# *THE GUIDE*

## 1

Raju welcomed the intrusion — something to relieve the loneliness of the place. The man stood gazing reverentially on his face. Raju felt amused and embarrassed. "Sit down if you like," Raju said, to break the spell. The other accepted the suggestion with a grateful nod and went down the river steps to wash his feet and face, came up wiping himself dry with the end of a checkered yellow towel on his shoulder, and took his seat two steps below the granite slab on which Raju was sitting cross- legged as if it were a throne, beside an ancient shrine. The branches of the trees canopying the river course rustled and trembled with the agitation of birds and monkeys settling down for the night. Upstream, beyond the hills, the sun was setting. Raju waited for the other to say something. But he was too polite to open a conversation.

Raju asked, "Where are you from?" dreading lest the other should turn around and ask the same question. The man replied, 'I'm from Mangal — "

"Where is Mangal? "

The other waved his arm, indicating a direction across the river, beyond the high steep bank. "Not far from here," he added. The man volunteered further information about him- self. "My daughter lives nearby. I had gone to visit her; I am now on my way home. I left her after food. She insisted that I should stay on to dinner, but I refused. It'd have meant walking home at nearly midnight. I'm not afraid of anything, but why should we walk when we ought to be sleeping in bed?"

"You are very sensible," Raju said.

They listened for a while to the chatter of monkeys, and the man added as an afterthought, "My daughter is married to my own sister's son, and so there is no

problem. I often visit my sister and also my daughter; and so no one minds it."

"Why should anyone mind in any case if you visit a daughter?"

"It's not considered proper form to pay too many visits to a son-in-law," explained the villager.

Raju liked this rambling talk. He had been all alone in this place for over a day. It was good to hear the human voice again. After this the villager resumed the study of his face with intense respect. And Raju stroked his chin thoughtfully to make sure that an apostolic beard had not suddenly grown there. It was still smooth. He had had his last shave only two days before and paid for it with the hard-earned coins of his jail life.

Loquacious as usual and with the sharp blade scraping the soap, the barber had asked, "Coming out, I suppose?" Raju rolled his eyes and remained silent. He felt irritated at the question, but did not like to show it with the fellow holding the knife. "Just coming out?" repeated the barber obstinately.

Raju felt it would be no use being angry with such a man. Here he was in the presence of experience. He asked, "How do you know?"

"I have spent twenty years shaving people here. Didn't you observe that this was the first shop as you left the jail gate? Half the trick is to have your business in the right place. But that raises other people's jealousies!" he said, waving off an army of jealous barbers.

"Don't you attend to the inmates?"

"Not until they come out. It is my brother's son who is on duty there. I don't want to compete with him and I don't want to enter the jail gates every day."

"Not a bad place," said Raju through the soap.

"Go back then," said the barber and asked, "What was it?

What did the police say?"

"Don't talk of it," snapped Raju and tried to maintain a sullen, forbidding silence for the rest of the shave.

But the barber was not to be cowed so easily. His lifelong contact with tough men had hardened him. He said, "Eighteen months or twenty-four? I can bet it's one or the other."

Raju felt admiration for the man. He was a master. It was no use losing one's temper. "You are so wise and knowing. Why do you ask questions?"

The barber was pleased with the compliment. His fingers paused in their operations; he bent round to face Raju and say, "Just to get it out of you, that is all. It's written on your face that you are a two-year sort, which means you are not a murderer."

"How can you tell?" Raju said.

"You would look different if you had been in for seven years, which is what one gets for murder only half-proved."

"What else have I not done?" Raju asked.

"You have not cheated in any big way; but perhaps only in a small, petty manner."

"Go on. What next?"

"You have not abducted or raped anyone, or set fire to a house."

"Why don't you say exactly why I was sent to jail for two years? I'll give you four annas for a guess."

"No time now for a game," said the barber and went on,

"What do you do next?"

"I don't know. Must go somewhere, I suppose," said Raju thoughtfully.

"In case you like to go back to your old company, why don't you put your hand in someone's pocket at the market, or walk through an open door and pick out some trash and let the people howl for the police? They'll see you back where you want to be."

"Not a bad place," Raju repeated, slightly nodding in the direction of the jail wall. "Friendly people there — but I hate to be awakened every morning at five."

"An hour at which a night-prowler likes to return home to bed, I suppose," said the barber with heavy insinuation. "Well, that's all. You may get up," he said, putting away the razor. "You look like a maharaja now" — surveying Raju at a distance from his chair.

The villager on the lower step looked up at his face with devotion, which irked Raju. "Why do you look at me like that?" he asked brusquely.

The man replied, "I don't know. I don't mean to offend you, sir." Raju wanted to blurt out, "I am here because I have nowhere else to go. I want to be away from people who may recognize me." But he hesitated, wondering how he should say it. It looked as though he would be hurting the other's deepest sentiment if he so much as whispered the word "jail." He tried at least to say, "I am not so great as you imagine. I am just ordinary." Before he could fumble and reach the words, the other said, "I have a problem, sir."

"Tell me about it," Raju said, the old, old habit of affording guidance to others asserting itself. Tourists who recommended him to one another would say at one time, "If you are lucky enough to be guided by Raju, you will know everything. He will not only show you all the worth-while places, but also help you in every way." It was in his nature to get involved in other people's interests and activities. "Otherwise," Raju often reflected, "I should have grown up like a thousand other normal persons, without worries in life."

My troubles would not have started (Raju said in the course of narrating his life-story to this man who was called Velan at a later stage) but for Rosie. Why did she call herself Rosie? She did not come from a foreign land. She was just an Indian, who should have done well with Devi, Meena, Lalitha, or any one of the thousand names we have in our country. She chose to call herself Rosie. Don't imagine on hearing her name that she wore a short skirt or cropped her hair. She looked just the orthodox dancer that she was. She wore saris of bright hues and gold lace, had curly hair which

she braided and be flowered, wore diamond earrings and a heavy gold necklace. I told her at the first opportunity what a great dancer she was, and how she fostered our cultural traditions, and it pleased her.

Thousands of persons must have said the same thing to her since, but I happened to be the first in the line. Anyone likes to hear flattering sentiments, and more than others, I suppose, dancers. They like to be told every hour of the day how well they keep their steps. I praised her art whenever I could snatch a moment alone with her and whisper in her ear, out of range of that husband of hers. Oh, what a man! I have not met a more grotesque creature in my life. Instead of calling herself Rosie, she could more logically have called him Marco Polo.

He dressed like a man about to undertake an expedition — with his thick colored glasses, thick jacket, and a thick helmet over which was perpetually stretched a green, shiny water- proof cover, giving him the appearance of a space traveler. I have, of course, no idea of the original Marco Polo's appearance, but I wanted to call this man Marco at first sight, and I have not bothered to associate him with any other name since.

The moment I set eyes on him, on that memorable day at our railway station, I knew that here was a lifelong customer for me. A man who preferred to dress like a permanent tourist was just what a guide passionately looked for all his life.

You may want to ask why I became a guide or when. I was a guide for the same reason as someone else is a signaler, porter, or guard. It is fated thus. Don't laugh at my railway associations. The railways got into my blood very early in life. Engines with their tremendous clanging and smoke ensnared my senses. I felt at home on the railway platform, and considered the stationmaster and porter the best company for man, and their railway talk the most enlightened. I grew up in their midst. Ours was a small house opposite the Malgudi station. The house had been built by my father with his own hands long before trains were thought of. He chose this spot because it was outside the town and he could have it cheap. He had dug the earth, kneaded the mud with water from the well, and built the walls, and roofed them with coconut thatch. He

planted papaya trees around, which yielded fruit, which he cut up and sold in slices: a single fruit brought him eight annas if he carved it with dexterity. My father had a small shop built of deal wood planks and gunny sack; and all day he sat there selling peppermint, fruit, tobacco, betel leaf, parched gram (which he measured out of tiny bamboo cylinders), and what-ever else the wayfarers on the Trunk Road demanded. It was known as the "hut shop." A crowd of peasants and drivers of bullock wagons were always gathered in front of his shop. A very busy man indeed. At midday he called in when he went in for his lunch and made a routine statement at the same hour. 'Raju, take my seat. Be sure to receive the money for whatever you give. Don't eat off all that eating stuff, it's kept for sale; call me if you have doubts."

And I kept calling aloud, "Father, green peppermints, how many for half an anna?" while the customer waited patiently.

"Three," he shouted from the house, with his mouth stuffed with food. "But if he is buying for three-quarters of an anna, give him . . ." He mentioned some complicated concession, which I could never apply.

I appealed to the customer, "Give me only half an anna," and gave him three peppermints in return. If by chance I had happened to take four greens out of the big bottle, I swallowed the fourth in order to minimize complications.

An eccentric cockerel in the neighborhood announced the daybreak when it probably felt that we had slept long enough. It let out a shattering cry which made my father jump from his bed and wake me up.

I washed myself at the wall, smeared holy ash on my forehead, stood before the framed pictures of gods hanging high up on the wall, and recited all kinds of sacred verse in a loud, ringing tone. After watching my performance for a while, my father slipped away to the back yard to milk the buffalo. Later, coming in with the pail, he always remarked, "Something really wrong with that animal this time. She wouldn't yield even half a measure today."

My mother invariably answered, "I know, I know. She is getting wrong-headed, that is all. I know what she will respond to," she said in a mysterious, sinister manner, receiving the pail and carrying it into the kitchen. She came out in a moment with a tumblerful of hot milk for me.

The sugar was kept in an old tin can, which looked rusty but contained excellent sugar. It was kept on a wooden ledge on the smoke-stained wall of the kitchen, out of my reach. I fear that its position was shifted up and up as I grew older, because I remember that I could never get at that rusty can at any time except with the cooperation of my elders.

When the sky lightened, my father was ready for me on the *pyol*. There he sat with a thin broken twig at his side. The modern notions of child psychology were unknown then; the stick was an educator's indispensable equipment. "The unbeaten brat will remain unlearned," said my father, quoting an old proverb. He taught me the Tamil alphabet. He wrote the first two letters on each side of my slate at a time. I had to go over the contours of the letters with my pencil endlessly until they became bloated and distorted beyond recognition. From time to time my father snatched the slate from my hand, looked at it, glared at me, and said, "What a mess! You will never prosper in life if you disfigure the sacred letters of the alphabet." Then he cleaned the slate with his damp towel, wrote the letters again, and gave it to me with the injunction, "If you spoil this, you will make me wild. Trace them exactly as I have written. Don't try any of your tricks on them," and he flourished his twig menacingly.

I said meekly, "Yes, father," and started to write again. I can well picture myself, sticking my tongue out, screwing my head to one side, and putting my entire body-weight on the pencil: the slate pencil screeched as I tried to drive it through and my father ordered, "Don't make all that noise with that horrible pencil of yours. What has come over you?"

Then followed arithmetic. Two and two, four; four and three, something else. Something into something, more; some more into less. Oh, God, numbers did give me a headache. While the birds were out chirping and flying in the cool air, I cursed the

fate that confined me to my father's company. His temper was rising every second. As if in answer to my silent prayer, an early customer was noticed at the door of the hut shop and my lessons came to an abrupt end. My father left me with the remark, "I have better things to do of a morning than make a genius out of a clay-head."

Although the lessons had seemed interminable to me, my mother said the moment she saw me, "So you have been let off! I wonder what you can learn in half an hour!"

I told her, "I'll go out and play and won't trouble you. But no more lessons for the day, please." With that I was off to the shade of a tamarind tree across the road. It was an ancient, spreading tree, dense with leaves, amidst which monkeys and birds lived, bred, and chattered incessantly, feeding on the tender leaves and fruits. Pigs and piglets came from somewhere and nosed about the ground thick with fallen leaves, and I played there all day. I think I involved the pigs in some imaginary game and even fancied myself carried on their backs. My father's customers greeted me as they passed that way. I had marbles, an iron hoop to roll, and a rubber ball, with which I occupied myself. I hardly knew what time of the day it was or what was happening around me.

Sometimes my father took me along to the town when he went shopping. He stopped a passing bullock cart for the trip. I hung about anxiously with an appealing look in my eyes (I had been taught not to ask to be taken along) until my father said, "Climb in, little man." I clambered in before his sentence was completed. The bells around the bull's neck jingled, the wooden wheels grated and ground the dust off the rough road; I clung to the staves on the sides and felt my bones shaken. Still, I enjoyed the smell of the straw in the cart and all the scenes we passed. Men and vehicles, hogs and boys — the panorama of life enchanted me.

At the market my father made me sit on a wooden platform within sight of a shop man known to him, and went about to do his shopping. My pockets would be filled with fried nuts and sweets; munching, I watched the activities of the market — people buying and selling, arguing and laughing, swearing and shouting. While my father was gone on his shopping expedition, I remember, a question kept drumming in

my head: "Father, you are a shopkeeper yourself. Why do you go about buying in other shops?" I never got an answer. As I sat gazing on the afternoon haze, the continuous din of the marketplace lulled my senses, the dusty glare suddenly made me drowsy, and I fell asleep, leaning on the wall of that unknown place where my father had chosen to put me,

"I have a problem, sir," said the man.

Raju nodded his head and added, "So has everyone," in a sudden access of pontificality. Ever since the moment this man had come and sat before him, gazing on his face, he had experienced a feeling of importance. He felt like an actor who was always expected to utter the right sentence. Now the appropriate sentence was "If you show me a person without a problem, then I will show you the perfect world. Do you know what the great Buddha said?" The other edged nearer. "A woman once went wailing to the great Buddha, clasping her dead baby to her bosom. The Buddha said, 'Go into every home in this city and find one where death is unknown; if you find such a place, fetch me a handful of mustard from there, and then I'll teach you how to conquer death.' "

The man clicked his tongue in appreciation and asked, "And what happened to the dead baby, sir?"

"She had to bury it, of course," said Raju. "So also," he concluded, while doubting in his mind the relevance of the comparison, "if you show me a single home without a problem, I shall show you the way to attain a universal solution to all problems." ]

The man was overwhelmed by the weightiness of this statement. He performed a deep obeisance and said, "I have not told you my name, sir. I am Velan. My father in his lifetime married thrice. I am the first son of his first wife. The youngest daughter of his last wife is also with us. As the head of the family, I have given her every comfort at home, provided her with all the jewellery and clothes a girl needs, but . . ." He paused slightly before bringing out the big surprise. But Raju completed the sentence for him, "The girl shows no gratitude."

"Absolutely, sir!" said the man.

"And she will not accept your plans for her marriage?"

"Oh, too true, sir," Velan said, wonderstruck. "My cousin's son is a fine boy. Even the date of the wedding was fixed, but do you know, sir, what the girl did?"

"Ran away from the whole thing," said Raju, and asked, "How did you bring her back?"

"I searched for her three days and nights and spotted her in a festival crowd in a distant village. They were pulling the temple chariot around the streets and the population of fifty villages was crowded into one. I searched every face in the crowd and at last caught her while she was watching a puppet show. Now, do you know what she does?" Raju decided to let the other have the satisfaction of saying things himself, and Velan ended his story with, "She sulks in a room all day. I do not know what to do. It is possible that she is possessed. If I could know what to do with her, it'd be such a help, sir." Raju said with a philosophic weariness, "Such things are common in life. One should not let oneself be bothered unduly by anything."

"What am I to do with her, sir?"

"Bring her over; let me speak to her," Raju said grandly.

Velan rose, bowed low, and tried to touch Raju's feet. Raju recoiled at the attempt. "I'll not permit anyone to do this. God alone is entitled to such a prostration. He will destroy us if we attempt to usurp His rights." He felt he was attaining the stature of a saint. Velan went down the steps meekly, crossed the river, climbed the opposite bank, and was soon out of sight. Raju ruminated. "I wish I had asked him what the age of the girl was. Hope she is uninteresting. I have had enough trouble in life."

He sat there for a long time, watching the river flow into the night; the rustle of the peepul and banyan trees around was sometimes loud and frightening. The sky was clear. Having nothing else to do, he started counting the stars. He said to himself, "I

shall be rewarded for this profound service to humanity. People will say, 'Here is the man who knows the exact number of stars in the sky. If you have any trouble on that account, you had better consult him. He will be your night guide for the skies.' " He told himself, "The thing to do is to start from a corner and go on patch by patch. Never work from the top to the horizon, but always the other way." He was evolving a theory. He started the count from above a fringe of Palmyra trees on his left-hand side, up the course of the river, over to the other side. "One . . . two . . . fifty- five . . ." He suddenly realized that if he looked deeper a new cluster of stars came into view; by the time he assimilated it into his reckoning, he realized he had lost sight of his starting point and found himself entangled in hopeless figures. He felt exhausted. He stretched himself on the stone slab and fell asleep under the open sky.

The eight-o'clock sun shone fully on his face. He opened his eyes and saw Velan standing respectfully away on a lower step. "I have brought my sister," he said and thrust up a young girl of fourteen, who had tightly braided her hair and decorated herself with jewellery. Velan explained, "These jewels were given by me, bought out of my own money, for she is after all my sister."

Raju sat up, rubbing his eyes. He was as yet unprepared to take charge of the world's affairs. His immediate need was privacy for his morning ablutions. He said to them, "You may go in there and wait for me."

He found them waiting for him in the ancient pillared hall. Raju sat himself down on a slightly elevated platform in the middle of the hall. Velan placed before him a basket filled with bananas, cucumbers, pieces of sugar cane, fried nuts, and a copper vessel brimming with milk.

Raju asked, "What is all this for?"

"It will please us very much if you will accept them, sir."

Raju sat looking at the hamper. It was not unwelcome. He could eat anything and digest it now. He had learned not to be fussy. Formerly he would have said, "Who will eat this? Give me coffee and *idli,* please, first thing in the day. These are good

enough for munching later." But prison life had trained him to swallow anything at any time. Sometimes a colleague in the cell, managing to smuggle in, through the kindness of a warder, something unpalatable like mutton-puff made six days ago, with its oil going rancid, shared it with Raju, and Raju remembered how he ate it with gusto at three in the morning — a time chosen before the others could wake up and claim a share. Anything was welcome now. He asked, "Why do you do all this for me?"

"They are grown in our fields and we are proud to offer them to you."

Raju did not have to ask further questions. He had gradually come to view himself as a master of these occasions. He had already begun to feel that the adulation directed to him was inevitable. He sat in silence, eying the gift for a while. Suddenly he picked up the basket and went into an inner sanctum. The others followed. Raju stopped before a stone image in the dark recess. It was a tall God with four hands, bearing a mace and wheel, with a beautifully chiselled head, but abandoned a century ago. Raju ceremoniously placed the basket of edibles at the feet of the image and said, "It's His first. Let the offering go to Him, first; and we will eat the remnant. By giving to God, do you know how it multiples, rather than divides? Do you know the story?" He began narrating the story of Devaka, a man of ancient times who begged for alms at the temple gate every day and would not use any of his collections without first putting them at the feet of the God. Halfway through the story he realized that he could not remember either its course or its purpose. He lapsed into silence. Velan patiently waited for the continuation. He was of the stuff disciples are made of; an unfinished story or an incomplete moral never bothered him; it was all in the scheme of life. When Raju turned and strode majestically back to the river step, Velan and his sister followed him mutely.

How could I recollect the story heard from my mother so long ago? She told me a story every evening while we waited for father to close the shop and come home. The shop remained open till midnight. Bullock carts in long caravans arrived late in the evening from distant villages, loaded with coconut, rice, and other commodities for the market. The animals were unyoked under the big tamarind tree for the night, and the cartmen drifted in twos and threes to the shop, for a chat or to ask for things to eat or

smoke. How my father loved to discuss with them the price of grain, rainfall, harvest, and the state of irrigation channels. Or they talked about old litigations. One heard repeated references to magistrates, affidavits, witnesses in the case, and appeals, punctuated with roars of laughter — possibly the memory of some absurd legality or loophole tickled them.

My father ignored food and sleep when he had company. My mother sent me out several times to see if he could be made to turn in. He was a man of uncertain temper and one could not really guess how he would react to interruptions, and so my mother coached me to go up, watch his mood, and gently remind him of food and home. I stood under the shop yawning, coughing and clearing my throat, hoping to catch his eye. But the talk was all-absorbing and he would not glance in my direction, and I got absorbed in their talk, although I did not understand a word of it.

After a while my mother's voice came gently on the night air, calling, "Raju, Raju," and my father interrupted his activities to look at me and say, "Tell your mother not to wait for me. Tell her to place a handful of rice and buttermilk in a bowl, with just one piece of lime pickle, and keep it in the oven for me. I'll come in later." It was almost a formula with him five days in a week. He always added, "Not that I'm really hungry tonight." And then I believe he went on to discuss health problems with his cronies.

But I didn't stop to hear further. I made a swift dash back home. There was a dark patch between the light from the shop and the dim lantern shedding its light on our threshold, a matter of about ten yards, I suppose, but the passage through it gave me a cold sweat. I expected wild animals and super- natural creatures to emerge and grab me. My mother waited on the doorstep to receive me and said, "Not hungry, I suppose! That'll give him an excuse to talk to the village folk all night, and then come in for an hour's sleep and get up with the crowing of that foolish cock somewhere. He will spoil his health."

I followed her into the kitchen. She placed my plate and hers side by side on the floor, drew the rice-pot within reach, and served me and herself simultaneously,

and we finished our dinner by the sooty tin lamp stuck on a nail in the wall. She unrolled a mat for me in the front room, and I lay down to sleep. She sat at my side, awaiting Father's return. Her presence gave me a feeling of inexplicable coziness. I felt I ought to put her proximity to good use, and complained, "Something is bothering my hair," and she ran her fingers through my hair and scratched the nape of my neck. And then I commanded, "A story."

Immediately she began, "Once upon a time there was a man called Devaka ..." I heard his name mentioned almost every night. He was a hero, saint, or something of the kind. I never learned fully what he did or why, sleep overcoming me before my mother was through even the preamble.

Raju sat on the step and watched the river dazzling in the morning sun. The air was cool, and he wished he were alone. His visitors sat patiently on a lower step, waiting for him to attend to them, like patients in a doctor's room. Raju had many problems of his own to think of. He suddenly felt irritated at the responsibility that Velan was thrusting on him, and said frankly, "I am not going to think of your problems, **Velan;** not now."

"May I know why?" he asked humbly.

"It is so," Raju said with an air of finality.

"When may I trouble you, sir?" he asked.

Raju replied grandly, "When the time is ripe for it." This took the matter from the realms of time into eternity. Velan accepted his answer with resignation and rose to go. It was rather touching. Raju felt indebted to him for the edibles he had brought, so he said pacifyingly, "Is this the sister you told me about?"

"Yes, sir; it is."

"I know what your problem is, but I wish to give the matter some thought. We cannot force vital solutions. Every question must bide its time. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," Velan said. He drew his fingers across his brow and said, "Whatever is written here will happen. How can we ever help it?"

"We may not change it, but we may understand it," Raju replied grandly. "And to arrive at a proper understanding, time is needed." Raju felt he was growing wings. Shortly, he felt, he might float in the air and perch himself on the tower of the ancient temple. Nothing was going to surprise him. He suddenly found himself asking, "Have I been in a prison or in some sort of transmigration?"

Velan looked relieved and proud to hear so much from his master. He looked significantly at his difficult sister, and she bowed her head in shame. Raju declared, fixedly looking at the girl, "What must happen must happen; no power on earth or in heaven can change its course, just as no one can change the course of that river." They gazed on the river, as if the clue to their problems lay there, and turned to go. Raju watched them cross the river and climb the opposite bank. Soon they were out of sight.

## 2

We noticed much activity in the field in front of our house. A set of men arrived from the town every morning and were busy in the field all day. We learned that they were building a railway track. They came to my father's shop for refreshments. My father inquired anxiously, "When shall we have the trains coming in here?"

If they were in a good mood, they answered, "About six or eight months, who can say?" Or if they were in a black mood, "Don't ask us. Next you will tell us to drive a locomotive to your shop!" and they laughed grimly.

Work was going on briskly. I lost to some extent my freedom under the tamarind tree, because trucks were parked there. I climbed into them and played. No one minded me. All day I was climbing in and out of the trucks, and my clothes became red with mud. Most of the trucks brought red earth which was banked up on the field. In a short while a small mountain was raised in front of our house. It was enchanting. When I stood on the top of this mound I could see far-off places, the hazy

outlines of Mempi Hills. I became as busy as the men. I spent all my time in the company of those working on the track, listening to their talk and sharing their jokes. More trucks came, bringing timber and iron. A variety of goods was piling up on every side. Presently I began to collect sawn-off metal bits, nuts and bolts, and I treasured them in my mother's big trunk, where a space was allotted to me amidst her ancient silk saris, which she never wore.

A boy grazing his cows approached the spot just below the mound on which I was playing a game by myself. His cows were munching the grass right below the mound, on which the men were working, and the little fellow had dared to step on the slope where I played. I was beginning to have a sense of ownership of the railway, and I didn't want trespassers there. I frowned at the boy and barked, "Get out."

"Why?" he asked. "My cows are here, I'm watching them."

"Begone with your cows," I said. "Otherwise they will be run over by the train, which will be here shortly."

"Let them be. What do you care?" he said, which irritated me so much that I let out a yell and pounced on him with "You son of a . . ." and a variety of other expressions recently picked up. The boy, instead of knocking me down, ran screaming to my father. "Your son is using bad language."

My father sprang up on hearing this. Just my misfortune. He came rushing toward me as I was resuming my game and asked, "What did you call this boy?" I had the good sense not to repeat it. I blinked, wordlessly, at which the boy repeated exactly what I had said. This produced an unexpectedly violent effect on my father. He grabbed my neck within the hollow of his hand, and asked, "Where did you pick that up?" I pointed at the men working on the track. He looked up, remained silent for a second, and said, "Oh, that is so, is it? You will not idle about picking up bad words any more. I will see to it. You will go to a school tomorrow and every day."

"Father!" I cried. He was passing a harsh sentence on me. To be removed from a place I loved to a place I loathed!

A tremendous fuss was made before I started for my school each day. My mother fed me early and filled up a little aluminum vessel with refreshment for the afternoon. She carefully put my books and slate into a bag and slung it across my shoulder. I was dressed in clean shorts and shirt; my hair was combed back from the forehead, with all the curls falling on my nape. For the first few days I enjoyed all this attention, but soon developed a normal aversion; I preferred to be neglected and stay at home to being fussed over and sent to a school. But my father was a stern disciplinarian; perhaps he was a snob who wanted to brag before others that his son was going to a school. He kept an eye on my movements till I was safely on the road each morning. He sat in his shop and kept calling every few minutes, "Boy, have you left?"

I walked endlessly to reach my school. No other boy went in my direction. I talked to myself on the way, paused to observe the passers-by or a country cart lumbering along, or a grasshopper going under a culvert. My progress was so halting and slow that when I turned into the Market Street I could hear my classmates shouting their lessons in unison, for the old man, our master, who taught us, believed in getting the maximum noise out of his pupils.

I don't know on whose advice my father chose to send me here for my education, while the fashionable Albert Mission School was quite close by. I'd have felt proud to call myself an Albert Mission boy. But I often heard my father declare, "I don't want to send my boy there; it seems they try to convert our boys into Christians and are all the time insulting our gods." I don't know how he got the notion; anyway, he was firmly convinced that the school where I was sent was the best under the sun. He was known to boast, "Many students who have passed through the hands of this ancient master are now big officials at Madras, collectors and men like that. . . ." It was purely his own imagining or the invention of the old man who taught me. No one could dream that this was in any sense a school, let alone an outstanding school. It was what was called a *pyol* school, because the classes were held on the *pyol* of the gentleman's house. He lived in Kabir Lane, in a narrow old house with a cement *pyol* in front, with the street drain running right below it. He gathered a score of young boys of my age

every morning on the *pyol*, reclined on a cushion in a corner, and shouted at the little fellows, flourishing a rattan cane all the time. All the classes were held there at the same time, and he bestowed attention on each group in turn. I belonged to the youngest and most elementary set, just learning the alphabet and numbers. He made us read aloud from our books and copy down the letters on our slates, and looked through each and gave corrections and flicks from the cane for those who repeated their follies. He was a very abusive man. My father, who wanted to save me from the language of the railway trackmen, had certainly not made a safer choice in sending me to this old man, who habitually addressed his pupils as donkeys and traced their genealogies on either side with thoroughness.

The thing that irritated him was not merely the mistakes that we made but our very presence. Seeing us, such short, clumsy youngsters, always fumbling and shuffling, I think got on his nerves. Of course, we made a lot of noise on his *pyol*.

When he went into his house for a moment's nap or for his food or for any of a dozen domestic calls, we rolled over each other, fought, scratched, bleated, and yelled. Or we tried to invade his privacy and peep in. Once we slipped in and passed from room to room until we came to the kitchen and saw him sitting before the oven, baking something. We stood at the doorway and said, "Oh, master, you know how to cook also!" and giggled, and a lady who was standing nearby also giggled at our remark.

He turned on us fiercely and ordered, "Get out, boys; don't come here; this is not your classroom," and we scampered back to our place, where he found us later and twisted our ears until we screamed. He said, "I am admitting you devils here because I want you to become civilized, but what you do is . . ." and he catalogued our sins and misdeeds.

We were contrite, and he softened and said, "Hereafter let me not catch you anywhere beyond that threshold. I will hand you over to the police if you come in." That settled it. We never peeped in again, but when his back was turned confined our attention to the drain that flowed beneath the *pyol*. We tore off loose leaves from our notebooks, made boats, and floated them down the drain, and in a short while it became an established practice, and a kind of boat-racing developed out of it; we lay

on our bellies and watched the boats float away on the drain water. He warned us, "If you fall off into the gutter, you will find yourselves in the Sarayu River, remember, and I shall have to tell your father to go out and look for you there, I suppose!" and he laughed at the grim prospect.

His interest in us was one rupee a month and anything else in kind we cared to carry. My father sent him every month two cubes of jaggery, others brought in rice and vegetables and anything else he might demand from time to time. Whenever his store at home ran out, he called one or another to his side and said, "Now if you are a good boy, you will run to your house and fetch me just a little, only so much, mind you, of sugar. Come, let me see if you are smart!" He adopted a kindly, canvassing tone on such occasions, and we felt honoured to be able to serve him, and pestered our parents to give us the gifts and fought for the honour of serving him. Our parents showed an excessive readiness to oblige this master, grateful probably because he kept us in his charge for the major part of the day, from morning till four in the afternoon, when he dismissed us and we sprinted homeward.

In spite of all the apparent violence and purposelessness, I suppose we did make good under our master, for within a year I proved good enough for the first standard in Board High School; I could read heavier books, and do multiplication up to twenty in my head. The old master himself escorted me to the Board School, which had just established itself, and admitted me there; he saw me off in my new class, seated me and two others, and blessed us before taking leave of us. It was a pleasant surprise for us that he could be so kind.

Velan was bursting with news of a miracle. He stood before Raju with folded hands, and said, "Sir, things have turned out well."

'I' m so happy — how?

"My sister came before our family gathering and admitted her follies. She has agreed . . ." He went on to explain. The girl had all of a sudden appeared before the assembled family that morning. She faced everyone straight and said, "I have behaved

foolishly all these days. I will do what my brother and the other elders at home tell me to do. They know what is best for us."

"I could hardly believe my ears," explained Velan. "I pinched myself to see whether I was dreaming or awake. This girl's affair had cast a gloom on our home. If you left out our partition suit and all the complications arising from it, we had no worry to equal this. You see, we are fond of the girl, and it pained us to watch her sulk in a dark room, without minding her appearance or dress or caring for food. We did our best to make her cheerful and then had to leave her alone. We had all been very miserable on account of her, and so we were surprised this morning when she came before us with her hair oiled and braided, with flowers in it. Looking bright, she said, 1 have been a bother to you all these days. Forgive me, all of you. I shall do whatever my elders order me to do." Naturally, after we got over the surprise, we asked, 'Are you prepared to marry your cousin?' She did not answer at once, but stood with bowed head. My wife took her aside and asked whether we might send word to the other family, and she agreed. We have sent the happy message around, and there will soon be a marriage in our house. I have money, jewellery, and everything ready. I will call the pipers and drummers tomorrow morning and get through it all quickly. I have consulted the astrologer already, and he says that this is an auspicious time. I do not want to delay even for a second the happy event."

"For fear that she may change her mind once again?" Raju asked. He knew why Velan was rushing it through at this pace. It was easy to guess why. But the remark threw the other into a fit of admiration, and he asked, "How did you know what I had in mind, sir?"

Raju remained silent. He could not open his lips without provoking admiration. This was a dangerous state of affairs. He was in a mood to debunk himself a little. He told Velan sharply, "There is nothing extraordinary in my guess," and promptly came the reply, "Not for you to say that, sir. Things may look easy enough for a giant, but ordinary poor mortals like us can never know what goes on in other people's minds."

To divert his attention, Raju simply asked, "Have you any idea of the views of the bridegroom? Is he ready for you?

What does he think of her refusal?"

"After the girl came round, I sent our priest to discuss it with him, and he has come back to say that the boy is willing. He prefers not to think of what is gone. What is gone is gone."

"True, true," Raju said, having nothing else to say and not wishing to utter anything that might seem too brilliant. He was beginning to dread his own smartness nowadays. He was afraid to open his lips. A vow of silence was indicated, but there was greater danger in silence.

All this prudence did not save him. Velan's affairs were satisfactorily ended. One day he came to invite Raju to his sister's marriage, and Raju had to plead long and hard before he could make him leave him alone. However, Velan brought him fruit on huge trays covered with silk cloth, the sort of offering which Raju would conjure up for the edification of his tourists when he took them through an ancient palace or hall. He accepted the gift gracefully.

He avoided the girl's marriage. He did not want to be seen in a crowd, and he did not want to gather a crowd around him as a man who had worked a change in an obstinate girl. But his aloofness did not save him. If he would not go to the wedding, the wedding was bound to come to him. At the earliest possible moment Velan brought the girl and her husband and a huge concourse of relatives to the temple. The girl herself seemed to have spoken of Raju as her savior. She had told everyone, "He doesn't speak to anyone, but if he looks at you, you are changed."

His circle was gradually widening. Velan, at the end of his day's agricultural toil, came and sat on the lower step. If Raju spoke, he listened; otherwise he accepted the silence with equal gratitude, got up without a word when darkness fell, and moved away. Gradually, unnoticed, a few others began to arrive very regularly. Raju could not very well question who they were: the river bank was a public place, and he himself

was an intruder. They just sat there on the lower step and looked at Raju and kept looking at him. He didn't have to say a word to anyone: he just sat there at the same place, looking away at the river, at the other bank, and tried hard to think where he should go next and what do. They did not so much as whisper a word for fear that it might disturb him. Raju was beginning to feel uncomfortable on these occasions, and wondered if he could devise some means of escape from their company. Throughout the day he was practically left alone, but late in the evening, after doing their day's work, the villagers would come.

One evening before the company arrived he moved himself to the back yard of the temple and hid himself behind a gigantic hibiscus bush full of red flowers. He heard them arrive, heard their voices on the river step. They were talking in low, hushed voices. They went round the building and passed by the hibiscus bush. Raju's heart palpitated as he crouched there like an animal at bay. He held his breath and waited. He was already planning to offer an explanation if they should discover his presence there. He would say that he was in deep thought and that the hibiscus shade was congenial for such contemplation. But fortunately they did not look for him there. They stood near the bush talking in a hushed, awed whisper. Said one, "Where could he have gone?"

"He is a big man, he may go anywhere; he may have a thousand things to do."

"Oh, you don't know. He has renounced the world; he does nothing but meditate. What a pity he is not here today!"

"Just sitting there for a few minutes with him — ah, what a change it has brought about in our household! Do you know, that cousin of mine came round last night and gave me back the promissory note. As long as he held it, I felt as if I had put a knife in his hand for stabbing us."

"We won't have to fear anything more; it is our good fortune that this great soul should have come to live, in our midst."

"But he has disappeared today. Wonder if he has left us for good."

"It would be our misfortune if he went away."

"His clothes are still all there in the hall."

"He has no fears."

"The food I brought yesterday has been eaten."

"Leave there what you have brought now; he is sure to come back from his outing and feel hungry." Raju felt grateful to this man for his sentiment.

"Do you know sometimes these Yogis can travel to the Himalayas just by a thought?"

"I don't think he is that kind of Yogi," said another.

"Who can say? Appearances are sometimes misleading," said someone. They then moved off to their usual seat and sat there. For a long time Raju could hear them talking among themselves. After a while they left. Raju could hear them splashing the water with their feet. "Let us go before it gets too dark. They say that there is an old crocodile in this part of the river.'

"A boy known to me was held up by his ankle once, at this very spot."

"What happened, then?"

"He was dragged down, next day. . . ."

Raju could hear their voices far off. He cautiously peeped out of his hiding. He could see their shadowy figures on the other bank. He waited till they vanished altogether from sight. He went in and lit a lamp. He was hungry. They had left his food wrapped in a banana leaf on the pedestal of the old stone image. Raju was filled with gratitude and prayed that Velan might never come to the stage of thinking that he was too good for food and that he subsisted on atoms from the air.

Next morning he rose early and went through his ablutions, washed his clothes in the river, lit the stove, made himself coffee, and felt completely at ease with the world. He had to decide on his future today. He should either go back to the town of

his birth, bear the giggles and stares for a few days, or go somewhere else. Where could he go? He had not trained himself to make a living out of hard work. Food was coming to him unasked now. If he went away somewhere else certainly nobody was going to take the trouble to bring him food in return for just waiting for it. The only other place where it could happen was the prison. Where could he go now? Nowhere. Cows grazing on the slopes far off gave the place an air of sublime stillness. He realized that he had no alternative: he must play the role that Velan had given him.

With his mind made up he prepared himself to meet Velan and his friends in the evening. He sat as usual on the stone slab with beatitude and calm in his face. The thing that had really bothered him was that he might sound too brilliant in everything he said. He had observed silence as a precaution. But that fear was now gone. He decided to look as brilliant as he could manage, let drop gems of thought from his lips, assume all the radiance available, and afford them all the guidance they required without stint. He decided to arrange the stage for the display with more thoroughness. With this view he transferred his seat to the inner hall of the temple. It gave one a better background. He sat there at about the time he expected Velan and others to arrive. He anticipated their arrival with a certain excitement. He composed his features and pose to receive them.

The sun was setting. Its tint touched the wall with pink. The tops of the coconut trees around were aflame. The bird-cries went up in a crescendo before dying down for the night. Darkness fell. Still there was no sign of Velan or anyone. They did not come that night. He was left foodless; that was not the main worry, he still had a few bananas. Suppose they never came again? What was to happen? He became panicky. All night he lay worrying. All his old fears returned. If he returned to the town he would have to get his house back from the man to whom he had mortgaged it. He would have to fight for a living space in his own home or find the cash to redeem it.

He debated whether to step across the river, walk into the village, and search for Velan. It didn't seem a dignified thing to do. It might make him look cheap, and they might ignore him altogether.

He saw a boy grazing his sheep on the opposite bank. He clapped his hands and cried, "Come here." He went down the steps and cried across the water, "I am the new priest of this temple, boy, come here. I have a plantain for you. Come and take it." He flourished it, feeling that this was perhaps a gamble; it was the last piece of fruit in his store and might presently be gone, as might the boy, and Velan might never know how badly he was wanted, while he, Raju, lay starving there until they found his bleached bones in the temple and added them to the ruins around. With these thoughts he flourished the banana. The boy was attracted by it and soon came across the water. He was short and was wet up to his ears. Raju said, "Take off your turban and dry yourself, boy."

"I am not afraid of water," he said.

"You should not be so wet."

The boy held out his hand for the plantain and said, "I can swim. I always swim."

"But I have never seen you here before," Raju said.

"I don't come here. I go farther down and swim."

"Why don't you come here?"

"This is a crocodile place," he said.

"But I have never seen any crocodile."

"You will sometime," the boy said. "My sheep generally graze over there. I came to see if a man was here."

"Why?"

"My uncle asked me to watch. He said, 'Drive your sheep before that temple and see if a man is there.' That is why I came here today."

Raju gave the boy the banana and said, "Tell your, uncle that the man is back here and tell him to come here this evening."

He did not wait to ask who the uncle was. Whoever he might be, he was welcome. The boy peeled the plantain, swallowed it whole, and started munching the peel also. "Why do you eat the peel? It will make you sick," Raju said.

"No, it won't," the boy replied. He seemed to be a resolute boy who knew his mind.

Raju vaguely advised, "You must be a good boy. Now be off. Tell your uncle."

The boy was off, after cautioning him, "Keep an eye on those till I get back." He indicated his flock on the opposite slope.

## 3

One fine day, beyond the tamarind tree, the station building was ready. The steel tracks gleamed in the sun; the signal posts stood with their red and green stripes and their colorful lamps; and our world was neatly divided into this side of the railway line and that side. Everything was ready. All our spare hours were spent in walking along the railway track up to the culvert half a mile away. We paced up and down our platform, a gold mohur sapling was planted in the railway yard. We passed through the corridor, peeping into the room meant for the stationmaster.

One day we were all given a holiday. "The train comes to our town today," people said excitedly. The station was decorated with festoons and bunting. A piper was playing, bands were banging away. Coconuts were broken on the railway track, and an engine steamed in, pulling a couple of cars. Many of the important folk of the town were there. The Collector and the Police Superintendent and the Municipal Chairman, and many of the local tradesmen, who flourished green invitation cards in their hands, were assembled at the station. The police guarded the platform and did not allow the crowds in. I felt cheated by this. I felt indignant that anyone should prohibit my entry to the platform. I squeezed myself through the railings at the farthest end, and by the time the engine arrived I was there to receive it. I was probably so small that no one noticed my presence.

Tables were laid and official gentlemen sat around refreshing themselves, and then several men got up and lectured. I was aware only c' the word "Malgudi"

recurring in their speeches. There was a clapping of hands. The band struck up, the engine whistled, the bell rang, the guard blew his whistle, and the men who had been consuming refreshments climbed into the train. I was half inclined to follow their example, but there were many policemen to stop me. The train moved and was soon out of sight. A big crowd was now allowed to come on to the platform. My father's shop had record sales that day.

By the time a stationmaster and a porter were installed in their little some house at the back of the station, facing our house, my father had become so prosperous that he acquired a *jutka* and a horse in order to go to the town and do his shopping.

My mother had been apathetic. "Why should you have all this additional bother in this household, horse and horse gram and all that, while the buffalo pair is a sufficient bother?"

He did not answer her in any detail, just swept off her objections with, "You know nothing about these things. I have so much to do every day in the town. I have to visit the bank so often." He uttered the word "bank" with a proud emphasis, but it did not impress my mother.

And so there was an addition of a thatch-roofed shed to our yard, in which a brown pony was tied up, and my father had picked up a groom to look after it. We became the talk of the town with this horse and carriage, but my mother never reconciled herself to it. She viewed it as an extraordinary vanity on my father's part and no amount of explanation from him ever convinced her otherwise. Her view was that my father had overestimated his business, and she nagged him whenever he was found at home and the horse and carriage were not put to proper use. She expected him to be always going round the streets in his vehicle. He had not more than an hour's job any day in the town and he always came back in time to attend to his shop, which he was now leaving in charge of a friend for a few hours in the day. My mother was developing into a successful nagger, I suppose, for my father was losing much of his aggressiveness and was becoming very apologetic about his return home whenever the horse and the carriage were left unused under the tamarind tree. "You take it and go to

the market, if you like," he often said, but my mother spurned the offer, explaining, "Where should I go every day? Some day it may be useful for going to the temple on a Friday. But ought you to maintain an extravagant turnout all through the year, just for a possible visit to the temple? Horse gram and grass, do you know what they cost?" Fortunately, it did not prove such a liability after all. Worn out by Mother's persistent opposition, my father seriously considered disposing of the horse and (a fantastic proposal) converting the carriage into a single bullock cart with a "bow spring" mounted over the wheel, which a blacksmith of his acquaintance at the market gate had promised to do for him.

The groom who minded the horse laughed at the idea and said that it was an impossible proposition, convincing my father that the blacksmith would reduce the carriage to a piece of furniture fit for lounging under the tamarind tree. "You could as well listen to a promise to turn the horse into a bullock!" he said, and then he made a proposal which appealed to my father's business instinct. "Let me ply it for hire in the market. All gram and grass my charge — only let me use your shed. I will hand you two rupees a day and one rupee a month for the use of the shed, and anything I earn over two rupees should be mine.'

This was a delightful solution. My father had the use of the carriage whenever he wanted it, and earned a sum for it each day, and no liabilities. As the days passed, the driver came along and pleaded lack of engagements. A great deal of argument went on in the front part of my house, in semidarkness, between my father and the driver as my father tried to exact his two rupees. Finally my mother too joined in, saying, "Don't trust these fellows. Today with all that festival crowd, he says he has not made any money. How can we believe him?"

My mother was convinced that the cart-driver drank his earnings. My father retorted, "What if he drinks? It is none of our business."

Every day this went on. Every night the man stood under the tree and cringed and begged for remission. It was evident that he was misappropriating our funds. For within a few weeks the man came and said, "This horse is growing bony and will not

run properly, and is becoming wrong-headed. It is better we sell it off soon and take another, because all the passengers who get into this *jutka* complain and pay less at the end because of the discomfort suffered. And the springs over the wheels must also be changed." The man was constantly suggesting that the turnout had better be sold off and a new one taken. Whenever he said it within my mother's hearing she lost her temper and shouted at him, saying that one horse and carriage were sufficient expense. This reduced my father to viewing the whole arrangement as a hopeless liability, until the man hinted that he had an offer of seventy rupees for both horse and carriage. My father managed to raise this to seventy-five and finally the man brought the cash and drove off the turnout himself. Evidently he had saved a lot of our own money for this enterprise. Anyway, we were glad to be rid of the thing. This was a nicely calculated transaction, for as soon as the trains began to arrive regularly at our station we found our *jutka* doing a brisk business carrying passengers to the town.

My father was given the privilege of running a shop at the railway station. What a shop it was! It was paved with cement, with shelves built in. It was so spacious that when my father had transferred all the articles from the hut shop, the place was only one-quarter filled; there were so many blank spaces all along the wall that he felt depressed at the sight of it. For the first time he was beginning to feel that he had not been running a very big business after all.

My mother had come out to watch the operation and taunted him. "With this stock you think of buying motor cars and whatnot." He had not at any time proposed buying a motor car, but she liked to nag him.

Father said, rather weakly, "Why drag in all that now?" He was ruminating. "I shall need at least another five hundred rupees' worth of articles to fill up all this space."

The stationmaster, an old man wearing a green turban round his head and silver-rimmed spectacles, came along to survey the shop. My father became extremely deferential at the sight of him. Behind him stood Karia the porter in his blue shirt and turban. My mother withdrew unobtrusively and went back home. The stationmaster

viewed the shop from a distance with his head on one side as if he were an artist viewing a handiwork. The porter, ever faithful, followed his example, keeping himself in readiness to agree with whatever he might say. The stationmaster said, "Fill up all that space — otherwise the ATS might come round and ask questions, poking his nose into all our affairs. It has not been easy to give you this shop. . . ."

My father sat me in the shop and went over to the town to make the purchases. "Don't display too much rice and other stuff — keep the other shop for such things," advised the stationmaster. "Railway passengers won't be asking for tamarind and lentils during the journey." My father implicitly accepted his directions. The stationmaster was his palpable God now and he cheerfully obeyed all his commands. And so presently there hung down from nails in my father's other shop bigger bunches of bananas, stacks of Mempu oranges, huge troughs of fried stuff, and colorful peppermints and sweets in glass containers, loaves of bread, and buns. The display was most appetizing, and he had loaded several racks with packets of cigarettes. He had to anticipate the demand of every kind of traveler and provide for it.

He left me in charge of his hut shop. His old customers came down to gossip and shop, as had been their habit. But they found me unequal to it. I found it tedious to listen to their talk of litigation and irrigation. I was not old enough to appreciate all their problems and the subtleties of their transactions. I listened to them without response, and soon they discovered that I was no good companion for them. They left me in peace and wandered off to the other shop, seeking my father's company. But they found it untenable. They felt strange there. It was too sophisticated a surrounding for them. Very soon, unobtrusively, my father was back in his seat at the hut shop, leaving me to handle the business in the new shop. As soon as a certain bridge off Malgudi was ready, regular service began on our rails; it was thrilling to watch the activities of the stationmaster and the blue-shirted porter as they "received" and "line-cleared" two whole trains each day, the noon train from Madras and the evening one from Trichy. I became very active indeed in the shop. As you might have guessed, all this business expansion in our family helped me achieve a very desirable end — the dropping off of my school unobtrusively.

# 4

The banana worked a miracle. The boy went from house to house, announcing that the saint was back at his post. Men, women, and children arrived in a great mass. All that they wanted was to be allowed to look at him and watch the radiance on his face. The children stood around and gazed in awe. Raju tried to manage the situation by pinching a few cheeks and saying some inanities, or even indulging in baby-talk in order to soften the awkwardness of the situation. He went up to young boys and asked, "What are you studying?" in the manner of big men he had seen in cities. But it was stupid to imitate that question here, because the boys giggled, looked at one another, and said, "No school for us."

"What do you do all day?" he asked, without any real interest in their problems.

One of the elders interposed to say, "We cannot send our boys to the school as you do in towns; they have to take the cattle out for grazing."

Raju clicked his tongue in disapproval. He shook his head. The gathering looked pained and anxious. Raju explained grandly, "Boys must read, first. They must, of course, help their parents, but they must also find the time to study." He added on an inspiration, "If they cannot find the time to read during the day, why should they not gather in the evenings and learn?"

"Where?" asked someone.

"Maybe here." Raju added, pointing at the vast hall, "Maybe you could ask one of your masters. Is there no schoolmaster in your midst?"

"Yes, yes," several voices cried in unison.

"Ask him to see me," Raju commanded authoritatively, with the air of a president summoning a defaulting assistant master.

Next afternoon a timid man, who wore a short tuft with a turban over it, turned up at the temple hall. Raju had just finished his repast and was enjoying a siesta in the hall, stretching himself on its cool granite floor. The timid man stood beside an ancient

pillar and cleared his throat. Raju opened his eyes and looked at him blankly. It was not the custom there, in that society, to ask who or why, when so many came and went. Raju flourished an arm to indicate to the other to sit down and resumed his sleep. When he awoke later, he saw the man sitting close to him.

"I'm the teacher," the man said, and in the muddled state of half-sleep Raju's old fears of schoolteachers returned: he forgot for a split second that he had left all those years behind. He sat up.

The master was rather surprised. He said, "Don't disturb yourself. I can wait."

"That's all right," said Raju, recovering his composure and understanding his surroundings better. "You are the school- master?" he asked patronizingly. He brooded for a moment, then asked in a general way, "How is everything?"

The other merely replied, "No different from what it used to be."

"How do you like it?"

"What does it matter?" the other said. "I only try to do my best and do it sincerely."

"Otherwise, what's the use of doing anything at all?" asked Raju. He was marking time. He was not very clear-headed yet after the deep sleep, and the problem of boys' education was not uppermost in his mind at the moment. He said tentatively, "After all, one's duty — '

"I do my utmost," said the other defensively, not wishing to give way. After these parleys, which lasted for half an hour, the village master himself clarified the position. "It seems you suggested that the boys should be assembled here and taught at nights."

"Oh! eh!" Raju said. "Yes, I did, of course, but it's a matter in which the decision should be purely yours. After all, self-help is the best help; I may be here today and gone tomorrow. It's up to you to arrange it. I meant that if you want a place — you can have it." He swept his arm about with the air of one conferring a gift on a whole community.

The teacher looked thoughtful for a moment and began, "I'm not sure, however — "

But Raju suddenly became argumentative and definite. He said with a lot of authority, "I like to see young boys become literate and intelligent." He added with fervor because it sounded nice, "It's our duty to make everyone happy and wise."

This overwhelming altruism was too much for the teacher. "I'll do anything," he said, "under your guidance." Raju admitted the position with, "I'm but an instrument accepting guidance myself."

The result was that the teacher went back to the village a changed man. Next day he was back at the pillared hall with a dozen children of the village. They had their foreheads smeared with sacred ash, and their slates creaked in the silent night, while the teacher lectured to them, and Raju, seated on his platform, looked on benignly. The teacher was apologetic about the numbers: he could muster only about a dozen boys. "They are afraid of crossing the river in the dark; they have heard of a crocodile hereabouts."

"What can a crocodile do to you if your mind is clear and your conscience is untroubled?" Raju said grandly. It was a wonderful sentiment to express. He was surprised at the amount of wisdom welling from the depths of his being. He said to the teacher, "Don't be dispirited that there are only a dozen. If you do your work sincerely by a dozen, it'll be equivalent, really, to serving a hundred times that number."

The teacher suggested, "Do not mistake me, but will you speak to these boys whenever you can?" This gave Raju a chance to air his views on life and eternity before the boys. He spoke to them on godliness, cleanliness, spoke on Ramayana, the characters in the epics; he addressed them on all kinds of things. He was hypnotized by his own voice; he felt himself growing in stature as he saw the upturned faces of the children shining in the half-light when he spoke. No one was more impressed with the grandeur of the whole thing than Raju himself.

Now that I reflect upon it, I am convinced I was not such a dud after all. It seems to me that we generally do not have a correct measure of our own wisdom. I

remember how I was equipping my mind all the time. I read a certain amount of good stuff in my railway-shop keeping days. I sat in that shop, selling loaves of bread and aerated water. Sometimes school-boys left their books with me for sale. Though my father thought very highly of our shop, I could not share his view. Selling bread and biscuits and accepting money in exchange seemed to me a tame occupation. I always felt that I was too good for the task.

My father died during the rainy part of that year. His end was sudden. He had been selling and talking to his cronies in his hut shop till late at night; then he counted the cash, came into the house, consumed his rice and buttermilk, laid himself down to sleep, and never woke again.

My mother adjusted herself to the status of a widow. My father left her enough to live on comfortably. I gave her as much of my time as possible. With her consent, I closed down my father's shop and set up at the railway station. It was then that I began to develop new lines. I stocked old magazines and newspapers, and bought and sold schoolbooks. Of course my customers were not many, but the train brought in more and more school-going population, and the 10:30 local was full of young men going off to Albert Mission College, which had just been started at Malgudi. I liked to talk to people. I liked to hear people talk. I liked customers who would not open their mouths merely to put a plantain in, and would say some-thing on any subject except the state of crops, price of commodities, and litigation. I am afraid, after my father's death, his old friends wilted away and disappeared one by one, chiefly for want of an audience.

Students gathered at my shop while they waited for the trains. Gradually books appeared where there were coconuts before. People dumped old books and stolen books and all kinds of printed stuff on me. I bargained hard, showed indifference while buying and solicitude while selling. Strictly speaking, it was an irregular thing to do. But the stationmaster was a friendly man who not only obtained unlimited credit for anything he and his children took from my shop, but also enjoyed the privilege of drawing his reading material from the stack growing in front of my shop.

My bookselling business was an unexpected offshoot of my search for old wrapping paper. When people bought something I hated to see them carry it off in their hands. I liked to wrap it up nicely, as well as I could, but as long as my father was in control he said, "If anyone brings a piece of paper, he is welcome to wrap up anything; but I can't do it for him. Profit being what it is, we can't afford to spend it on wrapping paper. If a man buys oil, let him bring a pot to carry it in. Do we provide him with that?" While he practiced this philosophy it was impossible for anyone to find even a scrap of paper in our shop. After his death I adopted a new policy. I made it known far and wide that I was looking for old paper and books, and soon gathered a big dump. In my off-hours I sat sorting it out. During the interval between trains, when the platform became quiet, there was nothing more pleasing than picking up a bundle of assorted books and lounging in my seat and reading, occasionally breaking off to watch through the doorway the immense tamarind tree in the field. I read stuff that interested me, bored me, baffled me, and dozed off in my seat. I read stuff that pricked up a noble thought, a philosophy that appealed, I gazed on pictures of old temples and ruins and new buildings and battleships, and soldiers, and pretty girls around whom my thoughts lingered. I learned much from scrap.

The children were enchanted by the talk they had had in their class from Raju (even their master sat absorbed in open- mouthed wonder). They went home and described the wonders they had been told about. They were impatient to be back on the following evening and listen to more. Very soon the parents joined their children They explained apologetically, Children come home rather late, you see, master, and are afraid to return home — especially crossing the river at night — "

"Excellent, excellent," Raju said. "I wanted to suggest it myself. I'm glad you have thought of it. There is no harm. In fact, you may also benefit by keeping your ears open. Keep your ears open and mouth shut, that'll take you far," he said, hitting upon a brilliant aphorism.

A circle formed around him. They sat there looking on. The children sat there looking on. The master sat there looking on. The pillared hall was bright with the

lanterns the villagers had brought with them. It looked like a place where a great assembly was about to begin. Raju felt like an actor who had come on the stage, and, while the audience waited, had no lines to utter or gestures to make. He said to the master, "I think you may take the children away to their corner for their usual lessons; take one of the lamps with you."

Even as he said it he could not help thinking how he was issuing an order about the boys who were not his, to the teacher who need not obey him, pointing to a lamp which again was not his. The teacher started to obey him, but the boys lingered on. He said, "You must read your lessons first and then I will come and speak to you. Now I will first speak to your elders — what I say to them will not interest you." And the children got up and went away with the teacher to a farther corner of the pillared hall.

Velan ventured to suggest, "Give us a discourse, sir." And as Raju listened without showing any emotion, but looking as if he were in deep contemplation, Velan added, "So that we may have the benefit of your wisdom." The others murmured a general approval.

Raju felt cornered. "I have to play the part expected of me; there is no escape." He racked his head secretly, wondering where to start. Could he speak about tourists' attractions in Malgudi, or should it be moral lessons? How once upon a time there was a so and so, so good or bad that when he came to do such and such a thing he felt so utterly lost that he prayed, and so on and so forth? He felt bored. The only subject on which he could speak with any authority now seemed to be jail life and its benefits, especially for one mistaken for a saint. They waited respectfully for his inspiration. "Oh, fools," he felt like crying out. "Why don't you leave me alone? If you bring me food, leave it there and leave me in peace, thank you."

After a long, brooding silence, he brought out the following words: "All things have to wait their hour." Velan and his friends who were in the front row looked worried for a moment; they were deferential, no doubt, but they did not quite realize what he was driving at. After a further pause, he added grandiosely, "I will speak to you when another day comes."

Someone asked, "Why another day, sir?"

"Because it is so," said Raju mysteriously. "While you wait for the children to finish their lessons, I'd advise you to pass the hour brooding over all your speech and actions from morning till now."

"What speech and actions?" someone asked, genuinely puzzled by the advice.

"Your own," said Raju. "Recollect and reflect upon every word you have uttered since daybreak — "

"I don't remember exactly. . . ."

"Well, that is why I say reflect, recollect. When you don't remember your own words properly, how are you going to remember other people's words?" This quip amused his audience. There were bursts of subdued laughter. When the laughter subsided Raju said, "I want you all to think independently, of your own accord, and not allow yourselves to be led about by the nose as if you were cattle."

There were murmurs of polite disagreement over this advice. Velan asked, "How can we do that, sir? We dig the land and mind the cattle — so far so good, but how can we think philosophies? Not our line, master. It is not possible. It is wise persons like your good self who should think for us."

"And why do you ask us to recollect all that we have said since daybreak?"

Raju himself was not certain why he had advised that, and so he added, "If you do it you will know why." The essence of sainthood seemed to lie in one's ability to utter mystifying statements. "Until you try, how can you know what you can or cannot do?" he asked. He was dragging those innocent men deeper and deeper into the bog of unclear thoughts.

"I can't remember what I said a few moments ago; so many other things come into one's head," wailed one of his victims.

"Precisely. That is what I wish to see you get over," said Raju. "Until you do it, you will not know the pleasure of it." He picked out three men from the gathering. "When you come to me tomorrow or another day, you must each repeat to me at least six words that you have been speaking since the morning. I am asking you to remember only six words," he said pleadingly as a man who was making a great concession, "not six hundred."

"Six hundred! Is there anyone who can remember six hundred, sir?" asked someone with wonder.

"Well, I can," said Raju. And he got the appreciative clicking of tongues which he expected as his legitimate due. Soon the children were there, a great boon to Raju, who rose from his seat as if to say, "That is all for the day," and walked toward the river, the others following. "These children must be feeling sleepy. Take them safely home, and come again."

When the assembly met next, he provided it with a specific program. He beat a soft rhythm with his hands and chanted a holy song with a refrain that could be repeated by his audience. The ancient ceiling echoed with the voices of men, women, and children repeating sacred texts in unison. Someone had brought in tall bronze lamps and lit them. Others fed them with oil; others had spent a whole day twisting bits of cotton into wicks for the lamps. People brought of their own accord little framed pictures of gods and hung them on the pillars. Very soon women started to come in batches during the day to wash the floor and decorate it with patterns in colored flour; they hung up flowers and greenery and festoons everywhere. The pillared hall was transformed. Someone had also covered the platform in the middle of the hall with a soft, coloured carpet; mats were rolled out for the assembly to sit on.

Raju soon realized that his spiritual status would be enhanced if he grew a beard and long hair to fall on his nape. A clean- shaven, close-haired saint was an anomaly. He bore the various stages of his make-up with fortitude, not minding the prickly phase he had to pass through before a well-authenticated beard could cover his face and come down his chest. By the time he arrived at the stage of stroking his beard

thoughtfully, his prestige had grown beyond his wildest dreams. His life had lost its personal limitations; his gatherings had become so large that they overflowed into the outer corridors and people sat right up to the river's edge.

With the exception of Velan and a few others, Raju never bothered to remember faces or names or even to know to whom he was talking. He seemed to belong to the world now. His influence was unlimited. He not only chanted holy verses and discoursed on philosophy, he even came to the stage of prescribing medicine; children who would not sleep peacefully at night were brought to him by their mothers; he pressed their bellies and prescribed a herb, adding, "If he still gets no relief, bring him again to me." It was believed that when he stroked the head of a child, the child improved in various ways. Of course, people brought him their disputes and quarrels over the division of ancestral property. He had to set apart several hours of his afternoon for these activities. He could hardly afford a private life now.There came a stage when he had to be up early and rush through all his own personal routine before his visitors should arrive. It was a strain. He sighed a deep sigh of relief and turned to be himself, eat like an ordinary human being, shout and sleep like a normal man, after the voices on the river had ceased for the night.

## 5

I CAME to be called Railway Raju. Perfect strangers, having heard of my name, began to ask for me when their train arrived at the Malgudi railway station. It is written on the brow of some that they shall not be left alone. I am one such, I think. Although I never looked for acquaintances, they somehow came looking for me. Men who had just arrived always stopped at my shop for a soda or cigarettes and to go through the book stack, and almost always they asked, *'How far is . . . ?" or "Which way does one go to reach . . . ?" or "Are there many historical spots here?" or "I heard that your River Sarayu has its source somewhere on those hills and that it is a beauty spot." This sort of inquiry soon led me to think that I had not given sufficient thought to the subject, I never said, "I don't know." Not in my nature, I suppose. If I had the inclination to say "I don't know what you are talking about," my life would have taken a different turn. Instead, I said, "Oh, yes, a fascinating place. Haven't you seen it? You

must find the time to visit it, otherwise your whole trip here would be a waste." I am sorry I said it, an utter piece of falsehood. It was not because I wanted to utter a falsehood, but only because I wanted to be pleasant.

Naturally, they next asked me the way. I said, "If you just go that way down to the Market Square and ask one of those taxi-drivers . . ." This was not a very satisfactory direction. Soon a man wanted me to show him the way to the Market Square and the taxi. There was a young son of the porter doing points-signaling duty whenever a train was about to arrive, who had no specified work to do at other times. I asked the young fellow to mind the shop while I helped the traveler to find a taxi.

At the market fountain stood the old shark Gaffur, looking for a victim. Fie made a specialty of collecting all the derelict vehicles in the country and rigging them up; he breathed new life into them and ran them on the mountain roads and into the forests. His usual seat was on the parapet of the fountain, while his car basked on the roadside beside the gutter. "Gaffur," I called out. "Here is a very good gentleman, a friend of mine. He wants to see . . . You must take him out and bring him back safely — that is why I have brought him to you personally, although this is not an hour when I should be away from my shop." We haggled over the prices; I allowed the customer to mention his figure and always tried to beat Gaffur down to it. When he demurred at the sight of the vehicle, I took up Gaffur's brief and explained, "Gaffur is no fool to have this kind of car. He searched far and wide to find this particular model; this is the only car which can go up to all those places where in some parts there are no roads at all, but Gaffur will take you there and bring you back in time for dinner tonight. Can't you, Gaffur?"

"Well," he drawled, "it is seventy miles each way; it is one o'clock now. If we leave at once and if there are no punctures on the way . . ." But I hustled him so much that Gaffur never really completed his sentence. When they returned it could not exactly be called dinnertime, unless you stretched it to include midnight, but Gaffur did bring him back intact, honked his car to wake me up, took his cash, and departed. The next train for the man would be at eight on the following morning. He had to

stretch himself under the awning on the platform of my shop and spend the night thus. If he felt hungry, I opened my store and sold him fruits and such things.

Travellers are an enthusiastic lot. They do not mind any inconvenience as long as they have something to see. Why anyone should want to forgo food and comfort and jolt a hundred-odd miles to see some place, I could never understand, but it was not my business to ask for reasons; just as I did not mind what people ate or smoked in my shop, my business being only to provide the supply and nothing more. It seemed to me silly to go a hundred miles to see the source of Sarayu when it had taken the trouble to tumble down the mountain and come to our door. I had not even heard of its source till that moment; but the man who had gone was all praise for the spot. He said, "I am only sorry I did not bring my wife and mother to see the place." Later in life I found that everyone who saw an interesting spot always regretted that he hadn't come with his wife or daughter, and spoke as if he had cheated someone out of a nice thing in life. Later, when I had become a full-blown tourist guide, I often succeeded in inducing a sort of melancholia in my customer by remarking, "This is something that should be enjoyed by the whole family," and the man would swear that he would be back with his entire brood in the coming season.

The man who had gone to the source of the river spoke all night about it: how there was a small shrine on the peak right at the basin. "It must be the source of Sarayu mentioned in the mythological stories of goddess Parvathi jumping into the fire; the carving on one of the pillars of the shrine actually shows the goddess plunging into the fire and water arising from the spot," et cetera. Sometimes someone with a scholarly turn of mind would come and make a few additions to the facts, such as that the dome of the shrine must have been built in the third century before Christ or that the style of drapery indicated the third century after Christ. But it was all the same to me, and the age I ascribed to any particular place depended upon my mood at that hour and the type of person I was escorting. If he was the academic type I was careful to avoid all mention of facts and figures and to confine myself to general descriptions, letting the man himself do the talking. You may be sure he enjoyed the opportunity. On the other hand, if an innocent man happened to be at hand, I let myself go freely. I pointed out to

him something as the greatest, the highest, the only one in the world. I gave statistics out of my head. I mentioned a relic as belonging to the thirteenth century before Christ or the thirteenth century after Christ, according to the mood of the hour. If I felt fatigued or bored with the person I was conducting, I sometimes knocked the whole glamour out by saying, "Must be something built within the last twenty years and allowed to go to rack and ruin. There are scores of such spots all over the place." But it was years before I could arrive at that stage of confidence and nonchalance.

The porter's son sat in the shop all day. I spent a little time each night to check the cash and stock. There was no definite arrangement about what he should be paid for his trouble. I gave him a little money now and then. Only my mother protested. "Why do you want him to work for you, Raju? Either give him a definite commission or do it yourself instead of all this wandering in the country. What good does it do you, anyway?"

"You don't know. Mother," I said, eating my late dinner. "This is a far better job I am doing than the other one. I am seeing a lot of places and getting paid for it; I go with them in their car or bus, talk to them, I am treated to their food sometimes, and I get paid for it. Do you know how well known I am? People come asking for me from Bombay, Madras, and other places, hundreds of miles away. They call me Railway Raju and have told me that even in Lucknow there are persons who are familiar with my name. It is something to become so famous, isn't it, instead of handing out matches and tobacco?"

"Well, wasn't it good enough for your father?" "I don't say anything against it. I will look after the shop also."

This pleased the old lady. Occasionally she threw in a word about her brother's daughter in the village before blowing out the lamp. She was always hoping that someday I would consent to marry the girl, though she never directly said so. "Do you know Lalitha has got a prize in her school? I had a letter from my brother today about it."

Even as the train steamed in at the outer signal, I could scent a customer. I had a kind of water-diviner's instinct. If I felt the pull of good business I drifted in the direction of the coming train; I could stand exactly where a prospective tourist would alight and look for me: it was not only the camera or binoculars slung on a shoulder that indicated to me the presence of a customer; even without any of that I could spot him. If you found me straying away in the direction of the barrier while the engine was still running through the lines onto the platform you might be sure that there was no customer for me on the train. In a few months I was a seasoned guide. I had viewed myself as an amateur guide and a professional shopman, but now gradually I began to think of myself as a part-time shopkeeper and a full-time tourist guide. Even when I had no tourist to guide I did not go back to my shop, but to Gaffur on the fountain parapet, and listened to his talk about derelict automobiles.

I had classified all my patrons. They were very varied, I can tell you. Some were passionate photographers; these men could never look at any object except through their view-finders. The moment they got down from the train, even before lifting their baggage, they asked, "Is there a place where they develop films?"

"Of course, Malgudi Photo Bureau. One of the biggest . . ."

"And if I want roll-films — I have, of course, enough stock with me, but if I run out . . . Do you think super-panchro three-color something-or-other is available there?"

"Of course. That's his special line."

"Will he develop and show me a print while I wait?"

"Of course, before you count twenty — he is a wizard."

"That is nice. Now, where are you going to take me first?"

These were routine questions from a routine type. I had all the satisfactory answers ready. I generally took time to answer the latter question as to where I was going .to take him first. It depended. I awaited the receipt of certain data before

venturing to answer. The data were how much time and money he was going to spend. Malgudi and its surroundings were my special show. I could let a man have a peep at it or a whole panorama. It was adjustable. I could give them a glimpse of a few hours or soak them in mountain and river scenery or archaeology for a whole week. I could not really decide how much to give or withhold until I knew how much cash the man carried or, if he carried a checkbook, how good it was. This was another delicate point. Sometimes a traveller offered to write a check for this man or that, and, of course, our Gaffur or the photo store or the keeper of the forest bungalow on top of the Mempi Hills would not trust a stranger enough to accept his check. I had to put off such an offer with the utmost delicacy by saying, "Oh, the banking system in our town is probably the worst you can think of. Sometimes they take twenty days to realize a check, but these poor fellows, how can they wait?" — rather a startling thing to say, but I didn't care if the banking reputation of our town suffered.

As soon as a tourist arrived, I observed how he dealt with his baggage, whether he engaged a porter at all or preferred to hook a finger to each piece. I had to note all this within a split second, and then, outside, whether he walked to the hotel or called a taxi or haggled with the one-horse *jutka*. Of course, I undertook all this on his behalf, but always with detachment. I did all this for him simply for the reason that he asked for Railway Raju the moment he stepped down on the platform and I knew he came with good references, whether he came from north or south or far or near. And at the hotel it was my business to provide him with the best room or the worst room, just as he might prefer. Those who took the cheapest dormitory said, "After all, it's only for sleeping, I am going to be out the whole day. Why waste money on a room which is anyway going to be locked up all day? Don't you agree?"

"Surely, yes, yes." I nodded, still without giving an answer to "Where are you going to take me first?" I might still be said to be keeping the man under probation, under careful scrutiny. I never made any suggestion yet. No use expecting a man to be clear-headed who is fresh from a train journey. He must wash, change his clothes, refresh himself with idli and coffee, and only then can we expect anyone in South India to think clearly on all matters of this world and the next. If he offered me any

refreshment, I understood that he was a comparatively liberal sort, but did not accept it until we were a little further gone in friendship. In due course, I asked him point-blank, "How much time do you hope to spend in this town?"

"Three days at the most. Could we manage everything within the time?"

"Certainly, although it all depends upon what you most wish to see." And then I put him in the confessional, so to speak. I tried to draw out his interests. Malgudi, I said, had many things to offer, historically, scenically, from the point of view of modem developments, and so on and so forth; or if one came as a pilgrim I could take him to a dozen temples all over the district within a radius of fifty miles; I could find holy waters for him to bathe in all along the course of the Sarayu, starting, of course, with its source on Mempi Peaks.

One thing I learned in my career as a tourist guide was that no two persons were interested in the same thing. Tastes, as in food, differ also in sightseeing. Some people want to be seeing a waterfall, some want a ruin (oh, they grow ecstatic when they see cracked plaster, broken idols, and crumbling bricks), some want a god to worship, some look for a hydroelectric plant, and some want just a nice place, such as the bungalow on top of Mempi with all-glass sides, from where you could see a hundred miles and observe wild game prowling around. Of those again there were two types, one the poet who was content to watch and return, and the other who wanted to admire nature and also get drunk there. I don't know why it is so: a fine poetic spot like the Mempi Peak House excites in certain natures unexpected reactions. I know some who brought women there; a quiet, wooded spot looking over a valley one would think fit for contemplation or poetry, but it only acted as an aphrodisiac. Well, it was not my business to comment. My business stopped with taking them there, and to see that Gaffur went back to pick them up at the right time.

I was sort of scared of the man who acted as my examiner, who had a complete list of all the sights and insisted on his money's worth. "What is the population of this town?" "What is the area?" "Don't bluff. I know when exactly that was built — it is not second-century but the twelfth." Or he told me the correct pronunciation of words. "R-

o-u-t is not ..." I was meek, self-effacing in his presence and accepted his corrections with gratitude, and he always ended up by asking, "What is the use of your calling yourself a guide if you do not know . . . ?" et cetera, et cetera.

You may well ask what I made out of all this? Well, there is no fixed answer to it. It depended upon the circumstances and the types of people I was escorting. I generally specified ten rupees as the minimum for the pleasure of my company, and a little more if I had to escort them far; over all this Gaffur, the photo stores, the hotel manager, and whoever I introduced a customer to expressed their appreciation, according to a certain schedule. I learned while I taught and earned while I learned, and the whole thing was most enjoyable.

There were special occasions, such as the trapping of an elephant herd. During the winter months the men of the Forest Department put through an elaborate scheme for trapping elephants. They watched, encircled, and drove a whole herd into stockades, and people turned up in great numbers to watch the operation. On the day fixed for the drive, people poured in from all over the country and applied to me for a ringside seat in the spacious bamboo jungles of Mempi. I was supposed to have special influence with the men who were in charge of the drive: it meant several advance trips to the forest camp, and doing little services for the officials by fetching whatever they required from the town, and when the time came to arrange for the viewing of the elephant-drive, only those who came with me were allowed to pass through the gates of the special enclosures. It kept all of us happy and busy and well paid. I escorted visitors in bunches and went hoarse repeating, "You see, the wild herd is watched for months . . ." and so forth. Don't imagine that I cared for elephants personally; anything that interested my tourists was also my interest. The question of my own preferences was secondary. If someone wanted to see a tiger or shoot one, I knew where to arrange it: I arranged for the lamb to bait the tiger, and had high plat- forms built so that the brave hunters might pop off the poor beast when it came to eat the lamb, although I never liked to see either the lamb or the tiger die. If someone wanted to see a king cobra spread out its immense hood, I knew the man who could provide the show.

There was a girl who had come all the way from Madras and who asked the moment she set foot in Malgudi, "Can you show me a cobra — a king cobra it must be — which can dance to the music of a flute?"

"Why?" I asked.

'I'd like to see one. That's all," she said.

Her husband said, "We have other things to think of, Rosie.

This can wait."

"I'm not asking this gentleman to produce it at once. I am not demanding it. I'm just mentioning it, that's all."

"If it interests you, you can make your own arrangements. Don't expect me to go with you. I can't stand the sight of a snake — your interests are morbid."

I disliked this man. He was taunting such a divine creature. My sympathies were all for the girl; she was so lovely and elegant. After she arrived I discarded my khaki bush coat and dhoti and took the trouble to make myself presentable. I wore a silk *jibba* and lace *dhoti* and groomed myself so well that my mother remarked when she saw me leave the house, "Ah, like a bridegroom!" and Gaffur winked and said many an insinuating thing when I went to meet them at the hotel.

Her arrival had been a sort of surprise for me. The man was the first to appear. I had put him up at the Anand Bhavan Hotel. After a day of sightseeing he suddenly said one after- noon, "I must meet the Madras train. Another person is coming."

He didn't even stop to ask me what time the train would arrive. He seemed to know everything beforehand. He was a very strange man, who did not always care to explain what he was doing. If he had warned me that he was going to meet such an elegant creature at our station I should perhaps have decorated myself appropriately. As it was, I wore my usual khaki bush coat and dhoti, a horrible unprepossessing combination at any time, but the most sensible and convenient for my type of work. The moment she got down from the train I wished I had hidden myself somewhere.

She was not very glamorous, if that is what you expect, but she did have a figure, a slight and slender one, beautifully fashioned, eyes that sparkled, a complexion not white, but dusky, which made her only half visible — as if you saw her through a film of tender coconut juice. Forgive me if you find me waxing poetic. I gave some excuse and sent them off to the hotel, and stayed back to run home and tidy up my appearance.

I conducted a brief research with the help of Gaffur. He took me to a man in Ellaman Street, who had a cousin working in the municipal office said to know a charmer with a king cobra. I carried on the investigation while I left the visitor to decipher episodes from Ramayan carved on the stone wall in Iswara Temple in North Extension — there were hundreds of minute carvings all along the wall. They kept the man fully occupied as he stooped and tried to study each bit. I knew all those panels and could repeat their order blindfolded, but he spared me the labor, he knew all about it.

When I returned from my brief investigation, I found the girl standing apart with every sign of boredom in her face. I suggested, *'lf you can come out for an hour, I can show you a cobra."

She looked delighted. She tapped the man on the shoulder as he was stooping over the frieze and asked, "How long do you want to be here?"

"At least two hours," he said without turning.

"I'll go out for a while," she said.

"Please yourself," he said. Then to me, "Go to the hotel direct. I'll find my way back."

We picked up our guide at the municipal office. The car rolled along the sand, crossed the stretch at Nallappa's grove, and climbed the opposite bank, the entire route carved by the wheels of wooden bullock carts. Gaffur looked sourly at the man sitting by his side. "Do you want me to reduce this to a bullock cart, dragging us about these places? Where are we going? I see no other place than the cremation ground there," he said, pointing at the smoke above a forlorn walled area on the other side of the river. I

didn't like such inauspicious words to be uttered before the angel in the back seat. I tried to cover them up hastily by saying something else aloud.

We arrived at a group of huts on the other side of the river. Many heads peeped out of the huts as soon as our car stopped, and a few bare-bodied children came and stood around the car, gaping at the occupants. Our guide jumped out and went at a trot to the farthest end of the village street and returned with a man who had a red turban around his head, his only other piece of clothing being a pair of drawers.

"This man has a king cobra?" I looked him up and down and said hesitantly, "Let me see it."

At which the young boys said, "He has a very big one in his house; it is true." And I asked the lady, "Shall we go and see it?"

We set off. Gaffur said, "I'll stay here, otherwise these monkeys will make short work of this automobile."

I let the other two go forward and whispered to Gaffur, 'Why are you in such a bad mood today, Gaffur? After all, you have gone over worse roads and never complained!"

"I have new springs and shock-absorbers. You know what they cost?"

"Oh, you will recover their cost soon; be cheerful."

"What some of our passengers need is a tractor and not a motor car. That fellow!" He was vaguely discontented. I knew his wrath was not against us, but against our guide, because he said, "I think it will be good to make him walk back to the town. Why should anyone want to come so far to see a reptile?" I left him alone; it was no use trying to make him cheerful. Perhaps his wife had nagged him when he started out.

The girl stood under the shade of a tree while the man prodded a snake to make it come out of its basket. It was fairly large, and hissed and spread out its hood, while the boys screamed and ran off and returned. The man shouted at them, "If you excite it, it will chase you all!"

I told the boys to keep quiet, and asked the man, "You are sure you will not let it slip through?"

The girl suggested, "You must play on the flute, make it rear its head and dance." The man pulled out his gourd flute and played on it shrilly, and the cobra raised itself and darted hither and thither and swayed. The whole thing repelled me, but it seemed to fascinate the girl. She watched it swaying with the raptest attention. She stretched out her arm slightly and swayed it in imitation of the movement; she swayed her whole body to the rhythm — for just a second, but that was sufficient to tell me what she was, the greatest dancer of the century.

It was nearly seven in the evening when we got back to the hotel. As soon as she got down, she paused to murmur a "Thanks" to no one in particular and went up the staircase. Her husband, waiting at the porch, said, "That's all for the day. You could give me a consolidated account, I suppose, later. I shall want the car at ten o'clock tomorrow." He turned and went back to his room.

I felt annoyed with him at this stage. What did he take me for? This fellow, telling me that he wanted the car at this hour or at that hour — did he think that I was a tout? It made me very angry, but the fact was that I really was a tout, having no better business than hanging around between Gaffur and a snake-charmer and a tourist and doing all kinds of things. The man did not even care to tell me anything about himself, or where he wanted to go on the following morning; an extraordinary fellow!

A hateful fellow. I had never hated any customer so much before. I told Gaffur as we were driving back, "Tomorrow morning! He asks for the car as if it were his grandfather's property! Any idea where he wants to go?"

"Why should I bother about it? If he wants the car he can have it if he pays for it. That is all. I don't care who pays for a thing as long as they engage me. . . ." He rambled on into a personal philosophy which I didn't care to follow.

My mother waited for me as usual. While serving me food she said, "Where have you been today? What are the things you have done today?"

I told her about the visit to the snake-charmer. She said, "They are probably from Burma, people who worship snakes." She said, "I had a cousin living in Burma once and he told me about the snake women there."

"Don't talk nonsense. Mother. She is a good girl, not a snake- worshiper. She is a dancer, I think."

"Oh, dancer! Maybe; but don't have anything to do with these dancing women. They are all a bad sort." I ate my food in silence, trying to revive in my mind the girl's scent-filled presence.

At ten next day I was at the hotel. Gaffur's car was already at the porch; he cried, "Aha! again," at the sight of me. "Big man! Hm, trying improvements!" His idiom was still as if he spoke of automobiles. He winked at me.

I ignored everything and asked in a businesslike manner, "Are they in?"

"I suppose so, they have not come out yet, that's all I know," said Gaffur. Twenty words where one would do. Something was wrong with him. He was becoming loquacious. And then I felt a sudden stab of jealousy as I realized that perhaps he too had been affected by the presence of the damsel and was desirous of showing off in her presence. I grew jealous and unhappy and said to myself, "If this is how Gaffur is going to conduct himself in the future, I shall get rid of him and find someone else, that's all." I had no use for a loquacious, nose- poking taxi-driver.

I went upstairs to Room 28 on the second floor of the hotel and knocked authoritatively. "Wait," said the voice from in- side. It was the man's, not the girl's, as I had hoped. I waited for a few minutes and fretted. I looked at my watch. Ten o'clock. And this man said, "Wait." Was he still in bed with her? It was a fit occasion, as it seemed to me, to tear the door down and go in. The door opened, and he came out, dressed and ready. He shut the door behind him. I was aghast. I was on the point of demanding, "What about her?" But I checked my impulse. I went sheepishly down with him.

He gave me a look of approval, as if I had dressed to please him. Before getting into the car he said, "Today I want to study those friezes again for a short while."

"All right, all right," I thought, "study the friezes or what- ever else you like. Why do you want me for that?"

As if in answer to my thoughts, he said, "After that — " He took out of his pocket a piece of paper and read.

This man would go on wall-gazing all his life and leave her to languish in her hotel room. Strange man! Why did he not bring her along with him? Probably he was absent-minded. I asked, "Is no one else coming?"

"No," he replied curtly, as if understanding my mind. He looked at the paper in his hand and asked, "Are you aware of the existence of cave paintings in these parts?"

I laughed off the question. "Of course, everyone does not have the taste to visit places like that, but there have been a few discriminating visitors who insisted on seeing them. But — but — it will take a whole day, and we may not be able to get back tonight."

He went back to his room, returned after a few minutes with a downcast face. Meanwhile I, with Gaffur's help, calculated the expense involved in the trip. We knew that the path lay past the Peak House forest bungalow. One would have to halt there for the night and walk down a couple of miles. I knew where the caves were, but this was the first time I was going to set eyes on them. Malgudi seemed to unroll a new sightseeing place each time.

The man sat back in the car and said, "You have probably no notion how to deal with women, have you?"

I was pleased that he was becoming more human in his approach. I said, "I have no idea," and laughed, thinking it might please him if I seemed to enjoy his joke. Then I made bold to ask, "What is the trouble?" My new dress and deportment gave

me a new courage. In my khaki bush coat I would not have dared to take a seat beside him or talk to him in this way.

He looked at me with what seemed a friendly smile. He leaned over and said, "If a man has to have peace of mind it is best that he forget the fair sex." This was the first time in our association of three days that he had talked to me so freely. He had always been curt and taciturn. I judged that the situation must be pretty grave if it unloosened his tongue to this extent.

Gaffur sat in his seat with his chin in his hand. He was looking away from us. His whole attitude said, "I am sorry to be wasting my morning with such time-killers as you two." A courageous idea was developing in my head. If it succeeded it would lead to a triumphant end, if it failed the man might kick me out of his sight or call the police. I said, "Shall I go and try on your behalf?"

"Would you?" he asked, brightening up. "Go ahead, if you are bold enough."

I didn't wait to hear further. I jumped out of the car and went up the steps four at a time. I paused at Number 28 to regain normal breath, and knocked.

"Don't trouble me, I don't want to come with you. Leave me alone," came the girl's voice from within.

I hesitated, wondering how to speak. This was my first independent speech with the divine creature. I might either make a fool of myself or win the heavens. How should I announce myself? Would she know my famous name? I said, "It's not he, but me."

"What?" asked the sweet voice, puzzled and irritated.

I repeated, "It is not him, but me. Don't you know my voice? Didn't I come with you yesterday to that cobra man? All night I didn't sleep," I added, lowering my voice and whispered through a chink in the door. "The way you danced, your form and figure haunted me all night."

Hardly had I finished my sentence when the door half opened and she looked at me. "Oh, you!" she said, her eyes lighting up with understanding.

"My name is Raju," I said.

She scrutinized me thoroughly. "Of course, I know you." I smiled affably, my best smile, as if I had been asked for it by a photographer. She said, "Where is he?"

"Waiting in the car for you. Won't you get ready and come out?" She looked disheveled, her eyes were red with recent tears, and she wore a faded cotton sari; no paint or perfume, but I was prepared to accept her as she was. I told her, "You may come out as you are and no one will mind it." And I added, "Who would decorate a rainbow?"

She said, "You think you can please me by all this? You think you can persuade me to change my mind?"

"Yes," I said. "Why not?"

"Why do you want me to go out with him? Leave me in peace," she said, opening her eyes wide, which gave me another opportunity to whisper close to her face, "Because life is so blank without your presence."

She could have pushed my face back, crying, "How dare you talk like this!" and shut the door on me. But she didn't. She merely said, "I never knew you would be such a trouble- some man. Wait a minute, then." She withdrew into her room. I wanted to cry with all my being, "Let me in," and bang on the door, but I had the good sense to restrain myself. I heard footsteps and saw that her husband had come to see the results.

"Well, is she coming or not? I am not prepared to waste all—"

"Hush," I said. "She will be out in a moment. Please go back to the car."

"Really!" He mutterd in amazement. "You are a wizard!" He noiselessly turned and went back to his car. Presently the lady did come out like a vision, and said, "Let us go. But for you I would have given you all a few surprises."

"What?"

"I would have taken the next train home."

"We are going to a wonderful spot. Please be your usual sweet self, for my sake."

"All right," she said and went down the steps; I followed. She opened the door of the car, went straight in, and took her seat, as her husband edged away to make space for her. I came over to the other side and sat down beside him. I was not prepared to go and sit down beside Gaffur at this stage.

Gaffur now turned his head to ask whether we might go. "We cannot return tonight if we are going to the Peak House."

"Let us try and come back," the man pleaded.

"We will try, but there is no harm in being prepared to stay over if necessary. Take a change of clothing. No harm in it. I am asking Gaffur to stop at my house."

The lady said, "Just a minute, please." She dashed upstairs and returned with a small suitcase. She said to the man, "I have your clothes too in this."

The man said, "Very good," and smiled, and she smiled and in the laughter the tension of the morning partly disappeared. Still, there was some uneasiness in the air.

I asked Gaffur to pull up at the railway station for a moment, the car facing away from my house. I didn't want them to see my house. "Just a moment, please." I dashed out. Directly the shop boy sighted me he opened his mouth to say something. I ignored him, dashed up to my house, picked up a bag, and ran out, saying, "I may stay out tonight. Don't wait," to my mother in the kitchen.

We reached the Peak House at about four in the afternoon. The caretaker was delighted to see us. He was often rewarded by me unstintingly with my clients' money. I always made it a point to tell my clients beforehand, "Keep that caretaker in good humor and he'll look after you and procure for you even the most impossible articles."

I repeated the formula now and the husband — he shall be referred to as Marco henceforth — said, "Go ahead and do it. I look to you to help us through. You know I have only one principle in life. I don't want to be bothered with small things. I don't mind the expense."

I told Joseph, the caretaker, to get us food and foodstuffs from his village, two miles away. I asked Marco, "Will you leave some cash with me? I'll render accounts later. I need not worry you again and again for small payments.

One could not foresee how he would react to such a request. He was unsteady — sometimes he announced aloud his indifference to money, next minute he'd suddenly show every symptom of miserliness and behave like an auditor, but ultimately he'd pay for everything if, as I discovered, he got a voucher for payments. He would not yield an anna without a voucher, whereas if you gave him a slip of paper you could probably get him to write off his entire fortune.

Now I knew the trick. As I found him stumbling for words, I said, "I'll see that you get proper receipts for every payment." It pleased him; he opened his purse.

I had to dispose of the taxi. Gaffur would come back on the following afternoon. I made Gaffur sign a receipt, and then gave some money to Joseph to fetch us food from a hotel in the village. Now that I was in charge of the arrangements, I had not much time to gaze on my beloved's face, al- though I was darting glances in her direction.

"The caves are a mile off, down that way," Joseph said. "We can't go there now. Tomorrow morning. If you leave after breakfast, you can come back for lunch."

The Peak House was perched on the topmost cliff on Mempi Hills — the road ended with the house; there was a glass wall covering the north veranda, through which you could view the horizon a hundred miles away. Below us the jungle stretched away down to the valley, and on a clear day you might see also the Sarayu sparkling in the sun and pursuing its own course far away. This was like heaven to those who loved wild surroundings and to watch the game, which prowled outside the glass wall at

nights. The girl was in ecstasy. Our house was surrounded with rich vegetation. She ran like a child from plant to plant with cries of joy, while the man looked on with no emotion. Anything that interested her seemed to irritate him.

She suddenly halted, gazing on the sun-bathed plains thou- sands of feet below. I feared that when night came on she might get scared. We heard the jackals howling, and all kinds of grunts and roars. Joseph brought a hamper of food for us and left it on a table. He brought milk, coffee, and sugar, for the morning, and showed me where the coal stove was.

The lady cried, "Nobody should get up till I call. I'll have coffee ready for everyone."

Joseph said, "Please lock the door inside," and added, "If you sit up on that veranda, you can watch tigers and others animals prowling about. But you must not make any noise; that's the secret of it." We watched Joseph pick up a lantern and go down the steps; we could see his lantern faintly light the foliage on the way and disappear.

"Poor Joseph, how bold of him to go down alone!" the girl said, at which the husband replied casually, "Nothing surprising. He has probably been born and bred here. Do you know him?" he asked, turning to me.

"Yes; he was born in that village and came to mind this place as a boy. He must be at least sixty years old."

"How has he come to be a Christian?"

"There was a mission somewhere here; missionaries go and settle down in all sorts of places, you know," I said.

Joseph had given us two lamps, brass ones filled with kerosene. One I kept on the kitchen table, and the other I gave the man for his room, leaving the rest of the building in darkness. Outside through the glass we could see the stars in the sky.

We sat around the table. I knew where the plates were. I set them on the table and served food — or, rather, attempted to serve food. It was about seven-thirty in the evening. We had seen a gorgeous sunset. We had seen the purple play of color in the northern skies after that, and admired it; we saw the tops of the trees lit up by stray red rays even after the sun was out of view, and had found a common idiom to express our admiration.

The man just followed us about. I had become so lyrical that he suddenly said, "Hey, Raju, so you are a poet too!" a compliment I accepted with becoming modesty.

At dinner, I picked up a dish and tried to serve. She said, "No, no. Let me serve you both, and I will be the last to eat, like a good housewife."

"Aha, that's a good idea," the man said jocularly. She ex- tended her hand for me to pass the dish to her. But I insisted on doing it myself. She suddenly darted forward and forcibly snatched it away from my hand. Oh, that touch made my head reel for a moment. I didn't see anything clearly. Everything disappeared into a sweet, dark haze, as under chloroform. My memory dwelt on the touch all through the dinner: I was not aware what we were eating or what they were saying. I sat with bowed head. I was nervous to see her face and meet her looks. I don't recollect when we finished eating and when she took away the dishes. I was only conscious of her soft movements. My thoughts dwelt on her golden touch. A part of my mind went on saying, "No, no. It is not right. Marco is her husband, remember. It's not to be thought of." But it was impossible to pull the thoughts back. "He may shoot you," said my wary conscience. "Has he a gun?" commented another part of my mind.

After dinner she said, "Let us go to the glass veranda. I must watch the game. Do you think they will come out at this hour?"

"Yes; if we are patient and lucky," I said. "But won't you be afraid? One has to wait in the dark."

She laughed at my fears and invited Marco to go with her. But he said he wanted to be left alone. He pulled a chair to the lamp, took out his portfolio, and was

soon lost in his papers. She said, "Shield your lamp. I don't want my animals to be scared off." She moved on light steps to the veranda, pulled up a chair, and sat down. On the way she had said to me, "Have you documents to see to?"

"No, no," I said, hesitating midway between my room and hers.

"Come along, then. Surely you aren't going to leave me to the mercy of prowling beasts?" I looked at the man to know what he would have to say, but he was absorbed in his papers. I asked, "Do you want anything?"

"No."

"I'll be on the veranda."

"Go ahead," he said without looking up from his papers.

She sat close to the glass pane, intently looking out. I softly placed a chair beside her, and sat down. After a while she said, "Not a soul. Do animals come here at all, I wonder, or is it one of the usual stories?"

"No, lots of people have seen them — "

"What animals?"

"Lions . . ."

"Lions here?" she said and began laughing. "I have read they were only in Africa. But this is really — "

"No; excuse me." I had slipped. "I meant tigers, and panthers, and bears, and sometimes elephants too are to be seen crossing the valley or coming for a drink of water at the pool."

"I'm prepared to spend the whole night here," she said. "He will, of course, be glad to be left alone. Here at least we have silence and darkness, welcome things, and something to wait for out of that darkness."

I couldn't find anything to say in reply. I was overwhelmed by her perfume. The stars beyond the glass shone in the sky.

"Can't an elephant break through the glass?" she asked, yawning.

"No; there is a moat on the other side. They can't approach us."

Bright eyes shone amidst the foliage. She pulled my sleeve and whispered excitedly, "Something — what can it be?"

"Probably a panther," I said to keep up the conversation. Oh, the whispers, the stars, and the darkness — I began to breathe heavily with excitement.

"Have you caught a cold?" she asked.

I said, "No."

"Why are you breathing so noisily?"

I wanted to put my face close to her and whisper, "Your dance was marvelous. You are gifted. Do it again sometime. God bless you. Won't you be my sweetheart?" But fortunately I restrained myself. Turning back, I saw that Marco had come on soft steps. "What luck?" he asked in a whisper.

"Something came, but it's gone. Sit down, won't you?" I said, giving him the chair. He sat down, peering through the glass.

Next morning I found the atmosphere once again black and tense — all the vivacity of the previous evening was gone. When their room opened, only he came out, fully dressed and ready. I had made the coffee on the charcoal stove. He came over and mechanically held his hand out as if I were the man on the other side of a coffee bar. I poured him a cup of coffee. "Joseph has brought tiffin. Will you not taste it?"

"No; let us be going. I'm keen on reaching the caves."

"What about the lady?" I asked.

"Leave her alone," he said petulantly. "I can't afford to be fooling around, wasting my time." In the same condition as yesterday! This seemed to be the spirit of their morning every day. How cordially he had come over and sat beside her last night in the veranda! How cordially they had gone into the hotel on that night! What exactly happened at night that made them want to tear at each other in the morning? Did they sit up in bed and fight, or did she fatigue him with a curtain lecture? I wanted to cry out, "Oh, monster, what do you do to her that makes her sulk like this on rising? What a treasure you have in your hand, without realizing its worth — like a monkey picking up a rose garland!" Then a thrilling thought occurred to me — probably she was feigning anger again, so that I might intercede.

He put down his cup and said, "Now let us go." I was afraid to ask him again about his wife. He was swinging a small cane impatiently. Could it be that he had been using it on her at night?

Even in my wild state, I did not make the mistake of asking again, "Shall I call her?" as that might have led to a very serious situation. I only asked, "Does she know about coffee?"

"Yes, yes," he cried impatiently. "Leave it there; she'll take it. She has enough sense to look after herself." He waved the switch, and we started out. Only once did I turn my head to look back, in the hope that she might appear at the window and call us back. "Did I come all the way for this monster's company?" I asked myself as I followed him down the hill slope. How appropriate it would be if he should stumble and roll down hill! Bad thought, bad thought. He walked ahead of me. We were like a couple of African hunters — in fact, his dress, with his helmet and thick jacket, as I have akeady mentioned, was that of a wild African shikari.

Our path through grass and shrub led to the valley. The cave was halfway across it. I felt suddenly irritated at the speed of his walk, as if he knew the way, swinging his cane and hugging his portfolio. If he could show half the warmth of that hug elsewhere! I suddenly asked, "Do you know the way?"

"Oh, no," he said.

"You are leading me!" I said, putting into it all the irony I was capable of.

He cried, "Oh!" looked confused, and said, stepping aside, "Well, lead us," and through an irrelevant association added, "kindly light."

The entrance to the cave was beyond a thicket of lantana. A huge door on its rusty hinges stood open. And, of course, all the crumbling brick and plaster was there. It was a cave with a single rock covering its entire roof; why any man should have taken the trouble to build a thing like this in a remote spot was more than I could understand.

He stood outside and surveyed the entrance. "You see, this entrance must have been a later improvisation; the cave itself, I know, must have been about first century A.D. The entrance and the door are of a later date. You see, that kind of tall entrance and the carved doorway became a current fashion in the seventh or eighth century, when the South Indian rulers be- came fond of . . ." He went on talking. Dead and decaying things seemed to unloosen his tongue and fire his imagination, rather than things that lived and moved and swung their limbs. I had little to do as a guide; he knew so much more of every- thing!

When he passed in, he completely forgot the world outside and its inhabitants. The roof was low, but every inch of the wall space was covered with painted figures. He flashed a torch on the walls. He took out of his pocket a mirror and placed it outside to catch the sunlight and throw a beam on the paintings. Bats were whirring about; the floor was broken and full of holes. But he minded nothing. He became busy measuring, writing down, photographing, all the time keeping up a chatter, not bothered in the least whether I listened or not.

I was bored with his ruin-collecting activities. The wall painting represented episodes from the epics and mythology, and all kinds of patterns and motifs, with men, women, and kings and animals, in a curious perspective and proportion of their own, and ancient like the rocks. I had seen hundreds like them, and I saw no point in seeing more. I had no taste for them, just as he had no taste for other things.

"Be careful," I said. "There may be reptiles in those cracks."

"Oh, no," he said indifferently; "reptiles don't generally come to such interesting places; moreover, I have this." He flourished his stick. "I can manage. I'm not afraid."

I suddenly said, "I seem to hear the sound of a car. If it's Gaffur, I'd like to be there at the bungalow, so do you mind if I go? I'll be back."

He said, "Keep him. Don't let him go away."

"When you return, come the same way — ^so that we may not get lost." He didn't answer, but resumed his studies.

I reached the house at a run and rested a while in the back yard to regain my breath. I went in, brushing back my hair with my hand and composing my features. As I entered, I heard her voice. "Looking for me?" She was sitting on a boulder in the shade of a tree. She must have seen me come up. "I saw you even half a mile away — but you couldn't see me," she said like one who had discovered a fault.

"You were on the peak and I was in the valley," I said. I went up to her and made some polite inquiries about her coffee. She looked both sad and profound. I sat down on a stone near her.

"You have returned alone. I suppose he is wall-gazing?" she said.

"Yes," I replied briefly.

"He does that everywhere."

"Well, I suppose he is interested, that's all."

"What about me, interested in something else?"

What is your interest?"

"Anything except cold, old stone walls," she said.

I looked at my watch. I had already been away from him for nearly an hour. I was wasting time. Time was slipping through my fingers. If I were to make good, I should utilize this chance. "Every night you generally sit up and quarrel, do you?" I asked boldly.

"When we are alone and start talking, we argue and quarrel over everything. We don't agree on most matters, and then he leaves me alone and comes back and we are all right, that's all."

"Until it is night again," I said.

"Yes, yes."

"It's unthinkable that anyone should find it possible to quarrel or argue with you — being with you must be such bliss.'

She asked sharply, "What do you mean?"

I explained myself plainly. I was prepared to ruin myself today if need be, but I was going to talk and tell her. If she wanted to kick me out, she could do it after listening to me. I spoke my mind. I praised her dancing. I spoke out my love, but sandwiched it conveniently between my appreciations of her art. I spoke of her as an artist in one breath, and continued in the next as a sweetheart. Something like, "What a glorious snake dance! Oh, I keep thinking of you all night. World's artist number one! Don't you see how I am pining for you every hour!"

It worked. She said, "You are a brother to me" ("Oh, no," I wanted to cry), "and I'll tell you what happens." She gave me an account of their daily quarrels.

"Why did you marry at all?" I asked recklessly.

She remained moody and said, "I don't know. It just happened."

"You married him because of his wealth," I said, "and you were advised by your uncle and the rest."

"You see," she began, plucking my sleeve. "Can you guess to what class I belong?"

I looked her up and down and ventured, "The finest, whatever it may be, and I don't believe in class or caste. You are an honor to your caste, whatever it may be."

"I belong to a family traditionally dedicated to the temples as dancers; my mother, grandmother, and, before her, her mother. Even as a young girl, I danced in our village temple.

You know how our caste is viewed?"

"It's the noblest caste on earth," I said.

'We are viewed as public women," she said plainly, and I was thrilled to hear the words. "We are not considered respectable; we are not considered civilized."

"All that narrow notion may be true of old days, but it's different now. Things have changed. There is no caste or class today."

"A different life was planned for me by my mother. She put me to school early in life; I studied well. I took my master's degree in economics. But after college, the question was whether I should become a dancer or do something else. One day I saw in our paper an advertisement — the usual kind you may have seen: 'Wanted: an educated, good-looking girl to marry a rich bachelor of academic interests. No caste restrictions; good looks and university degree essential.' I asked my- self, 'Have I looks?' "

"Oh, who could doubt it?'

"I had myself photographed clutching the scroll of the university citation in one hand, and sent it to the advertiser. Well, we met, he examined me and my certificate, we went to a registrar and got married.

"Did you like him the moment you saw him?"

"Don't ask all that now." She snubbed me. "We had had many discussions before coming to a decision. The question was, whether it would be good to marry so much above our wealth and class. But all the women in my family were impressed, excited that a man like him was coming to marry one of our class, and it was decided that if it was necessary to give up our traditional art, it was worth the sacrifice. He had a big house, a motor car, he was a man of high social standing; he had a house outside Madras, he was living in it all alone, no family at all; he lived with his books and papers.

"So you have no mother-in-law!" I said.

"I'd have preferred any kind of mother-in-law, if it had meant one real, live husband,** she said. I looked up at her to divine her meaning, but she lowered her eyes. I could only guess. She said, "He is interested in painting and old art and things like that.

"But not one which can move its limbs, I suppose, I said.

I sighed deeply, overcome with the sadness of her life. I placed my hand on her shoulder and gently stroked it. "I am really very unhappy to think of you, such a gem lost to the world. In his place I would have made you a queen of the world." She didn't push away my hand. I let it travel and felt the softness of her ear and pushed my fingers through the locks of her hair.

Gaffur's car did not turn up. A passing truck-driver brought the message that it had had a breakdown and would be coming on the following day. No one in the party minded really. Joseph looked after us quite well. Marco said it gave him more time to study the walls. I did not mind. It gave me an occasion to watch the game beyond the sheet glass every night, holding her hand, while Marco sat in his room, poring over his notes.

When Gaffur's car did turn up Marco said, "I want to stay on here; it is going to take more time than I thought. Could you fetch from my room in the hotel my black

trunk? I have some papers in it. I'd prefer to have you here also, if it is all the same to you."

I seemed to hesitate, and then looked up at the girl for a moment. There was a mute appeal in her eyes. I said yes.

"You may treat it as a part of your professional work," he said, "unless you feel it's going to hurt your general business."

"All right," I said hesitantly. "It's true, but I'd also like to be of service to you. Once I take charge of anyone, I always feel that they are my responsibility till I see them off again safely."

As I was getting into the car she said to her husband, "I'll also go back to the town; I want a few things from my box.

I added, "We may not be able to return tonight."

He asked his wife, "Can you manage?"

"Yes," she said.

As we were going down the mountain road I often caught Gaffur looking at us through the mirror, and we moved away from the range of his vision. We reached our hotel in the evening. I followed her to her room. "Should we go back this evening?" I asked her.

"Why?" she asked. "Suppose Gaffur's car stops on the way? Better not risk it on that road. I'll stay here tonight."

I went home to change. My mother was full of information the moment she saw me, and full of inquiries. I brushed every- thing aside. I rushed through my washing and grooming and took out another set of special clothes. I gave my old clothes in a bundle to my mother. "Will you tell that shop boy to take them to the dhobi and have them washed and ironed neatly? I may want them tomorrow."

"Becoming a dandy?" she said, surveying me. "Why are you always on the run now?" I gave her some excuse and started out again.

I engaged Gaffur for my own rounds that day. I was a true guide. Never had I shown anyone the town with greater zest. I took Rosie all over the place, showed her the town hall tower — showed her Sarayu, and we sat on the sands and munched a large packet of salted nuts. She behaved like a baby — excited, thrilled, appreciative of everything. I took her through the Suburban Stores and told her to buy anything she liked. This was probably the first time that she was seeing the world. She was in ecstasies. Gaffur warned me when he got me alone for a moment outside the store, "She is a married woman, remember." "What of it?" I said. "Why do you tell me this?"

"Don't be angry, sir," he said. "Go slow; that is all I can say."

"You are unhealthy-minded, Gaffur. She is like a sister to me," I said, and tried to shut him up.

All he said was, "You are right. What is it to me? After all, that man is there, who has really married her. And I've my own wife to bother about."

I left him and went back to the store. She had picked up a silver brooch, painted over and patterned like a peacock. I paid for it and pinned it on her sari. We dined on the terrace of the Taj, from where she could have a view of the River Sarayu winding away. When I pointed it out to her she said, "It's good. But I have had views of valleys, trees, and brooks to last me a lifetime." We laughed. We were getting into a state of perpetual giggling.

She liked to loaf in the market, eat in a crowded hotel, wander about, see a cinema — these common pleasures seemed to have been beyond her reach all these days. I had dismissed the car at the cinema. I did not want Gaffur to watch my movements. We walked to the hotel after the picture. We had hardly noticed what it was. I had taken a box. She wore a light yellow crepe sari which made her so attractive that people kept looking at her.

Her eyes sparkled with vivacity and gratitude. I knew I had placed her in my debt.

It was nearing midnight. The man at the hotel desk watched us pass without showing any interest. Desk-men at hotels learn not to be inquisitive. At the door of Number 28 I hesitated. She opened the door, passed in, and hesitated, leaving the door half open. She stood looking at me for a moment, as on the first day.

"Shall I go away?" I asked in a whisper,

"Yes. Good night," she said feebly.

"May I not come in?" I asked, trying to look my saddest.

"No, no. Go away," she said. But on an impulse I gently pushed her out of the way, and stepped in and locked the door on the world.

## 6

Raju lost count of the time that passed in these activities — one day being like another and always crowded. Several months (or perhaps years) had passed. He counted the seasons by the special points that jutted out, such as the harvest in January, when his disciples brought him sugar cane and jaggery cooked with rice; when they brought him sweets and fruits, he knew that the Tamil New Year was on; when Dasara came they brought in extra lamps and lit them, and the women were busy all through the nine days, decorating the pillared hall with colored paper and tinsel; and for Deepavali they brought him new clothes and crackers and he invited the children to a special session and fired the crackers. He kept a rough count of time thus, from the beginning of the year to its end, through its seasons of sun, rain, and mist. He kept count of three cycles and then lost count. He realized that it was unnecessary to maintain a calendar.

His beard now caressed his chest, his hair covered his back, and around his neck he wore a necklace of prayer beads. His eyes shone with softness and compassion, the light of wisdom emanated from them. The villagers kept bringing in

so many things for him that he lost interest in accumulation. He distributed whatever he had to the gathering at the end of the day. They brought him huge chrysanthemum garlands, jasmine and rose petals in baskets. He gave them all back to the women and children.

He protested to Velan one day, "I'm a poor man and you are poor men; why do you give me all this? You must stop it. But it was not possible to stop the practice; they loved to bring him gifts. He came to be called Swami by his congregation, and where he lived was called the Temple. It was passing into common parlance. "The Swami said this or that," or "I am on my way to the Temple." People loved this place so much that they lime-washed its walls and drew red bands on them.

In the first half of the year they had evening rains, which poured down fussily for a couple of hours to the tune of tremendous thunder; later in the year they had a quieter sort of rain, steadily pattering down. But no rain affected the assembly. People came shielding themselves with huge bamboo mats or umbrellas or coconut thatch. The hall became more packed during the wet season, since the people could not overflow into the outer courtyard. But it made the gathering cozy, interesting, and cool; and the swish of rain and wind in the trees and the swelling river (which made them carry their children aloft on their shoulders and cross the river only at certain shallow points) lent a peculiar charm to the proceedings. Raju loved this season, for its greenness everywhere, for the variety of cloud-play in the sky, which he could watch through the columned halls.

But he suddenly noticed at the end of the year that the skies never dimmed with cloud. The summer seemed to continue. Raju inquired, "Where are the rains?"

Velan pulled a long face. "The first rains have totally kept off, Swamiji; and the millet crop, which we should have harvested by now, is all scorched on the stalks. It's a big worry."

"A thousand banana seedlings are dead," said another. "If it continues, who knows?" They looked anxious.

Raju, ever a soothsayer, said consolingly, "Such things are common; don't worry too much about them. Let us hope for the best."

They became argumentative. "Do you know, Swamiji, our cattle which go out to graze nose about the mud and dirt and come back, having no grass to eat? "

Raju had some soothing remark for every complaint. They went home satisfied. "You know best, master," they said and left. Raju recollected that for his bath nowadays he had to go down three more steps to reach the water. He went down and stood looking along the river course. He looked away to his left, where the river seemed to wind back to the mountain ranges of the Mempi, to its source, where he had often con- ducted tourists. Such a small basin, hardly a hundred square feet with its little shrine — what had happened there to make this river shrink so much here? He noticed that the borders were wide, more rocks were showing, and the slope on the other side seemed to have become higher.

Other signs too were presently to be noticed. At the Harvest Festival, the usual jubilation was absent. "Sugar canes have completely wilted; with difficulty we have brought in this bit. Please accept it,"

"Give it to the children," Raju said. Their gifts were shrinking in size and volume.

"The astrologer says that we shall have very early rains in the coming year," someone said. The talk was always about the rains. People listened to discourses and philosophy with only half-interest. They sat around, expressing their fears and hopes. "Is it true, Swami, that the movement of airplanes disturbs the clouds and so the rains don't fall? Too many airplanes in the sky." "Is it true, Swami, that the atom bombs are responsible for the drying up of the clouds?" Science, mythology, weather reports, good and evil, and all kinds of possibilities were connected with the rain. Raju gave an explanation for each in the best manner he could manage, but he found his answers never diverted their minds.

He decreed, "You must not think too much of it. The rain god sometimes teases those who are obsessed with thoughts of him. How would you feel if someone went on mentioning and repeating your name all hours of the day and night for days and days on end?" They enjoyed the humor of the analogy, and went their ways. But a situation was developing which no comforting word or discipline of thinking could help. Something was happening on a different plane over which one had no control or choice, and where a philosophical attitude made no difference. Cattle were unable to yield milk; they lacked the energy to drag the plow through the furrows; flocks of sheep were beginning to look scurvy and piebald, with their pelvic bones sticking out.

The wells in the villages were drying up. Huge concourses of women with pitchers arrived at the river, which was fast narrowing. From morning to night they came in waves and took the water. Raju watched their arrival and departure as they passed in files on the high ground opposite, looking picturesque, but without the tranquility inherent in a picture. They quarreled at the water-hole for priorities, and there were fear, desperation, and lamentation in their voices.

The earth was fast drying up. A buffalo was found dead on a foot-track. The news was brought to the Swami early one morning by Velan. He stood above him as he slept and said, "Swami, I want you to come with us."

"Why?"

"Cattle have begun to die," he said with quiet resignation.

"What can I do about it?" Raju felt like asking, sitting up in his bed. But he could not say such a thing. He said soothingly, "Oh, no; it can't be."

"A buffalo was found dead on the forest path beyond our village."

"Did you see it yourself?"

"Yes, Swami, I come from there."

"Can't be as bad as that, Velan. It must have died of some other disease."

"Please come along and see it, and if you can tell us why it is dead, it will relieve our minds. A learned man like you should see and tell."

They were clearly losing their heads. They were entering a nightmare phase. The Swami knew so little of cattle, dead or alive, that it was of no practical use his going to see this one, but since they wanted it, he asked Velan to be seated for a few moments, and went down with him. The village street looked deserted. Children played about in the road dust, because the master had gone to town with a petition for relief addressed to the revenue authorities, and so the day school was closed. Women were moving about with water pots on their heads. In passing, "Could hardly get half a pot today," said some. "What's the world coming to. "You must show us the way, Swami."

Raju merely raised a hand and waved it as if to say, "Be peaceful; everything will be all right; I will fix it with the gods." A small crowd followed him and Velan to the forest path, saying the same thing over and over again. Someone reported worse happenings in the next village; cholera was breaking out and thousands were dying, and so forth; he was snubbed by the rest as a scaremonger. Raju paid little attention to the jabber around him.

There it was outside the village, on a rough foot-track that led into the forest, a buffalo with bones sticking out. Crows and kites, already hovering about, flew off at the approach of men. There was a sickening odour, and henceforth Raju began to associate the season with it. It could not be mitigated with soothsaying. He held his upper cloth to his nostrils and gazed at the carcass for a while. "Whose was this?" he asked.

They looked at one another. "Not ours," someone said. "It belonged to the next village." There was some relief at this thought. If it was one from the next village, it was far removed. Anything, any explanation, any excuse served to console people now.

"It belonged to no one," said another. "It looks like a wild buffalo."

This was even better. Raju felt relieved at the possibility of there being other solutions and explanations. He added, peering at it again, "It must have been bitten by a poisonous insect." This was a comforting explanation, and he turned back without letting his eye dwell on the barren branches of trees, and the ground covered with bleached mud without a sign of green.

This piece of interpretation by the Swamiji pleased the public. It brought them untold comfort. The air of tension suddenly relaxed. When the cattle were penned for the night, they looked on them without anxiety. "There is enough about for the cattle to feed on," they said. "Swami says that the buffalo died of a poisonous bite. He knows." In support of it, many anecdotes were told of the death of animals from mysterious causes. "There are snakes which bite into their hoofs." "There are certain kinds of ants whose bite is fatal to animals."

More cattle were found dead here and there. When the earth was scratched it produced only a cloud of fine dust. The granary of the previous year, in most of the houses, remained unreplenished and the level was going down. The village shopman was holding out for bigger prices. When people asked for a measure of rice he demanded fourteen annas for it. The man who wanted the rice lost his temper and slapped his face. The shopman came out with a chopper and attacked the customer; and those who sympathized with the man gathered in front of the shop and invaded it. The shopman's relatives and sympathizers came at night with crowbars and knives and started attacking the other group.

Velan and his men also picked up axes and knives and started out for the battle. Shrieks and cries and imprecations filled the air. The little hay that was left was set on fire, and the dark night was ablaze. Raju heard the cries, coming on the night air, and then he saw the blaze lighting up the landscape beyond the mound. Only a few hours before, everything had seemed peaceful and quiet. He shook his head, saying to himself, "The village people do not know how to remain peaceful. They are becoming more and more agitated. At this rate, I think I'll look for a new place." He went back to sleep, unable to take any further interest in their activities.

But news was brought to him early in the morning. Velan's brother told him while he was still half asleep that Velan was down with an injured skull and burns, and he gave a list of women and children hurt in the fight. They were mustering themselves to attack the other group tonight.

Raju was amazed at the way things were moving. He did not know what he was expected to do now, whether to bless their expedition or prevent it. Personally, he felt that the best thing for them would be to blow one another's brains out. That'd keep them from bothering too much about the drought. He felt a pity for Velan's condition. "Is he seriously hurt?" he asked.

Velan's brother said, "Oh, no. Just cut up here and there," as though he wasn't satisfied with the marks.

Raju wondered for a while whether he should visit Velan, but he felt a tremendous reluctance to move. If Velan was hurt, he'd get healed; that was all. And now the brother's description of the injuries, whether false or true, suited his program. There was no urgency to go and see Velan. He feared that if they made it a habit he would not be left in peace, as the villagers would always have a reason to call him out. He asked Velan's brother, "How did you yourself manage to remain intact?"

"Oh, I was also there, but they didn't hit me. If they had I would have laid ten of them low. But my brother, he was careless."

"Thin as a broomstick, but talks like a giant," thought Raju, and advised, "Tell your brother to apply turmeric to his wounds." From the casual tone with which this man was speaking, Raju wondered if it was possible that he himself had dealt a blow to Velan from behind; anything seemed possible in this village. All the brothers in the place were involved in litigation against one another; and anyone might do anything in the present sensational developments. Velan's brother rose to go. Raju said, "Tell Velan to rest in bed completely."

"Oh, no, master. How can he rest? He is joining the party tonight and he will not rest till he burns their houses."

"It is not right," Raju said, somewhat irritated by all this pugnacity.

Velan's brother was one of the lesser intelligences of the village. He was about twenty-one, a semi-moron, who had grown up as a dependent in Velan's house, yet another of Velan's trials in life. He spent his days taking the village cattle out to the mountains for grazing: he collected them from various houses early in the day, and drove them to the mountain- side, watched over them, and brought them back in the evening. All day he lounged under a tree shade, eating a ball of boiled millet when the sun came overhead, and watching for the sun to slant westward to drive the cattle homeward. He had hardly anyone to speak to except his cattle the whole day and he spoke to them on equal terms and abused them and their genealogy unreservedly. Any afternoon in the stillness of the forest, if one had the occasion to observe, one could hear the hills echoing to the choice, abusive words that he hurled at the animals as he followed them with his stick. He was considered well equipped for this single task, and from each house was given four annas a month. They did not trust him with any more responsible tasks. He was one of those rare men in the village who never visited the Swamiji, but preferred to sleep at home at the end of the day. But now he had come, almost for the first time. The others were preoccupied and busy with their preparations for the coming fight, and he was one of those whose employment was affected by the drought; no one saw any sense in sending the cattle out to nose about the dry sand and paying the idiot four annas a month.

He had come here this morning, not because anyone had sent him to carry a message for the Swamiji, but because he was at a loose end and had suddenly felt that he might as well pay a visit to the temple and receive the Swami's blessing. The fight was the last thing the villagers would have liked to bring to the Swami's attention, although after finishing it they might have given him a mild version. But this boy brought the news on his own initiative and defended their action. "But, Swami, why did they cut my brother's face?" He added sullenly, "Should they be left free to do all this?"

Raju argued with him patiently. "You beat the shopman first, didn't you?"

The boy took it literally and said, "I didn't beat the shop- man. The man who beat him was . . ." He gave a number of local names.

Raju felt too weary to correct him and improve his under- standing. He simply said, "It is no good; nobody should fight." He felt it impossible to lecture him on the ethics of peace, and so merely said, "No one should fight."

"But they fight!" the boy argued. "They come and beat us." He paused, ruminating upon the words, and added, "And they will kill us soon."

Raju felt bothered. He did not like the idea of so much com- motion. It might affect the isolation of the place and bring the police on the scene. He did not want anyone to come to the village. Raju suddenly began to think positively on these matters. He gripped the other's arm above his elbow and said, "Go and tell Velan and the rest that I don't want them to fight like this. I'll tell them what to do later." The boy prepared himself to repeat his usual arguments. But Raju said impatiently, "Don't talk. Listen to what I say."

"Yes, master," the boy said, rather frightened at this sudden vehemence.

"Tell your brother, immediately, wherever he may be, that unless they are good I'll never eat."

"Eat what?" asked the boy, rather puzzled.

"Say that I'll not eat. Don't ask what. I'll not eat till they are good."

"Good? Where?"

This was frankly beyond the comprehension of the boy. He wanted to ask again, "Eat what?" but refrained out of fear. His eyes opened wide. He could not connect the fight and this man's food. He wanted only to be released from the terrific grip over his left elbow. He felt he had made a mistake in coming to this man all alone — the bearded face, pushed so close to him, frightened him. This man might perhaps eat him up. He became desperately anxious to get out of the place. He said, "All right,

sir. I'll do it," and the moment Raju let his hold go he shot out of the place, was across the sands and out of sight in a moment.

He was panting when he ran into the assembly of his village elders. They were sitting solemnly around a platform in the center of the village, discussing the rains. There was a brick platform built around an ancient peepul tree, at whose root a number of stone figures were embedded, which were often anointed with oil and worshiped. This was a sort of town-hall platform for Mangala. It was shady and cool and spacious; there was always a gathering of men on one side conferring on local problems, and on the other women who carried loaded baskets on their heads and rested; children chased each other; and the village dogs slumbered.

Here were sitting the elders of the village, discussing the rain, the fight tonight, and all the strategies connected with it. They had still many misgivings about the expedition. How the Swami would view the whole thing was a thing that could be understood only later. He might not approve. It would be best not to go to him until they themselves were clear in their heads about what to do. That the other group deserved punishment was beyond question. Among those talking were quite a number with bruises and cuts. But they had a fear of the police; they remembered a former occasion when there had been a faction fight, and the government posted a police force almost permanently and made the villagers feed them and pay for their keep.

Into this council of war burst Velan's brother. The atmosphere became tense. "What is it, brother?" asked Velan.

The boy stopped to recover breath before speaking. They took him by the shoulder and shook him, at which he became more confused and blabbered and finally said, "The Swami, the Swami, doesn't want food any more. Don't take any food to him."

"Why? Why?"

"Because, because — it doesn't rain." He added also, suddenly, recollecting the fight, "No fight, he says."

"Who asked you to go there?" asked his brother authoritatively.

"I — I didn't, but when I — found myself there he asked me and I told him — "

"What did you tell him?'

The boy became suddenly wary. He knew he would be thrashed if he said he had mentioned the fight. He didn't like to be gripped by the shoulder — in fact, he was averse to being gripped in any manner at all; but there the Swami squeezed his elbow and brushed his beard on his face, and here these men were tearing at his shoulder. He felt sorry he had ever got involved. It was best not to have anything to do with them. They would wrench his shoulder off if they knew he'd been telling the master about the fight. So he covered up the entire business in the best manner he could think of. He blinked. They demanded of him again, "What did you tell him?"

"That there is no rain," he said, mentioning the easiest subject that occurred to him.

They patted him on the head and said contemptuously, "Big prophet to carry the news! He didn't know about it till then, I suppose." A laugh followed. The boy also simpered and tried to get over it.

Then he remembered the message he had been entrusted with, and thought it safer to say something about it, otherwise the great man might come to know of it and lay a curse on him. And so he said, coming back to the original starting point, "He wants no food until it is all right."

He uttered it with such solemnity and emphasis that they asked, "What did he say? Tell us exactly."

The boy deliberated for a moment and said, " Tell your brother not to bring me any more food. I won't eat. If I don't eat, it'll be all right; and then everything will be all right.' " They stared at him, puzzled. He smiled, rather pleased at the importance he was receiving. They remained in thought for a moment.

And then one of them said, "This Mangala is a blessed country to have a man like the Swami in our midst. No bad thing will come to us as long as he is with us. He is like Mahatma. When Mahatma Gandhi went without food, how many things happened in India! This is a man like that. If he fasts there will be rain. Out of his love for us he is undertaking it. This will surely bring rain and help us. Once upon a time a man fasted for twenty-one days and brought down the deluge. Only great souls that take upon themselves tasks such as this — " The at- mosphere became electrified. They forgot the fight and all their troubles and bickering.

The village was astir. Everything else seemed inconsequential now. Someone brought the news that upstream a crocodile had been found dead on the sand, having no watery shelter and being scorched by the sun. Someone else came with the news that the fast-drying lake bed in a nearby village was showing up an old temple which had been submerged a century ago, when the lake was formed. The image of God was still intact in the inner shrine, none the worse for having lain under water so long; the four coconut trees around the temple were still there. . . . And so on and so forth. More and more details were coming in every hour. Hundreds of people were now walking across the lake bed to visit the temple, and some care- less ones lost their lives, sucked in by loose mud. All this now produced a lot of public interest, but no fear. They were now even able to take a more lenient view of the shopman who had assaulted his customer. "After all, so and so should not have called him a whoreson; not a proper word."

"Of course, one's kith and kin are bound to support one. What are they worth otherwise?" Velan brooded over the cut on his forehead, and a few others suddenly recollected their various injuries. They could not decide how far this could be forgiven. They consoled themselves with the thought that a good number in the other group must also be nursing injuries at that moment; it was a very satisfying thought. They suddenly decided that they should have a third party to come and arbitrate, so that the fight could be forgotten, provided the other group paid for the burned-down haystacks and entertained the chief men of this group at a feast. And they spent their time

discussing the conditions of peace and rose in a body, declaring, "Let us all go and pay our respects to Swami, our savior."

Raju was waiting for his usual gifts and food. He had, no doubt, fruits and other edible stuff left in his hamper, but he hoped they would bring him other fare. He had suggested to them that they should try to get him wheat flour, and rice flour, and spices. He wanted to try some new recipes, for a change. He had a subtle way of mentioning his special requirements. He generally began by taking Velan aside and saying, "You see, if a little rice flour and chili powder could be got, along with some other things, I can do something new. On Wednesdays . . ." He enunciated some principle of living such as that on a special Wednesday he always liked to make his food with rice flour and such-and-such spice, and he mentioned it with an air of seriousness so that his listeners took it as a spiritual need, something of the man's inner discipline to keep his soul in shape and his understanding with the Heavens in order. He had a craving for bonda, which he used to eat in the railway-station stall when a man came there to vend his edibles on a wooden tray to the travelers. It was composed of flour, potato, a slice of onion, a coriander leaf, and a green chili — and oh! how it tasted! — although he probably fried it in anything; he was the sort of vendor who would not hesitate to fry a thing in kerosene, if it worked out cheaper. With all that, he made delicious stuff, and when Raju used to ask the vender how he made it, he gave him a recipe starting with, "Just a small piece of ginger," and then it went on to this and that. While discoursing on Bhagavad-Gita to his audience the other evening, Raju had had a sudden craving to try this out himself — he was now equipped with a charcoal stove and frying pan, and what could be more musical than well-kneaded dough dropping into boiling oil? He had enumerated his wants to Velan as delicately as possible.

When he heard voices beyond the mound, he felt relieved. He composed his features for his professional role and smoothed out his beard and hair, and sat down in his seat with a book in his hand. As the voices approached, he looked up and found that a bigger crowd than usual was crossing the sands. He was puzzled for a second, but felt that perhaps they were jubilant over the fact that he had prevented a fight. He

felt happy that he had after all achieved something, and saved the village. That idiot brother of Velan did not seem so bad after all. He hoped that they had the flour in a bag. It'd be improper to ask for it at once; they were bound to leave it in the kitchen.

They softened their steps and voices as they came nearer the pillared hall. Even the children hushed their voices when they approached the august presence.

They sat around in a silent semicircle as before, each in his place. The women got busy at once sweeping the floor and filling the mud lamps with oil. For ten minutes Raju neither looked at them nor spoke, but turned the leaves of his book. He felt curious to see how much of Velan's person was intact. He stole a glance across, and saw the scars on his forehead, and threw a swift look around and found that actually there was less damage than he had pictured in his mind. He resumed his studies, and only after he had gone through ten minutes of reading did he look up as usual and survey the gathering. He looked at his flock, fixed his eyes on Velan in particular, and said, "Lord Krishna says here — " He adjusted his page to the light and read a passage. "Do you know what it means?" He entered into a semi philosophical discourse on a set of rambling themes, starting with the eating of good food and going on to absolute trust in God's goodness.

They listened to him without interrupting him, and only when he paused for breath at the end of nearly an hour did Velan say, "Your prayers will surely be answered and save our village. Every one of us in the village prays night and day that you come through it safely."

Raju was puzzled by what he heard. But he thought that such high and bombastic well-wishing was their habit and idiom and that they were only thanking him for putting enough sense into their heads not to go on with their fight. The assembly grew very loquacious and showered praise on him from all directions. A woman came up and touched his feet. Another followed. Raju cried, "Have I not told you that I'll never permit this? No human being should ever prostrate before another human being."

Two or three men came up, one of them saying, "You are not another human being. You are a Mahatma. We should consider ourselves blessed indeed to be able to touch the dust of your feet."

"Oh, no. Don't say that — " Raju tried to withdraw his feet. But they crowded round him. He tried to cover his feet. He felt ridiculous playing this hide-and-seek with his feet. He could find no place to put them. They tugged at him from various sides and they seemed ready to tickle his sides, if it would only give them his feet. He realized that there was really no escape from this demonstration and that it would be best to let them do what they liked. Almost everyone in the crowd had touched his feet and withdrawn, but not too far away; they surrounded him and showed no signs of moving. They gazed on his face and kept looking up in a new manner; there was a greater solemnity in the air than he had ever known before. Velan said, "Your penance is similar to Mahatma Gandhi's. He has left us a disciple in you to save us." In their own rugged idiom, in the best words they could muster, they were thanking him. Sometimes they all spoke together and made a confused noise. Sometimes they began a sentence and could not get through with it. He understood that they spoke with feeling. They spoke gratefully, although their speech sounded bombastic. The babble was confusing. But their devotion to him was unquestionable. There was so much warmth in their approach that he began to feel it was but right they should touch his feet; as a matter of fact, it seemed possible that he himself might bow low, take the dust of his own feet, and press it to his eyes. He began to think that his personality radiated a glory. . . . The crowd did not leave at the usual hour, but lingered on.

Velan had assumed that he was on a fast today and for the first time these months had failed to bring in any food. Just as well. When they attached so much value to his fasting he could not very well ask, "Where is the stuff for my bond? It would be unseemly. No harm in attending to it later. They had assumed that he was fasting in order to stop their fight, and he was not going to announce to them that he had already had two meals during the day. He would just leave it at that, and even if his eyes should droop a little out of seeming fatigue, it would be quite in order. Now that it was

all over, why couldn't they go away? He signed to Velan to come nearer, "Why not send away the women and children? Isn't it getting late?"

The crowd left at nearly midnight, but Velan remained where he had sat all the evening, leaning against a pillar. "Don't you feel sleepy?" Raju asked.

"No, sir. Keeping awake is no big sacrifice, considering what you are doing for us."

"Don't attach too much value to it. It's just a duty, that is all, and I'm not doing anything more than I ought to do. You can go home if you like."

"No, sir. I'll go home tomorrow when the Headman comes to relieve me. He will come here at five o'clock and stay on till the afternoon. I'll go home, attend to my work, and come back,

sir."

"Oh, it's not at all necessary that someone should always be here. I can manage quite well."

"You will graciously leave that to us, sir. We are only doing our duty. You are undertaking a great sacrifice, sir, and the least we can do is to be at your side. We derive merit from watching your face, sir."

Raju felt really touched by this attitude. But he decided that the time had come to get to the bottom of it. So he said, "You are right. 'One who serves the performer of a sacrifice derives the same merit,' says our scripture, and you are not wrong. I thank God that my effort has succeeded, and you are all at peace with one another; that's my main concern. Now that's over, things are all right. You may go home. Tomorrow I'll take my usual food, and then I shall be all right. You will re- member to fetch me rice flour, green chili, and — " Velan was too respectful to express his surprise loudly. But he couldn't check himself any more. "Do you expect it to rain tomorrow, sir?"

"Well . . ." Raju thought for a moment. What was this new subject that had crept into the agenda? "Who can say? It's God's will. It may." It was then that Velan

moved nearer and gave an account of what his brother had told them, and its effect on the population around. Velan gave a very clear account of what the savior was expected to do — stand in knee- deep water, look to the skies, and utter the prayer lines for two weeks, completely fasting during the period — and lo, the rains would come down, provided the man who performed it was a pure soul, was a great soul. The whole countryside was now in a happy ferment, because a great soul had agreed to go through the trial.

The earnestness with which he spoke brought the tears to Raju's eyes. He remembered that not long ago he had spoken to them of such a penance, its value and technique. He had described it partly out of his head and partly out of traditional accounts he had heard his mother narrate. It had filled an evening's program and helped him divert his audience's mind from the drought. He had told them, "When the time comes, every- thing will be all right. Even the man who would bring you the rain will appear, all of a sudden." They interpreted his words and applied them now to the present situation. He felt that he had worked himself into a position from which he could not get out. He could not betray his surprise. He felt that after all the time had come for him to be serious — to attach value to his own words. He needed time — and solitude to think over the whole matter. He got down from his pedestal; that was the first step to take. That seat had acquired a glamour, and as long as he occupied it people would not listen to him as to an ordinary mortal. He now saw the enormity of his own creation. He had created a giant with his puny self, a throne of authority with that slab of stone. He left his seat abruptly, as if he had been stung by a wasp, and approached Velan. His tone hushed with real humility and fear; his manner was earnest. Velan sat still as if he were a petrified sentry.

"Listen to me, Velan; it is essential that I should be alone tonight. It is essential that I should be alone through the day tomorrow too. And then come and see me tomorrow night. I'll speak to you tomorrow night. Until then neither you nor anyone else should see me."

This sounded so mysterious and important that Velan got up without a word. "I'll see you tomorrow night, sir. Alone?"

"Yes, yes; absolutely alone."

"Very well, master; you have your own reasons. It is not for us to ask why or what. Big crowds will be arriving. I'll have men along the river to turn them back. It'll be difficult, but if it is your order it must be carried out." He made a deep obeisance and went away. Raju stood looking after him for a while. He went into an inner room which he was using as a bedroom, and laid himself down. His body was aching from too much sitting up the whole day; and he felt exhausted by the numerous encounters. In that dark chamber, as the bats whirred about and the far-off sounds of the village ceased, a great silence descended. His mind was filled with tormenting problems. He tried to sleep. He had a fitful, nightmare-ridden, thought choked three hours.

Did they expect him to starve for fifteen days and stand in knee-deep water eight hours? He sat up. He regretted having given them the idea. It had sounded picturesque. But if he had known that it would be applied to him, he might probably have given a different formula: that all villages should combine to help him eat bonda for fifteen days without a break. Up to them to see that the supply was kept up. And then the saintly man would stand in the river for two minutes a day, and it should bring down the rain sooner or later. His mother used to say, "If there is one good man anywhere, the rains would descend for his sake and benefit the whole world," quoting from a Tamil poem. It occurred to him that the best course for him would be to run away from the whole thing. He could walk across, catch a bus somewhere, and be off to the city, where they would not bother too much about him — just an- other bearded sadhu about, that was all. Velan and the rest would look for him and conclude that he had vanished to the Himalayas. But how to do it? How far could he go? Anyone might spot him within half an hour. It was not a practical solution. They might drag him back to the spot and punish him for fooling them. It was not even this fear; he was perhaps ready to take the risk, if there was half a chance of getting away. . . . But he felt moved by the recollection of the big crowd of women and children touching his feet. He felt moved by the thought of their gratitude. He lit a fire and cooked his food, bathed in the river (at a spot where he had to scoop the sand and wait five minutes for the spring to fill is vessel), and gulped down a meal before anyone should arrive even accidentally.

He kept a reserve of food, concealed in an inner sanctum, for a second meal at night. He thought suddenly that if they would at least leave him alone at night, he could make some arrangement and survive the ordeal. The ordeal then would be only standing knee-deep in water (if they could find it), muttering the litany for eight hours. (This he could suitably modify in actual practice.) It might give him cramps, but he'd have to bear it for a few days, and then he believed the rains would descend in their natural course sooner or later. He would not like to cheat them altogether about the fast if he could help it.

When Velan arrived at night, he took him into his confidence. He said, "Velan, you have been a friend to me. You must listen to me now. What makes you think that I can bring the rain?"

"That boy told us so. Did you not tell him so?"

Raju hesitated without giving a direct reply. Perhaps even at this point he might have rectified the whole thing with a frank statement. Raju hesitated for a moment. By habit, his nature avoided the direct and bald truth even now. He replied dodgingly, "It's not that that I am asking. I want to know what has made you think so about me."

Velan blinked helplessly. He did not quite understand what the great man was implying. He felt that it must mean some- thing very noble, of course, but he was unable to answer the question. He said, "What else should we do?"

"Come nearer. Sit down and listen to me. You may sleep here. I'm prepared to fast for the sake of your people and do anything if I can help this country — but it is to be done only by a saint. I am no saint." Velan uttered many sounds of pro- test. Raju felt really sorry to be shattering his faith; but it was the only way in which he could hope to escape the ordeal. It was a cool night. Raju asked Velan to go up with him to the river step. He took his seat on it, and Velan sat on a step below. Raju moved down to his side. "You have to listen to me, and so don't go so far away, Velan. I must speak into your ears. You must pay attention to what I am going to say. I am not a saint, Velan, I'm just an ordinary human being like anyone else. Listen to my story. You will know it yourself." The river trickling away in minute driblets made no noise. The dry

leaves of the peepul tree rustled. Somewhere a jackal howled. And Raju's voice filled the night. Velan listened to him without uttering a word of surprise or interjection, in all humility. Only he looked a little more serious than usual, and there were lines of care on his face.

## 7

I WAS accepted by Marco as a member of the family. From guiding tourists I seemed to have come to a sort of concentrated guiding of a single family. Marco was just impractical, an absolutely helpless man. All that he could do was to copy ancient things and write about them. His mind was completely in it. All practical affairs of life seemed impossible to him; such a simple matter as finding food or shelter or buying a railway ticket seemed to him a monumental job. Perhaps he married out of a desire to have someone care for his practical life, but unfortunately his choice was wrong — this girl herself was a dreamer if ever there was one. She would have greatly benefited by a husband who could care for her career; it was here that a handy man like me proved invaluable. I nearly gave up all my routine jobs in order to be of service to them.

He stayed for over a month at Peak House and I was in entire charge of all his affairs. He never stinted any expense as long as a voucher was available. They still kept their room in the hotel. Gaffur's car was permanently engaged, almost as if Marco owned it. The car did at least one trip a day between the Peak House and the town. Joseph looked after Marco so well that it was unnecessary for anyone else to bother about him. It was understood that I should devote a lot of time to looking after him and his wife, without sacrificing any other job I might have. He paid me my daily rate and also let me look after my "routine jobs," My so-called routine jobs now sounded big, but actually reduced themselves to keeping Rosie company and amusing her. Once in two days she went up to see her husband. She was showing extra solicitude for him nowadays. She fussed a great deal over him. It was all the same to him. His table was littered with notes and dates, and he said, "Rosie, don't go near it. I don't want you to mess it up. It is just coming to a little order." I never cared to know what exactly he was doing. It was not my business. Nor did his wife seem to care for the task he was undertaking. She asked, "How is your food?" She was trying a new technique on him,

after the inauguration of our own intimacy. She arranged his room. She spoke to Joseph about his food. Sometimes she said, "I'll stay on here and keep you company." And Marco acknowledged it in an absent-minded, casual manner. "All right. If you like. Well, Raju, are you staying on or going back?"

I resisted my impulse to stay on, because I knew I was having her company fully downhill. It would be polite to leave her alone with him. So I said, without looking at him, "I must go back. I have some others coming in today. You don't mind, I hope."

"Not at all. You are a man of business. I should not monopolize you so much."

"What time will you need the car tomorrow?"

He looked at his wife and she just said, "Tomorrow, as early as you can." He generally said, "Bring me a few sheets of carbon, will you?"

As the car sped downhill, Gaffur kept throwing glances at me through the looking-glass. I was cultivating a lot of reserve with him nowadays. I didn't like him to gossip too much about anything. I was afraid of gossip. I was still sensitive to such things and I was nervous at being alone with Gaffur and felt relieved as long as his remarks were confined to automobiles; but it was not in his nature to stick to this subject. He would begin with automobiles but soon get mixed up. "You must give me an hour for brake adjustments tomorrow. After all, mechanical brakes, you know; I still maintain they are better than hydraulic. Just as an old, uneducated wife is better than the new type of girl. Oh, modern girls are very bold. I wouldn't let my wife live in a hotel room all by herself if I had to remain on duty on a hilltop!"

It made me uncomfortable and I turned the topic deftly. "Do you think car designers have less experience than you?"

"Oh, you think these engineers know more? A man like me who has to kick and prod a car to keep it on the road has, you may be sure ..." I was safe; I had turned his mind from Rosie. I sat in suspense. I was in an abnormal state of mind. Even this did not escape Gaffur's attention. He mumbled often as he was driving me downhill, "You are

becoming rather stuck-up nowadays, Raju. You are not the old friend you used to be." It was a fact. I was losing a great deal of my mental relaxation. I was obsessed with thoughts of Rosie. I reveled in memories of the hours I had spent with her last or in anticipation of what I'd be doing next. I had several problems to contend with. Her husband was the least of them. He was a good man, completely preoccupied, probably a man with an abnormal capacity for trust. But I was becoming nervous and sensitive and full of anxieties in various ways. Suppose, suppose — suppose? What? I myself could not specify. I was becoming fear-ridden. I couldn't even sort out my worries properly. I was in a jumble. I was suddenly seized with fears, sometimes with a feeling that I didn't look well enough for my sweet-heart. I was obsessed with the thought that I hadn't perhaps shaved my chin smoothly enough, and that she would run her fingers over my upper lip and throw me out. Sometimes I felt I was in rags. The silk jibba and the lace-edged dhoti were being overdone or were old-fashioned. She was about to shut the door on me because I was not modem enough for her. This made me run to the tailor to have him make a few dashing bush shirts and corduroys, and invest in hair- and face-lotions and perfumes of all kinds. My expenses were mounting. The shop was my main source of income, together with what Marco gave me as my daily wage. I knew that I ought to look into the accounts of the shop a little more closely. I was leaving it too much to the boy to manage. My mother often told me, whenever she was able to get at me, "You will have to keep an eye on that boy. I see a lot of hangers-on there. Have you any idea what cash he is collecting and what is happening generally?"

I usually told her, "I should certainly know how to manage these things. Don't think I'm so careless." And she left me alone. And then I went over to the shop, assumed a tone of great aggressiveness, and checked the accounts. The boy produced some accounts, some cash, a statement of stock, some- thing else that he need for running the show, and some of his problems. I was in no mood to listen to his problems. I was busy and preoccupied, so I told him not to bother me with petty details and gave an impression (just an impression and nothing more) of being a devil for accounts.

He always said, "Two passengers came asking for you, sir."

Oh, bores, who wanted them, anyway? "What did they want?" I asked with semi-interest.

"Three days' sightseeing, sir. They went away disappointed."

They were always there. My reputation had survived my interest in the job. Railway Raju was an established name, and still pilgrims and travelers sought his help. The boy persisted. "They wanted to know where you were." This gave me food for thought. I didn't want this fool of a fellow to send them up to my Room 28 at the hotel. Fortunately, he did not know. Otherwise he might have done so. "What shall I tell them, Raju-sir?" He always called me "Raju-sir." It was his idea of combining deference with familiarity.

I merely replied, "Tell them I'm busy; that is all. I have no time. I'm very busy."

"May I act as their guide, sir?" he asked eagerly. This fellow was acting as a successor in my jobs one by one. Next, probably, he would ask permission to keep the girl company! I felt annoyed with his question and asked him, "Who will look after the shop?"

"I have a cousin. He can watch the shop for an hour or two, while I am away."

I could not think of a reply. I could not decide. The whole thing was too bothersome. My old life, in which I was not in the least interested, was dogging my steps; my mother facing me with numerous problems: municipal tax, the kitchen tiles needing attention, the shop, accounts, letters from the village, my health, and so on and so forth; to me she was a figure out of a dream, mumbling vague sounds; and this boy had his own way of cornering and attacking me. Then Gaffur with his sly remarks and looks, ever on the brink of gossip — Oh, I was tired of it all. I was in no mood for anything. My mind was on other matters. Even my finances were unreal to me, although if I cared to look at my savings book I could know at a glance how the level of the reservoir was going down. But I did not want to examine it too closely as long as the man at the counter was able to give me the cash I wanted. Thanks to my father's parsimonious habits, I had a bank account. The only reality in my life and

consciousness was Rosie. All my mental powers were now turned to keep her within my reach, and keep her smiling all the time, neither of which was at all easy. I would willingly have kept at her side all the time, as a sort of parasite; but in that hotel it was not easy. I was always racked with the thought that the man at the desk and the boys at the hotel were keeping an eye on me and were commenting behind my back.

I did not want to be observed going to Room 28. I was becoming self-conscious about it. I very much wished that the architecture of the place could be altered so that I might go up without having the desk-man watch me. I was sure he was noting down the hour of my arrival with Rosie, and of my departure. His morbid, inquisitive mind, I was sure, must have been working on all the details of my life behind the closed doors of Room 28. 1 didn't like the way he looked at me when- ever I passed: I didn't like the curve of his lip — I knew he was smiling at an inward joke at my expense. I wished I could ignore him, but he was an early associate of mine, and I owed him a general remark or two. While passing him, I tried to look casual, and stopped to say, "Did you see that Nehru is going to London?" or "The new taxes will kill all initiative," and he agreed with me and explained something, and that was enough. Or we discussed the Government of India's tourist plans or hotel arrangements, and I had to let him talk — the poor fellow never suspected how little I cared for tourism or taxes or anything now. I sometimes toyed with the thought of changing the hotel. But it was not easy. Both Rosie and her husband seemed to be deeply devoted to this hotel. He was somehow averse to changing, although he never came down from his heights, and the girl seemed to have got used to this room with its view of a coconut grove outside, and people irrigating it from a well. It was a fascination that I could not easily understand or explain.

In other ways too I found it difficult to understand the girl. I found as I went on that she was gradually losing the free and easy manner of her former days. She allowed me to make love to her, of course, but she was also beginning to show excessive consideration for her husband on the hill. In the midst of my caresses, she would suddenly free herself and say, "Tell Gaffur to bring the car. I want to go and see him."

I had not yet reached the stage of losing my temper or speaking sharply to her. So I calmly answered, "Gaffur will not come till this time tomorrow. You were up only yesterday. Why do you want to go again? He expects you there only tomorrow."

"Yes," she would say and remain thoughtful. I didn't like to see her sit up like that on her bed and brood, her hair unattended, her dress all crinkled. She clasped her knees with her hands.

"What is troubling you?" I had to ask her. "Won't you tell me? I will always help you."

She would shake her head and say, "After all, he is my husband. I have to respect him. I cannot leave him there."

My knowledge of women being poor and restricted to one, I could not decide how to view her statements. I could not understand whether she was pretending, whether her present pose was pretense or whether her account of all her husband's shortcomings was false, just to entice me. It was complex and obscure. I had to tell her, "Rosie, you know very well that even if Gaffur came, he couldn't drive uphill at this hour."

"Yes, yes, I understand," she would reply and lapse into a mysterious silence again.

"What is troubling you?"

She started crying. "After all . . . After all . . . Is this right what I am doing? After all, he has been so good to me, given me comfort and freedom. What husband in the world would let his wife go and live in a hotel room by herself, a hundred miles away?"

"It is not a hundred miles, but fifty-eight only," I corrected.

"Shall I order you coffee or anything to eat?"

"No," she would say point-blank, but continue the train of her own thoughts. "As a good man he may not mind, but is it not a wife's duty to guard and help her husband, whatever the way in which he deals with her?" This last phrase was to offset in advance any reminder I might make about his indifference to her.

It was a confusing situation. Naturally, I could take no part in this subject: there was nothing I could add to or subtract from what she was saying. Distance seemed to lend enchantment to her view now. But I knew that she would have to spend only a few hours with him to come downhill raging against him, saying the worst possible things. Sometimes I heartily wished that the man would descend from his heights, take her, and clear out of the place. That would at least end this whole uncertain business once for all and help me to return to my platform duties. I could possibly try to do that even now. What prevented me from leaving the girl alone? The longer Marco went on with his work, the longer this agony was stretched. But he seemed to flourish in his solitude; that's probably what he had looked for all his life. But why could he not do something about his wife? A blind fellow. Some- times I felt angry at the thought of him. He had placed me in a hopeless predicament. I was compelled to ask her, "Why don't you stay up with him, then?"

She merely replied, "He sits up all night writing, and — "

"If he sits up all night writing, during the day you should talk to him," I would say with a look of innocence.

"But all day he is in the cave!"

"Well, you may go and see it too. Why not? It ought to interest you."

"While he is copying, no one may talk to him."

"Don't talk to him, but study the objects yourself. A good wife ought to be interested in all her husband's activities."

"True," she said, and merely sighed. This was a thoroughly inexperienced and wrong line for me to take; it led us no- where, but only made her morose.

Her eyes lit up with a new hope when I spoke about the dance. It was after all her art that I first admired; of late, in our effort to live the lovers' life, that all-important question was pushed to the background. Her joy at finding shops, cinemas, and caresses made her forget for a while her primary obsession. But not for long. She asked me one evening, point-blank, "Are you also like him?"

"In what way?"

"Do you also hate to see me dance?"

'Not at all. What makes you think so?'

"At one time you spoke like a big lover of art, but now you never give it a thought."

It was true. I said something in excuse, clasped her hands in mine, and swore earnestly, "I will do anything for you. I will give my life to see you dance. Tell me what to do. I will do it for you."

She brightened up. Her eyes lit up with a new fervor at the mention of dancing. So I sat up with her, helping her to day- dream. I found out the clue to her affection and utilized it to the utmost. Her art and her husband could not find a place in her thoughts at the same time; one drove the other out.

She was full of plans. At five in the morning she'd start her practice and continue for three hours. She would have a separate hall, long enough and wide enough for her to move in. It must have a heavy carpet, which would be neither too smooth under the feet nor too rough, and which would not fold while she practiced her steps on it. At one corner of the room she'd have a bronze figure of Nataraja, the god of dancers, the god whose primal dance created the vibrations that set the worlds in motion. She would have a long incense-holder, in which at all times she would have incense sticks burning. After her morning practice, she would call up the chauffeur,

"Are you going to have a car?" I asked.

"Naturally, otherwise how can I move about? When I have so many engagements, it will be necessary for me to have a car. It'll be indispensable, don't you think?"

"Surely. I'll remember it."

She would then spend an hour or two in the forenoon studying the ancient works on the art, Natya Shastra of Bharat Muni, a thousand years old, and various other books, because without a proper study of the ancient methods it would be impossible to keep the purity of the classical forms. All the books were in her uncle's house, and she would write to him to send them on to her by and by. She would also want a pundit to come to her to help her to understand the texts, as they were all written in an old, terse style. "Can you get me a Sanskrit pundit? " she asked.

"Of course I can. There are dozens of them."

"I shall also want him to read for me episodes from Ramayana and Mahabarata, because they are a treasure house, and we can pick up so many ideas for new compositions from them."

A little rest after lunch; and at three o'clock she would go out and do shopping, and a drive and return home in the evening or see a picture, unless, of course, there was a performance in the evening. If there was a performance, she would like to rest till three in the afternoon and reach the hall only half an hour before the show. "That would be enough, because I shall do all the make-up and dressing before I leave the house."

She thought of every detail, and dreamed of it night and day. Her immediate need would be a party of drummers and musicians to assist her morning practice. When she was ready to appear before the public, she would tell me and then I could fix her public engagements. I felt rather baffled by her fervor. I wished I could keep pace at least with her idiom. I felt that I ought immediately to pick up and cultivate the necessary jargon. I felt silly to be watching her and listening to her, absolutely tongue-tied. There were, of course, two ways open: to bluff one's way through and trust to luck, or to make a clean breast of it all. I listened to her talk for two days and finally

confessed to her, "I am a layman, not knowing much of the technicalities of the dance; I'd like you to teach me something of it."

I didn't want her to interpret it as an aversion on my part to the art. That might drive her back into the arms of her husband, and so I took care to maintain the emphasis on my passion for the art. It gave us a fresh intimacy. This common interest brought us close together. Wherever we were she kept talking to me on the various subtleties of the art, its technicalities, and explaining as to a child its idioms. She seemed to notice our surroundings less and less. In Gaffur's car as we sat she said, "You know what a pallavi is? The time scheme is all important in it. It does not always run in the simple style of one-two, one-two; it gets various odds thrown in, and at a different tempo." She uttered its syllables, "Ta-ka-ta-ki-ta, Ta-ka." It amused me. "You know, to get the footwork right within those five or seven beats requires real practice, and when the tempo is varied . . ." This was something that Gaffur could safely overhear, as we went up the hill, as we came out of a shop, as we sat in a cinema. While seeing a picture, she would suddenly exclaim, "My uncle has with him a very old song written on a palm leaf. No one has seen it. My mother was the only person in the whole country who knew the song and could dance to it. I'll get that song too from my uncle. I'll show you how it goes. Shall we go back to our room? I don't want to see more of this picture. It looks silly."

We immediately adjourned to Room 28, where she asked me to remain seated, and went into the anteroom and came back with her dress tucked in and tightened up for the performance. She said, "I'll show you how it goes. Of course, I'm not doing it under the best of conditions. I need at least a drummer. . . . Move off that chair, and sit on the bed. I want some space here.'

She stood at one end of the hall and sang the song lightly, in a soft undertone, a song from an ancient Sanskrit composition of a lover and lass on the banks of Jamuna; and it began with such a verve, when she lightly raised her foot and let it down, allowing her anklets to jingle, I felt thrilled. Though I was an ignoramus, I felt moved by the movements, rhythm, and time, although I did not quite follow the meaning of the words. She stopped now and then to explain: *'Nari* means girl — and *mani* is a

jewel. . . . The whole line means: 'It is impossible for me to bear this burden of love you have cast on me.' " She panted while she explained. There were beads of perspiration on her forehead and lip. She danced a few steps, paused for a moment, and explained, "Lover means always God," and she took the trouble to explain further to me the intricacies of its rhythm. The floor resounded with the stamping of her feet. I felt nervous that those on the floor below might ask us to stop, but she never cared, never bothered about anything. I could see, through her effort, the magnificence of the composition, its symbolism, the boyhood of a very young god, and his fulfillment in marriage, the passage of years from youth to decay, but the heart remaining ever fresh like a lotus on a pond. When she indicated the lotus with her fingers, you could almost hear the ripple of water around it. She held the performance for nearly an hour; it filled me with the greatest pleasure on earth. I could honestly declare that, while I watched her perform, my mind was free, for once, from all carnal thoughts; I viewed her as a pure abstraction. She could make me forget my surroundings. I sat with open-mouthed wonder watching her. Suddenly she stopped and flung her whole weight on me with "What a darling. You are giving me a new lease on life."

Next time we went up the hill our strategy was ready. I would drop her there and come back to town. She would stay behind for two days, bearing all the possible loneliness and irritation, and speak to her husband. It was imperative that before we proceeded any further we should clear up the entire matter with her husband. She would do the talking for two days. And then I would go up and meet them, and then we would plan further stages of work for her career. She had suddenly become very optimistic about her husband, and often leaned over to whisper, "I think he will agree to our proposal," so that Gaffur should not know, or reveled in further wishful thoughts. "He is not bad. It's all a show, you know. He is merely posing to be uninterested. You don't talk to him at all. I'll do all the talking. I know how to tackle him. Leave him to me." And so she spoke until we reached the top. "Oh, see those birds! What colors! You know, there is a small piece about a parrot on a maiden's arm. I'll dance it for you sometime."