer. The glasses looked huge. I didn't know how I was going to swallow all that liquid. He drank quickly, relishing every mouthful. The drinks did not seem to affect him much. He was quite steady on his feet and he continued to make the same kind of remarks.

'I get bored eating,' he said, 'especially alone.'

That was not very convincing, because all the time I was talking to him he seemed detached and was only half-listenig. He was miles away and gave the impression of one who liked being alone.

'Actually, I'm never really bored," he said. 'No one can bore me. I'm too detached. To be bored by someone is a sign of weakness. It means that another human being can affect you to that extent. One must have inner strength."

His conversation was getting a litting too complicated for me. I had had a long lunch hour. It was getting late. 'I must get back to the shop,' I said.

'Must you?'

'Yes.'

'Have one for the road.'

'No thanks.'

'Quick one.'

'No. I must really go. I'll see you another time.'

'I want to see your shop,' he said.

'Do come,' I said. 'Where can I contact you?'

'Nowhere,' he said, 'but give me your telephone number. I'll get in touch with you.'

I gave it to him.

* * *

MOHAN kept his promise. He rang me up and we arranged to meet one evening. I tried to make a dinner appointment, but he would not hear of it and insisted on

our meeting in a pub. He was already there when I went in and was drinking with a man who resembled him.

'This is Demetrios Papadapoulos,' Mohan said. 'Hari Markand.'

His hand moved between us as he introduced us, but his face was turned in another direction. Demetrios had longer hair and fingers and gesticulated wildly as he talked. On closer examination I found that his features were not quite the same as Mohan's but there was a deeper resemblance between them. They were of the same type, the same ilk. Both were quite at ease with each other, and against a background of Nordics they looked like brothers. Strange men and long-haired women came and spoke to them, exchanged drinks, laughed and departed.

'They're all poets or writers of some sort,' Mohan whispered to me.

No amount of persuasion on my part could get them out of the pub before closing time. When they were finally pushed out, Demetrios suggested that we all go to his place. Mohan seemed to have agreed before he was even asked. I needed a little pressure.

'There's plenty of food at home,' Demetrios said.

We took a bus. Demetrios turned round and hullo'd to some of his acquaintances; Mohan leaned forward and greeted his friends. At one stop Demetrios got up excitedly and rushed downstairs. 'Here,' he said. 'Quickly!' He headed towards a coffee-stall. 'Let's take some food home.'

'I thought he had lots of food,' I said to Mohan softly.

'I don't think he remembers what he said.' Mohan answered, and giggled.

Demetrios bought three cups of coffee. 'This will warm you up,' he said. 'Isn't it cold?'

'Very.'

'Have you any coal?' Mohan asked.

'I don't know,' Demetrios said and then, 'I think there are one or two pieces. But you don't need any coal!'

Mohan laughed. I looked at them both. Demetrios solved the mystery. 'Have you ever seen Mohan make a fire?' he said to me. 'He just covers the fireplace with a newspaper, squats down, rubs his hands together, and lo, there's a fire! Magic!' They both laughed into their coffee and spilled it. I was immune to everything except the cold. They looked at me and laughed at my seriousness.

'I've no sense of humour,' I said. "That's what it is."

Demetrios, still laughing, bought three large pies and wrapped them in a piece of paper.

It was a long walk to the flat. Demetrious danced and sang and made us forget the cold. He performed the 'Dance of the Roddar' right in the middle of the street, his hair dangling wildly, and throwing his hands in the air. A car, with two men in it, stopped for him to finish the dance. Then they drew to the side. Demetrios went up and spoke to the men, while Mohan and I stood on the other side of the road and watched. He was a long time talking and suddenly we saw him flourishing his hands angrily. We moved over.

'What's the matter?' I said.

'Nothing,' one of the men replied. 'Your friend is trying to be funny.'

'I wasn't,' Demetrios said. 'They were rude to me.'

'Were you?' I asked.

'Does it matter?'

'Don't speak to me like that,' I said. 'Who are you?'

'We are Scotland Yard men.'

'Ho ho!' Demetrios shouted and started to dance again.

Mohan now intervened. 'Not now,' he said to Demetrios. 'Enough for tonight.' Then he turned to the policemen.

'Sorry my friends were rude to you. They didn't mean it.'

'Don't apologise,' Demetrios said. 'Hari is a barrister.'

'Don't take any notice of him,' Mohan said. 'Here's my identity card.'

'We don't want to see it. We know all about you.'

'Good night,' Mohan said.

'Good night. Look after your friends.'

There was no more dancing. Instead, Demetrios sang. One of the songs was called 'Cyprus Moon' He had composed this as a student in Cyprus. The mention of the island aroused a discussion between him and Mohan, who felt superior at being the citizen of a subcontinent with an ancient culture. He looked down upon people from small islands. 'Patches of grass,' was how he referred to such places. Demetrios did not give in. He, too, took his history back several thousand years, but not merely as far as Mohan his. Demetrios, however, invented myths and when he was not

able to substantiate them, he shouted: 'Myths are real; we all live by myths: they create the best poetry.'

'But what has that to do with history?' Mohan asked.

'A lot,' Demetrios shouted and performed a war dance. That silenced Mohan.

We entered the flat quietly. Demetrios had warned us in advance. Once in the flat we could do anything, he said We were in soon. Mohan knelt in front of the fireplace. Demetrios brought one small lump of coal and placed it on the ground.

'Any wood?'

'No.'

Mohan cleaned the place first; then he made three paper balls and arranged them inside to form a triangle. He placed the piece of coal on top of the balls, struck a match and held it under the tripod. Demetrios brought a *News Chronicle* and Mohan used it to cover the opening. He adjusted the paper to make sure there was no slit to let the air in. He squatted down, closed his eyes and rubbed his hands, and there was a wonderful fire. The lump of dull black coal now glowed and crackled at several flaming red places. The heat was terrific.

'Wonderful!' said Mohan 'We need it. Heat, that's what we want.'

'Have you ever done the rope-trick, Mohan?' Demetrios asked, looking very pleased.

'No. But I can do the mango trick'

'Can you?' I asked incredulously.

'Yes of course he can,' Demetrios said. 'Come on, do it now. Mohan. Show it to Hari.' He went into his bedroom

and brought out a mango stone. 'Here you are. Here's the stone. You left it here last time.'

* * *

I HAD heard of Indian fakirs doing the mango trick and I know people who swear to me that they have seen it done.

A stone is buried in the ground, the fakir rubs his hands over it and chants some Sanskrit *slokas*, a mango tree shoots up and stands a foot high bearing a couple of mangoes, whereupon the magician plucks these and hands them round to the bewildered spectators. The whole trick, including the ripening of the fruit, takes only fifteen minutes.

Mohan was now going to perform it. He held the stone in his hand. Instead of burying it in the ground, he was going to put it under the carpet. He was about to do the trick and I was getting a little frightened. Demetrios was sitting in a huge armchair, chuckling to himself. He pointed towards the fire. "Where did all the coals come from?" he said. We looked at Mohan. He was rubbing the mango stone between his hands. I took out my handkerchief and wiped the perspiration from my forehead. 'It's the heat,' Mohan said. 'Lovely!'

'What about the trick?' Demetrios said. 'I'm hungry.'

Mohan got up. 'Well,' he said. 'I don't think I'll do it tonight. I'm rather tired. Tomorrow. We'll have mangoes for breakfast. Nice, plump ones.'

He returned the stone to Demetrios, who looked very disappointed as he took it to his bedroom. He came back with a dirty fork, wiped it on his trousers, opened the parcel of pies and asked Mohan to warm them. Mohan thrust the fork into one of the pies and held it near the fire. When

all of them were sufficiently done, we started to eat. Demetrios enjoyed every bite. 'You're a wonderful cook,' he said to Mohan, pointing his forefinger at him.

'Wait till you eat my mango tomorrow,' Mohan replied.

Then there was the problem of sleeping accommodation. Demetrios's furniture hadn't all arrived, he had only one large bed at the moment. Mohan said he would sleep on the settee and suggested my sharing the bed with his friend. I didn't really want to do that as I did not know Demetrios well. I was shy and offered to sleep on the sofa.

'You can't do that,' Demetrios said. 'Let Mohan sleep in this room. He's used to sleeping on a settee; he doesn't mind. And there's the fire; he'll like it. Isn't it nice and warm here, Mohan?'

'Lovely.'

* * *

AND so it was settled. I went into the back room with Demetrios. There was only one worn-out, thin blanket on the bed. 'Don't worry,' he said, 'I've plenty of bed-clothes.' He undressed and put all his clothes on the bed, including the tie. He arranged them in different places according to plan. He seemed to know where the draughts came through and the weak spots in this blanket. 'You do the same,' he said.

When I had removed my jacket and tie, Demetrios said that he had no pyjamas for me. He, himself, was going to sleep naked. I refused to take off any more clothes. The bed looked very cold.

Demetrios got in first and moved to a corner. He switched off the light and I climbed in. We slept with our backs to each other. Things were all right for a while, then I began to feel something sticking to my knee. I reached or it.

"What's this?' I said.

Demetrios switched on the light. 'It's a pound of butter,' he said. 'My ration. Give it to me.' He put it on the table near the bed and turned off the light. Some more minutes. I pulled the pillow towards me. There was a rustling sound.

'What's that?'

'Some manuscripts,' he said. 'Keep quiet.'

'Yours?'

'No. Other people's. It's an anthology of war poetry.',

'What's it doing here?'

'I"m going to publish it. Be quiet.'

'Are you a publisher?'

'Yes. Sleep!'

I cleared my throat.

'Stop that!'

'Why?'

'I don't like it. Indians are always doing that.'

'Nonsense.'

'He does.'

'Who?'

"The one in the other room. He's all right now. He has lots of heat there. One needs it. Lots. Keep quiet.'

'I'm not saying anything,' I said.

'Don't bully me. Goodnight.'

I turned over on my side and tried to sleep. It was freezing. I felt for my jacket and pulled it up to my neck. My feet were cold and I rubbed them together.

'Are you cold?'

'Very.'

'I'm sorry.'

'I don't know how you manage to keep warm,' I said, 'especially in your birthday suit.'

'I'm not at all warm,' he said, 'but I'm all right. Used to it. Habit.'

"He says the same thing,' I said.

"Who?'

'The one in the other room.'

'Isn't he a lovely fellow? I adore him.'

Something now pricked my back. I felt for it and brought it out.

'What's this?'

'Give it to me.'

Demetrios crushed it in his hand. 'It's a piece of bread,' he said. 'Put it on the table. Here you are—some cheese. I told you I had lots of food. You wouldn't believe me.'

'Demi! Demi!' Somebody came into the room.

'Sh!' Demetrios started to snore.

'Demi! Somebody is in my bed. Are you awake?'

'Sh!'

'Demi! Demetrios!'

A figure moved about the room.

'I'm going now, Demi. I think I'll go to the Corner House. Sit up all night. See you tomorrow.'

The door banged. There was the sound of footsteps receding.

'Who's that?'

'Thank God she's gone.'

'Who's she?'

'She's a crazy woman. She has no room, so I put her up for a couple of nights in Mohan's bed. She's completely mad. Writes good poetry. I'm publishing her. She's in that anthology under the pillow. Let's sleep now.'

* * *

I THINK I had had a few hours of sleep when Demetrios woke me up. The lights were on and he held some papers in his hand.

'I don't want to read that anthology now,' I said.

'This is something else.'

'What?'

'Did you know I was a king?'

'What?'

'King. King of Cyprus.'

'So what?'

'I wanted to tell you. You're sleeping next to a king.'

'I see.'

'These documents prove it. You can read about my ancestry.'

'Not tonight. I'm tired.'

'But see this,'

'What's that?'

'It's a letter from the B. B. C. They know I'm a king.'

I yawned and looked at the letter. It was addressed to Prince Papadapoulos, commissioning him to write a talk on a bus conductress.

'This doesn't prove anything,' I said.

'But look at these '

'Not tonight. Let's sleep.'

It was I who caused the next disturbance. I had had a bad dream and had shouted. This had woken Demetrios. He was alarmed.

'What did you dream about?'

'I dreamt about the monkey's paw.'

'Monkey's paw?'

'Yes, monkey's paw. You know the story. W. W. Jacobs' *The Monkey's Paw.*'

'Silly fellow!' Demetrios said, brushing aside my remarks. He lay back, then suddenly sat upright in bed. 'I think your dream has something to do with that mango trick. Let me see if the stone is still here. He went to the other end of the room to his desk and looked for the stone in the drawers.

'It's missing,' he said.

'What?'

'It's gone.'

'Where?'

'There,' Demetrios said, pointing to the front room. 'He has got it.' I wiped my forehead with the blanket 'Don't be afraid,' he said. 'No harm done. We'll have mangoes for breakfast. Hope he has got three. We can each suck one.' He moved to the door, pushing it slightly ajar, and peeped in.

'It's there all right.'

'What?'

'The tree?'

'What tree?'

'The mango tree, you fool. That high.' He demonstrated. 'But I can't see any mangoes. It's too dark. Sleep now. And be quiet.'

I abandoned myself to my fate. We were awakened in the morning by the telephone ringing.

'You'll have to be quick,' Demetrios said over the phone. 'I'm freezing. Haven't any pyjamas.'

The caller didn't take long. Demetrios came back to the room looking like an inverted broomstick—his hair falling down the sides of his face and with a straight line for a body. I went to wake up Mohan. The mango tree had vanished. He got up, pushed his hair back and was soon ready to go out. Demetrios parted his hair without a mirror and wore it over his ears.

* * *

MOHAN was broke. Demetrios had spent all his money in the pub the previous night, and I had to lend them half-a-crown for cigarettes and fares. Mohan did not know where he was going to get money from. But that did not worry him. He was miles away, thinking, he said. Demetrios was all right. He would be getting a pound from his firm for his evening's expenses.

We had three rounds of coffee. But there was no mango. That was a great relief. Mohan returned the stone to Demetrios, who had to leave early to interview somebody prior to commissioning a book. Before going he ordered some books from me. They were for him, not for his firm, and he asked me to post them to his private address.

'By the way,' Mohan said after his friend had gone, 'about those books for Demetrios...'

'I'll post them to him.'

'Yes, but don't send him a bill.'

'Why not?'

'Because it will get on his nerves. Bills affect him that way.'

'Why?'

'Just a habit.'

'How will I get my money, then? It's a big order.'

'Oh, you'll get paid all right. Send the bill to his director. The firm will pay; they always do. That's the way it is.'

'I thought Demetrios was a publisher himself.'

'He works for a publisher.'

'Isn't he one himself?'

'Oh yes, he is. Don't bully me.'

It was now time for me to go to the shop. Mohan said he was going to the public baths. He went there every morning. It was another of his habits.

It was a long time before I heard from Mohan again. I rang up Demetrios and he said it was a habit of Mohan's to disappear mysteriously like that.

'Thanks for the books,' he said. 'I didn't expect to have them so soon. You're very businesslike.' He said nothing about payment. I had, of course, sent the bill to his director.

And one day, when I least expected him, Mohan called. He appeared quite suddenly as if from nowhere. For all I knew he might have dropped through the roof. I was right in the centre of the shop but I didn't see him come in. A man who could perform the mango trick was capable of anything, I thought.

This was his first visit to my shop. He hardly greeted me when I saw him, but went straight to the bookshelves. He looked up and down and sometimes knelt on the floor to reach the books. He was quite unlike any other customer. There was no question of buying; he just went on reading. He handled the books with care and treated them as if they were precious stones.

There were a number of people in the back room. I took him there and introduced him to them. He shook hands as if in a dream and spoke them while reading. He sat down, crossed his legs and started to shake his foot. He was restless and fidgety, and he said to me in Hindi: 'Get rid of these people. Let's go out together.' I did.

On the way to the pub he returned the half-crown he owed me.

'There's no hurry for that,' I said.

'No, no. Take it,' he said. 'I have some money. I've just sold a story.' Then he paid Demetrios' debt as well.

'I want to stock some of your books in my shop, I said. 'Where can I get them?'

'I've just completed my first book,' he said. 'Demetrios is publishing it. You'll have to wait till then.'

'When will that be?'

'In the autumn.'

He insisted on paying for most of the drinks.

'Who's publishing your story?'

'It'll be in a magazine.'

'Which?'

'*Horizon.*'

'When?'

'I don't know.'

'I'll sell it when your story appears.'

'If you can get it.'

'I can.'

* * *

He didn't like the pub we were in. It had a long bar and looked dismal. There was hardly a woman in it. It was

full of Fleet Street and city men, Mohan noticed that they drank more quickly than the people of his haunts. The glasses were refilled in quick succession. The barmaids pressed the button on a constantly ringing till confidently, pound notes were flashed and everybody bought his round. Nobody hesitated, as no one was waiting for an editor who paid only on publication and not on acceptance, nor for the cheque from the B. B. C. that always arrived just in time to save one from death by starvation.

'Let's get out of here,' Mohan said. 'This place is getting on my nerves.' I followed him.

We went to Mohn's local. Here there were people to him liking. He relaxed and enjoyed his drinks. I liked to see him that way. He seemed to know everybody in these parts. Many of them came and spoke to him. There were lots of handshakes, how-are-yous, when is-the-next-number-coming-out, I-liked-your-story, and have-you-seen-the-latest-*New Writing*. Several people bought us drinks. There was no question of rounds and turns. Those who could afford paid; those who could not felt no uneasiness. People were generous in a bighearted and natural sort of way. When it was near closing time Mohan started on pints. He gave the lead. I tried to give him some money. 'Don't be silly,' he said.

'Don't spend all your money,'

'What else is money for?'

'What'll you do tomorrow?'

'I don't know. Have a drink.'

'I think I've had enough,' I said.

'Don't be silly,' he said.

'It's bad for me.

'This habit.'

'Everything is a habit. Not drinking is also a habit.'

There was a big clamour for drinks. Mohan was served quickly. He had fine bar ways. Soon we were out in the streets looking for an eleven-o'clock pub.

'Haven't we had enough?'

'No. What else is there to do?'

'Eat.'

'What a bore!'

'Come and have some curry with me.'

'That'd be nice.'

'This way.'

'No, let's have some more drinks.'

* * *

I AGREED. There was no other alternative. Closing time was always there. It would be against habit to by-pass it. When we finally went to the restaurant we were both very hungry. It was a Lascars' place and there was plenty of rice, although there was a world shortage. We ate it with chicken curry and lentils. The manager of the restaurant bowed to us and said we could eat with our fingers. He didn't mind, nor did his customers. When we disregarded this concession, he said 'You can't enjoy chicken curry that way. You have to use your fingers.' He held his fingers together in a prismatic shape. 'Eat with the tips of your fingers, like this.' And he showed us with his thumb how to dig into the bone. Still we persisted with spoon and fork. He went away and returned with more rice.

'Demetrios would love this,' Mohan said. 'He's crazy about curry. I often cook for him. If he were here he would chew these bones.'

'He's a funny chap,' I said,

'Why?'

'He sucks mangoes and chews bones.'

'Demetrios is a natural person,' Mohan said. 'He's of the earth.'

'Shall we go?'

'Yes, Come with me.'

'Where?'

'Turkish Baths. Let's have a bath.'

'What? At this time?'

'It's good for you.'

'Not tonight.'

'Do come I feel lonely.'

'Why don't you go home?'

'I have no home.'

'Where do you sleep?'

'In the Turkish Baths.'

'You don't have a bath every day?'

'No, often I just sleep, But I feel like bath tonight Come on,'

'All right.

The baths were crowded. Several people were being turned away for lack of beds. 'It'll be all right,' Mohan assured me. He waited outside till the others had gone. 'Good evening, sir,' said the man who collected the entrance money and the tips and locked up the bathers' valuables for safe-keeping.

'Good evening. Any beds?'

'Certainly. there's always one for you.'

'I have a friend.'

'That'll be all right.' Then he turned to me. 'He's a gentleman,' he said referring to Mohan. 'He helps me and I help him.'

We went downstairs, Mohan chose two adjacent cubicles. Then we undressed and put towels round our waists. The baths were down another flight of stairs. We moved from one hot room to another much hotter. The steam room came last. After that there was no walking up and down. We were ready for a massage and a shower. When everything was over we wrapped ourselves up in hot towels and were led upstairs to our beds, like invalids. I felt very weak.

'You don't do this every day?'

'No, I told you I didn't. It's impossible. You lose a lot of weight after a bath and you feel weak. But it is very refreshing. An occasional Turkish bath is good for your health. How do you feel?'

'Fine. I feel so smooth.'

'You'll feel better tomorrow.'

'What do you do when you don't have a bath?'

'I just sleep and then go in the morning to the public baths.'

'You're funny.'

'I come here because I haven't got a room.'

'Isn't it expensive?'

'No. Not for a bed. A room costs much more nowadays. Besides, you have to pay the rent regularly. When I don't have any money I don't come here; I stay with a friend or sit up all nights at the Corner House, or walk the streets. Life goes on, you know. One somehow lives.'

'What a way to live.'

'Oh, I like it here, especially in the winter. It's nice and warm. Even the floor is hot. Feel it.'

I bent over the bed and touched the floor. It was hot I could feel the heat coming from the rooms below We had only a sheet over us, It was too warm for the single blanket given us.

'Some weeks ago a friend put me up for a while. But I preferred to come here some nights. It's warmer,' he said.

'Strange,' I said. 'It's like sleeping in a hospital.'

'Nonsense,' he said. 'I like people. Besides I am detached. I can be in a crowd and not be part of it'

* * *

AN attendant, naked but for a towel arouod his waist brought us weak tea and some toast. When we had had that we felt a little stronger. It's not expensive here,' he said.' 'When you haven't any money you don't need to have any of this; no tips and no massage. You only need the entrance money and perhaps another sixpenee for the man at the door. Even that is not always necessary.'

'I'm beginning to understand now,' I said.

'Actually, I'd like a room of my own,' he said. 'I want to collect my things together. At the moment they are all in different places. I used to have wonderful flats. I had one in Charlotte Street for years, then I shared a place with Demetrios in St. Martin's Lane.'

'Ha ha!'

'Why do you laugh?'

'I can visualise you and Demetrios in a flat together. Ha ha!'

'There's nothing funny about it,' Mohan said. 'Demetrios is a lovely fellow. I adore him.'

'He says the same thing about you.'

Mohan turned over, lay on his back and looked at the ceiling

'Tell me,' I said, 'how do you mean to pay for a flat?'

'I don't know. Don't bully me. Do you know of any flats to let?'

'No, it's almost impossible.'

'Then stop asking questions.'

The attendant came and removed the trays, then marked the cost of the refreshments on our tickets. More people came in. Some of them approached Mohan and asked for his guidance. They addressed him as if he were the owner of the place. For a moment I wondered why. But when I looked around and saw the people there, I realised that nobody else but my companion could be the owner of the Turkish Baths. He seemed to belong here.

'I had a lot of money some months ago,' Mohan said.

'Advance for your book?'

'Yes'

'Did you get a good sum?'

'Fair, but it's all gone now. And I had to lend Demetrios half of it'

'I thought he was your publisher.'

'He is.'

'So he paid you and took half of it back. How funny!'

'There's nothing funny about it Demetrios is a grand fellow. He's the most generous person I know.'

'Let's not quarrel,' I said. 'But I do hope you get some money. You can't live like this. How can you write without a place of your own?'

'I'm writing another book. It should be ready soon and then I'll have another advance.'

'Wish you all luck,' I said. 'I shall always pray for you.'

'Everything will work out all right,' he said, 'in the end. Let's sleep now. Don't worry. Sleep is better than prayer.'

* * *

MOHAN was up early in the morning and was walking barefoot up and down, feeling the heat of the floor on his feet. He stopped for a while and took exercises. He had noly a shirt on, and people looked at him, but he didn't seem to mind. The customers mostly were in a state of partial or complete nudity. The attendants, still wearing towels, went round making the beds. Sometimes the scanty costume slipped down from their waists. They picked it up, slung it over their shoulders and worked in their birthday suits. Their conversation often reiterated the same well-worn adjective.

'Where's my — towel' one said.

'Where's the — comb?' another said.

'Can we have some tea and toast?' Mohan ordered.

'Two — tea and toast,' one of the attendants shouted to the man in the kitchen.

'I'll have my tea weak,' I said.

'So will I,' Mohan said.

'Make the tea — weak,' the attendant said.

'Some language!' I remarked.

'Beautiful,' Mohan said. 'Good literature.'

While we were having breakfast Mohan said, 'How did you like the Turkish bath?'

'Very much,' I said, 'but I nearly killed myself'

'How?'

'I fainted in the steam room. I was suffocated and and couldn't breathe. I think it was due to the beer.'

'Nonsense.'

'It has happened before.' I said. 'You know, I don't drink very much. But one day I was with some people like you who made me drink in the afternoon till closing time. We had several pints and then ate hot curry quickly and on my way to the shop I went to the public baths and had a hot bath. It was a stupid thing to do.'

'Why? What happened?

'I fainted.'

'You didn't die?'

'No. But I threw up some blood later. They say you can kill yourself by a hot bath when drunk.'

'Fantastic theory you've got. Tell me, when are you going to find me a flat?'

'Why don't you look for one?'

'I can't be bothered.'

'Why should I bother?'

'I thought you were a friend of mine. I never go out

of my way to look for a flat. If I know of a place that's going, I take it. Otherwise my friends find flats for me. If they don't, well, that's the end. It has become a habit of mine to let things take their own course. But everything works out all right finally. Something does happen.'

An attendant came to make our beds. We had been sitting there after our breakfast. We got up and put on our clothes. There was something I had been wanting to ask Mohan. It had escaped me all this time. But as I put on my tie it came back to me.

'Mohan,' I said, 'why don't you go back home? You can do your writing there. And you'll have a better life.'

'I don't know.' he said. 'It has become a habit to stay here. I can't make up my mind to make a break. It's very difficult to tear yourself away from what you've been used to for several years.' He looked at me somewhat pathetically. I laughed.

'Don't bully me,' he said.

I collected my ticket and the key to my belongings and told him I must go.

'It's very early,' he said.

'I must have a coffee before I open the shop,' I said 'They don't serve coffee here.'

'Can't you do without coffee?'

'No. I must start the day with a cup of coffee.'

'Why'

'Habit,'

* * *

After this I saw Mohan several times; then a long break followed. Months passed. Spring came. then summer and with it the doodles. I had not seen him all this time. It was the longest period he had kept himself away. I was so busy saving myself and the shop from the V-bombs that I did not have the time to make a proper search for him. Demetrios was away in the country and I did not know any body else who knew Mohan.

Soon the doodle-bugs stopped coming. Books were bought and sold and life returned to normal. And one evening after closing the shop I was walking along Charing Cross Road when who should cross my path but Demetrios.

'Hello,' he said 'Isn't it a lovely evening?'

'Beautifully hot.' I said, 'Mohan would love it.' Demetrios turned his face away and looked at the window of a bookshop.

'I haven't seen him for a long time,' I said. 'I suppose he's busy with his second book.'

Demetrios turned to me, 'Haven't you heard?'

'What?'

'Didn't you know?'

'No. What do you mean?'

'Mohan is dead.'

'What?'

'Yes, dead, I thought you knew.'

'How did he die?'

'He had a Turkish bath after closing time.'

'Suffocated, I suppose.'

'Yes, in the steam room.'

'I knew it would happen. I warned him Foolish fellow. Why did he have to have a bath that day? He could have gone straight to bed.'

You can't do anything about it now. Things like that happen, you know,' Demetrios's voice was low and sad and he looked away from me. 'I did my best for him. But he was mad; completely crazy.'

The news was such a shock to me that I did not have time to figure out who was the madder of the two. Demetrios turned to me. 'Are you doing anything tonight?'

'No,' I said, 'nothing special.'

'Let's go to the Poets' Corner.'

'What's that?'

'It's a pub. Let's go and have a few.'

'No thanks,' I said.

'I'm depressed.'

'So am I.'

'Have just one.'

'No. Never again.'

He was obviously a student, had a kind face, and so I was able to summon enough c urage to speak to him.

"Excuse me," I said. "Do you know of any place where I could stay the night?"

"Just a minute" he said. "Let me buy some bread first, then I shall speak to you."

He soon turned to me. "I suppose you're from London," he said.

"Yes," I replied. "I've been bombed out. I want to find a place soon as I've a lot of work to do."

"Any exams?"

"No. I'm a writer."

"Oh!" He was speechless for a moment. "A young writer," he commented.

"Actually, I'm a law student," I said, "but I've put off my final exam in order to write."

"I'm a law student myself," he said, "busy swotting for my finals. I wish I could help you. It's dark outside and raining hard. Where can you go now? Oxford is so full at present."

"No rooms at your place?"

"None at all. I m sorry."

"That's all right," I said "but could you put me up in your room? You don't have to provide me with a bed. I can sleep on the floor and cover myself with my overcoat."

"My place is impossible," he said. "I 'm already putting up somebody — a kid. Any how let's get out of here and try to do something."

He helped me with my bag, and we walked in the rain to his lodgings.

"Let me take your bag and leave it in my room," he said, "then you'll be free of a burden. You wait outside. English people are funny; one has to be careful."

We went to the nearest pub in search of his landlord. Lala, my companion, went up to a man who was playing darts and mumbled a few words. The landlord looked at me over beer and flying darts There was no change in his expression.

"How did you get on?" I asked Lala when he came back to me.

"I don't know," he said. "I wish I could help you, but the girl is there."

"Your girl friend?"

"Dont be silly," he said. "You rush to conclusions. She's a poor kid. I'm looking after her. I'm her guardian. Have you ever been a guardian?"

"No," I replied. "What'll you drink?"

"I don't drink," he said, "But you can treat my landlord."

I bought Vichy water for Lala and myself and took a point of beer to his landlord.

"Thanks a lot," the landlord said, "You can sleep on the sofa in the sitting-room."

"Last orders, gentlemen, please!" the barman called out.

We walked back in rain I stopped a short time in the sitting-room, and then went up to see Lala. His room was bare. Sauce-less cups and unwased plates were lying on the floor, and my eyes made a futile search for a bed.

The kid was lying one two mattress, on laid on top of the other. She lay between blankets. I gussed her age to be anything between twenty and twenty five. Lala introduced us.

"Get up Kid, he said" "Be sociable."

"I'm tired," she said, smiling at me kindly. Then she yawned and asked my pardon. We talked for quite a while. The girl asked me some interesting questions. Now and again she sat up, taking care to cover her breasts.

"If you'll excuse us for a minute, we'll get your bed ready," Lala said.

I was puzzled at the mention of a bed. I went out and stood in the corridor. When I went back to the room I found a camp without bed clothes, and I noticed that the mattresses had been separated.

"The camp bed is for you," Lala said, "but what will you do for blankets?"

"I'll use my overcoat," I said

The girl laughed.

"Don't laugh, Kid," he said. "Don't be rude. You Should be sorry for our friend. He has been bombed out."

We slept in a row like patients in a hospital The grains of sand in the camp bed tickled me irritatingly, and my overcoal failed to slem the draught. But there was not a sound, either of breathing or snoring from my companions. There was no shifting from one side to the other. Lala and the kid slipt like mummies.

But soon Lala got up and switehed on the light "I don't think you're comfortable there," he said, "you'd better share my mattress."

"I don't want to trouble you," I said.

"Don't be silly," Lala said. "I like helping people"

I moved on to his mattress on tiptos lest I should wake. the girl Lala looked at her to make sure she wast fast asleepe

"She's a fine kid"' he said softly. "She has neither parents nor friends and is all alone in the world. I felt sorry for her and took the responsiblity of adopting her as my ward. She's an intelligent kid. You perhaps noticed how tired she was, but when you started to talk, she became interested and asked you intelligent questions.

I lay on my back listened.

"All my friend suspect me" Lala continued, "but I can assure you I've no other interest in the kid save that of a guardian in his ward. This morning my landlady said something nasty. I told her off and lent her a book on Evidence so that she might be familiar with the Law of Presumptions. I guard the kid's character and reputation like an angel. Have you ever been a guardian?"

"No," I said, "but I'd like to sleep now."

"You believe me, don't you?" Lala asked, looking at me pathetically, "I mean about me and the kid."

"I don't know," I said. "Let's sleep."

It was dark again. Lala and I tried to sleep with our backs to each other. A gust of cold wind brought a fresh draught. I pulled my overcoat up to my chin and pondered over the relationship of my companions.

The hours slipped by and the dawn crept in through the ineffective blacked-out and broken panes. Soon we crouched on the floor for coffee like coolies on a plantation.

"You must find good digs today," Lala said. "I'll take you to town."

"Thank you, Lala"

"Don't mention it," he said. "I like helping people."

The kid had an engagement, so Lala and I went in search of accommodation. Oxford was full of refugees from the German blitz and it was not easy to find lodgings.

"Let's have lunch," I said, tired from pushing through the crowds and pacing the intersecting streets of the town.

"Have lunch with me" Lala said. "You're my guest."

We found a table for two, and Lala drew my attention away from the caps and gowns of the undergraduates to the story of the kid. "I almost forced her to learn shorthand and typing," he said, "and now she is a good typist Soon I shall find her a good job. and then, hi, hi, hi..... I intend arranging a suitable marriage for her. You see, as a true Indian, I believe in arranged marriages."

"Why don't you marry her yourself?" I interrupted.

"You are not being serious, my friend," he replied in a surprised tone. "How can I possibly marry my ward?" Then he looked away from me and added, "Besides I'm already married."

"Does your wife know about your ward?"

"Of course," Lala replied. "I'm an honest person. I wrote to my wife and told her I was adopting a kid. My wife is a sweet thing. She wrote back asking me to bring the kid back home. She could be of help in the house, she said."

"I don't think the kid will get a warm welcome from your wife," I remarked.

Lala laughed. "You certainly have a sense of humour': he said. "Anyhow, let's stop being funny. I'm quite earnest about my plans for the kid. You see, my course at Oxford is nearly at an end and I shall be sailing home in a few months' time. Before that I must see her settled well in life".

"You'll have to hurry up," I said.

Lala bent over the table, got closer to me and pleaded "I think you'd make a good match for the kid. You seem a rather helpless sort of person, and I like helping people that's why I'm making this proposal. Besides, all a writer needs are talent, a typist and a typewriter. Talent you have, in the kid you'll find an ex cellent typist, and I shall provide the typewriter as dowry on the day you get registered in marriage to my war d. How about it, my young witer"?

Lala looked eager, sincere and pathetic. "Don't kid me," I said and left the table abruptly.

FRANCOPHILE

I WAS tired of walking up and down the Charing Cross Road. I seemed to have read all the books in the shops. There was no point in going into one of them and turning over the pages of a book I had read before. But I had another hour to wast before my lunch appointment. How was one to fill in the time? It didn't seem easy. I could thing of only one way — a pub.

I stepped into one, bought a beer and looked around for a seat. I hate sitting down in pubs. I much prefer to lean against the bar and drink. When I am with friends who insist on findig a table, I feel unduly harassed. But that day I wanted to sit down. My feet were aching, I had been walking a lot that morning to keep myself warm and busy.

And so with beer in hand I stood there and looked round the spacious saloon of the "Wild Duck." My eyes caught the attention of somebody beckoning to me. I screwed up my eyes and looked at him. I didn't know him. He called again. I went.

"Don't you know me?" he asked "I used to come to your bookshop ' "

I looked at him closely. but couldn't place him at all.

And there was something I didn't like about his appearance. But I noticed a kindliness in his eyes they contracted in a smile, creasing more sharply the lines around them I sat down.

"I liked your shop," he said.

"Did you buy any books?"

"Yes I bought a French book once."

"In French?"

"Yes"

"But we only had a few".

"That was it. I'd have been a regular customer if only you had had more books in French. I don't like translation".

"But we had many books by English authors".

"Never interested me"

"But you are English?"

"Yes, of course. But I admire the French. Let me buy you a drink. Finish that awful stuff. What'll you have? Waiter?"

"Beer," I said.

"Nonsense,' he said. "Nevar heard such nonsense before. You an educated man, an intellectual, drinking beer. Never heard of it. What nonsense!"

"What would you suggest?" I asked.

"Have an absinthe."

"Wouldn't mind trying," I said.

"Never had it before?"

"No"

"Nonsense! What nonsense!"

When the absinthe arrived, he took out two lumps of sugar from his pocket and gave one to me. I did not know what to do with it, but decided to do what he did He took a sip of the absinthe, then he sucked the lump of sugar.

"This is not the way to do it", he said. "It is difficult to be a Frenchman in England."

"But you are English?"

"Oh yes. All I am saying is that God has been kind enough to give us two of the finest peoples in the world as our neighbours."

"Tell me" I said. "who are these two peoples whom God has favoured by placing them near the English?"

"I never said that. What I did say was that we, the English, have been favoured by Providence in being given two of the best peoples in the world as our neighbours."

"Well, who are they?"

"Its obvious now. The French and the Scottish, of course Great people, the French. Most cultured people in the world. They're artists in the art of living."

* * *

HE had hardly finished speaking when he began to roar with laughter. His eyes were like to slits and there were now more lines around them,

"Well, young man" he said, "have more French books in your shop and I'll be a daily customer."

"I haven't got the shop any more." I said.

"Why? What happned?"

"Sold it"

"Why? I thought you were doing well."

"We did for a while, then the trade went down, especially during the bombs. The shop began to lose heavily, and so I had to give it up."

"Pity" he said "It was an interesting shop. I think one of the reasons for your failure was the lack of French books."

"Nobody cares for French books in that area." I said "Actually our site wasn't too good, not busy enough: Side Streets never pay"

"Nonsense," he said "French literature sells anywere, even in the jungle. The greatest literature in the world."

"You don't seem to understand the book trade," I said "Our district was good, but we are were poorly situated. We seem to be talking at cross purposes. There's no point in arguing."

"Good" he said, "fair enough. I win. Worth a celebration, boy. Waiter! Two more absinthes, please."

As before, he brought out to lumps of sugar, gave one to me and started to laugh.

"What are you doing now?" he said.

"I write"

"Any success?"

"Not much."

"Making any money?"

"None at all."

"Know any French?"

"Very little."

"That's why you're a failure," he said. "One can't possibly write without knowing French."

"But I do read a little French." I said, "and I've read a number of French works in English."

"That wan't do." he said. "You should be a master of the language. No man can be writer without knowing French".

"Actually, I am learning French now" I said.

"Good," he said. "Fair enough. I wing Waiter! Repeat please."

"I must go now," I said, "It's getting late."

"What's the hurry?"

"I've a lunch appointment."

"When?"

"I told him He took out his watch and said it was a dependable one. French make, he added. I noticed I still had some time to go.

"Why don't you come and have lunch with me?" I said "I'm meeting a New Zealand girl. You'll like her. She's an M. A."

"M. A. what"?

"M. A. New Zealand.

" I'd have come if your friend had been an M. A., Sorbonne, but not M. A., New Zealand. Good God, No."

"I don't think you're being serious " I said. "Perhaps you don't like women."

"That's impossible," He said. "Can you imagine a man who admires the French, as I do, not being a lover of women"?

"I don't quite follow you," I said. "I suppose it's English humour. It often misses me."

"Not English humour. he said. "French wit."

"I see."

"No my boy, Its impossible to like the French and not adore women. Ha! Ha! Ha!"

"I think I see your point now," I said.

"Good." he said, "I win. Cheers!"

"Cheerio!"

"Actually, why I don't want to come to lunch with you is because I don't like English food. You know what Voltaire said?.

"What?"

"Voltaire said: The English have several religions, but only one sauce!"

"I thought the English had only one religion."

"Nonsense", he said. "I have never come across so many religions among any other people in the world.

"And what's the English sauce?"

"Roast beef That's all. I hate it.

"What ab.ut the French?"

"The French have only one religion, but several sauces. You know French cooking — delicious"

"Extraordinary," I said. "The strangest thing I've ever heard in my life. Very interesting. I think to deserve a drink for that."

* * *

I DUG into my pockets. A half-crown was still there. "This is all I have," I said, "otherwise I'd have bought you a drink. I hope you don't mind. I'm sorry, but next week I expect to paid for a story, Then I shall treat you lavishly."

"Not at all," he said "put that wealth back. It was a pleasure to treat you. I like being with artists. Actually you're doing me a great favour by drinking with me."

"Nice of you to say that" I said.

"By the way," he said. "would you care to make some money?"

"I'll do anything to pick up a little money." I said.

"Ever bet?"

"Never"

"Make an exception this time and put your money on Sayani, the French horse. It's bound to win the 2-30 race."

"I don't see how I can do that," I said, "without any money and not knowing any bookies."

"I will lend you a pound." He said, "and introduce you to my bookmaker. It'll be O. K."

"Oh, no, you mustn't do that", I said, "You have already paid for a lot of drinks It isn't fair."

'Look here," he said, "I am already indebted to you for something and have been waiting all this time to repay you. Now the opportunity has come. I don't want to miss this chance, so please don't pleace let me down."

"I can't imagine how you could be indepted to me," I said, somewhat surprised.

"Listen," he said getting closer to me, when I used to come to your shop, the lady who was working for you treated me nicely. She said the kindest things, was always willing to converse was a good listener which is a rare gift, sir. An I — a thing I can never forget — the day I bought that French book she took me to your little office and made me a cup of coffee. I've waited long to express my appreciation both to you and your assistant and now the almighty has given me that opportunity."

I didn't have a ready answer to this eulogy, but merely looked away from him, then turned the drink and looked into it.

But I was able to see with the corner of my eye his hand moving towards his inside pocket. Then both his hands went under the table and I could sense the familiar folding of a pound note into a small square.

His arm now moved under the table like snake searching for my hand. Soon the note changed hands and found its way into my trouser pocket.

"Can I see you tomorrow?" asked.

"Why?"

"I'd like to return this to you"

"Don't bother about that. I'll see you, some time. Providence will see to that. Put that money on Sayani before you go to lunch and you'll have twenty pounds plus that quid on you before opening time this evening."

"Even if the horse doesn't win, I will pay you back," I said. I'm expecting some money for a story."

"Sayani is bound to win," he said, "no doubt about it. It's French. And don't mention that quid again. I am not hard up for a pound. So forget about it."

"I wish you'd come to lunch," I said, "I hate to leave you alone. You've been so nice to me."

"I'm all right," he said, "don't worry. I am going to a French film."

* * *

WHEN he turned the corner I took out the card he had given me and examined it. A pencil scribble said, "This is my friend," but the signature was indecipherable. I was quite ignorant of the procedure of betting and stood there trying to make up my mind. The massive clock above a block of offices across the road told me that I was a quarter of an hour late for my lunch date. I threw the card away, decided against Sayani and walked fast. I saw Tui from a distance,

waiting for me outside the restaurant. Her face split in a grin as I approached and there was no need for an apology.

"You've been drinking," Tui said.

"What makes you think that?"

"I can smell it. Besides, when you talk like that, I know you're drink."

"I am not" I protested. "I've had a few absinthes, but that wouldn't alter my views."

"Absinthe! How wonderful!"

"Why never had it?"

"No"

"Would you care for some this afternoon?"

"Yes. I've always wanted to drink absinthe. Just for the experience. So far I've only read about it in novels. But where can we go? The pubs are closed."

"I'm a member of a club in fleet Street. We can go there".

"Isn't it expensive?"

"Not very. I've got some money".

"How much?"

"A pound, and I've enough change for the taxi."

"What about the lunch?"

"I can owe that."

"Will they give you credit?"

"If they don't I'll throw this quid at them and tell them to keep the change."

"I've got a little money, It'll help."

"How much have you got?"

"About seven and six"

"Keep that, we'll go through my pocket first; then, if we feel like it, we might have a couple of pints of beer with your money."

We spent most of the afternoon arguing over Turkish coffee and that sobered me up and I began to long for more absinthe. I called the waiter and asked for the manager. There was no need for me to take him to a corner and whisper into his ear about the bill. The wealth I possessed gave me sufficient confidence and courage.

"oh yes, of course," the manager said. "You just sign the bill and give it to the waiter."

So that was settled.

Tui and I went out and, while I looked for a taxi, she bought an evening paper. I took the paper from her turned over the pages and sadly noted that Sayani had won the 2-30 race.

AT the club, I did not look at the waiter when he brought our drinks, but took the little square from my trouser pocket and Put it on the tray which he held above our heads. Tui grinned at me and I said, "Cheerio." Then I turned to the waiter for the change. He merely stared at me.

"No good sir, he said, this money's no good."

"What do you mean?"

He still held the tray above our heads. "No good sir" "Nonsence," I said.

The waiter lowered the tray for Tui to see. I noticed the square had been stretched and was now rectangular.

"It's a twenty-franc note," Tui said, grinning, with a cigarette in her mouth.

"I picked it up, and my head reeled and I felt like a drunken man as Tui reached for her bag and brought out her little purse.

LIABILITIES

" What can you do? " M. K. said to me when I asked him if he could find me a job.

" Anything, " I said.

" You know the book trade, " M. K. said.

" Yes, I've worked in a bookshop. "

" You find a shop for me and I'll make you the Manager. "

There was a bookshop in Bloomsbury I liked. It was smalld square shaped and had a pretty window. I walked in an aske, to see the Manager.

" I am the Manager. "

" I wondered if you'd care to sell your shop. "

" Yes. But who wants to buy it? "

" M. K. "

" Good. He's progressisve. We don't want to sell to reactionaries. You understand comrade. "

" Oh, yes. How much do you want? "

" Hundred and twenty-five pounds-eighty for stock and forty five for the good will. "

" Does that cover me? "

" It depends. How much are you getting from the other side? "

" I haven't arranged that yet. "

" I'll give you five per cent. Get another five from your man. That makes it ten in all. Quite resonable. "

" Quite. "

" Hurry up then. Make it quick. "

I ran to M. K. He was busy drawing up resolutions for a political meeting. There were several others in the office working for the revolution. When M. K. saw me he got up and led me to another room. He rang up somebody and told him about the shop.

" They'll soon be here, " he said putting the receiver down.

Two men arrived. One was tall, slim and fair ; the other was dark, fat, broad and had a huge curved nose. He was enormous. They called him Tiny. M. K. introduced us and I took them to the shop. No time was wasted. Jim Soames, the owner of the business, made a sales speech. They tried to beat down the price. But it was useless. If the price of stock was lowered, the value of the goodwill went up. When the latter was questioned, the former was raised. The total remained the same ; Jim Soames would not give in.

" Let's draw up the contract, " Bill, the slim partner, said.

" What about liabilities? " Tiny said.

" Has the shop any liabilities? " Bill asked.

" Yes ", Jim admitted. But you'll not be liable. "

" There can't be much of goodwill ", M. K. said.

" We must go now, " Tiny said.

" Yes. We have another appointment. You arrange everything, " Bill said to me.

" Our man is a barrister, " Tiny said to Jim, " he'll look after our interests. "

" What about the money? " Jim Soames said.

" We'll give you a cheque, " Bill and Tiny said together.

" Hari will collect it for you. " M. K. said.

And everything was settled. It was the quickest sale in the world.

Before they left, M. K. took me aside and said he had nothing to do with the business. Bill and Tiny were the real partners. But only Bill's name was to be mentioned in the contract, and I was to sign on his behalf. Jim's solicitor soon arrived and the agreement was drawn up quickly. One of the specific clauses was that the new proprietors would not be liable or debts of the past oweners. The former was personally resfponsible for such liabilities. When I was about to put my signature, Jim said I was a barrister, and the solicitor immediately rose and stood aside. I signed : P. P. Bill Watson, Hari Markand, Barrister-at-law.

Then I went to collect the cheque and when I returned I noticed the shop was crowded Soames had telephoned his customers and they had rushed to express their loyalty. Right

or wrong, deserved or otherwise, Jim maintained that it was all in order as the cheque had not been handed in, and when I produced it he had another excuse. He did not know the new principals and could not vouchsafe for the cheque. The banks were closed and he would have to wait till Monday to see if the money was really there. I kept my temper. I needed the job and didnot want to spoil everything at the last moment. Besides I was broke and was hoping to collect my commission. The more the sales, the less chance of Jim saying that he did not have enough cash. At 6 p. m. Jim Soames closed the shop and he gave me my five per cent when I reminded him about it. Then he handed me the keys and showed me where the switches were. Even at the last moment he collected some books. He said they were his personal property and had not been included in the original assessment. I was tactfully silent. Out in the street, he said, " Whatever you, don't let the party down No Trotskyist or Fascist literature, please. well, good-bye, comrade. And good luck. "

The stock looked much thinner when I went into the shop on Monday morning. I rearranged the books on the shelves and placed some of them with the front boards showing so as to fill up space. Then I went into the back room and waited for the customers. Somebody walked in noisily. It was Jim Soames. He had a parcel of books under his arm.

" Hello, comrade. "

" Hello, Jim. "

" Any sales? "

" Not yet. "

" What's happened to the books? "

" I think some of them are under your arm, " I said.

" These? Nonsense. I picked them up cheap this morning in Battersea. I thought you might care for some of them. "

" I've no money, " I said. " Haven't sold a single book yet. "

" That'll come, that'll come. " said Jim, " give the shop some time. It'll pick up. You know, Hari, sometimes this shop is so full that you can hardly move. "

" I noticed that on Saturday, I said.

Jim missed the point of my remark. He went inside and fetched the card index. He told me who the customers were and the kind of books they bought; then he explained to me the book trade and where I was to buy the books from.

" You can get everything from Axle books, " he said.

" Who are Axle Books? "

" Wholesalers. Just around the corner. Very convenient. They'll be very helpful. I'll put in a word for you. You can open an account with them. "

Just then the telephone rang. I took the receiver, stood near the partition that made a small back room for private use, and listened while keeping an eye on Jim's movements. He was walking around the shop examining the books and at the same time giving an ear and the corner of his eye to the telephone conversation.

" Could I speak to the Manager? "

" Speaking. "

" This is the Manager of the Axle Books. "

" Oh, hello, I was coming round to see you. "

" I hear you've taken over Ringwell Books, "

" Yes My friends. "

" M. K. "

" No, his friends. "

" We can't do any business with you. "

" Why not? "

" You owe us a lot of money: "

" That's imposible. We've just started. "

" But your firm does. "

" Which one? "

" Ringwell Books. "

" You mean the previous owner? "

" Yes. "

" We've nothing to do with them. "

" You took the shop over from them? "

" We did. But we are not liable for their debts. The contract specially says so. "

" But you are trading under the same name. As far as we are concerned Ringwell Books owe us the money and unless you settle that we'll have nothing to do with you. "

" What happens then? "

" We shall sue you. "

" You daren't do that. I am a barrister. "

There was burring sound, I replaced the receiver and went to the front of the shop. Jim had disappeared; but he came back soon. He had gone to sell his books, got good prices he said. Jim Soames knew his trade all right.

" There, " he said, standing outside the shop, " that's Axle Books. I'll take you there if you'd like to see. I know the Manager well. "

I turned my back on him and went into the back room. He came after me and held me by my arm.

" Why?, " he said. " Anything wrong? " Have you seen him? "

" Who? "

" Axle Books man. "

" I've just been talking to him on the telephone. "

" Did you mention me? "

" No, but he did. "

" What did he say? "

" He said you were a charming person. And very honest."

" It always pays to be honest in business, " Jim said, " take that tip from me. "

" I will. "

When we moved into the shop, the telephone started to ring again. Jim stopped me before I reached the receiver.

"' See you tommorrow."

"All right."

"By the way," He said "this book belongs to me."

"Which one?"

"This can I have it?"

"Go ahead. Take it"

"It's my personal property. If you come across it in the stock book, cross it out. Good Bye"

"Cheerio"

I lifted the receiver.

"Can I speak to the Manager."

" I'm the Manager. "

" My name is Alexander-Arthur Alexander. "

" Well "

" You owe me some money. "

" I don't know you. "

" You owe me two guineas. You promised to me Soviet Communism, you know Webb's book. "

" I don't know anything about it. We're a new firm and we're not liable for previous debts. "

" I don't care who you are. You're Ringwell Books you owe me the money, that's all."

" Don't be rude."

" You are being rude. Returm my money or I go to the Magistrate. "

" Don't talk to me like that, " I said. " I'm a barrister. "

I slapped the receiver down and gave him the burring sound. I sat down for a while in the back room and steadied my nerves. I suddenly remembered that Jim had taken a book. It was a rare and expensive edition of Pushkin's Evgeny Onegin. I got angry again and had to file my nails to calm myself. Another ring. Tiny was at the other end.

" How are the takings? "

" Nothing so far. "

" What? Nothing at all? You'd better buck up and do something about it. You'll have pay yourself, you know. "

"I thought you were paying me a salary"

"Yes. But it'll have to come out of the shop. We're not going to pay you for nothing. The shop will have to pave its way;; otherwise, we'll be forced to re-sell it. And, believe me, it'll be quicker than the last one".

A car drew outside the shop and a man with vaseline plastered hair got out and walked towards the shop.

"What's the matter?" Tiny said.

"I think it's a customer. '

"Do your stuff." Tiny said. "Remember your salary on Friday."

The man came close to me and held out hand. ''I'm Alexander.'' he said, ''Arthur Alexander. Sorry I was rude to you over the 'phone'.

''You weren't,'' I said.

He came out with more apologies.

''Let's forget about it,'' I said.

He smiled. ''Ther'es a book in the windo I'd like to bu''y.

''Which one?.''

''Nehru's Autobiography,'' he said.

''It's a good book,'' I said. ''Here you are. I've plenty.''

''Can I have two copies?''

''Yes of course.''

''I want one for a doctor friend of mine. He reads a lot. I'll bring him round to you. He'll buy a lot of books.''

''Thank you very much,'' I said. ''very kind of you''

He looked round and bought two copies of Nehru's Glimpses of World History and two copies of each of several political books. I made seperate bundles of the books. I made seperate bundles of the books, tied them up. The sale was considerable. I had covered my salary.

''By the way,'' I said, how much does the shop owe you? I'd like to settle that now.''

''You mean Ringwell Books?''

"Yes. The firm."

"Oh, forget about it," Mr. Alexander said. "You have nothing to do with it."

I carried the books to his car.

"Nehru is a wonderful man" he said just before he drove off? The remark came so suddenly that I was quite prepared for it. But I had my wits about me.

"Oh yes, of course" I said just in time.

"Don't tell people you are a barrister." M. K. said to me the next day.

"Why not?"

"Because you'll get into trouble. Take my advice."

* Soon after this the Manager of Axle Books telephoned.

"The Manager of please."

"Yes"

"I'm ringing to tell you that we've decided to do business with you. We recognize you as a different firm."

"Thank you," I said.

"That's all right, barrister," he said.

"Good bye, comrade," I said.

It was now evident that the manager of the Axile Books had consulted M. K. in the matter M. K. was highly respected in political circles and perhaps it was his influenee that made Axle Books change their minds which regard to us.

But Jim Soames and I had our own methods of dealing with past liabilities. I used my usual formulae and it deterred prospective plaintiffs. However several individuals and firms took out summons against Jim. At first they could not find him and finally when they did trace him they found Jim Soames in uniform. And in wartime you could not effectively sue a man in the army.

So that was that.

MOHAN liked her beacause she resembled Fanny "I know you from somewhere," she said.

"I thought I knew you," he replied. "What'll you drink?"

"I don't drink."

"Strange," he remarked. "Why come here?."

"Because I like it here. I think I'll have grape fruit." She shock her head exactly like Fanny. But looking at her closely he noticed that the resemblance between them was only slight. Fannay was dark; this one was fair. The farmer's likeness to a horse was rather faint; the latter had a typical horse face? Fanny was the better looking of the two.

"What's your name?"

"Natasha. You're Mohan?"

"Yes, How did you know?"

"I've heard people call you that. And I knew a lot of things about you."

"Such as?"

"Never mind.""

"Good or bad?"

"Pretty bad. I shouldn't be talking to you. Never mind. doesn't matter." She waved her hand. "You write, don't you?"

"Yes. do you read?"

"Not much. My father does,"

"What do you do?"

"I go to an art school"

"That's something."

"I don't like Picasso"

"What made you say that?"

"People round here do; they're poseurs. I'm not like them."

"I don't know what you are hinting at," he said. Have another drink."

"Ginger beer."

"Bobby," he called," a pint of bitter and a ginger beer.

"Bobby laughed as she opened a bottle of ginger beer.

"Somebody has to drink it, "she said.

"You come here a lot," Natashe said.

"Don't talk nonsense."

"They serve you quickly here because you are a regular Others have to wait a long time."

"It isn't that at all," he posted, "Bobby likes me. That's why I get quick service Women are always nice to me."

"You live on women."

"Don't talk rubbish. How on earth do you get that idea?"

"But I'm not going to be nice to you. You wan't like me. I'm not like people round here."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't go to bed with everybody."

"Nor do they."

"I won't sleep with anybody. My father will kill me."

She shook her head exactly like a pony. Her face now seemed even longer. Soon, he thought, she will be all profile and no face And he wondered why he found her attractive. There was not much in common between her and Fanny. Natasha prided hereself in the fact that she was bourgeois; but Fanny resented any association with that class. Fanny despised her parents, but Natasha adored her father. But they both admired a schse of humor and were quick to detect it. Their gestures, movements and expressions were alike. These, more than anything else, established a close kirship with people. And of course, between Fanny and Natasha there was that horse.

'I must go now," Natasha said.

"Stay a bit more," he suggested, "It's not closing time yet."

"I can't, my father will be waiting for me."

"When shall I see you again?"

"Soon," and she cantered away.

"It was several days before Mohan saw Natasha again. She was in the pub before him. For some reason he was late that day: She shock her head and almost neighed like a horse as he went in.

"Sorry I could'nt come all these days," she appoligised, "my mother has been ill and I had took after her."

"And how's your father?"

"Very well Thanks. He has been reading to me. He's wonderful!"

"You seem to be obsessed with your father. He seems to do everything for you."

"She threatened to slap him, Then she went to the bar and bought him a pint of bitter. He smiled.

"You're happy now, aren't you? You love it when women give you something."

"Off on it again," He said.

"That's all for tonight. Don't expect too much from me.',

After he had finished his beer they went to a Chinese restaurant for supper.

"The reason why I am so fond of my father," said Natasha munching mushrooms and bamboo shoots, "is because he has done so much foe me."

"I gathered that."

"Don't make fun of me, darling."

"We'll, go on, talk."

"About what?"

"Your father."

Natasha was looking at him with her left eye. He could now see only half her face. Her long blonde hair had tumbled down over the right side and was almost touching the yellow noodles on her plate. Her eye was a lovely sea-blue and, when it turned from him to the food, he could see its reflection in the chilli sauce in a little Chinese saucer.

"Well, my father is going to give me lots of money for my twenty-first birthday," Natasha said, throwing her head back. The hair flew back and now both her eyes, blue and closely set together, stared at him. She then bent down and her hair escalated down her profile. He looked at her and thought how beautiful she was. Natasha had a fair complexion and her skin was clear and transparent.

"When is your birthday?" he asked.

She gave the date and he made a mental note of it. Afterwards they walked under dim lights through half-deserted streets, stopped in dark corners and alley ways and Natasha began to looke more like a horse. She kissed him on his checks, made him taste her lipstick and enveloped him in a mass of golden hair.

"You won't get any of the money my father gives me," Natasha said pinching his check.

"I don't want any money from you," he assured her, "I only want you."

"My father will kill me. He will kill you. No daughter of mine he'd say ....."

"Stop babbling," he said.

When Natasha took leave of him she promised that she would stay longer with him on the next occasion as she intended to spend the night with a girl-friend.

Natasha's twenty-first birthday was drawing near and Mohan was on the lookout for money to buy her a present. Cash failed to materialise and he was getting worried. But on the day of her birthday a parcel of tea arrived from Ceylon.

It was beautifully packed, had a government seal on it, and a label said it was a gift from the Tea Commissioner. Mohan was happy, for not only would it make a good present for Natasaha but her father was also bound to be impressed with the paraphernalia. He was sure to go up in her father's estimation. This, he was persuaded to believe was very necessary if he was to make any headway with Natasha.

The door bell rang late in the night. He rushed downstairs with the parcel of tea and opened the door to greet Natasha who was full of gaity.

"Many happy returns," he said, handing her the parcel.

"Ceylon tea!" she gasped. "What a wonderful present for my twenty-first birthday. My father simply adores Ceylon tea."

She slid into his arms. He held her close to him and felt her body move inside her dress like a cat tied in a bag.

"Mohan," she wispered in his ear, "I don't have to sleep with my girl friend to night. You see, I am a major today. I Can do as please."

"What will your father say?"

Natasha silenced him with a prolonged kiss, and she soon followed him upstairs to his room without any thought of her father.

THE RAID

SHE was tall and dark and her hair was long and sleek. She was nervous and fidgetty as she sat alone at a table in the coffee bar. and, everytime the door of the saloon opened, she looked towards the entrance; At last he arrived.

"I thought you weren't coming," ahe snapped at him.

"Sorry," he apologised. "I was held up on the way."

"Typical of you," she commented angrily. "Looked at all the blondes, I suppose."

"Don't start a quarrel," he said. "What will you have?"

"You know what I want."

He went to the bar and fetched two cups of coffee.

"You took a long time to get the coffee," she remarked rather sharply.

"Rather busy tonight," he explained.

"You talked to everybody in the bar," she admonished him, "and looked at all the women. It's bad manners; you're supposed to be with me."

She was angry. He sipped his coffee and didn't say a word.

"Why don't you speak?"

"It's impossible," he answered. "The moment I open my mouth you eat my head off. You have an inferiority complex."

She leaned forward. "Listen," she reproved him. "We both have it, like most people."

"Don't talk rubbish," he protested. "I haven't any because I have two thousand years of culture behind me."

"It's always behind you," she taunted him. "That's what is wrong. And where do you think mine is? In front? Ha, ha!"

"I'm going," he said, "It's useless. We'll only quarrel."

She sipped her coffee.

"Wait," she said.

"Why?"

"Sit down. There's only one thing."

"I hate you," he said. "I don't wish to see you again."

"It's mutual," she retorted. "You're very naive. Hate does not cast out love. On the contrary, it's possible to hate and love at the same time. Not that I love, but thers's only one thing."

"What's love?" he asked sceptically.

"Love is what happens between two lovers," she answered brightly.

The sirens blew on then quite unexpectedly. It was the first air raid in several days. She was in panic.

"What shall we do?" he asked.

" Let's go to my flat, " she suggested. " It's in a modern block, and I always feel safe there. There's only one thing. Come! "

They left the coffee bar. The waitress with breasts like rapiers wished them goodnight and a safe journey home.

" Be careful if you can't be good, " she advised them.

" We'll be careful, " the girl replied with a knowing smile.

When they reached the the flat, they, went straight to the divan and reclined on it. Outwide it was quiet and bombless. Her eyes sparkled when the all-clear was announced.

" You have no inferiority complex now, " he muttered.

" Nor have you, " she murmured, " it's heaven. Darling we're in heaven "

Suddenly the sirens wailed over London like the combined moan of a thousand women.

" What's happening? " she asked with a tremor in her voice.

" The raiders have come back, " he replied calmly, " but who cares? We're in heaven. "

An enemy bombe dived low and was hovering in the air. Soon he seemed to be right above the flat.

" Hell! " she screamed. " Darling, we're in hell "

The bomber made a direct hit and reduced the flat and its contents to a mass of rubble.

THE CAT

"HAVE you ever been in love with a cat?" he asked me.

"No," I said. "I actually hate cats. What will you have? Icecream or milk-shake?"

"I'll have a glass of milk," he replied. "My cat adores milk. We have the same tastes."

He took a long sip of milk, then smacked his lips "I know it's bad manners to smack one's lips, but my cat does. We have the same habits. It's wonderful to share one's life with a partner who has the same tastes and manners."

"What do you mean, 'partner'?" I asked curiously.

"My cat," he answered. "She's my partner. I picked her up in a London hospital, fell for her the moment I saw her—collapsed like a house of cards."

I looked straight into my friend's eyes. There was not the slightest flicker of amusement. He was in dead earnest.

"My cat is quite uncommon," he continued. "Her hair is long and curls at hairpin bends. It's crinkly and crispy like the hair of a girl from Jamaica."

THIS was my first encounter with my friend after many years. We had been class-mates together, but soon after finishing school he had left for England. He had spent several winters there and had acquired one kind of reputation and another. The mildest of these was that he was a good conversationalist. However, I was somewhat disappointed. I was eager to hear him discourse about his experiences in England, but he persisted in talking about his cat. I gave him full scope.

"My cat is marvellously attractive," he said. "She has sharp teeth, tilted upwards but not protruding Don't you think it attractive?" he said. "I do. Tilted teeth excite me like a *retrousse* nose in a girl."

Actually, I am repelled by by protruding teeth. But to be fair by my friend, I must admit that I have never given a moment's thought to tilted teeth that do not project outwards, or to turned-up noses. These were new items for me in the repertoire of a woman's glamour.

"My cat is of a rare type," he commented. "She has a long straight back and walks as if she had swallowed a footrule."

I could not repress my laughter at his description. I now realised that he fully deserved his reputation for brilliant conversation. I suddenly became interested in his cat and, in order to keep him longer with me, I ordered some meat rolls.

"Not for me," he said, waving aside the meat dish. "I'd rather have fish-cakes. My cat adores them and I take the cue in all matters from her." I ordered fish rissoles for my guest and plate Vienna steak for myself. He bent down and almost kissed the rissoles when they arrived.

"The fish dish I like best is the tamil soup." he informed me. "I don't mean mulligatawny but the richer kind. The one

that contains fish, tiny crabs, prawns, jack seeds and what not. I believe it is called *kool*. Yes, *kool*. It's the best soup on the world's menu. It Certainly is the king of soups. It's far more satisfying than either the Chinese noodle soup or the Austrian *minnestrone*. Whenever I have it specially prepared by Kanmani, our maid, my cat and I sit out in the garden to relish it. She cuddles herself into a cosy corner in my lap and we both eat kool out of one and the same Chinese bowl."

I now felt that I had had enough of the cat, although I was not in the least bored. In fact, I was interested so far, but I wanted my friend to take up another theme.

"Haven't you ever been in love with a woman?" I asked him.

"I have," he admitted. "many a time."

"This too will pass like the others" I made the logical inference.

"Not this one," he assured me. "Never. Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder .....I'm married to my cat."

"Does it know about your past affairs?" I made a frontal attack.

"Certainly but she's catty about them all. My cat is a real women."

"Miaow!" I cried.

"Miaow!" He echoed.

"Once again I became eager to hear about my friend's activities in England.

"Tell me" I asked. "Why do you prefer to live in England?"

"The four seasons and a cat," He answered briskly.

"What do you mean?"

"Spring, summer, autumn, winter and a cat"

"What wonderful about them and where does the cat come in?"

"You'll see. Take the spring, for instance — love and all that."

I cut him short. "I know all about love. Proceed to the others."

"In the summer you can watch cricket."

"You can do that here too," I retorted, "in brighter sunshine and for a longer season."

"But it's not the same," he informed me.

"That's all right." I gave in. "I'm not interested in cricket anyway. Well, what happens in the autumn?"

"The leaves turn yellow matching the colour of a blonde's hair. Haven't you heard the expression. 'The autum-leaf yellow of her hair'?"

I now waited for the finale. I was convinced my companion would never be able to boost the English winter.

"What about the English winter? I here i'ts terrible."

"Rubbish," he contradicted me. "In the winter and old man sits beside old woman facing a blazing fire, and a cat cuddles cosily on the rug. There's love between the old couple. Warmth from the fire and friendship from the cat. Love, warmth and friendship. What more do you want in life?"

I began to ponder. My friend got up.

"I must really go now," he said. "My wife will be waiting for me."

"Which wife?" I asked irritably.

"Cat," he answered calmly. "You see, I met my wife at St. George's Hospital, in London, where she was a medical student. We fell in love with each other. After a fortnight's courtship we got married, and my wife Catlin, brought her pet, a huge black cat, along with her on our honeymoon, and on the very first night Catlin miaowed, purred and cuddled exactly like her pet which shared our bed. That's why I have named my wife Cat. Good night!"

DANGER

WHEN his father told him that I was a story writer he was eager that I should write a story about him. I was not much flattered by, this, yet it touched me. A few years back a smart, sophisticated young woman in London had made a similar request. That of course had tickled my vanity.

But though I have not nursed any regrets for never fulfilling the lady's wish, the little boy's repeated requests weighed on my mind.

I had somehow to make a start. "What's your name?" I asked the lad.

"Veeran," he said, but all my friends call me a Danger".

"That's interesting," I said, "because your real name and your nickname mean nearly the same thing."

"My friends must have known that," he commented.

"Anyhow, why do they call you Danger?" I inquired.

"Because I am a dangerous type," he replied. "When I left Malaya my classmates gave a big party because they were glad to get rid of me. They were happy I was going"

Then suddenly Danger pulled out a toy gun and pointed it at my chest.

"Will you write a story about me?" he yelled.

I stepped back in panic. I am terrified of guns, even of harmles ones.

"Put that pistol back!" I cried. Danger slid the weapon into his trouser-pocket and laughed.

"Will you write a story about me?" he asked again, his hand returning to his pocket.

"I certainly will," I said. "But don't bring out that dangerous weapon again."

"I want," Danger replied, "if you'll soon finish the story I want a story about me. I want my friends to read it. I want the whole world to know about me."

Some weeks after the gun episode, I saw Danger standing outside a jeweller's shop.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Daddy and mummy are inside," he said. "They're buying jewellery for Rita. You know uncle, she is going to get married."

"When?"

"Soon. I hope she marries a bandit."

"Why a bandit?"

"Oh, uncle, then I can shoot him and carry away all Rita's jewellery. I've shoot several bandits in Malaya."

The church was tightly packed with well-wishers and friends on the hot and stuffy afternoon when the marriage of Rita, Danger's elder sister, was solemnized. I preferred to stand outside, under the shade of a margosa tree, and fan myself with the nuptial hymn sheet.

Suddenly and mysteriously, Danger popped up from somewhere and beckoned me to bend down to his height.

"He is a bandit all right," he whispered in my ear. "I'm following them to Honeymoon to shoot him. Will you come with me, uncle?"

"Honeymoon — what do you know about that?" I asked, surprised.

"I know all about it," He said. That's the place people go to after they marry. Have you written the story uncle?"

"No," I replied, but I'm still working it out in my mind."

"Some writer you are!" Danger said.

Then I saw his hand sliding into his trouser-pocket. I stopped faning myself and somehow edged my way into the chapel.

A few months after his daughter's wedding, Danger's father, my cousin, came to see me. His chief concern now was for his son and he wanted me to find him a place in one of the overcrowded local educational institutions. Since I had influence at the Tamarind School, my cusin was keen that I should employ it for the benefit of his son.

And so, one fine morning, accompanied by Danger and his certificates, I entered the office of Miss Maple the Principal of the Tamarind School. Miss Maple could not possibly refuse me and soon led us to the primary department. The lower school was at the time attending morning service, but on seeing Danger the whole assembly fled into the adjoining compound. Both Miss Maple and I were puzzled. Neither of us saw Danger doing anything mischievous.

Soon, however, with Danger firing at the tiny girls and the little boys making feeble efforts to pelt stones at him, the field was turned into a veritable battle ground. The Principal made every effort to get her pupils back to the hall, but the Tamarinders yelled with one voice: "We won't come back till he goes away."

Miss Maple Danger and I went back to her office.

"I'm afriad I can't admit your protege," Miss Maple said to me.

Danger stood up and said, "I can speak English, Malay and Chinese."

"Please go away," the Principal admonished the little boy.

On our way back home, Danger gently passed my hand, saying:

"Now you can write a good story about me. You always said there was nothing to write about. What do you say now, Uncle?"

It did not take long for the towns-folk to spread the strange story of Danger and his gun, and no school in Jaffna was aeady to enrol him. I was brooding over my failure one day, when my cousin called with his family:

"Never mind, Thamby," he said, patting me on the shoulder. "I'm taking my son back with me to Malaya. I had intended to put him in a good school at Jaffna and settle down here. You know, we exiles have to return to our native land some time. But God has thought fit to postpone that day in my case: It is His will."

Then he gathered his family together and said, "Come, let us pray for Thamby before we wish him good-bye."

Every time he visited me, Danger's father, my cousin Sounperam, prayed for my well-being, especially for the spiritual portion of it, But on this occasion before we could completely invoke the blessings of the Almighty on me, Danger interrupted him and said: "O God, please help Uncle to become a writer. May Thy mercy be upon him. Amen."

THE MATHEMATICAN

IT was a moonlit night and the people of the town where walking leisurely on the maidan. Among them were a newly-married couple They did not walk abreast. The man was half a step in front of his wife. Strictly-speaking, she should have been at least a step behind her husband, but they were educated and comparatively modern. Hence half a step behind her husband, but they were educated and comparatively modern. Hence half a step, which to them was a negligible distance.

Chandram, the husband, taught mathematics to senior students in a high school. His qualification fitted him to be a lecturer in a university. That was his ambition.

Suddenly Subhadra, his wife, became thoughtful, as if she had recollected a significant event.

"What are you thinking? asked Chandram.

"I am thinking of the days I spent at the Tamarind School. Look, Look there. Do you see the building that rises above those walls?"

"Yes."

"That was where I studied".

"Oh yes, I remember now. The go between told my parents that you were an educated girl. Did you study a lot?"

"Well, I went up to the third form. It was once my ambition to pass the Junior Cambridge examination, but I married you in the meantime."

"Are you disappointed?"

"No, oh no!" she laughed, baring her teeth to the moonlight.

"Did you study mathematics also, Pearly Teeth?"

"Yes, I did algebra and geometry."

"Well" said Chandram, "define parallel lines."

"Parallel lines are those that do not meet however far they are produced."

"That's not quite correct. Your definition is all right for one who knows only elementary mathematics."

"How would you define them?"

"Parallel lines are those that meet at infinity." said Chandram solemnly. "You see, Subhadra, I am a higher mathematician."

"You are an educated man," commented his wife.

"You are educated too," replied Chandram, but not too much. Excessive education does not befit a woman. You are educated enough to be impressed with my learning, and you are not so educated that you get on my nerves."

Subhadra smiled, again showing her teeth which were whiter than the moonlight. Chandram, pleased with himself, wanted to go home. He led the way. His wife accompanied him, half a step behind.

During the years that followed Chandram showed more interest in mathematics than in his wife. She resented it, but never expressed her resentment either in words or deeds. She bore it all like a model wife. Of course, the husband did not entirely fail in his matrimonial obligations. Subhadra gave birth to children at regular intervals.

Chandram persuaded his wife to believe that he was a genius. His was no ordinary brain, he was different from the others. The poet is devoted to his poetry and the musician to his music. They may be failures as ordinary human beings, but you have to judge them in relation to their work. Chandram should be judged in the field of mathematics and not in the social world of ordinary men. He often went for a long walks, and when his wife asked him if he had met any of his friends, he would reply, "No, I have been roaming in the realm of mathematics." He quarrelled with his neighbours, he found fault with his servants; he solved the most difficult problems in calculus, but made mistakes in totalling tradesmen's bills. He neglected his children.

The husband and wife discussed Chandram the genius. One day he will be a Newton, at least a Ramanujam. Subhadra boasted about her hnspend to her friends and requested them to overlook his faults. She simplified life for him by attending to all his needs and never allowed her children to disturb their father in his work. Chandram acted like an extraordinary man. He inadvertently wore socks that didn't match, invited friends to his house but was out at the appointed time, and went for long walks in heavy rain. Chandram worked hard, his minds always on the alert for orginal solutions of problems. He discovered new and quicker methods and advised his students not to be frightened by verbosity in a test paper, but to ponder the question deeply and try and render the puzzle in terms of pure geometry.

But Chandram's attitude to life was not destined to go unchallenged. By winning an international prize for mathematics, he became famous and was appointed a professor at the Colombo

University. The varied life of the university was not a suitable field for the new professor's idiosyncrasies. Besides, the members of the staff, in addition to their own curriculum, took an interest in other activities. Colombo itself was very different from Jaffna. the home town of Profesor Chandram. Life was more complex in the city and people knew less of each other's private lives.

Chandram was jealous of his colleagues. There was Professor Sunderam, who, in addition to lecturing in history, considered himself an authority on music. He presided at most concerts. The assistant lecturer in mathematics held discourses on philosophy, while Prof. Mangalam, the lecturer in philosophy, was considered a writer. Apart from the adulation he received from him students and the residents of the town for his literary work. Prof. Mangalam thought and spoke a lot about himself.

But Professor Chandram could not even indulge in self-praise successfuly. In his home town he had roamed in the realm of mathematics, but in the metropolis there were so many who were roaming in the land of figures that it ceased to be original. The pepple who mattered were those who came out of their shells and entered the arena of life, in art or in politics. Chaudram wished to be recognised in the universty and given his due place, but as the years went by the staff of the university began to treat him more lightly. Chandram found that he was never asked to be the chairman of any committee, or warden of a hostel, or to act as registrar or principal of the college.

His colleagues held they were not being unfair to Chandram. They, of course, recognised his capabilities, but only as a very clever mathematician. They were prepared to look up to Chandram with awe and respect on his discovering a new theorem like the Binomial and thus making good his claims to genius; or they gave him the alternative of widening his interests and impressing on his colleagues that he was not merely a mathematical apparatus like the slide-rule.

During the next few years Chandram became very restless. He was yearning to discover something new but discovery was by no means easy. "My predecessors have discovered everything that is to be discovered, perhaps there is nothing new," he remarked to one of his friends.

"While you are differentitating equations on the blackboard, the world is marching past you" his friend commented. "Why don't you take an interest in life? Then people will think you are somebody. As it it is you are nobody."

"Don't say that. Don't say that!" shouted Chandram. "I am a genius. Do you realise that? I am a genius." He stared at his friend angrily, then controlled himself and added, "May be you are right. I too feel a pull in two directions; mathematics and the wide world; still the force of mathematics is stronger."

The professor of mathematics, unlike the other member of the staff, did not hold himself aloof from his students. He was rather free with the uudergraduates Sometimes he even made jokes at himself or his dozen children. One day, when it rained heavily and the water began to leak through the tiles, Chandram said; "In the honours class there are only a few students, I could ask them to come home, but with you intermediate students who number a hundred I can't possibly do that, becacause I already have an intermediate class at home." In the course of a lecture on Permutations and Combinations he would ask; "In how many different ways is it possible to take two of my boys and two of my girls across the stream?"

The undergraduates and post-graduates naturally did not keep themselves aloof. They joined their professor in the fun. Some become too free and easy with him, other even oversteped the limit.

Chandram gave his students an excellent training in mathematics. He held tests frequently and he chose lunar days for them so that while walking in the moonlight he might meditate on some of the original solutions of his students. At one of those tests Chandram himself was present, though usually he asked his assistants to preside. Chandram was fantastically dressed and had forgotten to comb his hair. He looked like an eccentric musician During the test he passed up and down the room supervising He noticed that every student was hard at work, except one whose paper seemed blank. You cannot bluff in mathematics. You either solve the problems or walk out of the hall.

Chandram also noticed that every time he looked at the student he seemed frightened, like a startled deer The Professor went near the pupil, whose paper was blank excedt for two lines Even these the undergraduate covered with his palm as the professor approached him. Chandram. forcibly pushed the student's hand away. The top line was now visible and it read as follows:-

Prof. Chandram plus Mathematics equals Infinity.

Chandram smiled happily, then began to pace up and down the room again. Soon after he mounted the platform and strutted about like a peacock. He was pleased with himself "Newton, Ramanujam, Chandram. Chandram, Newton, Ramannjah," he repeated the names.

A sudden thought flashed across his mind as he descended the platform. He asked the student to show him the second line. The latter turned pule and folded his book. Chandram told him it was improper to do that and ordered him to hand over the file. The professor read:-

Prof. Chandram minus Mathematics equals Zero.

Chandram's face fell. It was such an unexpected blow

that Chandram could not even regain enough composure to scold the student. He walked about like a man who had lost all his possessions. He felt like a paralytic in a room full of energetic and vital people, The university of the metropolis had reduced him to this state.

The light from the full moon spread itself like a white sheet over the maidan adjoining the university. People were not heavily dressed as during the day. Light shawls were carelessly thrown over the bare shoulders of men and translucent muslins held the soft contours of their wives. Subhadra, standing half a step behind her husband, loosened her jacket and let the air wander over her breasts, when she was suddenly called by her husband.

"Where are you?" he cried.

"I am just behind you."

"What is Professor Chandram plus mathematics?"

Subhadra was taken aback. She was not familiar with the term 'infinity'. Her knowledge of mathematics did not go so far. But she knew that mathematics together with her husband was something immeasurable. Subhadra used her own method of description.

"Well," she replied, "it is something greater than this world or the oceans. "Splendid," said Chandram "your description is wonderful." He looked at her affectionately and fondled her. Subhadra, having been taught that a woman should maintain strict modesty in public, even with her husband, resisted.

"I was not doing anything," said Chandram defensivcly "I was onlv testing the quality of the muslim." He gave his wife a sly look.

"My husband is behaving strangely today," Subhadra thought. "No, no, oh no!" she immediately corrected herself; "he is a genius, that's"

"Subhadra!"

"Yes, Professor?"

"Now, tell me, what is Professor Chandram minus mathematics?"

"That's easy" commented his wife, as her lips curled with a smile "Well, my dear Professor, you are nothing without mathematics" Subhadra expected her husband to be delighted with her reply and to express his appreciation of her muslin dress. She was surprised to find him reacting differently. Chandram abused his wife, threw his hands in the air and became hysterical.

A small crowd soon collected round the professor. They all looked like shadows in the moonlight. Some said that Chandram had actually gone mad, others that it was only a temporary aberration of the mind which now and again afflicts talented people, while the rest believed that he was performing the cosmic dance of Siva.

SOME friends of Subhadra took her in their charge, Chandram broke through the crowd, ran to the Principal of the college and demanded replies to his two questions. The demand was accompanied by mythological gestures. The Principal had no answer to give, became speechless, and was genuinely frightened. His wife began to scream. Her husband retained enough composure to send for the servant and ask him to call a taxi They experienced great difficulty in removing Chandram. The servant finally overpowered the professor and put him in the taxi While the servant held Chandram to his seat, the Principal got in and instructed the driver to take them to the Mental Hospital. Through the windows and in the moonlight he saw his wife being led home by a group of women. Chandram shouted for his wife. "You can't see her now," said the Principal in a commanding tone.

" All right, " replied the professor. " It doesn't matte, I'll meet her at infinity. "

A cloud covered the moon. The road no lonegr looked like a white sheet, Chandram became more violent and daspite the darkness the driver drove furiously to the Mental Hospital.

A BOX OF MATCHES

AN Indian visitor to the States, commenting on the American Way, writes;

"An Englishman I happened to meet who knew the country well enough, told me a story. He was staying in a high class hotel in New York. On many occasions he had, as a matter of courtesy, held the dining room door open for ladies to pass through. But never had he received the word of thanks that was his due.

"One day, he had decided that he would give a twenty dollar bill to the first American lady who had manners enough to thank him for his troulele.

"To his great surprise, the thanks came a day or two later. "Pardon me, Madam, but I owe you twenty dollars" he said to the stranger and explained the position. The lady smiled and shook her head. "What a pity that I'm not entitled to it', she said almost regretfully. I'm English."

The Indian traveller adds: "I feel convinced, however, that it is an undeserved mdictment of the American Way. In India, too, one does not thank. In fact, there are no real equivalents for "thank you" in our vocabulary. The innovation subriya is anaemic and one hears it perhaps only in a film.

In Ceylon, too, one does not freely thank. There aren't any real equivalents in either Sinhalese or Tamil for 'thank you'

Almost everyday up here in Jaffna, people annoy me by getting a match or a light from me without expressing the gratitude for my trouble. And when they borrow the whole box of matches, they not only refrain from thanking me, but even fail to return it.

One day, I was walking down the Fort in Colombo when I suddenly felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned round to see a towering figure of a man before me asking for a light. I lit his cigarette for him and waited for his thanks. All he said was. "Do you know, I've been running after you to get a light? Why do you walk so fast?"

I reminded him of his obligation and the recipient of of my favour thundered at me with clenched fist in the wonderful official language "If you are badly in need of matches, I can buy you a thousand boxes"

In England, thanking is so rigorously practised that even the giver thanks The owner of an article thanks the borrower for returning it. It is uncommon to find an Englishman thanking a man for saving thanking a man for saying 'thank' say 'thank you'?" At that time, although the usual responses to an expression of gratitude are: **'Don't mention it, 'Not at all', 'You're welcome'**, etc, But when you thank a German he replies **'bitte'**. (please).

During an early stay in England at an English hostel, I said to the maid one day: "Collect my laundry today," and she replied, 'Please say, 'please' '' In the evening, when she brought the parcel of clean cloths, I said to her, Put it over there, She held the parcel firmly and said, "Dont you ever I felt that the maid was extremely rude, and should be shown her place in society, but since then, on many an occasion, I have mentally thanked her for teaching me my manners.

All this is not an indictment of either the American way or the Oriental manner. Certain formalities take root in the life and speech of peoples and their absence in others has no real significance.

However, it was an American who first gave expression to that grand and cryptic response, '**thanks a million**'. Even if it were not so, let us give him the credit, for who else could afford to be indebted in such an extravagant sum?

YULETIDE IN LONDON

DURING my school days, affecting a premature cynicism, I thought it futile to send Christmas cards. But after many a white Christmas I have come to regard the card during the festive season as a bearer of the best of kindly feelings. In England, greeting through the post are enthusiastically practised that practically every home displays on its mantelpiece a variety of cards received by it for the occasion. I know of two sisters in London who greet each other in this fassion, although they occupy adjacent rooms in the same house. These cards of merriment and joy reach their destination some time before the day and stand upright on mantelpieces for nearly a fortnight after December 25.

The correct card to send is the traditional one which is recognisable as a Christmas card on sight. But among certain classes of people it has become fashionable to despatch reproductons of well-known works of art. The French Impressionists, the Italian masters, the English Romantics, the Kangra School, Chinese landscapes and Japanese prints have been prominent in satisfying the urge of people who wished to be different.

Among contemporary artists, Graham Sutherland, England's leading painter had the distinction a few years ago of being the bearer of goodwill during the festive season. Jamini Roy, the modern Indian primitive, followed him the next Christmas. "The Red Hills" by Sutherland was a rather pleasingly unusual sight on a Christmas card, and Jamini Roy's "The Annunciation" was a somewhat startling interpretation of the Christian theme.

It is Christmas Eve in London. The Jubilant crowds, loaded with presents, swing merrily along. The hotels, cafes and other places of amusement are packed with people intent on making themselves and their fellow beings happy. "Merry Christmas!" "Happy Christmas!" and "Season's Greetings!" resound in the smoky air. There is gladness in people's hearts and goodwill towards one another. There are no strangers but one large family on the gigantic merry-go-round that is London this night. The voices of children and the laughter of women sing gaily through the hours. Some go to parties, others to the midnight mass, but in the end they all wend their way home while soft silky snow alights on their faces like jasmine petals. And distant carols herald the birth of the new-born King.

Hark! the herald angels sing
Glory to the new-born king.

One opens the door in the morning and beholds the largest city in the world stretched out for miles in a white sheet of snow. The day starts propitiously, for the promise of a really white Christmas has been fulfilled. You collect more greetings cards and get ready for the family reunion. The family, is the pivot on which the entire jollity of Christmas Day revolves. Outside the home, London, on this festive day, is as quiet as a Sunday.

Silent night.....
Holy night.....

But after enjoying all the items on the Christmas menu and having had fun under the mistletoe, you suddenly become aware that the long night is still before you.

I grope my way to a party given by a friend of mine on Christmas night. It starts as the family merry-making is on the ebb. It is in the nature of a fancy-dress ball. The ensemble is a medley of fancy dress, correct evening dress, lounge

suits and flowing gowns. Bohemia turns up in its usual unconventional and unchanged attire. The guests do not just recline in frozen postures but wander round the hall, dancing, conversing and rubbing one another for warmth. Some stroll out in loving pairs into the garden. Nimble-footed waiters and white-clad maids with deft fingers jostle among the crowd, carrying masses of turkey, stuffed goose and tender chicken. The froth in the opened beer bottles matches the colour and coolness of the snow deposited on the window panes, and sparkling champagne flows like a river of gold. The guests now seem as if they had just emerged from a novel by F. Scot Fifzgerald.

Soon both the froth and the snow evaporate and one begins to despair that all good things come to an end. There is nothing else to do but wait for New Year's Eve. The waiting is in itself pleasurable, since it is often better to travel than to arrive.

THE FOOD OF LOVE

WHEN Prem Perera told Shyam Patel that he had arranged to meet a girl next day, Patel bounced from the ground like a tennis ball "It's I who should be elated, not you," Perera said.

"My delight is purely vicarious," Patel replied.

Perera and Patel shared a flat in the West End of London After a moment of joint happiness at the thought of one of them meeting a girl next day, they both sat by the fire and poked it. "It'd be fine if you too could meet a girl tomorrow" Perera said. "Then we could make a foursome."

Patel said a great deal by saying nothing. But soon he rose with a sudden jerk, as if his seat were on fire. "Prem," he said, "I met a girl the other day at Peter Black's party, a luscious, bosomy blonde with high cheek-bones. She gave me her telephone number and asked me to give her a tinkle."

"Ring her," Perera urged. "Want any coppers?"

Patel returned after his telephone call, smiling and pleased with himself. Admiring himself in the mirror above the fireplace, he told his friend that the Scottish blonde had promised to see him next day

"That's fine," Prem said. "Where's she meeting you?"

"Here, right here. She adores curry. What do you think of that? 'Curry is the food of love,' she said."

Sitting near the fire, they made arrangements for next day.

"Peter Black has gone to the country for the week-end. But he has lent me his key and the use of his flat. I'll entertain my girl there, while you dine with your Scottish lass here," Prem suggested.

"Splendid"

The fire showed sings of dying. They poked it from different angles, but it refused to respond. Bed beckoned to them warmly. They rose.

"Prem," Shyam called before getting into bed, who's going to do the cooking? My blonde adores curry and you know what my cooking is like!"

"I shall cook the entire dinner before I go out," Prem kindly offered. You will only have to keep it warm."

In the morning the charwoman came and tidied the flat, made their beds and cooked their breakfast. They told her of the curry party.

"Curry and girls!" she exclaimed. "What a combination! But don't make the place messy. Curry means more work for me, washing up. See?"

After the woman had gone, they relaxed on high-cushioned chairs, sipped their coffee and smoked. Whenever Peter Black was with them. they discussed with him the theatre and the cinema, but today their minds swerved to girls and curry Every thing they said was spiced with one of these condiments Prem talked of Lilian, the girl he had taken with him to Paris the girl he had taken with him to Paris the previous summer. He described to Shyam Lilian's dimples, her long hair worn in double plaits round her head with a centre parting running from her forehead down to the nape of her neck.

"What a fool you are!" Shyam exclaimed. "Taking a girl with you to Paris! It's like taking Maldive fish to a Sinhalese home.

Prem now started to cook. He sliced the onions into beautiful parabolas. He cut the potatoes into small pieces, so that they might glide easily down the slender throat of the Aberdonian. He fried everything in butter and not in margarine. Then he heard the pushing up a window in the flat above.

"Mr. Perera," a woman screamed from above. "please close your window! We can't stand the stinking smell of onions and garlic. We are neither dirty Jews nor blasted Indians nor stinking Spaniards." Mr. Perera shut his window.

Soon the curry was ready and after giving instructions to his friend as to how it was to be served. Prem left to keep his date. He stepped on the snowfilled street. Snow was lying in soft thin layers on roofs and on people's shoulders. On th opposite pavement he saw girls clinging to the arms of thei escorts.

"Curry and girls," he said to himself and made his way to the underground station. He reached Piccadilly, looked at the world clock, noted that he still had some time for his appointment and sauntered along Regent street. As he approached an Indian restaurant the aroma of spices pleasantly assailed his nostrils.

"Curry and girls", he mused as he entered the cafe. Reserving his big meal till the arrival of his girl, he ordered a snack. soon his mind wandered to the girl who would now be getting ready to meet him. He decided to dine with her in a Soho restaurant. He looked forward to his favourite menu-roast lamb, mint sauce and saute potatoes, white wine and Turkish

coffee followed by ligueuer. After dinner they would retire to Peter Black's flat to listen to some records. Music is the food of love, he assured himself.

''Curry and girls,'' Prem Perera lisped as he left the cate for his appointment under the world clock in Piccadilly station. He was not the only one to have a date there, underground. Having achieved fulfilment, many were leaving the place for the upper regions with their girls clutching their arms. Among them was an exotic looking Indian. He was strolling with a starry eyed girl with pouting lips. He had a far-away took as if dreaming of the shape of things to come.

Prem Perera circled the underground area looking for his date. Butthere was no sign of her. He gave her plently of time; still she did not show up. Perera left to listen to Peter Black's rec rds. Music is not the food of love, he contradicted himself. it is it's substitute.

Sometime later Shyam Patel was summoned to the telephone. Prem greeted him.

"Hello, Shyam'' he said, "Hope I'm not disturbing you."

''Not a bit,'' Shyam replied. "My blonde never turned up. We Asiatics at least keep our promises—I mean the ones we made to our wives before sailing."

Prem did not quickly react to this as he was not married but his mind drifted across the oceans to colombo's Cinnamon Gardens where his fiance was eagerly waiting for his trumphant return with post-graduate honours.

''Are you listening?" Shyam asked from the other end.

"Of course I am," Prem replied "There's something wrong with his phone''

"I've just had a letter from my wife," Shyam informed his friend. "I'll write and tell her how faithful I am to her! That'll please her a lot, the dear thing."

"Shall I ring off now?" Prem Perera asked.

"But, Prem, your curry was wonderful. It was simply delicious—best you've ever cooked."

There was a pause, and then he added, "Curry is not the food of my love, my friend. It is its substitute..."

THE INTERPRETER

J. J., a student in a Swabhasa School, attended Court one day to give evdence in a family dispute regarding the ownership of a cluster of palmyrah trees. In the court he was so impressed by the demeanour of the Interpreter Mudaliar, that he decided to aspire for that post in due course. This meant a switch-over from Swabhasa to English.

But his parents, who were a Thesawalamai couple, wished him to continue his studies in his mother-tongue. They felt that their son was making an untraditional move. There was none in their family who was versed in English. However, J. J. recalled to them the impressive custume of the Interpreter Mudaliar. If he were to pass the clerical examination and become an Interpreter Mudaliar. They would have the pleasure of seeing him in an Indian coat, English trousers, shoes of the best quality and Jaffna turban. Besides, there were other advantages such as position, pay and pension. His father nodded agreement. "To the study of Tamil there is no end," he said, "but a knowledge of English brings a job, money and glory"

"Let him go to an English School," his mother said. "If he becomes a Government servant, we will be favoured with a piano-playing daughter-in-law".

"J. J. was seventeen years old when he embarked on an English education. Since he was already a mature lad he chose the oldest school in Jaffna to help him tide over his difficulties in the quickest time. He showed great eagerness to master the

wonderful official language. Whenever anybody asked him who he had set out on this arduous task, he replied; "To the study of Tamil there is no end, brother, but a knowledge of English brings a job, money and glory."

J. J. worked hard at a well-known English Gramar, and he also read the Bible, especially the New Testament, as his missionary tutor had told him that the best English was to be encountered in the Gospels. And after a great effort for many years he succeeded in entering the government clerical service.

J. J. served in different parts of Ceylon in various capa cities and family achieved his life's ambition. He was appointed an Interpreter Mudaliar in a magistrate's court.

It was on a Thursday that mudaliar J. J. assumed duties. The lawyers had come quite early and had helped the litigant with sound counsel and had helped themselves to their client' money. The magistrate arrived much later and went straigh to the chambers.

The heat of the day was most oppressive. The sum seemed much fiercer here than elsewhere and the black coats of the lawyers circulated the heat evenly over their torsos. The litigants were seated on benches at the far end of the court. Some people stood about listlessly; others squated on the benches. "Court," called the sergeant as the magistrate took his seat on the Bench. "Attention".

Everybody rose.

The Interpreter Mudaliar took up the roll. Everyone was eager to see how he would fare on his first day. He handed the calling casses quickly to the magistrate. Please were recorded and dates assigned to everybody's satisfaction. So far so good.

Now and again the court sergeant broke forth; "Less silence!"

The proctors laughed at him and exchanged glances. Some made efforts to correct the sergeant but he persisted in shouting, "Less Silence!"

A barrister, who was present, appreciated the effectiveness of the sergeant's expression. There was no such thing as absolute nothingness, he said, so'less silence' was an accurate and scientific description. Besides, 'less silence,' which was an original expression, had more literary flavour than 'less noise'. The sergeant bowed to the barrister and shouted louder than before: "Less silence!"

"He's only a Swabhasa sergeant" an Inspector of Police was heard to remark.

The trials started. The electric fan dispersed hot air, and some hot words passed between the lawyers. A Proctor, with a cowlick hair style, was impatient to lead evidence for the prosecution. But the new Mudaliar would not surrender his sovereignty in his own sphere. He felt, rightly or wrongly, that some of the introductory questions should spring from him. He had already asked two questions and had creditably rendered the answers into English.

The witness answered in Tamil. The Interpreter Mudaliar translated the witness's answers into English for the benefit of the Bench and the Bar which had already understood the original

"What's your profession?" The Mudaliar fired his third preliminary question.

"I sell *appam*," the witness replied meekly.

The Interpreter hesitated for a moment. Perhaps the English equivalent of bread for appam eluded him momentarily; perhaps he wished to be impressive on his first day in court and his mind was searching for an uncommon word.

However, he was composed enough to remember the advice of the missionary and his mind wandered to the Gospels. And right in front of him he saw a vision. It was Lord Jesus performing the miracle of the loaves and fishes. "Loaf" the Interpreter thought, "that's" the word."

Mudaliar J. J. confidently turned to the court and conveyed the witness' answer: "The witness is a loafer, sir."

The Magistrate's normal impassive expression vanished in a split second and he burst into loud laughter. The Lawyers almost simultaneously expressed their mirth. The litigants, quite unaware of the episode, began to giggle as if they had inhaled laughing gas

"Less silence! the Swabhasa sergeant yelled.

The court relapsed into its formal and normal dignity. The Interpreter Mudaliar was once again ready to assist the court.

THE PANORAMA OF LORD'S

An English gentleman who had distinguished himself in life, letters and the Church, astonished the English-speaking world by remarking in the course of a lecture tour of America that Cricket was a boring game. The venerable Scholar had also added that the English would be better appreciated than they were at present had they not invested this dreary pastime. Furthermore, he could not understand how people of intelligence could sit and watch for several days overgrown men chase a ball or chase each other between six sticks.

The above criticism fell on deaf ears as far as England was concerned. The English do not regard Cricket as merely a game. It is a good deal more than that. Cricket is a Social event Some even consider it on occasion as friendly international warfare. And I am not alone in thinking of it as the English ballet. "Cricket is an institution and only a game incidentally", writes' Neville Cardus "As the Poet Laureate might easily be a poet',

Anybody who has been to Lord's, the Mecca of Cricket, for an important match and not enjoyed the game must be a very unaesthetic soul of person. The red ball, The green Turf, the blue sky. The players in white, the gestures of the bowlers and the movements of the batsmen are anything but dull.

With regard to the Americans, Aubrey Smith the film actor had already, taken the game to Hollywood and had planted English wickets on American soil years before the tourist pundit reached the States. And when America really gets started

it will not be Tyson bowling but Typhoon. It will be interesting to note that Ambrose Abarcrombie in Evelyn Waugh's brilliant novelette, *The Loved One*, was intended to be Sir Aubrey Smith. This should at least make literateurs curious.

People with widely varying interests are attracted to cricket. Neville Cardus writes on cricket and music; Professor Hardy taught mathematics at Cambridge and watched cricket at the oval. Alan Ross, young English poet, played for Oxford and Nottingham; Julian Symmons brother of A. J. A. Simmons of Baran Corvo fame, writes poems on the *Confusion of X*, detective novels for money, and is concerned with the class struggle and English country cricket; C.C.R. James, West Indian intellectual, started life as a reporter on cricket. In his younger days he showed promise as a sound but in one of the Carribean islands. Augustus John, the master draughtsman, Nina Hamnelt, the well known painter, and Dylan Thomas, the most famous of the younger poets come to Lord's because the bar is open all day

It is said of Professor Hardy that the two great pensions in his life were mathematics and watching cricket. In "*A Mathematician's Apology*" he wrote of the aesthetic's of mathematics, and in a day at the oval he expounded the beauty of cricket. He prefered the dual to Lord's because his favourite team was Surrey. It will be recalled that it was at the oval and against Surrey that Sarawate and Bannerji, going in tenth and eleventh, Set up a record scoring a century each. They faced no less a player than Alec Badsar, Surrey and England star bowler.

They say that C. L. R James, in his discourses on Marxism to a group of comrades, would often wander into talking cricket. If he didn't their migrate, this prophet of the Fourth International would go so left that he would turn right. Revolution is like a circle. When you travel very left you crash into right.

The day turns out to be fine, and the event is a match between Oxford and Cambridge at Lord's. The spectator can

delight himself by watching the game or feast his eyes on the array of beauties in their new look. The varsity contest assembles at Lord's the newest fashions and the gayest designs. You may be standing next to Gerald Wilde, surrealist painter and textile designer, whose wild and colourful work can be seen on the scarves worm as turans by some of the women spectators Soon Kardar is running to the boundary to save a four. He has done it, and as soon as he has returned the ball, the boys seated on the grass shout: "Abdul, what do you read at Oxford?"

"P. P. E.," replies Karder, before he starts on his trot.

"What's P. P. E. ?" One of the boys questions an obvious-looking undergraduate vhom he had previously marked out as an Oxonian because of his hoity-toity voice.

"Politics, Philosophy and Economics" The undergraduate smoking a curved cherrywood pipe, mumbles between puffs of smoke. The boy is none thewiser but turne to the field to apploud because Karder has been called upon to bowl.

The boys on the grass can at times be funny. I remember them collocting Souvenirs when the Indians played at lorld's. One of them said; "I've got Man-Cod's autograph now I must get one from Hay-fever". He meant Hofrez but Abdul Hafess is now A. H. Kardar It was at Lord's that Manhad sent two grand Successive sixes right into the pavilion. Nobody who watched the flight of the ball on that occasion or Manhad in action could possibly assert that crick et was dull.

The scene is the university match. Tambimuttu arrives with Roy Campbell, author of *Flowering Rifle*. On our way to the saloon Roy talks of his bull fighting days in Spain. One of the attractions of Lord's is that lounge faces the ground and you can watch the game while regaling and repasting. Augustus John and Nina Hammerr are already there and invite us to join them. They drink gin, Tambimuttu swallows beer, and I sip

tomato juice, Nina keeps the party going. She is a brilliant conversationalist. People flock round and buy her drinks just to be in her Company and enjoy her wit. Today she is in particularly good form and relates episodes in the lives of Sickert and Modigliani. They had both been friends of hers. The former had written her letters some of which were pnblished in *Horizon;* The latter had given her some of his Drawing which of course, she had sold long ago. She offers to treat us. Roy stops her.

"Have you any money, Nina?" he asks

"I've plently of 'mun'" she replies Just sold one of my paintings to Augustus. Been paid too! Ha! ha!"

Augustus laughs while she buys him a double gin with his money. I change over from tomato juice to emage crush. Nina raises her eyebrow "You behave as if you're about to go into bat", she says. "Come! Come!"

Nina keeps talking. Dylan Thomas comes in with Louis Mac Nicee, post and rodio playwright. Roy Campbell invites them for a drink. Dylan accepts but Mac Nicce declines.