



A

# SEPARATE HOME

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Translated by N K Mahalingam

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## A Separate Home

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### **A Separate Home**

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# A Separate Home

*Oru Thani Veedu*

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Translated from Tamil by  
N K Mahalingam



A Separate Home

Our Tamil World

M. Thiruvalluvar

Translated from Tamil by  
N. K. Manikam





PART ONE  
AUNT'S HOME

THE  
HOMES



# 1

Dropping the palm leaf basket on to the ground, Singarasan sat down near the stone mound. The next moment, his hands got busy collecting a basketful of stones. When the basket was full, he held the rim tightly and shook it as he turned to look behind him. There were no signs of her arrival.

He could not wait for long. All of a sudden he got up and called out loud, looking at the house beyond the thatched fence.

‘Girlie!’

There were still no signs of her coming. About a hundred yards away, the temporarily laid path looked desolate.

‘Setha!’ Singarasan called out again.

The noise of the chisel breaking the stones, the rustle of the cement mixer and the voices of masons who were busy building the house could be heard clearly and distinctly. Only Setha seemed to keep quiet without replying.

After a couple of minutes, Singarasan cried out again, ‘Setha!’

'Cooi!' came the reply from a distance. The next minute, Setha came running towards him almost tripping over her skirt, with a basket in one hand and two palmyra tubers in the other.

'What were you doing girlie?' an irritated Singarasan asked, staring at her. The moment he saw the tubers in her hand, his face lit up.

She did not answer. The end of the tuber she was chewing showed up at the corner of her mouth. Pushing it into her mouth, she dropped the basket she had in her hand.

'Where did you get this tuber, girlie?' Singarasan begged of her, expecting a reply.

She promptly answered, '*Achchi* gave it to me. It seems somebody had given it to her.' Stretching her arms, Setha gave him the tubers.

Taking them from her, Singarasan sat down on the stone mound. Tucking away one tuber safely into his clothes, he peeled the other and began to eat it. Having filled her basket with the stones, she asked him, 'Can I help you in lifting it onto your head?' Only then did Singarasan get back his energy and strength.

They struggled to raise the basket to put it on his head. Singarasan's basket was huge; it was woven with pieces of palmyra leaf intertwined with fibres, and the rim was strengthened with the spine of the palmyra leaf. The basket was one among the many bought for building Setha's house. Setha's basket was similar but smaller in size. Adjusting the basket on his head, Singarasan bent his body a little and helped lift Setha's basket onto her head. Then, they began walking towards the adjoining compound leaving behind the stone mound that marked the land belonging to a Singaporean.

In the adjoining compound was Setha's house. A new house was under construction replacing an older one.

As Singarasan dropped the stones from his basket to heap them with the rest near the foundation pit, Mason Thambithurai's voice made Singarasan's head turn.



'Oh yes, the girl has a soft corner for him!' he said to his co-workers, pointing out Singarasan.

The other person did not quite understand his remark. He looked at Singarasan and Setha intently.

'She ran and gave him the tubers her mother had given her', Thambithurai continued.

Both Singarasan and Setha understood that Thambithurai was teasing them. 'Hmm. I'll tell my achchi,' said Setha, pretending to cry, with a serious face. She began to move away from the place.

'Yes, of course. Isn't the bridegroom carrying stones on his head?'

'Oh, he has to carry it. Because they're building the house for him, aren't they? If he does not help, then who will?'

Setha walked away but she would have heard everything. Singarasan felt shy and happy at the same time. Hiding his emotions, he retorted, 'Ok, ok, don't blabber, get back to work.' He began to walk towards the Singaporean compound.

With this, the masons stopped teasing. But their words began to reverberate in him and disturbed Singarasan.

He swung the basket and played around with it as he walked. Their words echoed in his mind. Though he was happy he felt shy over their remarks. Forgetting himself, he walked towards the fence, and absent-mindedly crashed into it, but did not care. Continuing to play with the basket, he looked at the far end of the compound. Setha had just sat down to collect the stones, after throwing the basket near the stone mound.

Singarasan had neither the experience nor maturity to understand or comprehend completely the emotions at that moment. However, the adolescent mind did not fail to give meaning to it and his imagination took wings. Scenes of a wedding flashed across his mind. It was a wedding that took place a month ago. The bride and the groom mutually exchanged garlands. Wearing a headgear,

the groom majestically held the bride's hand and went round the holy fire in front of the priest and the people gathered there. How could he do it? The very thought made Singarasan shy. He was also going to do the same thing he felt had the courage to do it. He would wear a silk *dhoti*, silk shawl and silk turban, and yes, the turban had to be tilted backwards at an angle, only then would it look splendid!

Engrossed in his pleasant thoughts, Singarasan forgot about Setha. He forgot that Setha was the daughter of a wealthy man who owned shops in Colombo. Eventhough Setha picked stones alongside Singarasan, and appeared ordinary in a simple skirt and blouse, she represented the distinctive upper class people.

Setha was only fourteen. An age at which one wore skirt and blouse. She was studying in grade seven at Sanmuganathan Primary School in Ward nine. She was the daughter of the wealthy Ponnambalam. Her not-so-dark complexion and thin appearance bore witness to it. Setha's mother, Sinnathangam, was 'very fair skinned' and loving and compassionate. She was now in her 40s and one could imagine how beautiful she would have been during her younger days. Even if Setha would not bloom into such a beautiful woman, one could expect her to have her mother's traits of love, compassion and good nature. Setha was Singarasan's 'first cousin', his paternal aunt's daughter whom he could marry as per tradition.

Singarasan's father Kanthaiyar and Setha's mother Sinnathangam were siblings. Setha called Singarasan's father *mama*. Singarasan was studying in Tamil medium, in ninth grade at Ganesha High School in Ward 12. In another three months, in 1950, he would be eighteen years old. Singarasan's was once an affluent family that became poor much later. Kanthaiyar, when he was a wealthy man set an example for the others in the Ward to follow. But now, he was just an ordinary hawker in Colombo, selling about 2,000 cigars a day. When Setha was born, both the families had agreed that she



would be given in marriage to Singarasan. But at that time things were different. Kanthaiyar was a wealthy owner of shops, not a hawker.

'What are you doing here? Come on, let us go quickly!' The voice brought Singarasan back to his present.

Singarasan blushed and realised it was Setha who had yelled at him. She had filled up her basket and was waiting for him to do the same. He silently dropped the basket down and began to pick up the stones without even looking up at her. His hands worked slowly as if it felt the pain in his heart. Setha joined him and hurriedly filled his basket with stones. It was her hurry that made him realise that he was himself slow in his work. Why did she suddenly get annoyed? Was it because she had waited for him after filling her basket while he was immersed in his own world of imagination? Or, was it because she didn't like what mason Thambithurai said? Singarasan could not comprehend it. He realised that a little girl like her could make him feel small. His tender feelings for her changed and he thought, 'Like her father, she is conceited... all because of money.' To bring down his anger, he felt like mocking at her. Looking at her face, he found in it not conceit but something else. Setha was silently picking up stones. Her dark, grave, and drawn-out face resembled her father's. The annoyance that was explicit on her face made her beautiful. Was it conceit? Wasn't she the very same girl who had brought tubers for him a little while ago?

The piece of tuber that he still kept wrapped up in his cloth bore testimony to her love by pricking his belly. Thambithurai's words also flashed across his mind, 'The girl seems to be fond of him! He has to carry the stones, for, they are building it for him. Who else will carry them, if not he?'

Singarasan calmed down as quickly as he had become angry. He filled the basket rapidly, with renewed enthusiasm and shouted animatedly, 'All right, hold it.' He lifted the basket on to his head first and then the other on to hers.

The evening turned dark and soon the night befell. After finishing the work, Singarasan stayed on at Setha's home. He did this very often. He would eat his dinner there and then go home. However, that day was unusual. When he left for home, Sinnathangam *maami* handed him Rs.1.50 and said, 'Give this to your *achchi*, Singarasa. I told her about this at noon.'

The next moment, Singarasa understood what it was for. Half a day's wages for picking up stones, after school!

Singarasan stared at her blankly. If it were some other day, he would have been very happy. He knew very well that with this Rs. 1.50 a lot of things could be bought for his house. However, on that day, he did not like to accept the money. Was it because of the delightful memory that lingered in his mind or is it the incident at the stone mound? He was confused. 'It is not necessary, *maami*,' he said and began to walk towards his home without looking back. He did hear Sinnathangam *maami* calling out his name, in the dark, as he was walking through the corridor in the adjoining compound. Nevertheless, he deliberately refused to answer her.

## 2

When Singarasan reached home, his sister Parimalam was draining out the *kanchi* from the pot. She served the rice onto a plate and some chilli paste from a coconut shell. That was all there was for dinner. His mother Valliammai could do with the *kanchi*.

Calling out '*akka*' Singarasan entered the room. He sat down on the jackwood cot that was pushed against the thatched fence. The empty brandy bottles that lay heaped near the compound wall, the large chest and the wooden cot bore testimony to the fact that Kanthaiyar was once a well-to-do *mudalali*. The only comfort that Singarasan enjoyed in that house was lying down on the smooth cot.

'Hey, do you need rice?' asked Parimalam. She knew that he would have had dinner at maami's house. It had become a routine for maami to feed him his dinner. Still, Parimalam could not quietly go ahead with the dinner and therefore asked him.

'No, I don't want,' he said. He suddenly remembered the tuber in his pouch and gave it to Parimalam. Whenever he was offered anything to eat, he would always bring back a little for his sister without fail.



An excited Parimalam received it from her affectionate brother and asked him, 'Where did you get this from?'

As Singarasan reminisced, the pleasant thoughts brought a smile on his face. He said with pride, 'Setha gave it to me'.

However, only disappointment remained for Singarasan. Although she heard Setha's name, she gave least importance to it, rolled the rice into a morsel and went about eating it. At least, she could have reacted like the masons did, he thought.

When Singarasan was showing his displeasure, his mother Valliammai entered the room. Her face lit up at the very sight of Singarasan, who was lying on the cot.

'Did maami give some money? The reason behind her bright face took the form of a question.

'What?' Singarasan asked scornfully.

'Your maami said she would pay you for collecting the stones. Did she?'

'Oh! She said she will give money for collecting stones and you accepted it?'

Valliammai fell silent. Although Singarasan was young, nobody said anything against him in his house. He grew up without much help from them. Moreover, they were dependent on him. If things went out of Valliammai's hands, all she could do was shout at him madly or curse him or chase him with a broom. But this time around, she did not even do such things.

Singarasan retorted, 'You let me work and eat at their place, and do not care for me at all. And if I do some work for them you ask money for it shamelessly! If you expect any wages from them for whatever I do, I don't know how I will react!'

Singarasan spread a mat on the cot and lied down. Valliammai, without talking further, took some palmyra leaf strips and the half-woven mat and sat down in a corner of the house, grumbling.

The words she mumbled were drowned out by the noise of weaving the palmyra strips.

She continued saying, 'The Zamindar's son has come home without accepting wages. Let him buy the rice tomorrow. Let me see what he is going to have for tomorrow's breakfast.'

'Okay, okay. Keep quiet, achchi,' said Parimalam. As she was keeping the plate on the pot after washing her hands and the plate, she said, 'You refused the money and came. Now, go catch some fish in the sea tomorrow. Then we can cook some *koozh*.'

Singarasan did not utter a word. He lay silently facing the thatched fence. As his anger increased at his mother, thoughts about the stone mound flashed across his mind. What was Setha's true identity? The one who gave him the tuber or the one who was annoyed? Did she bring the tuber for him or did she give away what she brought for herself?

Complications that had never showed up until then, started anew for Singarasan. He could not solve them. He was happy that he had not accepted any money and thought it was the best thing that had happened on that day.

Pungudutivu is one of the islands at the tip of the Jaffna peninsula in Sri Lanka. A traveller to any part of Sri Lanka would come across at least one person from Pungudutivu who would have a cigar store, a restaurant, a textile shop, or some other business. In the distribution of money that came from the Sinhala region, Pungudutivu could compete against any other part of Jaffna peninsula for its share. The island lies between Velanai adjoining Jaffna town, and the historically famous Nainativu. An important island, it resembled the drawing of an amoeba in a student's biology notebook.

To the east of this island is Ward nine, and to the west, Ward eleven and twelve. To the south is Ward ten and to the north, Ward eight. The Palk Straits spread out in the east. Even in conditions of severe famine, the fish and crabs from the sea, and



the products of palmyra tree were enough to feed the inhabitants. However, at that time these products were not being fully utilised. The Western civilisation that had gripped Sri Lanka crept into Pungudutivu. Palmyra products were being used only in a few houses like Valliammai's. In addition, the differences in the rigid caste system of Jaffna prevented others except five or six *thimilars* families to go into the sea for fishing. Fishing was much hated by the so-called *Saiva Vellalars*, as a shameful job. They felt proud about it knowing fully well that this kind of attitude would not even fetch them a square meal. Kanthaiyar's family was one such, and so was Singarasan.

Waking up before dawn and having a cup of black tea, Singarasan went to the sea with a hoe and a small basket to dig for worms. This has to be done in secrecy. He had to cover his face, squeeze himself through a small gap in the fence at the backyard, run along the tobacco plantation, and walk across the jungle, to reach the seashore. But there was every possibility of someone taking notice of him despite this, especially if someone came to buy some fish!

The tides were low in the mornings compared to the evenings. The best of worms, used as bait for catching *thirali* fish were available aplenty in the bluish marshy shore. Making sure no one spotted him, Singarasa dug up the ground in a hurry. He did not have enough time on hand and people might turn up there any time. There was ample time before the sea began to flow and he could look for worms unhurriedly. But he had to reach school before eight and he had a mile to walk – from Ward nine to twelve. So began to hurry.

Beads of sweat ran down his bare body which glistened in the sun's rays, making the body glow. Though digging was a strenuous task, he did not bother. Taking a deep breath, he dug up the sand, looked for worms and filled up his small basket in about half an hour. He thought he could go fishing after coming back from school. So off he went homewards by the same route. Through the same gap in the fence he appeared in the backyard again. As he



hid the basket and walked around to the front yard a surprise awaited him.

There stood Setha with her skirt tucked up a little, listening to Valliammai who was squatting on the raised platform at the entrance of their house with a cup of tea. Singarasan ran towards her asking 'What do they want, achchi?' He was oblivious to the fact that sand particles were still sticking to his feet without being washed away.

Valliammai did not answer him and totally ignored him even as she cooled her tea. Parimalam who came from inside the house whispered to him to wash away the sand from his feet. The fact that Setha had noticed him go to dig for worms did not bother Singarasan much as he went to the well to wash the sand away. But what Parimalam said seemed more important to him.

'Setha has come of age. She has come to tell achchi about it.'

Her words and the way she was displaying her uneasiness made him feel a bit proud. But he was surprised at the reason behind it. The mason's mockery seemed to have aroused some excitement in her, which surprised him. 'Though she resembles her father, she has probably taken after Sinnathangam maami.' He laughed at this revelation—without being overheard by Setha. He did not want to embarrass her.

### 3

The loudspeaker began to blare much before dawn. Colombo *mudalali* Ponnambalam's house was busy with people decorating the *panthal* and the shed, and spreading large mats. During the auspicious time of *Trihona natchathra*, *thuthiya thithi* and *Sitha Yoga*, Setha's coming of age would be celebrated with a ceremony. This got etched in Singarasan's memory.

After a month, the auspicious day arrived. Only Singarasan had experienced the difficulties of the arduous task during that month. He collected the pillars for the shed, the coconut leaves for the roof and sides. They had demolished the old house and started building a new one, and had to put up a shed in addition to the house. With Singarasan's help, the lumber and coconut leaves were collected. As there were no other men in the house, Sinnathangam maami tacitly employed Singarasan to supervise the workers. In addition, he had to go to the washerman's and the decorator's houses.

When Sinnathangam maami sent people out with invitation cards, she sent Singarasan along, too. Ponnambalam had sent money from Colombo for the ceremony. Sinnathangam maami had to buy things from Jaffna for the rituals. When she sent people to buy things, she sent Singarasan along, as he was a trusted person. For arranging the *melam*, loudspeaker and so on too, Singarasan was



there. His responsibility was no less significant when the shed was being decorated throughout the night. Running these errands, he could not attend school for ten days, and he was doubly happy about it.

As far as Singarasan was concerned, he seemed to have gained experience good enough for a whole life. Whatever the responsibilities he was assigned with, he accomplished them splendidly, sometimes with others' help. He realised that all those who appeared older, could be easily brought under his control and made to follow his orders. The things which he thought only older people could do, could also be achieve easily. It appeared easy for him to get all the workers together and make them work. He liked to move freely with them and he realised that this helped him excel at such jobs.

Knowingly or unknowingly, Sinnathangam maami made him a big man within one month's time by assigning certain responsibilities to him. Also, the jokes the shed workers cracked, the meaningful looks of people he went to invite, the questions they asked, the enjoyable experiences, memories of his travel to Kayts and Jaffna – all were unique. When he recalled them, his heart was filled with contentment. Was it only that, he wondered? Everybody knew that he worked hard without going to school. Wouldn't Setha be aware of it when everybody else knew it? And what would she think? Her thoughts fuelled him to do everything.

As all the boys in the Ward surrounded the loudspeaker, the operator played the records on the gramophone. The famous song that was on everybody's lips at that time 'da da da dada' blared in the air as if it would tear up the eardrum. Sitting in a corner of the house, on a palmyra mat, Singarasan was putting betel leaves and arecanuts into small bags to be distributed to the guests. The blue shirt his father Kanthaiyar had sent for the past New Year looked great on him. He roamed bare bodied and wore a shirt only to school. He would not even wear those beautiful shirts to school that he got once a year. Today the new shirt enhanced his looks



and made him look extraordinary. He combed his hair to one side with a stylish look, which added elegance. As his hands worked mechanically, he hummed the song, 'da da da dadada' and it looked as if his hands worked in tune to the song.

Not all villagers celebrated such a ceremony with melam and gramophone. Not even for Singarasan's sister Parimalam. That narrowed it down to only a few lucky people in the village who could afford to celebrate in a grand manner. As a little boy, he remembered having gone to hear the 'song box' at such a function even without going to school. Then, he stood in a corner as an outsider but now, he was assigned duties and given certain responsibilities. Apart from feeling proud, he had an overall feeling that all the things done were for him and by him.

'Here!' he heard someone call out to him.

Singarasan looked up. 'Put these in each of the bag,' said Ponnambalam handing over a box full of lemons to him. Singarasan nodded his head in affirmation.

Ponnambalam had come from Colombo three days back. But he had talked to him only once. He would only nod and smile. Not only with Singarasan, even with the others. He would not talk much, except with his fellow businessmen. In addition to owning several grocery stores in Colombo, he was a businessman dealing with import and export. Though his place of birth was Suruvil, he married at Pungudutivu. He did not have an impressive physique or personality. His dark complexion and thin physique would not pass him off as a mudalali. However, his indifferent attitude and ill-tempered facial expression made others respect him. His thin, combed back hair and broad forehead made him look special. There were people around him who would die for his nod and smile. This must have been because he was a mudalali, and yes, his character.

Singarasan raised his head to see if Ponnambalam had left. He saw him a little farther away, talking with a fellow mudalali.

Singarasan felt relieved. It was surprising to him that he felt his presence even after Ponnambalam left. Only then did he realise that he did not like Ponnambalam much. But why? He didn't have an answer to that.

Around one in the afternoon, the procession started. They took Setha for a bath in the 'good water' well. By then Singarasan had finished all his errands. Led by the mudalalis and elders, walked a group of women, and Setha was enclosed in a space between them. Amidst the rustle of a collage of coloured saris, voices of different types intermingled. 'Son, didn't your father come?' an elderly person asked him. Several others also asked the same question subsequently. Only then did he understand that his father's absence had become a big issue.

'Kanthaiyar has to be here. Why hasn't he come?'

Singarasan also did not know why his father had not come. Ignoring the issue, he tried to get involved in other things.

A veil covered Setha's face as she walked among the group of women. He wished to see how she looked but he could not. Within that month, she would have changed a lot, he thought. In addition, he began to develop an indescribable longing towards her, which he could not fathom. Once again, he tried to get a glimpse of Setha but could only see her veil. Though he had spent the whole month at Setha's house, he could neither see her nor talk to her. In Sinnathangam maami's house masons, women workers and labourers were aplenty and he could not even get a glimpse of Setha who was lying low in a hut near the kitchen. She must have felt shy to show up, he thought and it was not the only reason—Sinnathangam maami had confined her to the room. She knew how to be kind and be strict at the same time. He wished he could see her once, in her new appearance.

His yearning came to an end when he saw the beautiful Setha on the ceremonial platform after the ceremony. He was surprised at



her appearance. Was it the same little girl who had picked up stones with him in the Singaporean compound? She was dressed in a red silk sari with a matching red blouse—she had blossomed into a woman. Although she kept her head bent and low, she did not appear to be shy. Her hair neatly parted in the middle, and decorated with flowers could be visible through the veil.

‘This is a new fashion,’ Singarasan said to himself. Until then he had not seen anybody wearing a veil. No such thing was done for his sister Parimalam. And he did understand the differences between this ceremony and his sister’s. During Akka’s ceremony, a few people gathered and bathed her near the well, making her sit on bundles of palmyra stalks. However, he was not able to recollect if they had celebrated her ceremony in a grand manner with a ‘song box’ and a veil.

‘This is Colombo tradition, I suppose.’ Unconsciously, a sense of frustration and ridicule crept into him during the procession. After seeing Setha, the excitement and thrill that he had felt for the last one month seemed to be slowly melting away. He looked at himself surreptitiously.

The new shirt and white dhoti that were kept safely in the box did make him look splendid. But did they have the power to raise him to Setha’s level of appearance? A faint feeling of doubt crept into him that he would not be able to join her. ‘Even if I want to join her, will they include me?’ The very thought of ‘them’ made him realise that they were a class apart. But he couldn’t understand or describe what ‘them’ meant. In addition, he felt that it was not right to mark everyone as ‘them’. ‘Even if I could say anything about anybody else, I cannot say the same about Sinnathangam maami.’ This gave him some consolation. At the same time, he did see an indifferent attitude in Setha’s downcast head as she received the ceremonial pot. The scene at the stone mound where she got annoyed came back to his mind. Rather than maami’s beauty, Setha had inherited her father’s conceit, he thought. He felt inexplicably sad.



He remembered the mason's mockery too, but its power seemed to fade away. Moreover, what he realised at the well the other day seemed a mere imagination. Singarasan felt ashamed and uneasy. He could not stay in the same place and he did not want Setha to see him in that situation. But how could he move away from that place? Would his leaving the place make her take notice of him? These thoughts made him stay put in the same place. He did not have any other choice and this proved to be a big embarrassment for him.

'Singarasan!' somebody called out to him. He felt as if that person knew of his embarrassment and tried to draw others attention to the same. Feeling uneasy, he ignored the call, and even cursed him. But the voice only became louder. 'Singarasan! Singarasan!'

Singarasan turned towards him reluctantly. It was a close relative of Singarasan who beckoned him. He was sitting near Setha with a new briefcase and a ledger book in hand. Singarasan could not refuse him and went near him unenthusiastically.

'Your handwriting is good, isn't it?' He asked Singarasan, who nodded in the affirmative. 'All right then, you update this whenever I ask you to.' He gave a ledger book and a pen to Singarasan.

Suddenly, he felt that he was being crowned, as if he was the new king. This came as an unexpected change for him, who was feeling uncomfortable until then. He was sitting very near to Setha. He could even hear the slight rustle of her sari produced by her slight movement. Now she would know exactly where Singarasan was seated, and could look at him too. Would she not have heard the relative calling him and giving him the book? Singarasan was not embarrassed or uneasy anymore. Instead, a feeling of self-confidence and pride arose in him. 'It does not matter even if the shirt and the dhoti are not very good,' he thought. 'Ignoring everyone else, didn't he call only me? Setha would have noticed it.' Singarasan, as his name suggests, got down to writing, like a lion.

'M Ponniah, Ward 9, Rs. 101.00'

'E Selludurai, Ward 10, Rs. 101.00'

As he started writing, it became a very interesting job for him. But he could not enjoy it for long. He heard somebody say, 'Kanthaiyar has come'. The next moment, everyone, including Singarasan, had their eyes glued to the entrance of the shed. With blood-shot eyes and unkempt hair, Kanthaiyar walked in. Singarasan's heart suddenly broke, like a snapped *Veena* string.

Opposite the raised platform, plantain leaves were being placed in front of the guests and food was being served. It was a norm that all those who attended the ceremony had to be served satiating food. Except for those who wanted to gift cash, the rest were lined up for lunch. Kanthaiyar, Singarasan's father, appeared, and one could guess from his very looks that he was not his true self. Nevertheless, it was Ponnambalam's responsibility to receive anyone who came in as a guest. And Kanthaiyar was none other than Ponnambalam's brother-in-law.

'Welcome, Sir. We thought you may not come,' said Ponnambalam as he received Kanthaiyar at the entrance. 'Are you coming straight from Colombo?'

Leaving the ledger open on the briefcase and biting the pen between his teeth, Singarasan looked at both of them. What would happen next, he thought. Whatever Singarasan had feared of, came true. Pushing away Ponnambalam's extended hand, Kanthaiyar showed least respect and did not care for anyone when he uttered these words: 'Get lost! You have acquired new wealth and it shows in your character. Whatever said and done, you are an outsider. Where is my sister, Sinnathangam?'



Ponnambalam's face turned pale but Kanthaiyar did not care about that.

'Sinnathangam! Sinnathangam! Where is Sinnathangam?'

'Kanthaiyar, what is the problem, why are you shouting?' Ponnambalam tried to pacify him. He must have felt uncomfortable as all this was happening in front of everyone.

'You... you... don't touch my hand.' He pushed him away and started calling out for his sister again. 'Sinnathangam! Where's Sinnathangam?'

'What's it, brother, you are coming only now?' What Sinnathangam asked did not seem important to Kanthaiyar. His anger and feelings that were kept bottled up for long were released now.

'You all are big people now, aren't you?' Kanthaiyar asked her angrily. 'Abundant money has blinded your eyes, hasn't it? Did you ever inform me about the ceremony? Are we so down and out? You couldn't see us because we appear so small in front of you? And if you had invited me, it would be shameful for you, wouldn't it be? It won't look respectful either, will it? The man from Suruvil has shown his true colours, but you also ignored me, didn't you, Sinnathangam?'

Kanthaiyar shook Sinnathangam up, and her position became precarious.

'What's the all the noise you are creating? Are you drunk?' asked Ponnambalam pulling Kanthaiyar away from Sinnathangam. He quivered in anger and it showed in his explicitly on his face. He retorted, 'Hey, why are you getting agitated? Didn't I send you an invitation?'

Kanthaiyar's anger suddenly turned towards Ponnambalam. 'You sent a card! Hey, you man from Suruvil, you've become a great and rich man! Haven't you? I also stay in Colombo. Couldn't you come and invite me personally? You could invite the other mudalalis but not me! Oh, yes. Now I'm not a mudalali. That's why you turned a blind eye to me, isn't it?'

Kanthaiyar continued to speak to him in filthy language. Ponnambalam could have been patient but he did not keep his cool either. As soon as Kanthaiyar used obscene words, Sinnathangam came on her knees in front of Ponnambalam shouting, 'I beg of you, please don't do anything'. In spite of that Ponnambalam had raised his hand in anger.

Plonk... came the sound.

Ponnambalam did not stop with that. He leapt at Kanthaiyar shouting at him to 'get out' of the place.

'What if I didn't invite you personally? Do you think I'm going to give my daughter in marriage to your son? If not for this street monger and the fishing rod carrying son, would my daughter and I be losers! You get out of my place...'

Pandemonium followed. Some joined the brawl, and some made peace. In the melee, the people who were having food scrambled and ran amok, the plantain leaves were trampled upon, the rice basket was toppled, the curries were spilt, and all hell broke loose. When Kanthaiyar and Ponnambalam were pushing each other, some tried to control them by pulling them in opposite directions, and it looked like a tug of war. Sinnathangam and Valliammai wailed in sorrow.

Only Singarasan stayed unmoved, the pen and book still on his lap. He kept on chewing the pen clip unawares, and it lay on the ground. The broken clip injured his finger and blood began to ooze from it.

'If not for this street monger and the fishing rod carrying son, would my daughter and I be losers!' These words hurt Singarasan. It was thousand times more powerful than the slap that fell on Kanthaiyar's cheek.

Singarasan looked at the fuming dark figure amidst the chaotic crowd. He was looking at him as if he was seeing that man for the first time. Is he the person who spoke like that? In fact,



Ponnambalam had never ever appeared like that before. Where had all his sense of dignity and discipline gone? Was he such a weakling? To Singarasan he seemed a coward, a pitiless coward! He openly and unnecessarily brought up the issue, carrying the fishing rod, and it was an insult to not only Kanthaiyar's profession but also his, that too in front of the whole gathering. How weak he was!

The impulsive urge and rage that Singarasan felt when Ponnambalam beat his father Kanthaiyar, began to subside slowly. Instead a feeling of hatred and disgust towards Ponnambalam ran through him. The graceful name mudalali and the dignity associated with it seemed to have fallen with regard to Ponnambalam. His appearance and position seemed to be crumbling! 'Chi! Is he a human being? He is a pitiless animal!' Singarasan murmured as he put down the book and pen, got up and walked away.

The person who was collecting the money had already left the place, to make peace, leaving the money-box open. Singarasan did not care about that too. 'Let them throw this money to the dogs. Even dogs would not take it.' Valliammai who was standing outside the shed cried out to him angrily, 'Hey, you! Get up and come away!'

At a distance, some people were trying to pacify Kanthaiyar taking him away to their house. Singarasan silently walked out. He did not sympathise with Valliammai though she gave vent to the same feelings that he had. In fact he thought that Valliammai and Kanthaiyar were the chief cause for all these. He realised that the act of Ponnambalam developed a feeling of disgust and hatred in him rather than rage. Instead he was enraged at his parents. He walked away thinking 'If these people did well, why should this situation arise at all?'

'Hurry up!' said Valliammai, grumbling, scolding and mumbling, walking behind him. Was she trying to shift the blame and guilt on him due to her inability? Singarasan could not suppress his



outrage anymore. 'You shut up and come!' He shouted at her. 'I know how to take care of myself. If you talk to me unnecessarily I'll kill everyone and walk away!' One could hear his teeth grind as he said this. 'What good did you both do to me as mother and father? You let me eat at other people's house shamelessly, and now you have started talking big!'

'Oh! Here is a big mudalali. That mudalali has to invite this mudalali. If he didn't tell this mudalali, this mudalali would not come. If he invited this mudalali, that would be a shame for him. These guys ... someday... someday....' he grumbled. But Singarasan could not finish it. He could not say what had to be done or even worse, could not say it. Grinding his teeth again, he clenched his fist. And that was all he could do.

His palm and fingers became wet. Only then did he realise the blood oozing out of his finger that was injured a little earlier. At the very sight of blood, his inner feelings of fear, weakness and fright surfaced, but lasted only for a moment. The next minute, they were gone and a soothing feeling came upon him. In fact, he now enjoyed looking at it.

As if everything had returned to normalcy, the 'song box' began to blare '*If your eyes deceived you, why do you get angry with me? da da da dadadada*' at Ponnambalam's house.

'Was it Setha who was singing?' Singarasan had a sudden hallucination, though he knew it was silly. The song did give him a message. And the message gave him an indescribable pain. '*Why do you get angry with me? Why do you get angry with me? Why do you get angry with me?*'

Angry?

He felt as if he wanted to kill everyone. At the same time, amidst all the anger, a feeling of affection ran through him. If not, why did he feel that pain? Why did that song wring his heart?

Kanthaiyar and a few others who tried to pacify him stood talking in the frontyard of the house. When Singarasan heard their voices,

the message of the song came back to him. *'If your eyes deceived you, why do you get angry with me?'* As if Kanthaiyar had overcome it, he seemed to look peaceful. Was it the same with Singarasan too? Probably that was why it was painful and sad for him also. Did he still wish to be 'on good terms' with Ponnambalam's family?

When Singarasan looked at his father Kanthaiyar, he hated himself. 'Why should I become sad,' he asked himself. 'These people have got together and are cheating my parents. Do they have any respect or dignity at all? They are talking all this just for a day's meal and a drink. And my parents will still believe them!'

The pain that peaked a little while ago started disappearing now. Singarasan had killed it even before it began to take roots. But his anger began to show its head again, which seemed to be valid and reasonable. The song continued to be heard.

'Their song and their entertainment!'

Squeezing his hands, Singarasan nursed malice.

'Them'. His earlier confusion of whether to include Sinnathangam maami in that group or not was no longer an issue for him. Even his memories of their earlier enmity had vanished.

'Their song and their entertainment!'



When Singarasan woke up, there was turbulence at home. He had cried for a long time and then fallen asleep without his knowledge. Nobody woke him up even though it was late in the evening; in fact it was about eight in the night. Only the turmoil and the outrageous noises at home had woken him up from deep sleep.

He lay still and listened to their conversations. 'You don't earn much... You want to take him... You can't take him with you and educate him there... If you don't have any other job, just go... Let him stay here... With your meagre income, you think you can educate him in Colombo? Forget it!' and so on.

Valliammai was shouting at the top of her voice and throwing pots and pans around in anger. Others' voices were also heard. Singarasan became alert. It did not take long for him to realise that all the discussion and quarrel centred round him. Listening carefully, he lay still and silent, facing the thatched fence. He did not wish to move or disturb their conversation.

He heard Kanthaiyar clearing his throat. 'Don't scream like an inauspicious, bare woman,' he continued. 'You don't want him to come with me to Colombo, join a school, and come up in life. Instead you want him to stay with you and learn bad things like you?'



A long-felt desire surfaced in Singarasan's heart. How nice it would be if he could actually study in Colombo! And better still if he got a job. He will be well off and earn respect too! And Ponnambalam wouldn't call him 'one who carries a fishing rod' anymore. Instead, wouldn't he come forward to give Setha in marriage to him?

But, but... does Kanthaiyar have the money to take him to Colombo and educate him? Does he have the means to do it?

The next moment, another problem cropped up, suppressing that desire. Subsequently, old memories associated with it also surfaced.

Kanagarasan, Singarasan's classmate belonging to the same village, also went to Colombo saying he was going to study there. His father too had proudly said that he would educate him there and get a good job for him. But after a month, his father made him work in a shop saying 'education was nonsense'. Now, he works as a street vendor at Norris Road, selling apples shouting all day, 'apples, apples'. The same could happen to Singarasan as well. Also, there would be no escape from Ponnambalam's ridicule.

'This good-for-nothing rascal has come.'

It was Valliammai who screamed at Kanthaiyar. This was nothing new. When they were newly married and had enough money, they were happy and loved each other. But that was when Singarasan was a small boy. But they have been like this as far as he remembered, since he started having food at Sinnathangam maami's house. Therefore, Valliammai's rants did not surprise him. He had heard and seen worse things like that.

'Who asked him to come here? Having slept with hundreds of Sinhala women, what has come here for? When he is here, he can't just eat, sleep and be quiet. He has started talking as if he is going to do great things. You don't need to make false promises that you are going to take him away with you. You go back tomorrow. At least I don't have to listen to your boasting. I can't suffer you anymore. I just can't.'

Abusing him in filthy language, Valliammai walked out of the house taking her mat and pillow, towards the kitchen located in the backyard, to sleep there. She did this many a time, foregoing even food, just sleeping there. She would not even come near Kanthaiyar.

About ten minutes after Valliammai was gone, Parimalam shook Singarasan up and said, 'Get up, brother, to eat.' Parimalam was not to be seen till then. Singarasan woke up lazily.

'This woman speaks too much' grumbled Kanthaiyar to his daughter, as he was sitting down to have his meal.

'Let her be. But this man from Suruvil is showing off that he has too much money... All right, let me see how long this money is going to last him. That man from Singapore had also talked big like this and he died poor at last, without a land or house of his own. Now this man from Suruvil is also talking big...'

Neither Singarasan nor Parimalam said a word. They were busy eating.

Even the next morning, things did not smoothen out between Kanthaiyar and Valliammai. The rage had not subsided and there were still some angry exchanges, but not as profuse as the day before. Until Kanthaiyar stayed on, this would continue, and this was not new to Singarasan. So he did not take things seriously. When he got up the next morning, he ate what Parimalam gave—some left-over rice and green chilli paste, and went off to school. There was some curry left over but it would hardly suffice even Kanthaiyar.

Singarasan was studying at Ganesha High School situated in Ward 12. He always enjoyed his walk through the winding lime stone paths and the green paddy fields near 'Peria Kirai' on his way to school.

However, on that day, Singarasan's heart remained lifeless. No sight aroused any interest in him – the main reason being the



unpleasant incident that took place at maami's house. Secondly, his cousin, Selvarasan, who always accompanied him to school, did not turn up that day. Selvarasan would not accompany him hereafter. For, he was going to study in a school in Jaffna, staying at his wealthy brother-in-law's house. This news shook him and he became very sad. Singarasan felt that everybody seemed to have conspired against him all of a sudden, to neglect and abandon him. His eyes were filled with tears and even the lush green paddy fields on the way did not soothe him.

He came back home as fast as he had gone to school, within an hour. As he crossed the paddy fields on to the lane that led to his house, Selvarasan appeared before him all of a sudden, carrying a 'trunk' box on his shoulder. It did not take long for Singarasan to understand that Selvarasan was on his way to Jaffna. Singarasan forced a smile on his lips and said, 'So you've started your journey to Jaffna. I don't know how auspicious it will turn out to be because you have met me on your way.'

'Is there any other person who can be more auspicious than you, *machchan*,' saying so, Selvarasan brought the trunk box down in one of his hands and hugged Singarasan with the other. 'All right, where are you coming from now? Haven't you gone to school today?' Selvarasan continued.

'Of course, I'm coming from school.' Singarasan observed.

'What? From school? It's not yet ten. Are you coming from school? Stop joking,' Selvarasan said smiling.

'Oh, yes. I'm coming from school.'

'Then where are your books?'

'Books...' Singarasan did not finish what he began to say.

'What are you hiding from me? Tell me. Where are your books?' Selvarasan's curiosity increased.

'I threw those books at Chelliah teacher's face!'



'What are you saying?' Selvarasan looked at him in astonishment.

'Yes, I hurled those books at him very hard... very hard.'

'What exactly happened? Why did you hurl the books at him like that?'

The incident came back to his mind. He started explaining it to Selvarasan. Because of what had happened at maami's place, Singarasan felt empty and lifeless from within. Nobody had consoled him. As soon as he went to school, his classmates coming from his area, who knew about the incident, began to talk among themselves ridiculing him. Annoyed, he got angry and felt like breaking their bones. At the same time he felt helpless and could not concentrate on his lessons.

The incident began to flood his mind, and he was enraged like lit firecrackers. Just then, Chelliah teacher was entering the class saying, 'What is all this noise, islanders.' He was prejudiced towards the village kids. The student sitting next to Singarasan, in a soft but audible voice, scoffed, 'Look, *leaf-cutter* has come.' Chelliah teacher heard this and was annoyed. However, he pretended as if he had not heard it. As he did not know who exactly had uttered those words, he went ahead with the lesson.

Singarasan could not concentrate on these things. His mind wandered elsewhere, and he was disturbed.

'Hey, preoccupied with fishing, eh?' asked Chelliah teacher coming down sternly at him. Singarasan felt as if he was unexpectedly slapped on his cheek. Chelliah teacher must have gathered what had happened at Ponnambalam's house. Some of the students might have put it into his ears. Even if he had not known anything, he would have exhibited his prejudice. He had asked him the same question many number of times.

Coming near him the teacher asked him again, 'Preoccupied with fishing, eh?'

Ponnambalam was a wealthy man but was not cultured or well-behaved. It was evident from his cheap behaviour at the function

the previous day. But he had not expected this from a teacher who had to teach others about culture and manners...

With a flinging noise, the books in Singarasan's hand struck Chelliah teacher's face and got scattered on the ground. The next moment, Singarasan walked away from his classroom.

'Why did you behave like this?' Selvarasan asked, after hearing his story patiently.

'What else could I do? If you had been in my situation, you would have done the same thing.' Singarasan was still fuming from inside.

The trunk box that was on Selvarasan's shoulder was now on Singarasan's.

'I won't say I wouldn't have done it. I have thought of doing the same thing to him several times. But when there are worse fellows like Ponnambalam, what is the use of getting angry with persons like Chelliah teacher?'

'Ponnambalam is not only my mama, your *kunchiappar*, too. His arrogance is going to dwindle very soon.'

'As long as you scrounge for money from the Sinhalese, you can't trounce them. Not when you are mere workers. Our progress is the cure for that illness. Now that you have left the school, what are you going to do now?'

'As that stupid teacher said, I'll carry a fishing rod.'

'Stop joking and study. That's the only way to accomplish what you wish to do.' Engrossed in their talk, they reached the old port of Madaththuvveli. Only then they realised that they have walked a long distance.

The bridge that Ambalavanar had started building that would connect Madaththuvveli in Pungudutivu and Velanai remained incomplete. To cover that short distance, they had to take a boat or catamaran.



When they reached the old port, they looked at the other shore, Velanai. They could faintly see that a bus had just come and was parked there. Now, Selvarasan had to take a boat to Velanai shore and then take a bus to Mandaitivu. From there, he had to go to Jaffna.

'The islanders' journey to town seems to be difficult,' Singarasan thought to himself. He remembered his father Kanthaiyar's journey from Colombo. To circumvent this long distance, he used to hire a boat at Velanai to reach Ward 9 directly. He remembered his younger days. Like lightning, some pleasant memories sprouted momentarily and disappeared. Then a series of memories about Kanthaiyar, Ponnambalam, Chelliah teacher and Valliammai flashed across his mind. He felt a sense of hatred and frustration running through him.

All of a sudden Singarasan bid goodbye to his cousin, 'I'll take leave machchan. You go ahead. Don't forget me.' Selvarasan noticed this sudden change in Singarasan, and did not know how to react. Regaining his composure, Selvarasan said in a choked voice, 'Don't give up on going to school.'

Singarasan who had walked a short distance acknowledged Selvarasan by nodding his head. That gave Selvarasan a bit of satisfaction.



Parimalam was busy writing something lying on the cot inside the house. In the front yard, there was a neem tree. One of its roots had sprouted from the ground, and was bent nicely to form a seat. Singarasan sat on it.

On the opposite side, beyond the thatched fence, among the tall coconut trees' leaves, stood the new stone house with a roof of 'sovereign' mark bricks. The whitewashing was being done for the house. It was the first of its kind – not only in that Ward but the entire Eastern part. To Singarasan, their arrogance seemed to show off in the house's appearance. Looking at that house and then the surrounding ones, he looked at his own. The smile that had appeared at the corner of his mouth suddenly disappeared.

All the houses in the vicinity, including his, were built of mud and had thatched roofs, made of either coconut or palmyra leaves. There was only one room for all purposes – puja room, bedroom, store room and so on. In front of it was a tiny hut that was the kitchen. The houses did not stand firm; they were bent on one side as if they were willing to serve Ponnambalam's 'stone house'.

Of course, it was so true. There were many households in the area that had connections with Ponnambalam's house and earned their

livelihood – some families sent their ‘boys’ for work at his Colombo stores for monthly wages; a few others sent their young daughters to help Sinnathangam pound rice, grind flour and other domestic chores; a few belonging to the Vellala community earned a living by sending fish to Ponnambalam’s house; some men helped mend fences, dug wells, planted trees, took up plantations for lease; a few women fetched water, wove baskets and mats; and some made a living by carrying tales from one place to the other.

Singarasan laughed at himself as he thought he too had served them to make a living until yesterday! He carried baskets of stone to help them build their house. Sinnathangam maami had even come forward to pay him. Even though he tried to cover it up in the name of relationship, that was the truth. The incident that happened the other day, demonstrated this clearly. Ponnambalam demonstrated that if you are penniless, you are worthless too!

Singarasan’s heart became heavy with grief as he remembered the heap of empty bottles that lay at the bottom of the compound. What a lot of money Kanthaiyar spent on alcohol and women! They could not pile up money the same way! Valliammai was able to contend with Kanthaiyar in this matter. She drank along with Kanthaiyar and spent money. At the end of all the revelry, she had opened an account at Kanagasabai’s toddy tavern. Singarasan’s lips became dry once again. All right, if they could not save money, could they not at least renovate this house! Is this the house of ‘rich Kanthaiyar’ he thought.

Singarasan remembered how Kanthaiyar would shout at Valliammai in an inebriated mood, proclaiming that he was once the ‘rich Kanthaiyar’: ‘You... think before you talk. Do you realise who you are talking with? I’m that rich Kanthian! Understood! Don’t I know these new mudalalis? These men had begged and borrowed money from me to start their businesses! Yes, who do you think this rich Kanthian is?’



When he boasted like this, Valliammai would retort, 'Yes. Try saying this to those Sinhala women. Don't come and tell me. This would be sweet for them to hear.'

Kanthaiyar would shout back at her 'What did you say? What did you say...' and chase her with a palmyra stalk pulled out from the thatched fence to beat her up. When he did so, the house looked like one that was pulled by the dogs. That was the mansion where rich Kanthaiyar lived! Singarasan felt like laughing at this. Even if they had a fraction of the money they squandered, Singarasan would not have to go fishing or eat at maami's house or study in the village. As Kanthaiyar wished, would he not have studied in Colombo? There was a sudden rush of emotions in Singarasan's mind. He wanted to study and improve his standard of living. That was one way to solve the problem in the opposite house. His machchan Selvarasan's words came back to his mind repeatedly: 'Don't stop going to school!'

Yes, as Kanthaiyar said, what if Singarasan could actually go to Colombo and start studying? But, but...

Kanthaiyar in a sudden emotional moment uttered those words, but later everything subsided. After a couple of days, he went to Colombo without speaking anything about his education.

Perhaps Kanthaiyar also had a false ambition! The argument Kanthaiyar had with Valliammai on that day was perhaps the reflection of just an emotional outburst consequent to what had happened in Ponnambalam's house! Kanthaiyar must definitely have felt humiliated when Ponnambalam insulted them. He must have had a baseless desire because of the pain that arose involuntarily. Yes, only if Singarasan could be educated and put on the path of progress... Because of that desire he would have spoken like that. He would have realised his weakness later and not dived into that matter. Yes, it must have been so.

Singarasan did not know what it was. Yet, Singarasan certainly knew that the house on the opposite side seemed to be insulting



him. Every hope to rise to Ponnambalam's standard was always ending in failure. Nevertheless, he did not give up.

Every time he tried to raise himself up, he was hit by hard blows. The news that Ponnambalam had admitted Setha to a school in Jaffna was one of them. Setha too had gone to Jaffna to study English. In the widening gulf between Setha and Singarasan it was another milestone! Within a month after the dawning of 1950, Singarasan was faced with a new and depressing problem!

Singarasan was staring at the stone house on the opposite compound. The problem that was emerging in the opposite compound was, of course, a mammoth one. Did the house that was built through his blood and toil, pose a huge problem? The very thought of it annoyed him and made him feel helpless. And the stone house brought back another set of memories with it. That's where Setha lives. When he thought of it as Setha's house all the pain and frustration disappeared. He felt ecstatic. Even though he was poor, and not as rich as Ponnambalam, Setha was still his. She belonged to him. It was not a false desire; he had every right over her. When he thought of these things, he felt unrestrained, free and light.

How could it be said that Setha was not his? What if he too became a rich man like Ponnambalam? Even if he did not, he had his right over her as a first cousin...

'Singarasan!'

Parimalam was standing in front of him.

Abandoning his thoughts, he looked at her implying, 'What?'

Parimalam came closer to him. Handing him a letter she asked, 'Can you give this letter to Nagarasan, who has come from Haputale? He is at our elder maami's house.'

'What! Our cousin Nagarasa?' Singarasan looked at her with surprise.

Until the previous day, nobody knew if Parimalam was at home or not. She was a humble and modest person. Now suddenly she had become bold, with a letter in hand! Were these secret and bold ideas hiding behind all her modesty and humility?

Singarasan could not contain his astonishment. 'What, to cousin Nagarasan?' he asked her again, doubtfully.

'Yes, brother. Don't be so astonished. Give it to him without anybody's knowledge. He knows. I have sent him letters earlier too,' Parimalam begged him, stroking his cheeks. But her cajoling did not contain his amazement. 'What? Have you given him letters even earlier?' screamed Singarasan.

Nagarasan was the son of Chellamma, the elder sister of Sinnathangam maami. Nagarasan was one of the partners at a tea estate in Haputale. Once a year or so he would come to the village and stay there for a couple of days. During his stay, he would visit all his relatives in pure white dhoti and shirt, wearing a glittering golden chain around his neck. He had even come to Singarasan's house a couple of times. That was all Singarasan knew about Nagarasan.



Singarasan had even overheard Kanthaiyar and Valliammai mentioning that Parimalam could be married off to Nagarasan. However, what Singarasan did not even dream of or expect was that Parimalam was secretly exchanging letters with Nagarasan. As he had not expected this, he had shouted in amazement. She came closer to him and said, 'Shsssh... don't shout. Yes, I have sent him letters earlier. He also writes to me. Earlier, Setha used to carry my letters to him. Now, there is nobody else to help. That is why I am asking you to help. Don't tell anyone. Not even our Achchi, ok?'

'What? Did Setha carry the letters?' But he did not ask Parimalam about it. He concluded that he could not fathom these women. His mind wandered off to Setha. What was her feeling towards him? Does she think of him now? His heart was filled with a longing for her. Well... How could he climb up to her status? Only if he did that, could he even think of her. The next moment, there sprang a sudden, new light of hope. It was the reflection of the golden chains and bracelet glittering on Nagarasan's neck and wrist. On the pretext of akka's relationship, he could approach Nagarasan, and with his help he could study in Jaffna! A new opportunity.

Hiding the letter in his waist pouch, Singarasan flew like the wind. Though Nagarasan was short and stout, he was fair complexioned and polished in his looks. He might even be half an inch shorter than Parimalam. Even though the Ward nine people had nicknamed him 'Midget Nagarasan', his magnetic persona commanded the respect of everyone.

However short be the man who stood there reading Parimalam's letter with a bright smile and feeling a bit shy was a respectful person in the eyes of Singarasan. He was also hopeful that this man would certainly brighten up his future.

Nagarasan, who was completely immersed in reading the letter, inquired, 'How are you, Singarasan? What are you doing now?' And it seemed as if he was trying to hide his shyness. Or did he speak just for the sake of giving respect to the person in front of



him? Whatever it was, the very enquiry seemed to fill Singarasan with hope. He was in fact waiting for such an opportunity. 'I'm not doing anything.' He hesitated for a moment and continued, 'I'm doing nothing. I've no job. I wish to study in Jaffna. My dad told me he'd take me to Colombo to study. But he left without telling me anything. That is why I'm doing nothing now. I still want to study, but there's nobody to help me. That's why...' as he uttered these words in anticipation, he hoped that Nagarasan would help him.

He wanted to continue saying, 'That is why I have come to you seeking help,' but he stopped abruptly. To ask for help directly seemed very inappropriate to him. So he hoped that Nagarasan would read between the lines and understand his predicament.

Sadly, Nagarasan did not respond and concentrated on the letter, reading it carefully. Was he actually reading the letter or thinking how and what to answer? Singarasan became nervous as he thought, 'Was it all right to talk like that? Was it good manners?'

A little later, after reading the letter and closing it, Nagarasan looked at him and asked, 'Are you still interested in continuing your studies?' Singarasan nodded his head in the affirmative.

With a mocking smile on his face, Nagarasan asked, 'Why do you want to study? We didn't study to make money. How much are you going to earn wearing a pair of trousers and speaking a few words in English? A hundred rupees... it wouldn't even meet your daily needs. One can make thousands in a business without all these and still be rich. You don't have to study. In another couple of years I'm going to start a business in Colombo on import and export of tea. At that time, I'll involve you too. Until then, do something.' He looked at Singarasan as though he was looking for Singarasan's approval, and continued.

'I'll tell you something. For the time being, open a small shop behind your house in the vacant land and do a small business. I'll give

you the money to buy the stock. You don't need to return that money. What do you say? Will you do it? Go ahead and build a small shop... I'll give you the money to buy provisions. Do you agree?'

Singarasan nodded his head unconsciously.

8

## 8

Singarasan did not return in the same speed as he had gone there. He didn't get what he expected. If Nagarasan had promised to help him study at Jaffna, Singarasan's joy and happiness would have been manifold. He would not have walked that distance, he would have flown across! But Nagarasan didn't say any such thing. Even if he had kept quiet it would not have affected Singarasan this much. It was to be expected. But by ridiculing Singarasan's ambitions, he shook the very foundation that Singarasan wished to lay for his future. *'How much are you going to earn wearing a pair of trousers and speaking a few words in English?'* What else could he mean when he said those words?

Still, he could not oppose that view. How could he? Perhaps it was true. In addition, Nagarasan had also mentioned that he would teach him tea export business. Anyway, Ponnambalam is doing no better. He could actually follow Nagarasan's advice and put up a small shop in that 'vacant land'! It was better to set up a shop instead of fishing, weaving mats and going half-starved. But...but... As long as there was disparity in Singarasan's expectation and what he actually got, the 'but' factor would remain... Sauntering back home he thought that giving this news to his achchi or akka could cheer him up a bit.



As he approached his house he heard someone singing. That was Singarasan's achchi, Valliammai who would often break into a song when she was on a 'high'. If Valliammai could starve without eating for hours or sometimes even for days together, it was only because of Kanagasabai's toddy. Singarasan wondered how she could get money for that alone when she did not have any money to buy even rice. Perhaps, the price of rice and provisions were more than that of toddy.

Valliammai's brother-in-law Sellathurai was sitting on the cot inside the house. In front of him, holding the end of her sari, she was walking across, singing and acting. Singarasan was amused and at the same time annoyed. When she saw him she stopped singing, hesitated for a moment and then became furious for no reason.

'Where've you been?'

'Nowhere' said Singarasan hesitantly.

'What? You roam around and come back home. And I'll cook rice and keep it ready for you.' Saying so, she grabbed a bundle of stalks and started chasing him.

Singarasan could not understand anything. As he was used to such things, his legs instinctively took him beyond the thatched gate and on to the road. Valliammai did not chase him beyond that. Her outrage and behaviour demonstrated that she did not like his arrival at that time. 'Let her do anything', cursing her, he went to the seashore in search of the boys who played *kitti*.

When he had just crossed the first street after the T junction, he heard someone calling out to him: 'Singarasan, are you coming to weave mats at Rani akka's house?'

Certainly, it was a young lass's voice. Even before he turned around to see who it was, he had recognised it. When Singarasan turned around, there stood Manonmani, Moothamby's daughter, partially visible, as she opened the thatched gate he had just passed by.

Singarasan stood still in a state of shock, as she continued, 'Ah, Singarasan. Are you coming to weave mat at Rani akka's house? A few people get together there to weave mats. Are you coming, too?'

She waited for an answer from him but he remained silent. Assuming that he did not object to it, she said, 'Why don't you come and join us tonight?'

'Okay', Singarasan said, nodding his head.

'You should definitely come.' Saying this firmly but gently, she walked away crossing over to the other side of the road with a bundle of cut palmyra stalks in her hand.

After walking some distance in the opposite direction Singarasan stopped and turned around to see her.

As she crossed the T junction, she too had stopped to look at Singarasan, without him noticing her. But the bundle of stalks had betrayed her.

To the south of Nakkanthu pond, some 200 yards from the T junction that lay to the north of Singarasan's house is situated Rani's house – where Manonmani asked Singarasan to come to weave mats. But if one made a beeline to the short cut that ran behind Kanagasabai's shop, between Singarasan's house and Rani's house the distance would not be even one hundred and fifty yards. Her house was an old fashioned clay house with thatched fence and roof made of woven coconut stalks.

It was dark when Singarasan went to Rani's house with the bundle of leaves that Parimalam had cut and the not yet fully woven mat. He had stopped going to school and weaving mats has now become his fulltime job. It gave him the right to demand food from his achchi, Valliammai. Not only Singarasan but even other men who had no other work would weave mats at home. Nevertheless, nobody would like to say it openly as they felt ashamed to admit the fact. That's why he preferred to go to Rani's house after dark to weave mats.

As Singarasan approached Rani's house, people who were standing in the half lit front yard greeted him.

'Singarasan has come! Singarasan has come! I told you he would come to weave mats.' He could very well guess that voice belonged to Manonmani.



After sometime, Manonmani, with four or five girls and a couple of boys younger to Singarasan, sat down in the front yard and started to weave mats. Singarasan observed that his arrival brought some fresh enthusiasm and excitement among them. He had gone to other places to weave mats day and night but had never experienced such enthusiasm and interest that centred round him. Nobody would have even cared about him then as he was very young and it would not have mattered to them. Now, he could see that he earned some respect! Singarasan felt a ray of hope emerging within him. Moreover, Manonmani's words also showed some respect for him. A spark of brightness shone in her eyes soothed his heart. All these things made him a new man!

Rani, who had just returned home, went in, lighted a lantern and placed it in the front yard, as if she was happy about him coming to weave mats. Generally, the moonlight took care of the lighting, but that day there seemed to be a change due to Singarasan's arrival!

Rani was a young widow of about 35 years of age. She was elegant and beautiful. When she was very young, due to poverty she was married off to a rich, old man in Jaffna. She became a widow early in life. She did not have parents or children and therefore took on this new role in Pungudutivu, Ward 9. Singarasan had noticed several times that whenever other women saw Rani, they would make faces, raise their shoulders in disapproval and secretly rebuke her. However, what some of them did clandestinely she did openly. That's the only difference. Singarasan may or may not know anything about such things, but he certainly did not care about it. It was not his age to worry about such things. Rani was not Setha. He was least concerned about Rani's affairs and because of this, he felt that Rani was a better and kinder person compared to other women.

'Singarasan, have you had dinner?' asked Rani, carrying a bundle of stalks and a mat to the front yard.

'Not yet. Only when I go home,' replied Singarasan.

'Why go home in this dark? Eat and sleep here.'

'Here?' Singarasan said shyly.

'Why? Did your achchi say that you should not sleep here?' When Singarasan did not answer her, she continued: 'Oh! After weaving we all sleep here. The girls sleep with me inside the house. You boys sleep out in the open.'

Singarasan had his dinner there. Thereafter, it became a routine. Even if he had eaten at home, she would not let him go without food. He had to eat rice there at least once a day. Whatever she brought from the sea, like crabs and oysters, there would be a fair share for Singarasan. In addition, once in a way, there were other varieties like *kanchi*, *pittu* and tea. They were more expensive, more than the income she got from selling mats. Singarasan did realise that. With whatever meagre she earned, she met her expenses, without indulging in prudence or restraining, like others. On the contrary, she had a generous heart and spent well! Singarasan did not go into details as to where she got the money for such additional expenses. He did not have the time nor was it a necessity for him. The reception he received there and the subsequent satisfaction he obtained from just being there did not encourage him to think on those lines.

One thing seemed important to Singarasan. He did not have any problem with food when he had Sinnathangam maami's help. Similarly, Rani's help had also solved that problem. However, if Sinnathangam maami's help reflected a mother's love and support, it gave an impression that others had to show pity on him. While Sinnathangam maami was feeding him, she also nurtured a sense of inferiority in him that Ponnambalam's family was rich, Kanthaiyar's was poor, inferring that Setha was rich and Singarasan poor. So, it made him feel that he lacked self-confidence.

Rani's support was somewhat different. Even if there was no affection or love of a mother in it, there was some interesting aspect in her relationship. Singarasan felt that he was very indebted to



Sinnathangam maami whenever she fed him. But he did not feel so with respect to Rani. Instead, it was Rani who behaved as if she was indebted to him. Her affection was boundless without any restriction and it could be interpreted in any way. Singarasan could have taken advantage of it, but didn't. He realised that Rani expected something back from him. He had the illusion of a pair of eyes following him like slaves expecting something! He felt that her eyes secretly whispered, 'You are not a beggar to be pitied by others. You have unique power. You are a great man!'

If Rani's eyes whispered it, Manonmani's screamed it. And only this forbade Singarasan to go to Rani as she had expected. Sometimes it also pulled Singarasan in different directions and there stood Manonmani. Not just her even the other girls who came forward to weave mats showed an interest in him. They brought for him whatever they prepared at home – *pulukkodial*, *tuber*, *uluthan chuzalai*, sweets and delicacies. However, they did not show much of an interest compared to Manonmani.

Singarasan felt like a complete man when saw Manonmani. How she dressed herself up for him! Her soothing looks and glances made him self-confident! Sometimes, she did things that were daring and unexpected. And what she did after a month could be interpreted so!

That night, Singarasan, Manonmani and another girl came to weave mats. For some reason, the others did not come. In the midst of weaving mats, they played a game called 'the baby breathes heavily' in order to overcome sleep. As Rani was in the kitchen cooking, she did not join.

A mat was hung to hide the entrance. All but one would hide behind the mat, and stay outside in the front yard. One of those behind the mat would tap on the mat. The person outside should guess and shout the name of the person who tapped from inside. If the guess is incorrect, the game would continue with the others also tapping on it taking turns. If the guess was correct, the person



who tapped should go out and start the game anew. This was called 'the baby breathes heavily'.

On that particular night too, the game was played. As there was no one else, only Manonmani and Singarasan were hiding behind the mat. In the front yard, the other 'girl' stood.

'I'll tap,' said Singarasan and lifted his hand to tap.

'No, I'll tap,' said Manonmani and caught his hand.

'Okay, tap' said Singarasan. She did not tap and kept holding his hand.

'What?' asked Singarasan and looked at her. In the dark of the night, her eyes shone.

She said softly, 'Singarasan...'

'Hmm...'

'Singarasan, Setha has come on a holiday.'

'... So what?'

'Singarasan ... Singarasan.'

'Come on girl, what is it?'

'Will you marry only Setha?' she asked with sarcasm and a yearning look.

Singarasan did not know how to react. As soon as she mentioned Setha's name, he was bewildered. How could he answer the question? All the old memories and longings that he had suppressed for a month, emerged. Singarasan did not know what to say. As his silence continued, Manonmani sighed. The next moment Singarasan pulled back his hand saying 'Leave me alone, girl.' The girl in the front yard became impatient at the long silence and shouted, 'What, won't you tap?'

## 10

'Will you marry only Setha?' This question kept echoing within Singarasan.

Manonmani did not ask this without purpose, he thought. She had actually voiced something that was in Singarasan's heart. The voice kept asking him, with the same mix of ridicule, yearning, and mockery – 'Will you marry only Setha?'

The way he was feted at Rani's house for a month made him feel proud that he had become a respectable person. But he knew that this was not permanent or anything to be proud of. It was like a house of cards, ready to fall apart if someone were to shake it. Manonmani did just that, by asking him, 'Will you marry only Setha?' He felt as if the question had ripped his heart apart. The discomfort he had felt a month back, was back with him. Perhaps if she had not asked that question, things would have felt better.

Singarasan was walking towards Rani's house with the bundle of palm leaf stalks cut down by Valliammai, humming a song. Humming a song did not mean that he was happy. Even in anger and frustration, he would feel like screaming or humming a song. He was in a hurry because he did not want others to notice him.

Opening the thatched gate he looked at the lane and found it empty. Singarasan's gate was also on the lane that led to Sinnathangam maami's house. Singarasan leaped to the road right away. But, alas, before taking a step further he stood petrified.

In front of him, came from the lane to the road, not only Sinnathangam maami but also fully-grown and beautiful Setha in a silk skirt and a blouse.

Singarasan took half a minute to compose himself and to continue to walk. Before that, whatever that had to happen had happened.

In Sinnathangam maami's face there seemed an indication of a smile. Singarasan was not sure about that as he did not care much about her. Nor did he observe her. What he cared for and observed was the person behind her.

In a silk-bordered yellow coloured skirt and a blouse whose colour he couldn't figure out, she appeared in resplendent beauty appropriate to her age. Was she the same Setha who picked stones with Singarasan a few months back? God! Even beauty seemed to belong only to Ponnambalam's family! On her forehead was a red *pottu*. It was not the usual black dot that was common. Perhaps it might be the custom of the town school! The colour of dot was matching her skirt as well. In her ears were two tiny golden ear studs like rain drops that fall from the roof slopes. Her skin appeared radiant.

All these thoughts ran through him when he thought about her leisurely. However, what really perturbed him in the first instance was Setha's smile. It appeared sarcastic to him. If anyone else had seen Singarasan in that position, they would also have smiled at him like that. But Singarasan was not going to be satisfied with that thought, because the person who laughed at him was Setha.

Setha...

Composing himself somehow, he ran away from that place.

However, he could not run away from the shame. That smile followed him; in fact it came along with him. It appeared to tell



him, 'Now, along with the fishing rod, he is carrying a stalk bundle too! Is that weaver of mats and fish baskets going to marry my daughter?'

Singarasan could not bear the shame. But the new voice that came along with him was worse. The laugh was that of Setha; the voice, that of Ponnambalam. Again, he felt the same old heart-rending pain that he had felt five months ago.

Only then Singarasan knew that the scar made by Manonmani was undeniably permanent. Rani's eyes might always wander around him and might speak in wonder of whatever he did. Manonmani's soothing looks might long for him forever. But these things wouldn't make him a respectable man. Setha's smile would destroy and demolish all his arrogance and conceit. All these days, he had started from a small stream in search of a large flood, but had in fact ended up in mud and enjoyed the muck as though it was heaven.

Singarasan continued to run with the bundle of stalks. The disgraceful memories made him want to scream aloud.

When he reached Rani's house and threw the stalks near the thatched wall it fell with a huge thud.

Rani who was in the kitchen came out asking, 'What is that, Singarasan?'

As far as Singarasan was concerned, the old Rani was dead. Her care and affection did not seem to matter now. They didn't make him appear to be respectable person, but instead they ended up making him look like a cheap fellow.

'Who called this woman out?', he thought. But instead said aloud, 'Nothing.'

'I was scared by the way you threw the bundle of stalks.' She came close to him with a yearning look in her eyes. Singarasan did not understand her. 'Singarasan, I need to talk to you about something.'

There is nobody here now. So, this is the right time. Come here.' When she said that, Singarasan was surprised.

He sat on the small mat that lay in the patio. Rani sat on the opposite side. When she bent forward as if to touch him, he felt a little uncomfortable. She was wearing a old, but spotless sari and a blouse.

In her well-built body, the flesh of her arms bulged around the tight blouse. As she sat bent, her huge bosom were unusually attractive.

'Please don't mistake me, Singarasan!' She started.

Singarasan still did not understand anything. He nodded his head to mean 'yes.'

'Did Manonmani talk to you?' asked Rani softly.

Singarasan stared blankly, though he seemed to understand a little bit. He answered 'no'.

'She wants to marry you. She has been persterring me to convey this to you and wants me to help her. What do you say?' She hesitated for a moment and continued. 'Oh, you don't need to marry her now. You can marry her when you are ready. Even if they don't have money they have some land and a house. It is better to ask your consent rather than listening to your achchi's insults. If you say yes, then there is nothing to worry. The marriage can happen anytime. Whatever you want, I'll be there to mediate and get it for you.'

Singarasan laughed aloud. He thought, 'Oh! This is what they were planning?' His laughter was cut short as Rani touched the raw nerve.

'Perhaps you may want to marry Setha. But, Singarasan, it would not happen at all. Ponnambalam is a rich man. Also, she is studying English in Jaffna. They'll marry her off only to a working person. You drop that plan. Even if Manonmani has no money she has



some land and a house. If you marry her, her entire family will treat you like a king.'

'Rani Akka!' That voice cut Rani short.

Singarasan and Rani turned towards the front yard. Manonmani stood there looking at them demurely.

She wore a Lankan green sari, over her shoulder and a matching green lined tight blouse. There was a black pottu on her forehead. A thick layer of talcum powder was applied heavily on her face. She was an average looking girl but fairer than Setha and older than her. If she went to Jaffna to study, perhaps, she would also have a rich and luxuriant look.

'Look at her. She is much better than Setha. Also, they won't come to you. But, Manonmani is longing to come to you.' Rani's remarks brought him back to senses.

Singarasan could not tolerate it anymore. He might have even accepted such an offer if it was made three days before. But now he felt bitter that he had to bargain for a cheap deal. Moreover, it reminded his shortcoming that he was in no position to bargain with Ponnambalam's family. He decided not to pursue this offer. He might not get Setha, but that did not matter. He would not allow anyone else to grab him. He was not prepared to wallow in a small stream.

'Singarasan, what do you say?' asked Rani.

He answered her curtly. 'Rani Akka. Don't ask this type of question. If you talk like this, I will never come here again!'



The 'land outside' meant the piece of the land near the road that belonged to Singarasan's family. There Singarasan was planning to set up the shop that Nagarasan had suggested. Whatever time that was left after weaving mats and fishing, he spent on building the shop. First, he found a suitable place near the road and cleared it. Then he collected wood, thatches and other things and started building the shop. It took him nearly a year to build it. At last, there appeared a so-called shop next to the road – an empty hut with thatched fences, roof with coconut stalks and smoothened clayed floor.

When he looked at it finally, he did not believe that it was he who had built it. It had been a year since he started going to Rani's house to weave mats, and he enjoyed it immensely. A year ago, in Chellamma maami's patio what Nagarasan told him echoed in his ears: 'You set up a shop and I'll give you money.' It was like a dream, unbelievable, and so was the shop!

Nonetheless, only that shop had made Singarasan stay in Pungudutivu the whole year. Building the shop was his ambition as well.

Nobody asked him to go away from Pungudutivu or called him anywhere. Generally, when they reached fourteen or fifteen years of age, the 'boys' in that village went to work in shops away from home. In some corner of the Sinhala country, there would unfailingly be a Pungudutivu man owning a cigar store or a textile store or a restaurant. 'Boys' below 12 or 13 would go to work in such stores, dropping out from school. Those who did not have this kind of an opportunity would attend school twice a week. They would eventually become their fathers' 'helpers' or they would secretly go fishing for the rest of the week. And some boys who were born in such families and who were interested in education would learn only Tamil and look for jobs not more lucrative than 'Tamil teachers.' In their free time, they would work in the plantations or paddy fields. Singarasan could not be included in any of these categories – he was of a strange combination.

Although he had realised consciously that education was the only way for his progress, he was not in a position to accomplish it. It became certain that he would not be able to go to school henceforth. It was true that he would not get a respectable job in Pungudutivu. What would people say to a nineteen-year-old boy who was hanging around in the village weaving mats? But no one had to ask Singarasan anything. He himself was annoyed by his inability. The only reason for his staying on in Pungudutivu was the shop. A stepping stone to success, to the tea export business as Nagarasan had suggested.

A year had passed. The store has been built and Nagarasan has not written to him. He had come a year ago and stayed for a couple of days. That was all. He had neither come after that nor written a letter. He has not even written a letter to Parimalam. He would write to her only if he came to Pungudutivu, Parimalam said. But could he not write to Singarasan about his future plans? Parimalam could understand Nagarasan's vow of silence. To have such a bizarre relationship with him Parimalam might perhaps



have enough patience and hope. But Singarasan could not understand his silence. What Nagarasan had earlier promised him seemed a distant dream to Singarasan now. If he were Parimalam he would not have faith in Nagarasan. However, in spite of it, he went ahead with the shop, and even waited for a year. Was there a secret reason behind his patience?

The reason was probably Rani's support and Manonmani's relationship. Otherwise, Nagarasan's promise and encouragement could have caused distress to Singarasan. He would have been disappointed, and gone to another place in search of a job in five or six months. Nothing would have held him back at the village for a year. Perhaps Manonmani was the reason for his staying back. His conscience pricked him at times that it might be true.

Rani's mentioning of Manonmani to Singarasan, his subsequent answer and behaviour indeed brought about a thaw in their relationship. But it did not last too long. With the passage of time, Manonmani and Rani began to behave with Singarasan as if no such incident had happened. Moreover, with Rani's advice, Manonmani began to confront him. However, to her bad luck, he was prepared to face it even before he was attacked.

One day, when Singarasan went to Rani's house with the bundle of stalks, he heard Rani and Manonmani discussing him. An alert Singarasan stopped on his way and eavesdropped on them.

'What is it, akka? Why does he keep a strange face?' asked Manonmani.

'Maybe he doesn't like you. What can we do about that? Men are always like that. They will eventually come behind you, wagging their tails. What if he doesn't come? Don't give up. Go behind him and try to get him on to your side. Remember, if anything happens, it will be to your advantage. I'll take care of the rest,' advised Rani.

Singarasan understood, what the words implied. But he did not get angry at all. After all, one would get angry only when the enemy's plans are unknown and one is caught in the trap. Now



that he knew everything beforehand, he could face them boldly and there was no need to be angry. On the contrary, this would only evoke a chuckle, Singarasan thought.

After this incident, Singarasan knew where to draw the line in his relationship with them. Knowing their secret motives, he did not wish to completely break away from their relationship too. Singarasan valued the rice and porridge and all the amusement he got at Rani's house. Losing them and countering Valliammai and her abusive language would make him neither respectable nor smart. Moreover, Nagarasan had also asked him to wait. Therefore, he should not leave Rani's house, he thought. At the same time, he could go up to a point, but not beyond. This would make them think that they are on the right track. This kind of a hope was necessary to continue their relationship. As long as he was not cheating or betraying anyone, it was okay! If he thought about anything else, life wouldn't be easy for him to live.

After this, his relationship with Manonmani got better and a new warmth had set in. At times, it gave him an intoxicating happiness. To Singarasan, it was just an amusement. Days passed by. Rani showed more support to him than ever before. But Singarasan did not care about her. He paid attention only to Manonmani. At times, if he felt uncomfortable in her presence, he would leave immediately and go back to start working in the 'land outside'. It was fun, but within the limit.

However, Singarasan was not a Rama or Lakshmana. Sometimes, he was afraid that he would forget that limit. An incident that happened one day was reason enough for that fear.

It was after dusk when he reached Rani's house with the bundle of stalks. Others had not come yet. There was not even a lamp lit, and the moon shone brightly in the front yard. Suddenly somebody came from behind him and covered his eyes.

Who else? It was her.

Singarasan tried to uncover his eyes but could not. She held her palms tightly over his eyes. With all his might, he pulled her hands away. Whether he pulled her in front of him or she fell on him purposely, he did not know. He saw that she was lying on him without feeling shy.

The night was dark. The moonlight that fell on them through the coconut leaves only intoxicated them more. Singarasan forgot all about the limits. He could only look at her hands that still circled his neck, her brightly shining eyes and her trembling lips and felt her hot breath on his cheek. They were entangled in a long kiss. He came back to his senses when she whispered, 'Singarasan, will you marry me?'

It was then that he woke up. He would never enter into such a trance again. At the same time, he could not avoid sympathising with her either. Poor girl! After spreading a net and waiting for the prey to fall, she spoiled everything by alerting him, herself. Poor girl!

Singarasan continued to go to Rani's house as usual. One day, Manonmani brought him the news that he had been waiting for all along. 'Singarasan, it seems Nagarasan has come to town yesterday. There are rumours that he will put forth a proposal to marry your sister.'

The next minute Singarasan ran towards his house. Valliammai and Parimalam were talking to each other with a letter in their hands. 'He has come, it seems, Akka.' Singarasan's screaming did not surprise Parimalam.

'Yes, I know,' she said. 'Appu has written a letter. He is coming today to propose marriage. But the groom's side is demanding ten thousand rupees as dowry.'

'Ten thousand rupees!' Singarasan shrieked in horror. How could they afford that money?



Without listening to anything, Valliammai went into the kitchen.  
'Oh God, he has come.'

Why was she hurrying into the kitchen?

'Was she going to cook rice?' Singarasan turned around to see.

Through the thatched gate, Kanthaiyar was coming back from Colombo with a leaf basket and a box.

## 12

A week had passed since Kanthaiyar's arrival and nothing happened. Kanthaiyar and Valliammai fought everyday. They didn't have to do anything special. All they had to do was to stay away from each other and not fight. But, the same old drama continued everyday. Valliammai snarled like a cat and ran around the compound, pulling her sari up. Kanthaiyar too would jump after her. He would chase her relentlessly. Plates would fly and pots and pans would smash. Parimalam would run after them, trying to calm them down unsuccessfully and at last she would give up and sit in a corner crying and tired. This happened day after day. It was all because, Nagarasar's family asked a dowry of ten thousand rupees.

Singarasan felt that he was going crazy. He felt that it was better not to be born at all, rather than being born a poor. While they suffered every day, there were people who did not suffer even a little bit of it and instead lived happily. When he thought about such people, he felt like setting them and even their creator ablaze in one go.

Singarasan did not like his achchi Valliammai at all. To think that she was the one who gave birth to him looked shameful and disgraceful at times. Although she had difficulty in finding food



for them she had no problem at all to find money to drink toddy at Kanagasabai's tavern! After drinking she could have a good time with *Kunchiappu* Kurumoorthi. But whenever Kanthaiyar came, she would have 'frenzy.' Singarasan's father, Kanthaiyar, might even be bad but he did not like Valliammai behaving like this. Couldn't she refrain, at least for one day, from provoking fights?

Singarasan already knew Valliammai's character and even if he tolerated it he could not bear Nagarasan's behaviour. Nagarasan looked a real humbug but behaved like a gentleman. In that week alone how many times had he gone to him as a messenger, how many letters Parimalam had sent him through Singarasan. By giving some money out of the dowry that he was going to scrounge from them and showing off as if he had helped Singarasan to get a good name. In addition, he appeared a deceitful beggar who wanted to pose off as a rich person that he had thus far pretended to be only by getting the dowry. If not why else would he say, 'What can I do, brother, my achchi, appu and brothers are saying that I should get ten thousand rupees?' whenever he went to him as a messenger as if he did not know anything and deceitfully dodged him.

After that Singarasan was not prepared to believe him. Moreover, he thought it was his duty to explain these to Parimalam and make her not to trust Nagarasan anymore.

It became dark after the evening had passed.

Valliammai was lying in the kitchen curled up on a half finished palmyrah leaf mat.

After the fight that began in the morning she had been lying there in that fashion without eating her lunch. Singarasan did not care about her at all. Instead, there remained a kind of anger towards her.

Kanthaiyar had gone somewhere. Parimalam was lighting the lamp inside the house.

He approached her calling akka.

'What?' said she and turned slowly towards him. But there was no life in her movement or talk.

'Akka, sit here. I want to tell you something,' he said and made her sit on the bed. 'Akka, do you still trust Nagarasar?'

'Why?' asked Parimalam.

'Why, he is cheating, Akka, purposely. He is a real humbug. He is a cheat. Don't trust him, Akka.

'Don't say that about him, brother. Everything is my fate,' said Parimalam.

'Fate and nonsense. Forget about him. We can get another bridegroom giving the two thousand rupees Dad promised by selling the land and the house. If that is not enough I'll earn money by going somewhere and give your dowry. You forget about this Nagarasar. We don't need him.'

Parimalam smiled wryly while a couple of teardrops fell. A frustrated smile. Her face glowed unusually. She said something as if she had lived a contented life. 'God had not given me that luck. Until you earn to give me dowry, how can I wait? Then who is going to marry me? I'm already twenty-three. Who is going to marry me for the two thousand rupees we have and whom we like. Moreover, why should appu and achchi trouble themselves because of me. It's better to die than all these, brother.

'ngngng'. That noise did not allow her to talk further.

'Nagarasan is demanding too much. He is not giving in at all. He is jumping too much. If that is so, he could have said 'no' in Colombo itself. Why should he come here to pull everything apart?' As he was entering into the house he was talking aloud to himself.

Singarasan and Parimalam stood up slowly without saying anything.

'Nagarasan is demanding too much.' He said to himself again looking at them and asked Parimalam, 'Where is she?'



'She is lying in the kitchen,' said Parimalam.

'What? She has not got up yet?' Kanthaiyar's voice rose a bit.

Neither Singarasan nor Parimalam spoke anything.

'Is she going to lie down? Yes, is she going to lie down? Girl, you go tell her to get up before I become mad.'

Parimalam went slowly and woke her up. 'Achchi, Appu has come. Wake up and give him some food.'

The next moment, they heard a noise of a mat being thrown down and a very loud shriek that could be heard all over the neighbourhood.

'It all started when this good for nothing fellow proposed marriage with Nagarasan. This stupid fellow came fully drunk and has constantly been troubling us. Enough is enough. God-forsaken man! Good for nothing fellow! Why didn't he stay back in Colombo? Why did he come here? Why can't he die now? Oh, Oh... Enough, enough, God this is enough.'

Kanthaiyar remained silent. She did not stop even then.

'Why did this fellow come here? I ask you! Why did this fellow come running here, from Colombo? Let someone take my daughter away. Why did this fellow come here? I don't want him to discuss her marriage. I am suffering because of this fellow. He gave me this disease after sleeping with hundreds of women and I am suffering now. Why did he come here now?'

Singarasan who was looking at all these things could not tolerate them. She behaved as if she wanted to chase Kanthaiyar away from here. Was this the stupid woman who married this man once upon a time and gave birth to us?

'Why, you stupid woman, are you now screaming like this as if a thunderbolt has fallen. Can't you stop for a short time?' Singarasan yelled at her without his knowledge.



That was enough for Valliammai. The next moment, 'Are you also with him? Are you also with him, idiot? Oh, mother god. Everybody together is killing me? Oh mother god! Oh mother god!' She beat herself on her head, screamed and started rolling on the floor!

Then Kanthaiyar became really mad.

'Since I tolerated you, you became too much, didn't you? Became too much, didn't you?' Saying that he ran to her and kicked her.

Valliammai began to scream more. People began to gather to watch at the fence that rattled.

Everything became unendurable. At other times Parimalam used to make peace by running and falling in between them. But today she kept quiet in a corner without doing anything. 'Appu, don't do anything. I'm begging you. Don't do anything.' Singarasan had to make peace today by pulling Kanthaiyar away from her.

However, when Kanthaiyar stopped kicking her, Valliammai, tightened her sari that went over her shoulder and ran behind the kitchen. And there was heard a frightening thud. Valliammai had jumped into the well.

Then the villagers gathered, pulled her out of the well, resuscitated her by applying roasted neem leaves to her nose and finally gave her a couple words of advice. When they left it was past midnight. Singarasan's household too became peaceful in a way.

Everything seemed all right and it dawned. When Singarasan went to answer a call of nature in the compound behind the house, he, suddenly, ran home screaming frighteningly, 'Appu! Achchi!' as if he had become possessed by a devil.

When Kanthaiyar and Valliammai ran to see what it was, a horrible sight awaited them something that they never saw before in their lifetime.

In the 'land outside' where Singarasan had built the store, Parimalam's body was hanging with a rope around her neck.

The house that should have been a wedding place had turned into a funeral house. Parimalam who should have been sitting as a bride in the wedding platform was lying there lifelessly, severing her ties to this world. People who should have come to bless her had come there to mourn. Instead of *thavil melam*, *sad parai melam* sounded there.

Kanthaiyar and Valliammai didn't have to worry about Parimalam's marriage thereafter. Dragging her marriage as a pretext they did not have to demonstrate their own anger and fights. What would have happened as a result of her marriage? Only a lame life - a pathetic life where she would have to pretend to be living. And then, in the mechanical life she would lead, there would be childbirths where she would produce more stillbirths like Parimalams and Singarasans. Now, there was none of that. Parimalam was dead. She could not have done anything better in her life.

When Singarasan looked at Parimalam, an agonizing pain erupted in his heart. Even through that pain, he could not avoid feeling that she had been smarter. He felt frustrated and sad like he had never felt in his nineteen years before. All of a sudden, Parimalam,



in her own way of challenging the society, had seemed to have provided him with some enlightenment and a sort of courageous indifference. He did not cry. He had cried all day but stopped now. There was nothing to cry for. On the contrary, there was some indifference, some frustration. Hence a new perspective.

Kanthaiyar was never useful to Parimalam. Singarasan could feel that Kanthaiyar felt embarrassed and sad that he could not help his own daughter as a man having lived for such a long time. Valliammai was still lamenting aloud with wailing and mourning songs.

Nagarasan came dressed in a pure white dhoti and a golden neck chain. If he had a conscience, should he not have died in disgrace and sadness? For, he was the cause for her unnecessary death. Well... Nagarasan was a person who measured the feelings in currency. Would his conscience prick him? Singarasan seemed to understand the true meaning of what Nagarasan said the other day. Was it only for an outward show that he had asked him to start a store? Who knew? Singarasan could not think more about him? He was not going to think about Nagarasan anymore in his life. For he was one of those hypocrites and weeds in the society.

It was not known if compromises took place in a funeral house. Forgetting the old hostilities, Sinnathangam maami as well as Ponnambalam came. Setha too came on a day's leave from school. As far as Singarasan was concerned their visit did not give him any satisfaction. Whether they came or not did not matter to him.

However, when Singarasan saw Ponnambalam he felt an unrecognizable hatred towards him. The broad forehead, combed back hair, indifferent appearance, angry facial expression that demanded other's respect – all were mere symbols that represented deliberate envy of others and identities of a class that controlled others. That was how everything looked to Singarasan. It seemed an illusion that Parimalam's death had changed their indifferent attitudes. Yes, it was only because of a few Ponnambalams who hoarded the money and tried to buy others' lives and Nagarasans

who demanded ten thousand and twenty thousand! Poor Parimalams! If their fates were not determined in a few Ponnambalam's boxes of money, where else?

He could not have that much love ever on Setha who cried falling on Parimalam's body. Even in that situation the memory that she came there had made him feel some tenderness in some corner of him. That the very same reason why Parimalam died in fact was the foundation on which Setha's good life depended this vaguely infuriated him against her. If it was because of ten thousand rupees Parimalam died and Setha was going to live because they had ten times that much money, was Setha then not guilty?

Suddenly, Singarasan heard the high sound of the drums and the wailing of mourning songs of the women, hugging one another.

Singarasan who sat leaning against a pillar came out of his thoughts.

The parai melam sounded in a very high pitch.

It was an announcement that someone important was coming to their house. If the person was a male, a male relative would show his grief by shaking his hand and a kiss on the cheek. If the person who came was a female, the women would gather near the dead body in a circle, beat their chests with both hands, sing mourning songs and hug one another and wail.

Nobody knew who had come until that time. There was nobody in that house except Singarasan to give hands to those who came. It should have been done by Kanthaiyar, his father. Having his daughter's death as a pretext, he got drunk, fell somewhere, broke his forehead, and lay under the neem tree like another dead body with blood oozing from his head. Nobody expected anything from Kanthaiyar, Singarasan gathered from their facial expression. In that situation, he did not expect Kanthaiyar to receive the guests.

Singarasan started to move fast.

The parai melam sounded frequently.



Lot of people were arriving. Singarasan was giving his hand to them. He went and gave his hand to those who came earlier when he was lost in his thoughts. The plates of betel and arecanut were passed on.

The parai continued to sound. It sounded high and low according to the status of the person who came. If the person who came was richer and of an upper caste, the sound was louder. By beating like that, the drummers attracted their attention towards them. If the visitors turned towards them the drummers ingratiated themselves to get money for toddy.

In the midst of all this grief, Singarasan's eyes could catch these things, too. Mudalalis and their money! High caste and their bossing! Begging of these poor! He was exasperated.

A little away from the drummers, some men were decorating the funeral bier. The drummer's caste men did the decoration. A 'boss' 'unofficially' supervised them. As if the decorators were scared of him, every now and then, they said 'boss' and 'acted'. In the meantime, if a rich person came that side to spit, the ritual of bending and begging of the decorators continued.

Just south of the drummers, the barber, Saveri, was preparing a pot for the rituals that were going to take place at the funeral pyre. The *dhobi* who decorated the shed with white cloths was cracking jokes with the barber. They were all dependants on the vellala caste for their existence. The vellala caste that controlled them. No. Those were the ones that were imprisoned by their rituals. That was the right way they should be looked at, thought Singarasan. Their castes and their rituals!

Like the women who sang the mourning songs around the dead body, the meaningless rituals and the castes were dead a long time ago.

It was good that his sister Parimalam had not taken the ceremonial baptism. If not, a *saiva* priest would have to come to send her to Siva's world by doing rituals over the body! Parimalam was not

that sinful! Although she escaped these rituals, would that be over with these rituals only? Even for those small funeral rituals they would need four or five hundred rupees. There would be a third day ritual, fifth day ritual, seventh day ritual, then 28th day ritual. Then monthly and yearly... Singarasan could not believe all these rituals! He wanted to finish these rituals quickly. He was in a hurry. He started to move fast.

At that time the parai melam sounded feverishly.

He raised his head and looked at the gate. His cousin, Selvarasan, who went to study in Jaffna was coming. When Singarasan saw him his grief overflowed. At the same time the phrase, 'the Sinhala cousins' money' Selvarasan used when he was leaving for Jaffna at the old port, popped up in his mind suddenly for no reason. Because of 'Sinhala cousins' money, Ponnambalathar's household insulted them; ignored them like dogs! Even Nagarasan too priced his sister for ten thousand rupees and killed her! Behind all these things lay Sinhala country money! If there was not that money, one should not live! Singarasan's vision became blurred with tears.

Selvarasan did not wait for Singarasan to go to him. Crying 'Oh, my cousin' he jumped and hugged Singarasan.

'Akka has cheated me and left us,' Singarasan cried back. That cry rang high even in that din.

The funeral rituals were over and even the one month ritual was over. One day Singarasan sat alone on the neem tree's root in the front yard of the house. Kanthaiyar and Valliammai had gone somewhere. Even though there was no public war between them, there was, of course, that cold war. If there was no work for them, it was better for them both to visit someone's house. As such, Singarasan sat there alone. Only then Sinnathangam maami came looking for him.

After the funeral, Sinnathangam maami came there very often. But Singarasan would not go to their house. He did not believe that there was such a relationship.



When she was coming along she asked him, 'Singarasa, are you alone?' Rising from the root, he said 'yes, maami' and that seemed to satisfy her.

'Singarasa, I wanted to tell you something.' Sinnathangam maami sat on the same neem root that Singarasan got up from. 'Singarasa, aren't you doing anything? If you're going to work in any shop, why don't you go and work in our shop? My husband will take care of you well. Also, you can progress in a few years. What do you say, Singarasa?'

Singarasan knew that Sinnathangam maami asked him because of the pity she had for him. He did know that. He knew that she wanted to help them somehow. But Singarasan did not like that. She was trying very hard to expiate and hide the blame and guilt Parimalam's death brought on them, thought Singarasan. In addition to that, he did not want to work under that Ponnambalam. That was unthinkable.

'I can't, maami. I'd do anything else, but not this. Even if my achchi and appu chase me out of the house I'll not do this. If I don't go perhaps I may rot but even then I'd not do that. I don't care. I can't go over there.' He told her in no uncertain terms.

Sinnathangam maami tried a little more. She could not. Thinking something else, she asked him to stay there, she went home and came back. She took out something from her sari's front fold.

'Singarasa, even if you don't want to come to the shop, at least keep this money and do something and try to come up. The way you began to build the hut for the shop, do something. Don't show it to your parents. Here's a thousand rupees.' She gave him a bundle of money.

'Oh, I don't want this, maami.' Singarasan refused flatly. But she forced him.

'Singarasan, haven't I brought you up since you were little? Didn't I feed you with my own hands? I'm like your own mother.

Singarasa, without saying no, accept. If you become rich, I'll be very happy.' Saying that she grasped his hand and pressed it into it. The tears flowed from his eyes.

Singarasan could not do anything. Whatever he had thought about them, he could not swim against the current of love. 'Now, I am accepting this, maami, but whether I progress or not I'll one day return everything, together.' When he said that, those words mixed in his mouth with the tears that flowed along his cheek.



PART TWO  
OUR HOME

OUR HOME



# 1

Parimalam passed away in 1951. Singarasan was only a nineteen-year-old lad then. He was intelligent but had not achieved anything in life. Singarasan had done nothing substantial to live up to his name which meant 'a lion in action'. For Singarasan or anybody, those years were not significant at all. All he remembered was that those nineteen years were a saga of his fight for survival and food. His future was uncertain with a lot of rocks and thorns on his path. The only assets he had were some home truths that he had picked up on his way, knowingly or unknowingly. The little 'light' was all that experience had brought with it. He had nothing else, way back in 1951.

Five years after that, in 1956, the situation was different. When he started the shop in Ward One in Pungudutivu with the thousand rupees that Sinnathangam maami gave, he did not believe that there would be so many changes in his life within a span of five years. He grew very handsome and likeable, and there were several changes in his life as well. The shop he started ran smoothly and reasonably well. 'Singarasan's Shop' was well known in Pungudutivu East for reasonable prices and for its plethora of items. He returned the money Sinnathangam maami gave him within two years.

Even while he was doing business, he studied privately, taking tuitions, and passed the S.S.C. exam and the first course in Teacher Training Certificate. Above all, what was very important was that he showed interest in the country's political process. He became one of those thousands of true political grass-root workers who were perhaps more important than the actual leaders, and who worked behind the scene all over the country to popularise the party. Now, he had developed some attachment in life for he had an ideal in life. The political ideas gave him that ideal.

Ward 1 of Pungudutivu appeared to be a small but growing town. A village court, a hospital, a government *Maha Vidyalayam*, a high school and a post office were all situated there, and it was full of people and easily reachable by any means of transport. It was here in Ward I, Singarasan set up a shop with the money that Sinnathangam maami had given him. He did not want to start his business in the 'land outside'. That place would not give him peace anymore. So he chose Ward 1.

Singarasan did not have any other way to survive, and even the educated and wealthy people did not know what to do at that time. The shop helped him lead an independent life not work for others. His honesty and having the least profit margin in his business gave him that edge to succeed within a year. A thousand rupees seemed a comfortable capital to set up a shop in Pungudutivu. Before the end of the second year of business he returned Sinnathangam maami's money.

However, Singarasan's ambition was not to become a mudalali. That he had once wished to become a very rich man like Ponnambalam was true. But Parimalam's death and his maturity of mind with the passage of time diminished it. Also, his mindset that Ponnambalam was a great man too disappeared. Singarasan felt that amassing money by any means and watching it would make a man a watch dog and not a real great man. He felt that he was a greater man than Ponnambalam at heart. He wanted to



show it to the world and did not hesitate from doing things that his heart urged, including the passing of S.S.C. exam.

The Government *Maha Vidyalayam* was located next to 'Singarasan's Shop'. A graduate teacher popularly called the 'Communist Master' taught there. Singarasan was drawn towards him. Everyday after closing the shop he went to the teacher for 'tuitions' for an hour. Master did not care about the fee. But Singarasan insisted that he should take fifteen rupees every month, and did not accept money for the cigarettes he bought.

Master had taught him very well. To prove this, Singarasan passed his S.S.C examination at the end of the year and continued his education. He completed the Teacher Training course too. His master's opinion too vouched for his competence. 'Singarasan, I'm very proud to teach you,' he often said. That certainly was not false praise.

Thereafter, Singarasan did not pursue his career as a teacher because he did not want to get a job by bribing someone in the 'Hindu Board.' He did not continue to study either. Unlike Ponnambalam, he wanted to serve the country passionately, and he found a way to do it – politics! To take care of his basic needs, there was the shop that was now a co-operative store. And on the other hand he was happy he was into politics. So he did not aspire to do any other work. It was the 'Communist Master' who had initiated Singarasan into politics. It was not accidental. He had an inclination towards it even as a child. The master only gave him support. This was proved by his snapping ties with the master later.

Besides the newspapers and books that he bought for sale, the books he bought with the master's advice piled up in Singarasan's shop. Singarasan read all of them. In addition, the master explained about the communist principles. Singarasan's experiences had fallen into their places beautifully and expansively, and linked with the final ideal. The attachment Singarasan had to the Master grew thicker. They gathered some more students and youth, and



organised a study circle, which met at Singarasan's shop. It would generally be a talk explaining communist principles, in accordance with the historical, political, social and economic principles of Marxism. Every time he heard the lecture, he would be thrilled like a person listening and experiencing it for the first time.

The lectures on the historical progression of primitive communism, feudalism, capitalism, and proletariat revolution!

The period of socialism between capitalism and communism!

Amidst thousands of conflicts in the capitalism it grew in unison!

Although these lectures had their own pitfalls, they helped understand the social trends, Singarasan felt. How well Ponnambalam, Nagarasan and Chelliah teacher fit into this, Singarasan thought several times. Similarly, like his father Kanthaiyar and mother Valliammai there were people who were good for nothing. When he thought of them he laughed openly. When he thought of people like Sinnathangam maami who came from the same class and sowed the seeds of revolution, he was ecstatic at his own discoveries.

In the course of time some plays were staged and meetings were held on the basis of this viewpoint. Singarasan participated in both. People who knew him until yesterday were stunned. Was it 'Kanthaiyar's son Singarasan who spoke like that? Was he the person who acted like that? Was he the person who had become such a hero? In the end, Singarasan had surpassed even his teacher in his skills.

Only then Singarasan began to look at things deeper than that of the Communist Master's principles. Why was 'he' evasive? Why wasn't he forthright in his opinion when it came to everyday political events? Even if he expressed his opinion sometimes, why was he contradicting himself later on? Why was he reluctant to fight for just causes, for which Singarasan wanted to fight? Why was he, who always talked big about 'revolution, revolution,' evasive as if he was a slave to somebody in private?

Nallasivam master's voice which very often jokingly articulated, 'Singarasan, what does your Moscow say?' became loud and clear to him. Nallasivam master who was called 'Ceylon BA' by the students was always ridiculed by the Communist Master. him because he was a 'federalist.' Hence in Communist Master's words he was a 'reactionary.'

One day when Nallasivam master came to buy cigarettes at Singarasan's shop he praised the play Singarasan took part in. Singarasan had been thinking all this time that Nallasivam master's polished appearance and speech came from his 'Ceylon BA'. But on that day, he thought it was all because of Nallasivam master's inner reflection. If not for that, would he openly praise the talents of those from the opposite camp? Thereafter, Singarasan showed interest in talking with him. Also, he somehow found out the opinion of his party in his own words. But unexpectedly, the opinions began to work on his mind.

'Singarasan, your permanent revolution and internationalism can't be understood by the Tamils, specially now. Perhaps, even if they can, they would be swallowed by the Sinhalese in their 'racist' hunger. Thereafter, nationalism and internationalism are all a comical story. Internationalism and its precedent nationalism shouldn't be born out of the swallowing of one race by the other. All the races should join together, having their equal rights intact! We also like it. But before achieving it we would like to achieve our rights which are essential. Nationalism is the association of free people. So is internationalism. They are not the association of slaves. There lies the difference - between you and us. Do you understand, Singarasan?'

Certainly, Singarasan understood it. The truth of the matter was that Singarasan understood the Marxist's words only when Nallasivam master started to explain the other side of the reasons that the Communist Master evaded.

'Why do the Communists who boast about nationalism and internationalism become evasive when they come to the local issues, specially the Tamil-Sinhala problem?'



'Why can't these communists emphatically say that the Tamils' demand is reasonable from their point of view?'

'According to Lenin, all minorities should enjoy all the rights the majority enjoys? Isn't that so? Then why are these people scared to express it? By doing so, do they pretend that they are progressives? Is it not foolish?'

'In the case of the oppressed castes they urge them hard to fight against high castes but when the Sinhalese take away the Tamils' land, language and all, they keep quiet. Why?'

'Is this the so-called Marxism and Leninism? Why this treachery?'

When Nallasivam pointed them out one by one, Singarasan saw the light. That the Communist Master was not a real communist also came to light. That most of the communists were acting like that also became clear to him. So he began to ignore the Communist Master and took over the better side of communism. With the help of social, political and economic insights of communism and accepting the profound cultural rights of Tamils, if one fought for the rights he would be the one who would lead any liberation movement, Singarasan believed firmly.

With the delight that he obtained from such emotional thoughts, he got involved in politics day and night, forgetting himself. Having ignored the Communist Master and ridding the guilt feeling with clear and complete understanding, he began to explain his principles to the 'others'. The difference between the Communist Master and Singarasan slowly seeped in, and the gap widened breaking their ties completely. After five months, he explained his transformation in the 'other' circle and on the 'other' platform.

'Just because some people were born in a low or oppressed class, they turned communists without understanding what it was all about. I have not joined the Federal Party and become a federalist just because I was born and raised in a village and did not know English. I became one after having learned well about other parties and weighing their interests.'



'As far as great men and philosophers are concerned, it was Gandhi and not Marx or Lenin who could impress me. For the benefit of the next generation, we can't sacrifice the present one. Also, by such activities we do without our knowledge, we should not fall prey to someone's dictatorship. I don't like that. While accepting the need for social change I acknowledge the importance of limited individual rights and freedom. Also, because Marxist ideas were propagated wrongly in various ways among the Sri Lankan Tamils the political differences were shown as caste differences and casteism has become solidified, not thawed. Above all, what attracted me most are language and regional issues. Looking at these, the Tamils' entire economic problems lie there, I feel.'

'It would be utter foolishness to think that we can bring about a social and economic revolution, lose the language and land and have another class in the master's list, resulting in another regressive step in the ladder of slavery. Instead, we can become our own masters and think of our needs; and about revolution much later. Moreover, such needs of the Tamils can be fulfilled only by the Tamils. That is my firm belief.'

Thereafter, Singarasan believed in fighting for that political cause with his principles. He spent all his income from his business on the cause. He made reasonable contribution in electing a Federal MP from his electorate. He believed that the year 1956 was significant in his life, as the transitional period came to an end. Singarasan felt that he had done the right thing for the first time in life. In the very first election he was eligible to vote. He cast his vote for the right person with the right principle, and was very happy about it.

He had watched the previous elections held in 1947 and 1952 closely. Ambalavanar and Alfred Thambiayah, who contested in the Kayts constituency, came to his mind. Among the adjoining islands, the bridge that joined Pungudutivu with Velanai was built by the efforts of Amabalavanar who wanted to make Pungudutivu a great place. With those who worked for him during that election, Singarasan too had joined hands.

*Women, beat Kummi rhythm*

*Women, beat Kummi rhythm*

*Praise the name of great Vanar and*

*Beat Kummi rhythm*

*Beat Kummi rhythm*

This song adorned the banners, which were put up on the palmyrah trees and fences by some of Ambalavanar's supporters. And Singarasan went behind them, leading the boys who carried the paste in palmyrah shells. Later that day, when Ambalavanar lost, he and his supporters walked back home sadly.

So he became a follower of the communist master who gradually made him also a communist. At that time, he had ridiculed these democratic elections saying they were just an eye-wash. He laughed at himself now when he remembered the time he had supported the nationalism of the communists. Yet at that time racism had not raised its head fully in the South of Ceylon. N M Perera's Sama Samaja Party had not given up the principle of parity for the Tamils.

And before he became a hard-core communist shouting slogans for everything that mechanical communism dictated, he was rescued by Nallasivam master who came to teach in the same *Maha Vidyalayam*, way before 1956. He was one among the defeated group in 1952. Later, he became a communist and now in 1956 with the support of all the experience he had and being in the midst of the elections, he achieved victory. A new life dawned on him. Even if he did not know how his future would be, he knew for certain, how he should live. Even though people's welfare was the ambition in his life, his entire life would not revolve around it. His personal problems too cropped up once in a way. One night, when he was going home after closing his shop, somebody stopped him at the gate. That was not a public problem.

He heard a very familiar voice! Yes, it was Manonmani who walked towards him.



## 2

After Parimalam's death, Singarasan's frequenting Rani's house for weaving mats stopped and therefore the opportunities to meet Manonmani also became rare. To be honest, Singarasan sometimes avoided it purposely for he did not want any unnecessary trouble. So he did not understand why she came on her own to meet him after such a long time. He looked at her with wonderment. He observed in the darkness that even though she had not grown taller, she had become a little plump and looked prettier. She came hurriedly towards him but when she came near him, she stood silently.

'Girl, what do you want at this time?' Singarasan was the one who started the conversation.

'I wish to talk to you. If we continue to talk here people may misunderstand; please come inside, I'll tell you,' she said, opening the gate and entering inside.

Singarasan followed her in awe, as her respectful words, 'your' and 'please come' were new to him. Or, had he grown big? Did she feel so? Singarasan felt surprised and was glad too. He was anxious to know why she was calling him inside. It was about eight o'clock. The moon had not appeared yet. Yet, it was not that dark and a



light shone from a faraway place. Manonmani stood near a coconut tree, which reminded him of the past. Suddenly, the thought of holding her in his arms in the front yard of Rani's house, came to Singarasan's mind. However, the anxiety she showed did not give anymore room for encouragement.

'What is it, girl?' Singarasan asked her again.

'There is a marriage proposal for me from Trincomalee. Achchi and Appu have said yes and they are going to take me there tomorrow morning.' She stopped at that.

Singarasan was really happy when he heard this. 'Why are you trembling for that? So everything is well done! Manonmani, you go have a good life,' he said nervously.

It was not happy news for Manonmani, though. 'Oh! You don't know anything. They are going to give me to a widower. I'm going to stay with you. You have to take care of me. I beg you. Don't say no,' holding his hands she started begging.

Singarasan did not know what to say. Her predicament touched him. Tightly holding the hand that held his, he said, 'Manonmani.' He did not know what to say further. What could he say?

'Oh! I beg of you. Don't say no, please,' she reiterated. Seeing her advancing towards him, he felt that she would cry on his shoulders any moment.

The next moment Singarasan held her at a distance. If he gave room he knew he would give in to her. What if he gave in? A question arose from the bottom of his heart. But his mind would not permit him even to think of it, as he knew well, the ways of the world. Setha's memories were also sitting tight.

'Manonmani, when I see your position I feel like crying,' he choked. The tears in his eyes shone in the dark. 'Manonmani, really I feel like crying but how can I tell you my position? Like in the past, I am neither arrogant nor unable to understand your position. After akka's death I have changed a lot. Manonmani, I know your

difficulties. I know your feelings. I am also a human being. I also have feelings and desires. To fulfil them I look for them in some other direction. That became my goal since I was young. It had been my obsession even before I met you and became acquainted with you. If it were someone else he would have chased you away. No one but I would have understood your position so much. However, I am unable to help you. Please Manonmani I beg of you, don't ask me anything. Till Setha marries someone, I cannot marry anybody. Perhaps if she was married off to somebody I'd marry you. Don't ask me before that. As I understand your position, please do understand mine too and forgive me. Please, Manonmani.' The tear rolled down his cheek.

Manonmani, however, was not willing to give him up. On the contrary, his speech only brought her closer to him. She began to address him with his first name. 'Don't say that Singarasan, I beg you. Don't tell me to go.'

Singarasan was upset that she was unable to understand him. Shaking her shoulders, he started convincing her forcibly. 'Manonmani, you are talking without understanding others' feelings. Without knowing Setha's position for certain I can't marry you. Even if I did, I would not be able to live happily with you. If I had married you without knowing Setha's situation, I would always think that I had made the decision foolishly in a hurry and the guilt would kill me. The villagers would say that I was a fool. I wouldn't be able to live a fulfilling life with you. Also, whenever she saw me I would die of shame. You don't know how I was embarrassed once when she saw me carry a bundle of leaves at this very gate. If I married you and appeared before her I would be embarrassed as if the whole world ridiculed me. I would die of that, Manonmani. Only my heart would know why. You would not understand it. Please bear with me for a few days. Ask your parents to wait. Setha also would be married off shortly. Even now I could ask them for her hand and if they said no, I would marry you. Thereafter I would forget her. My heart would be hardened and I can marry you. Before that I can't do it. You should give me



an opportunity, Manonmani. I am not god. I too have desires. Please go now. Go.' He lightly pushed her upto the gate and left her there.

Manonmani was adamant. Valliammai's voice that came from home, intervened.

'Who is it? Is it Singarasan? Singarasan?'

'There, achchi is going to come. Go soon. Go, Manonmani. Don't be mad. Be patient for some days.' Saying so, he pushed her out.

'I'm going tomorrow. How long can I wait?' Losing hope, and a little angry and frustrated, she began to walk away fast. The next moment she disappeared in the dark.

Everything was dark. The same darkness enveloped Singarasan's heart as well. Suddenly, he felt something that urged him to cry out, 'Manonmani' and run after her. But Singarasan could not, as a voice called out to him from behind. 'Who did you talk with, *thambi?*' asked Valliammai.

Singarasan could not do anything thereafter. He returned inside with Valliammai. He could not sleep the whole night. He kept thinking whether what he did was right and just. He was restless throughout the night. He realised that there was no difference between him and Nagarasan. He could point a number of reasons for his decision and a lot more against Nagarasan's. However, the feeling of guilt made him stand on par with Nagarasan. Who was Setha? What was the relationship between her and him? Wasn't it just a dream? 'Oh! Was it just a dream? Who said so? Oh no! What to believe and what not believe?'

Singarasan woke up in the morning and walked to Manonmani's house. Manonmani was not there. From there he went to Rani's house. When he asked, 'Akka, where is Manonmani?' her reply was irksome: 'Before dawn, even before the cocks crowed, they left for Trincomalee. She is getting married there. Why should she come here?'

Singarasan turned around. 'Singarasan! Singarasan!' He did not hear Rani calling out his name. The time had not come to hear it out.

Months had passed. Singarasan's grief slowly reduced. However, he could not completely root it out. There was no reason for him to worry for Manonmani. He never promised her that he would marry her. Also, one day when Rani mentioned it to him he had flatly refused. He was not at all responsible for her. Even his pleading on that night seemed too much. Anyone but him would not have been so considerate towards her. Even the relationship they previously had would not be worth the sacrifice for her. He did not approach her on his own. She contrived it and acted upon it. Therefore, there was no room to feel ashamed about it. He realised it was all because of Parimalam's death and the natural empathy he felt for others. He was punishing himself a great deal, he thought. Yet, he could not completely eradicate the guilty feeling he experienced.

To forget his worries, he went to the shop regularly and took care of it vigilantly. It was a time when businessmen in the Sinhalese regions closed their shops and fled to the Tamil areas to save their lives. Among them was Ponnambalam who closed his shops in Colombo and came running to his village, Pungudutivu. The reason was that as soon as the Bandaranaike government came to power, it passed the Sinhala Only Act. The day the Act was passed, the



Tamil leaders went on a *satyagraha*, at the Galle Face Green peacefully protesting against it. The Sinhala thugs beat, kicked and stoned them, and the Sinhala communalists triggered riots. The race riots spread in the Sinhala regions, and the shops belonging to the Tamils were wrecked and looted. The Tamil officers and workers who lived in the Sinhala regions were attacked. This was the first time that Sinhala communalism, with the advent of the Sinhala Only Act, expressed its aggression against the Tamils openly. Thereafter, it began its serial run.

According to the Sinhala Only Act, a Sinhala alphabet, SRI, was displayed in all the vehicles' licence number plates. As opposed to that the Tamils displayed the Tamil alphabet, SRI. In the Sinhala regions all the Tamil letters were painted with tar. In opposition to this, the Tamils shouted slogans like, 'Tamil will not die of painting tar.' They opposed the Sinhala SRI, went to prison and started the 'All Tamil Movement'.

The local politics began to get heated up. Again, Singarasan's focus turned towards it.

After the Galle Face Green peaceful demonstration of sitting Satyagraha and the riots that followed, the Federal Party held a conference in Trincomalee and its subsequent procession, a *Yatra*. To Singarasan, these events greatly allowed him to forget his own worries as well. He was very happy that he found an outlet for his grieving mind that gradually had become too soft when it came to others' problems and worries. Also, he felt a little comfortable that Manonmani was in Trincomalee. Not that he wanted to see Manonmani there. Just a little satisfaction. So, when he went with Nallasivam master and others he did not think that he had a personal problem. It was the same when he came back after the conference. But once back home, the same old problems cropped up.

He heard that Setha had got a doctor's proposal. Valliammai revealed this to him in a sad tone. She must have had similar desires and ideas too. As soon as he arrived home she told him the news excitedly.

The day before, the bridegroom's party had come over for talks, She told him. They came in two huge cars and the whole village had gathered to witness the parade. They seemed to have demanded seventy thousand rupees in cash, jewellery and a house in Colombo, altogether more than a lakh of rupees as dowry. Ponnambalam agreed to that and left for Colombo the following day to make preparations!

Singarasan's imaginary castle crumbled to pieces. Only then he did he know how much he had believed in Setha.

One lakh rupees!

That was the only barrier between him and her. Oh! Singarasan's heart itself would be worth more than many lakhs. And his idea would be worth more than a lakh.

'Setha, one lakh rupees has made you greater! Hmm... wasn't it so? One lakh rupees were nothing to you. But Parimalam hanged herself to death for not being able to give a mere ten thousand rupees. Didn't you know that? Let it go. Didn't you know that there was somebody next door without asking for a copper cent but waiting for you and only for your love? Hmm... The money had blinded your eyes. Now you are going to live with somebody whom you do not know. He did not come to you. He came for only one lakh rupees. But... I?'

For days on end, he had similar thoughts. Setha's thoughts were no longer fond hopes. Ponnambalam had money. True. For that, Singarasan was not prepared to fear any longer. Now he had more etiquette than money and also earned fame in his village. If Ponnambalam had ten people to give respect for his money, there were at least a hundred to respect him for his word. Singarasan's fondness and hope on Setha was long gone. It was an old story.

Singarasan could not wait for long. At least, would not Sinnathagam maami listen to him? One day, he went next door to meet her.



He went there after seven or eight years, for the second time. He had been there earlier to return the money he owed to Sinnathangam maami. Setha was not in the village at that time. Now she has come back having failed in one subject, in the S.S.C exams repetitively. When Singarasan went there, behind the south fence of the back yard, he saw the tip of a red dotted sari disappearing, signaling that someone was watching him. There were no other signs of Setha's presence. The house looked gorgeous. The features that he did not like in Ponnambalam could be found in it, too. To build that house, he too had carried stones once upon a time! He liked the jasmine creepers in the front yard very much. 'Oh! Come Singarasan. Since when have you remembered us?' Sinnathangam maami asked him as she came out of the kitchen.

'I always remember you,' he replied as he entered the veranda. She pointed to a sofa and asked him to sit down.

'Singarasan, I heard you are taking part in procession in other places. Why are you getting involved in such unnecessary things? If a policeman shot you or the Sinhalese rioted and endangered your life what would you do? Why are you doing such...?' Sinnathangam maami showed great concern for him.

'If I died what great loss would it be for others?' Singarasan said jokingly. 'Akka died. Now who lost anything? Who worried about her? Everything is like that, maami.'

Sinnathangam maami could not understand Singarasan's philosophy. 'Wait Singarasan, let me prepare some coffee for you.' She went inside. Within two minutes, she came back with a copper cup full of coffee. In Sinnathangam maami's cooker there would always be coffee, and he knew about it. But he did not like to drink it. Yet, out of respect, he took a few sips.

'The coffee can wait, maami. First of all, let us talk about why I came here.' Sinnathangam maami leaning against the pillar, anxiously asked, 'What's it?'

'Is it true that Setha has got a marriage proposal?'

Sinnathangam maami did not speak.

'Why, maami, don't you want to tell us? Why, don't you want us, maami?

'Don't say like that, Singarasan?' she sighed. 'We have got a proposal from a doctor in Jaffna. Your uncle had gone to Colombo for talks.'

They did not speak after that for sometime. There was silence as they were immersed in their own thoughts. Singarasan's voice was filled with grief. He murmured in a deep voice, 'We were also doing well once upon a time. My appu too was rich then. Money will come today and go tomorrow. But a good heart is what is needed, maami. Yes, a good heart. Now you are approaching a person whom we don't know well. But tomorrow they're not going to help you. We're the people who would come to your help. We may not have the kind of money that you have. But we're not doing badly either. If we're fully down and out, it doesn't matter. But after all, you've helped me and brought me to a good position; leaving me out now is not good, maami. I haven't come here to force you to do anything. But I can't help but tell you. What you are doing is atrocious. You had somebody at home but went in search of someone outside. Rich or poor, if we all live together it is better, maami. Setha is always mine. I could not keep quiet. That's why I came here. Please think a little before you go ahead. She is your only child. Don't take a hasty decision. You know us since my childhood. But you don't know much about others. You may get someone well off profession-wise but you can't get a greater person like us in heart.'

Suddenly, Singarasan turned around to walk away. He could not stay there any longer. Sinnathangam maami who came running behind him caught up with him at the gate.

'Singarasan, you don't know anything about me yet. You don't know. I wanted you to come with us. That's why I called you to come to stay in his shop. You refused. I wanted you to become rich.



That's why I gave you money. I also begged him again and again. Setha also wept continually and starved for some days. But you were squandering away your time in party work, forgetting your shop. You didn't stop with that. You went on those platforms saying 'We must do away with people like Ponnambalams, which he did not like. What can I do? Setha also likes you. But he doesn't listen to us. You know that.' She burst into tears.

'It's okay, maami,' he said as he walked away. It was a frustrating predicament. There was one Valliammai who controlled one Kanthaiyar; here was Ponnambalam who controlled Sinnathangam. Wouldn't they ever compromise and reconcile?

Even as profound grief choked him, Singarasan suddenly felt happy thinking: 'Setha likes you, too... Setha also wept continually and starved, too.'

Then? Was there any hope yet?

'Even Setha likes you.... Setha wept and did not even eat...'

So? So?

'Then there is still hope?'

'Singarasan! Hey, Singarasan! You've started. Go ahead and do it! Even when the idea came about her, you must have realised the difficulties as well. You should have given up then! You did not and entertained it for years. You made that your ideal, and ignored the obstacles. Now why do you give up? Hmm... go! Go full length. Go to its end! Whether it materialises or not, you need not care about it. But try till the end. Now you go! Go!'

'Hmm... Can I go?'

Singarasan scratched his head. Having come from Sinnathangam maami's house, he was in a similar dilemma. 'Could I go? Was it all right? If he went away, would it be successful?'

Between the period of Setha's attainment of age and her going to Jaffna to study he did not talk with her even once. The day Ponnambalam and Kanthaiyar fought came as the dividing line. The memorable things that had happened prior to it filled his mind. Picking up stones in a basket at the stone mound; the tuber



she gave him and so on. The memories of other events were not forgettable either. It was embarrassing when he was caught by her, with a bundle of leaves. Even afterwards, he met her in the lane on his way. But he did not see anything in her except a kind of respect and shyness in her bending the head, pretending he was not coming in front of her, or loss of composure. Once in a while she would smile. That too was very rare.

Perhaps if Singarasan had talked she too would have spoken to him. But he did not know how to start a conversation. In addition, meeting her unexpectedly was not the time for any progress. Only the fierce fight between Ponnambalam and Kanthaiyar developed, and the hostility between the two families grew unwittingly. It stood as a barrier between Singarasan and Setha too! In fact, Setha going to Jaffna for higher studies, and Singarasan establishing a shop did not create any new opportunities to renew their relationship. Frankly speaking, they had widened the gulf. As a result, a chance meeting on the road did not make it conducive to their relationship. Except the bonding and affection that he felt for her, he had no contact with her though she lived next door. In such a situation, could he go and speak to her about his feelings?

Singarasan scratched his head. Something within him urged him to go to her house. Sinnathangam maami's words too encouraged him.

'Setha also likes you. She did not even sleep and was crying.'

What if it was true? He felt he better go!

Singarasan made up his mind and thought of a plan. If Setha agreed, he had to discuss it with her and come to an agreement. If the situation demanded, he would be able to bring her to his house. How else could it be done? First, he wanted to meet her and waited for that 'golden' opportunity.

Sinnathangam maami would go to fetch sweet water for drinking. Without going to the shop he waited for Sinnathangam maami to leave with the pitcher in hand. There would be nobody in the

house except Setha. He peeped through the hole in the thatched fence and saw Setha sewing something on the sewing machine. The next minute he began to walk towards their house.

Singarasan went there very cautiously. His heart began to beat in tune with Setha's sewing machine. Would everything be all right? He opened the gate and went in. The creaking noise of the gate pierced his ears. Before he took another five steps, the noise of the machine stopped abruptly. As he reached the inner thatched fence, he saw only the machine. Setha was not there. He heard a door close and the keys turn. Had Setha hidden herself?

Singarasan stepped into the house, and looked around. Nobody could be seen. An unfinished red blouse was lying on the machine. The stool next to it lay aside. Yes, she had hastily run away from there to hide herself. How did she see him? From near the sewing machine, Singarasan looked at the yard and could see the gate beyond the inner thatched fence. She must have seen him when she heard the gate creak.

Singarasan looked through the rooms one by one. He had to hurry up. This was not the time to justify his actions. Now that he had come, he wanted to express his feelings to Setha before Sinnathangam maami returned, and also find out what she had in mind. Only one room was locked – the middle one, the one next to the machine. The key was missing from the door. Had she locked herself inside? 'Setha!' Singarasan knocked the door. There was no reply.

'Setha, please come out. I wish to talk to you. I won't do anything. Don't be scared. Please come out.' There was no reply at all!

'Setha!...' 'Setha!' Singarasan was upset. 'Setha, I'm not an animal. I swear I won't do anything. Come out, don't be afraid. This is more important than my life. Please come out!'

Perhaps she was not in the room! 'Setha!' Singarasan called out aloud. Still, there was no reply. Singarasan understood everything clearly. Yes, she was in the room but was keeping quiet. The next



minute Singarasan became sad. 'Setha, now you've grown up. You don't want to talk to me. You're educated and rich. I'm unsuitable to talk with. Am I so bad that you can't come out and ask, 'Why did you come?' How close I was with you earlier! You know. I never did anything bad to you. Why are you hiding from me now? I carried stones to build this house. I worked like a dog during your puberty ceremony. The very same Singarasan has come and is knocking at your door now. Please come out. You don't need to marry me. You don't need to talk to me. At least just because I have come to your house, come out and see me.'

There was no response for that either. Singarasan could not speak anymore. His self-respect did not permit him to stay there any further. Singarasan knocked at the door for the last time. 'It doesn't matter, Setha, it does not matter. I don't care about myself. I wish you well wherever you're. That is my last wish.'

Singarasan turned to leave. Suddenly he heard a noise. What was it? Was it a hiccup or sob? Was Setha crying? He suddenly jumped back and knocked at the door again. However, it was still the same. Perhaps, he was imagining things.

He waited and observed the door for a few minutes and began to walk. Memories laughed at him from within. He deserved that and much more. How much Manonmani begged him the other day. He deserved this very well. 'Just go away' he said. 'Why worry now? Parimalam could die. Manonmani could marry an old widower as a second wife. You dreamed that you could get Setha! You are mad! Setha is not Parimalam! Setha is not Manonmani! She is a class! With her comes a stone house, a lakh of rupees and shops in Colombo. Ponnambalam. He is a class apart! You're just a worm in front of them! A worm...!'

Singarasan did not clutch his chest in pain. Even if it broke and he died he would not care. Who else cared? But it did not seem to be so. He would not die! Everyone could not escape easily like Parimalam.

Three months had passed. Singarasan still lived. One day, when he was in the shop he was holding a crumpled wedding card. It was SETHA's. She was getting married in December 1957. If he could remove that doctor's name and print his instead.

'Why are you laughing on your own, Singarasan?' He heard someone. Singarasan raised his head up and looked. There stood Rani, in a red sari and looking fresh and beautiful as ever.. Yes, for some, years were like ages. Would not they age?

Singarasan laughed and said 'Nothing'. He could not keep quiet without saying, 'You're becoming younger and younger, sister.'

'I came to the goldsmith's place dressed up. You are teasing me for that. Now, you have grown like a bridegroom. Haven't you.' She smiled meaningfully. Can I have a pound of potatoes?' she continued.

Singarasan weighed the potatoes putting them in the scales. 'See, you're trying to palm off all the bad ones to me!' She stretched her hands over his shoulder and began to select the potatoes. The scales were in front, Rani behind, and in the middle was Singarasan. The hot air that came from Rani blew on his shoulder. Something soft and round pressed against him, hard. He did not prevent her. Yes, why would he?

Singarasan's conscience had not died. It is learning a new philosophy instead. That was all.



The glow of the moonlight that fell through the coconut leaves on the front yard dizzied him. Singarasan was sitting on the small mat that was spread on the patio. Today after closing the shop, he came in search of Rani.

The moonlight that spread on the yard swayed with the shadow of the coconut leaves. And so did Singarasan's mind. His thoughts were intoxicated. What he was about to do is not justifiable according to the social traditions. He was not even prepared to place his faith in them. To force himself to give into these social traditions seemed foolish. Where was this society and its traditions when a Parimalam died without the 'ten thousand rupees' or a Manonmani was forcibly given in marriage to an old man. Singarasan did not care about the society or its tradition. He knew that these traditions were all false piety. He believed that whatever he was doing was fair. He did not care if others didn't believe so. He was not in a surreal situation as he sometimes acted or portrayed when he was with Manonmani. He was fully aware of his actions now. So he was not bothered about the repercussions. The moonlight that lit up the front yard did not make his brain work but only made him feel a little giddy.

With a bottle in one hand and an empty mug in the other, Rani walked towards him from the kitchen hut. In the moonlight, her appearance seemed surreal and she looked stunning. He thought it was just a hallucination or she was a dream girl. Suddenly, he felt a sharp piercing pain in his heart. Should it always come in the midst of his imagination and poetry? But the next minute, it disappeared. Now it seemed to be happening. Why couldn't he enjoy it consciously? Rani poured the contents out of the bottle into the mug and kept it by his side. She sat in the patio opposite to him.

'What's this, sister?' Singarasan asked.

'A little palm toddy,' Rani said.

'Where did you get this from?'

'I bought it for you,' she said proudly.

Singarasan looked at her once. Then he turned to look at the mug and watched the toddy as it was filled to the brim, and the bubbles were sizzling. Singarasan laughed aloud.

'Why are you laughing, Singarasan?' a surprised Rani asked him.

'Once I had a policy that I should not drink this. Now everything is gone. Also, now suddenly there has appeared a philosophy to justify that, too. That's why I laughed.'

'What's that philosophy?' she asked.

'That? I wonder if you would understand it. Anyway, I'll tell you. As we drink tea and coffee we can drink toddy, too. Depending on the income. Everything depends on our mind. Also, when we drink tea and coffee our money is spent. But if we drink toddy, the money remains. Only worries disappear. Also, some will get jobs, too. So we can drink some toddy but not arrack,' Singarasan laughed again.

'Oh, yes, you need some excuse to drink,' said Rani and burst out laughing.

Singarasan took the mug and drank the toddy in one go. Rani was surprised at this, and poured the remaining into the mug.



'For how many people have you poured like this, sister?' he asked suddenly.

She raised her head, looked sternly at him and laughed, without responding to the question. That seemed enough for Singarasan. He felt weird after gulping the entire mug. Rani, who bent a little forward, reminded him of Manonmani. Fine pomp and show! Now she had gained more flesh! Her breasts were heavier than before. The smell of 'lux' soap and a pleasant talcum powder made Singarasan's head spin. The chewing of betel intoxicated him in the lantern light.

'Sister, how old are you?' Singarasan asked her, scrutinising her body.

Smiling bashfully, Rani said, 'thirty six.'

'Thirty six... Hmm...' Singarasan took a deep breath. Yes, there was a reason in Rani's case. This was the only capital Nature had gifted such people. The toddy also intoxicated him and he drank up the rest as well. One bottle of toddy was nothing for Singarasan and it had no effect on him. Was it true?

Why was Rani becoming a dream day by day? Why was the smell of 'lux' soap and talcum powder making him impatient? Why did he want to hold her in his hands and enjoy?

'Singarasan...' There was a whisper in his ears followed by a laugh. Did the powder whisper? Was it a fantasy woman who spoke? Who whispered?

While his left hand drew pictures on her back, his right hand went deeper down her clothes.

Hey!

Was there a Setha anywhere?

Setha? Who was she? Where was she? Madness!

To forget Setha and purge the thoughts that troubled him, he had found a way out.

Rani!

Days passed by and so did the months. Four or five months had passed by after Setha's wedding. The day Setha's wedding took place it was a day of festivities in Ward 9. All along the lane, a shed was put up and decorations filled the area. For more than ten days the aroma of short eats could be smelt, and the arrival of kith and kin in the neighbour's house could be seen!

Singarasan vanished from the neighbourhood for ten or fifteen days and nights. Valliammai did not speak a word about it. He had given up even the shop and the party. Rani's house was his Varanasi, Mecca, Jerusalem and all. Once, he snuggled upto her as he was drawn by her sexy looks and the fragrance of 'lux' and talcum powder. He would not have the so-called Setha in that world. Even her memories were erased from his mind. The *melam* that beat incessantly in Ponnambalam's house would not intrude into the sweet-smelling world. Leaving everything aside, he concentrated on the mug full of toddy that invited him. It was a magic potion for everything. The very next minute thoughts about Setha would dissolve in the ocean of his heart.

After the wedding, Setha left for Colombo with her husband. In the following months, Rani's need became less. He could, therefore, pay attention to his business. Also, as Rani's need became less, the need for the partying increased for both. The Vavuniya Conference that took place in 1958 after six months of Setha's wedding absorbed him entirely.

On the day of the Vavuniya Conference, like all the Tamils, Singarasan also had felt immense hope and interest. However, some shocking news also arrived from the Sinhala region. Panic followed. The day after Singarasan had returned from the conference, Radio Ceylon announced:

Communal riots!

Emergency declared!

Curfew declared throughout the country!



## 6

The emergency period, with curfew imposed, dragged on and was painful. Days turned out to be ages and minutes seemed like days of the World War dread and panic. Terror enveloped the whole place, making the village look lifeless. At the same time there was palpable silence in every nook and corner. The army trucks that roamed on the roads only worsened the frightful situation rather than calming it. Battery-powered radios also echoed with panic and terror.

At the same time, news about the communal riots spread all over the village. Each and every piece of news was vicious to hear and seemed to reverse human evolution. The priest and his wife at the Panandura Hindu temple were tortured and killed. The Tamils who took refuge inside the temple were pulled out and petrol was poured on them and burnt alive.

In Biyagala, a shop boy was cruelly beaten up. Frightened, cornered and helpless, someone who climbed on to a tree and hid in its branches was pulled out and thrown into a barrel of burning tar. In Galewala, some people's legs were chopped off and stomachs slit open and the mangled remains were thrown into the jungle. A few distorted bodies and hacked limbs floated in the rivers. Tamil women were stripped in front of their husbands and raped brutally.

In South Ceylon, people behaved worse than animals. All these happened within twenty-four hours. The then Prime Minister Banadaranaika utilised this opportunity to take revenge on the Tamils and said 'Let them taste it,' and failed to declare curfew.

Consequently, there were Tamil refugees all over South Ceylon. As all those refugees could not be transported by land, steps were taken to ship them to the Tamil regions. After weeks, somehow the Tamil refugees were brought back home. They were shipped to Point Pedro and transported by buses to Pungudutivu free of charge.

Singarasan observed in this short period all the details of history and the truth in them. He knew very well about the struggle for independence. He, however, could not harden his heart when he saw them.

Haggard looking and in soiled clothes, the refugees arrived in a pathetic condition by ship. They possessed nothing but life? Hmm... What was the use of having it anyway? In the process of fighting for their rights, they lost all their income and possessions. It seemed they had almost lost their lives too by looking at the deplorable condition they arrived in. 'Ah! Tamils! This is your state of affairs now! Once upon a time, it is said, you were in a very high position and ruled a large part of the world! You were known for your civilization, your rule and other things. Is it true? Why this state of affairs now? Is there a government to take care of your interests? Is there an army to protect you? Is there a way to voice your opinion?

You seem to live in India, Ceylon and the world over; then why are you keeping quiet now? After getting your freedom you have given it away to the 'Congress' and 'Mahajana Front,' making us refugees! It is a shame! Tamils! This is shameful!

Singarasan stood at the pillar of the shop. His eyes became moist and he heard the Communist Master's voice. 'Singarasan, you seem to be worried?'



'Nothing, master,' Singarasan tried to be evasive.

Walking one step ahead and picking up a cigarette in hand, he said, 'Right, do you see what has happened to us now? Because of your activities, see how thousands of innocent people have died unnecessarily.'

'What are you saying, master? I don't understand,' said Singarasan.

The Communist Master lighted a cigarette, inhaled a mouthful and puffed it out. Then he began as if he was going to say something great. 'What is that you don't understand, Singarasan? All this has happened because you were all fighting for federalism, Tamil kingdom and so on. See how thousands have died because of this. How many have lost their homes and shops. If you had kept quiet they also would have been quiet.'

Singarasan could not tolerate anymore. 'Master, you are older to me. If not, I would have chased you away. All you worry about is Moscow. You don't care about the Tamils or their rights. If you want, you be like that. We don't care. But why are you rubbing salt into our wounds unnecessarily?' Singarasan paused awhile for breath and continued again.

'Master, we are worried more about the situation than you all are. But we have not done this. We are only guilty of asking for our rights. For that, they have punished us. The majority rule is such. The very same reason is sufficient to argue that we should not live at their mercy or should not believe them. We should not ask for federalism henceforth, master. What the Tamils should ask for is a separate country and we should fight for it. Difficulties that we may face during the struggle cannot be avoided. We should pay no heed to them. It is a historical and revolutionary necessity. We shall fight till we achieve freedom. Even if many die in the process, we will not deter from our mission. But it does not mean that we are dispassionate towards the dead. We will empathise with every Tamil. Besides, you cannot justify this. What did you do in

Hungary? Just because we had asked for our rights, so many of us have died. To show your refusal you killed so many of them. Not only that. What are you doing in Russia? In the name of proletarian revolution and in order to establish a couple of people's dictatorship, for the last fifty years, you are still sending people to Siberia to die. There are many in your country emerging as a leader today and disappearing tomorrow. How can this be justified? Please don't stay here for a long time, at least today? I might do anything. Please go away.' Singarasan started pushing him away literally.

The Communist Master started moving away. Drawing in the smoke of the cigarette deeply and letting it out, he seemed to let off his steam. 'You are a grown-up person now. You've studied too much.'

An agitated Singarasan stared at him. His heart pounded. If any other person had said that he would not have minded. But coming from an educated person, it sounded crazy. Also, he would have said so many other things that were shameful and disgraceful. He was upset when he thought he could have given a more appropriate reply. But Singarasan did not have much time to waste worrying about that. So, he closed the shop the very next minute, took his bicycle and left. Would not Rani wipe away his worries?

But Rani could not help him get rid of his worries that particular day. The news she told him as soon as he arrived made him run away a crazier person. 'Singarasan, did you hear this!' Rani cried aloud. 'It's not even one year after the marriage and this has happened. When the riots began in Colombo, Setha's husband was coming from Panadura. There, the Sinhalese beat him up and killed him. They also burnt the car, poured petrol over him, burnt him alive and pulled him on to the road! Now she is a widow. The entire family is grieving there. I'm coming straight from there.'

Singarasan did not know how he reached there. Everyone was crying and mourning. Setha was pregnant, her hair was dishevelled, and she was crying embracing Sinnathangam maami.



Singarasan felt nauseated. The voice that pierced from his heart with a shooting pain, ended up as a mere whisper, dying in the throat. 'Setha! Oh! My Setha!'

Singarasan sat leaning on the inside fence covering his head. If he stood up he thought he would fall. He began to sweat profusely. After a few seconds, he felt the nauseating feeling disappear slowly, though it was not fully gone. Just then, he saw that dark, fat man in trousers pointing a finger at him.

Communist Master!

'You!'

'You are the person who is guilty!'

You!

Even after returning home, he could still hear the voice within him.

You! You! You are the guilty one!

Singarasan tried hard to pacify that voice. Without realising he started replying to that voice aloud: 'Why are you guilty? What crime did you commit? Singarasan, you are a crazy man! Just because that master blabbered something you are confused! That confusion only got aggravated when you saw Setha in that pathetic condition. Your love for Setha makes you feel guilty. Your principles and your party would not accuse you. Truly speaking, Setha's situation itself should firm up the resolve in your principles. You have to show more fervour in your party. A number of Sethas have been put in such a situation. Why, because you are all under foreign domination. You are not guilty. That is just a hallucination! Confusion!'

The very next minute his mind wandered. 'Setha did not represent the Tamils who left their villages to make money. She was a symbol of the new breed of people who had forgotten their villages and permanently settled in Colombo. For them, the Tamil language,



Tamils' rights and dignity were less important than money and ostentation. Truly speaking, they were also one of the reasons for the Tamils not achieving their rights. They were in fact the obstacles.'

Singarasan uttered a number of similar things. Because Singarasan had strictly followed Communist Master and ignored everything else, he was reaping its rewards.

'You! You! You are guilty!'

Singarasan sank into deep thought and did not care much about food or water. He was always deeply involved in his thoughts. This did not go waste and his real self appeared slowly.

Yes. He heard the voice of someone else from within, which extended a hand and beckoned him. No, it was certainly not the Communist Master's voice. Now, he could prove the Communist Master's arguments false. Singarasan told him that to his face. Therefore, it was not his voice but something else. Even if that Communist Master had not come across in his life, this would have come into his life anyway. What the Communist Master had done was that he expected its coming. Even though Singarasan could not accept his argument as far as the accusation was concerned it was similar to something else. That was it. Now the accuser was not the Communist Master; it was someone else.

Who was it? It was not difficult for Singarasan to narrow down on him. It was not new to him but very familiar. It was that of the person who had pointed a finger against Nagarasan in Parimalam's funeral! It was the voice that had accused Nagarasar; the one that distressed him after Manonmani begged of him and left him the other day. Yes, it was the voice that bothered him. It was Singarasan's own imagination mind that could not endure the people's plights, and sometimes inordinately. Yes, that was the one.

Looking back, he became more accustomed to it now. Both of them began to get well acquainted. From then on, there was not much

anxiety or agitation in his voice. Though there was not much of a rationale, it constantly pleaded him to reconsider what he had said. 'It is true you and your party had not done anything wrong. Your struggle is reasonable. And it is necessary too. But did you know that even if they were not part of your struggle it was your duty to help them? Setha's problem may not demand immediate attention. In due course, it may become a social problem which might be not solved on its own. But is it not a problem of your dear one? Is it not your responsibility to solve a problem that has arisen next door, right in front of your eyes, as a result of your struggle? Also, you already love her so much. Therefore, you have to solve her problem. Yes, yes. It should be you, only you.'

But how can it be solved?

How else? Yes, that is how... You! You! You are the one!'

In order to explore the possibilities of his decision and discuss it, Singarasan liked to know others' opinion. However, he did not like to approach Valliammai, his achchi regarding this. She did not have any opinion on anything. In the course of time, she had become a machine that accepted everything that he told her. She did not have to weave mats or work now, Singarasan provided her with everything. Therefore, she could not object to anything Singarasan said. Singarasan, therefore, could not anticipate any sensible answer from her.

Singarasan's father Kanthaiyar had not come to Pungudutivu even during the riots. Ponnambalam had shops, money, people and security too. So he stayed there. He did not like to come home. But what about Kanthaiyar? Poor man, he stayed in Chekku Street as if it was his home. As far as he was concerned he was not going to help the Tamils anyway. He grew to be an inert person over the years and did not care about where he died. How could Singarasan voice his own problem to him? Singarasan, therefore, went to Rani for advice.

Rani dismissed it outright. 'Singarasan, are you crazy? Not that I don't pity her. I have a great deal of sympathy for her. Anyone



would pity her because she has become a widow within five or six months of her marriage and she is pregnant too. No one can be as unlucky as her. But there is no written rule or it is not in the scriptures that you should marry her. Have you become mad? You are a prince now; do you need her? Even though you had difficulties when you were young, now you don't have any problems. In the village you have good prospects for marriage. You have a good business and name, and you lead a respectful life; why do you need a pregnant widow? I also heard that some rich people are waiting to give their daughters in marriage to you. You are now talking like a crazy man. Just mind your business. Are you carrying a child that you want to marry anybody so desperately?'

Singarasan did not utter a word. She did not seem to provide any valid reason against accepting Setha either, he thought. He therefore did not interrupt her talk while waiting to hear if anything substantial came out.

'Singarasan, why are you looking at me like a mad man?' continued Rani. 'What has happened to you? In the party and meetings you used to advise everyone. Have you forgotten how they had insulted you when they became rich? In the puberty ceremony, didn't they slap your father and kick him out? Even though you begged them to give Setha in marriage to you, didn't they give her to someone else because he was a doctor? For their arrogance and money-mindedness they deserve this and more. Why do you worry? Instead you have to marry someone right in front of their eyes, live a happy life and prove to them that you are great. And stop talking like a crazy person.'

'What you said may be reasonable to a certain extent, sister. But I can't do such a thing. Perhaps, I am naive. Naive or not, I can't take such a revenge. Already, I have come to a position where my personal life is nothing to me. If it has to change, I have to marry Setha. When Setha is in distress next door, I can't live like a lord. Also, according to me, Setha has not married anyone yet. She still

lives as fresh as a virgin in my mind, sister. Besides, when I think she was married to someone else, I become instantly distressed, thinking of the fact that I was also responsible in shattering her marriage and killing her husband. I have to marry Setha for her as well as for myself, for a happy life together. I don't feel she is a widow.'

It was Singarasan's mind that spoke; it did not come from his lips. He neither wished to intervene nor counter her argument. Even if he said something she would not understand, he thought. He waited to see what she still had to say. 'What? Did you understand?' asked Rani. 'Did you understand? You don't need to do anything. You don't need to care about whatever she undergoes. Understand?' That was all. She did not have anything more to say.

Singarasan reached out and grabbed her shoulder softly. 'Sister, don't be angry. Tell me. If you were in Setha's position, what would you do, sister?' The next moment, Rani laughed haughtily. 'You asked me if I were in that position. Wasn't I? I am also in Setha's position. How many years have passed since my husband died? Have I not been single ever since? Am I not living without a husband?'

'Are you without a husband?' Singarasan mocked.

'Then, am I with a husband?' Rani cut into his words.

'Oh, yes, yes!' Singarasan screamed instinctively. 'Yes, yes. How many people are coming to you! For how many people do you pour out toddy? I come to you? Why do you give me toddy and meals? After your husband's death if someone had married you, would you have lived like this? Would he have allowed you to do this? The society ruined your chance of marrying. You are ruining the society in turn. Setha would do the same tomorrow. Just because they have money would she not have any feelings? If we and the society betray her now, Setha would betray the society later and poison it. Understand?' Singarasan screamed.



Rani, closing her ears with her hands, ran out. 'Society, society. God alone knows what you are talking about. I told you because you asked me. Why are you screaming at me because of that? It's your wish. Those who advise you would be dishonoured like this. You do whatever you wish to do. Whether you marry or give birth, who cares. Oh! Setha is five or six months pregnant. What are you going to do with it?' Rani asked standing in the front yard.

'I'll wait till she gives birth to the child. Then I'll go and tell my wish and ask for her hand.'

Rani walked towards the kitchen with a groan.

After making sure that Sinnathangam maami had left with the pitcher to fetch water, Singarasan slowly opened the neighbour's gate and entered the compound of the house. Walking past the front yard he heard the lullaby softly coming from inside the house. 'Aarr aarr oh! Aarr aarivaroh!' He stopped at the steps and looked inside. Setha was swinging the cradle in the corner, oblivious of the outside world, as if she was immersed in her own thoughts. Could Singarasan make a way into her world? Could he also have access to her world where her thoughts revolve around the child? Even if he made his way through, could he have it as his own?

Climbing the steps Singarasan tripped, and stay put at the same place. Setha turned towards him. As she saw him there unexpectedly she smiled softly and stared meaninglessly at him. During the five or six months after Setha returned to Pungudutivu, Singarasan went there about ten times. He did not wish to go there very often. He felt that the family would not have liked it. Perhaps, they were afraid that people would gossip. But he did not want to completely refrain from going there as well. His earlier experience taught him how to approach her now. If he suddenly went up to her without being familiar, probably she would not hide from him but might refuse to hear anything. What would happen to



Singarasan? Therefore, he thought she should first get used to his coming there often before he put forth his intentions. The matter was delicate and should seep into her mind like little drops of rain first and then thunderstorms. So he pursued to approach her occasionally if not frequently.

Nevertheless, he chose to do so only in the presence of Sinnathangam maami. It was good enough for the time being. Whenever he went there, Sinnathangam maami talked with him amiably and beyond expectations. But Setha would sit in a corner indifferently, with a faint smile and speak a couple of words to show respect. And then she would stare meaninglessly. After Setha gave birth to the child, it was the third time he had gone there. First time, he went to see her at Invuvil Hospital and visited her after she returned from the hospital. This was the first time that he was going there when she was all by herself. Even now, the same empty stare was all that remained in her eyes.

Singarasan climbed the stairs leading into the house. 'Achchi has gone to fetch water,' she replied promptly.

What was the meaning of that? Perhaps it meant 'I don't want to talk or have any association with you. You can talk only with achchi. Now that achchi is not here, you may go.' Not that Singarasan did not understand it. But if he showed he understood it, would he be able to achieve what he had come for?

Singarasan sat on the sofa. 'All right. Let her come,' he replied, which obviously implied 'I'm going to wait for her. I'm not leaving.'

'Then I'll bring some coffee'. She let the cradle go and went into the kitchen. Was this to escape from him? Singarasan waited. He had to have a thick skin and a hard heart to bear it all. He was prepared for anything, at least temporarily. After ten minutes, no, after ten decades, she returned with a mug of coffee in hand. 'Please, drink, brother. Achchi will be coming soon,' said Setha. She kept the mug on the centre table and turned towards the cradle. She particularly stressed the word 'brother'.

Singarasan was prepared. If she went back to the cradle it would be difficult to pull her back. And if he missed this chance there would be hardly any ever. 'Setha,' he said.

Setha stopped and turned towards him slowly. Her eyes opened as if they were asking 'what?'

'Setha, I wish to talk something with you. That is about my, your, and 'our' future. Think about it carefully and let me know your opinion. Whatever you say, I'll accept. Think deeply and tell me what you like.' He stopped for a while. 'Setha, don't you like to call me something else, other than brother? Setha's eyes opened a little wider. The lifeless, empty and meaningless stare disappeared and a new life, a meaning, a desire emerged. A hint of tears in the dark pupils brightened them. The very next moment, they all disappeared. She did not speak. She wanted to walk out of the situation.

'Setha' said Singarasan, to grab her attention. 'Setha, before you went to Colombo a year ago (he deliberately avoided the phrase, 'before you were married') when I came and knocked at the door, you did not open it. That hurt me a lot, you know. How much I suffered, did you know, Setha.'

Singarasan's words became hoarse with emotional spontaneously. They must have touched her heart, which was evident from the tears that filled the corner of her eyes. It looked as if she had not cared about herself. There was a sea of change in her. She was shaping herself up the way Singarasan wished, like a pitiable and compliant soft toy; she was transforming herself unawares. Yet, in order to keep herself in the same old lofty place, however difficult it was, she said, 'I don't understand what you are saying. Maybe you came here and knocked at the door when I was not here!'

An absolute lie! Her face itself betrayed her. She walked up to the cradle to hide her feelings. Singarasan did not let her go. Whatever her feelings, she did not say anything against him. Her facial expression suggested that he could continue to advance.



Singarasan followed her to the cradle. Holding the opposite side of the cradle, without looking at her face, he began to express his inner feelings. Had he looked at her face, he was afraid that his chain of thoughts would be disrupted. 'Setha, please don't get angry with me because I'm telling you this. But I can't help but tell you. I wish to marry you, Setha. I can't marry anyone but you. If you marry me, you will not regret it, Setha. You are educated. That is why I'm asking so humbly. Please don't refuse my wish.'

Singarasan chose his words very carefully. Setha was a widow now. He did not want to use any words to imply that she was a widow and he was approaching her because she was helpless. If she got such a feeling, she would someday hate him and might even refuse him now. How he hated Rani once because of the way Rani referred to Manonmani. That still lingered in his mind.

'Setha, I wish to marry you wholeheartedly. I have not liked anyone else!' He stressed on his pain, again not intending to remind her of her situation. Setha kept quiet for sometime. She broke the silence with a stern reply. 'I was already married.'

'Not that I don't know about it, Setha,' said Singarasan. 'I don't care about that at all. Honestly speaking, you are still a virgin in my mind to whom nothing had ever happened. Nothing is going to destroy my feelings for you. Please, Setha, don't turn down my wish. Don't refuse.'

'But my husband's memories are still in my mind. They will remain in me forever. Also, I have a child.'

'Don't worry, Setha. Till your husband's memories fade away, and you can add my memories in it I'll wait. If they do not disappear, even then, you can show that on this baby boy. This baby is ours. We have to bring this child up with all the comforts. And that, I will certainly do.'

He felt that Setha had joined him mentally a long time ago. A little while ago, she was like soft clay that could be moulded the way he wanted to. But in her words, she tried to jump to the old lofty place

that could not be reached. Or, perhaps she kept asking just to satisfy herself. 'I' would be guilty. The people would rebuke me. Then you also will be angry at me. You would even hate me and leave me.'

'No, Setha. You have never done any crime. You were married legally and publicly. That was not a crime. You became a widow. That was not your mistake either. You don't need to worry about that at all. I'll never give you up.' He promised her, and at the same time he wanted to say something else. He could not prevent himself from saying it. He did not want to leave her, to think and be frightened of the stigma she would have. He did not like the respect and love she would show towards him as a result. Their mutual love and respect would not be understood. Singarasan did not like it.

'Setha, honestly I am the one who has committed a sin. After you left, I did not feel that I had any personal life. I did not wish to establish a life of my own. In public life and as far as others are concerned, though I lived an ideal and just life, I have failed as a person. I never felt such a failure was immoral. I don't know if you know it or not. But even the villagers might know the relationship I have with Rani. But only if you wish I will not have such a life hereafter. I will have a principle in my personal life. Please say yes, Setha.'

From Setha's eyes, tears rolled down profusely. 'What an honest person you are, to tell me everything,' she said and spoke with an open heart.

'I will also tell you my side of the story. I would have eloped with you if I had come out when you knocked at the locked door the other day. Hiding in the backyard I listened to all the things that you told achchi. You don't know how I much suffered after you left. I was so anxious to run away with you. At the same time, I did not want to spoil my parents' reputation. If I had done that my father would have killed himself. That is why I did not open the door that day. If I had come out I would not have been able to say



'no'. After you left, I cried profusely. Now on hearing that you are famous in the village I am very happy for you. But when Achchi tells me that you are going to Rani's house I get mad and become very sorrowful. I didn't talk with you till this day, not because I was angry but because if I talked with you, I was afraid, I would spoil your life. I wanted you to marry someone and live happily. But now you are...'

'Setha!' a voice that came from the yard interrupted them.

Sinnathangam maami had come back.

'I'll ask maami, too. She will not say 'no'. But before that, will you say 'yes' Setha,' Singarasan asked fondly.

Looking at him out from the corner of her eyes she bent her head down in shyness. Her words changed and seemed to be in the affirmative.

'You better ask achchi first.'

Singarasan wished to hug her. The feelings that Rani had raised started dying now. With the thought that Setha had become his wife, he also felt a respectable feeling towards her. He wanted to enjoy it thoroughly later. Why should he be in a hurry now? He gently tapped on her cheek with a finger. Sinnathangam maami did not oppose it. She already wanted to marry her off to Singarasan so there was no reason for her to oppose it. 'Singarasan, you have to be happy with her always. Don't do anything bad to her, listening to other people's gossip,' she begged of him.

Singarasan assured her, 'Till my death I'll take care of her. If I die, you have to take care of her,' and laughed out loud.

'Why are you saying that, Singarasan?' asked Sinnathangam maami.

'I don't care much about my death,' replied Singarasan. Sinnathangam maami could not understand him. Ponnambalam had nothing to say. He was reluctant to even face Singarasan.

Singarasan did not like his money or house. He brought Setha to his own house.

One day, Singarasan was sitting on the root of the neem tree in the front yard. The morning sunshine freshly coloured the roof of the stone house in the opposite compound. In that colour, Ponnambalam's house seemed to sport a fresh look. There was no show of power anymore. It did not look like a big deal to Singarasan. On the contrary, Ponnambalam looked naked and downcast before him, bereft of his money power and class. Were those belonging to the uncivilised world dying slowly?

'Why are you looking there and laughing? You don't look that side hereafter,' Setha who came from behind, said covering his eyes. Pulling her gently in front of him, he embraced her, lifted up her face and said, 'Setha.'

'Hmm...' said she, with her eyes half-closed, under his charm.

'Setha, if a person has some ideals and lives for them he will definitely achieve them, if not today, tomorrow or the day after, or someday. I had two ideals. One that grew since I was a child was achieving you. I have got you now. The other one came after I matured. That is, we need a house. We have to live for that,' said Singarasan.

'You said you did not need the house. Why do you need one now?' asked Setha.

'I'm not talking about that house. That one could be destroyed by a foreign government, murderous army if there is an Emergency like now (1958). What I mean is a country for ourselves, a government of our own, protection for us and a large home.' When he started to talk to her like this, they heard the child cry in the cloth cradle. 'To bring up the child crying in the cradle comfortably, we need a new house!' When he said this aloud, he forgot about Setha. He did not see her face or dark eyes before him. On the contrary, there were a lot of struggles going on in his mind. At the



end of them all, emerged a bright light. And words began to pour from his mouth.

‘Until that I’ll fight. No, we all will fight. Our younger generations will fight. If they refuse to let us have a country and government under a confederation, a separate country under a larger confederation comprising Tamil Nadu will be established. We will fight for that. Whether anybody supports me or not, I’ll fight. I’ll fight, establishing a covert underground revolutionary movement under my leadership. At the beginning, as far as my first ideal was concerned, I might have had some disappointments and strayed to Rani. However, as far as the second ideal is concerned no disappointments will prevent me. I’ll fight persistently.’

Singarasan’s speech was interrupted by a ‘kluck’ sound.

Singarasan hurriedly looked up. Setha, who sat there in front of him, was crying.

‘What’s it, Setha?’ asked Singarasan.

She did not speak.

‘What’s it, Setha?’ he asked again.

‘Earlier, he passed away... kkk... kkk...’ heaved Setha.

‘Why are you crying for that now, Setha?’

‘Again, you are talking about fights and struggles.... kkk... kkk...’

‘So what?’

‘In that ...You...kkk.. kkk...You...’

Singarasan embraced her. ‘Chi. Why are you crying for that now? There is some more time for that, Setha. Don’t worry about that.’ He tapped her cheek.

Setha did not stop. She continued crying.

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M. Thalayasingham (1950-1970), a Sri Lankan Tamil writer is one of the significant contributors of literary works on the Eelam. Fighting against casteism in his village, Pungudutivu, he fell victim to brutal assaults and died.

*A Separate Home*, his only novel, depicts the internal struggles of a young protagonist, who yearns for 'a separate home' for himself and the Tamils.

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