

Children at Work

I

Introduction

Velu was an eleven year old boy. He had run away from home. He got into a railway train without a ticket. He had to do so because he had no money. He escaped the ticket collector's notice because he did not come to that unreserved compartment.

Velu on the Platform

He got off the train at Chennai Central. His legs were unsteady as if he was still standing in a moving train. It was because of tiredness, weakness and fear. The crowds and the way the people looked upon him, made him miserable. He sat on a bench on the platform with his small bundle beside him. He was very hungry. For two days, he had eaten nothing but some peanuts and a piece of jaggery.

Velu Meets Jaya

Suddenly he heard a rough voice calling him. He saw a girl around his age. She was wearing a very long banian. Velu stared at her vacantly. Then she asked his name. She guessed rightly that Velu had run away from home. She told him that he won't get food sitting there.

The girl was a ragpicker. She picked her sack and moved away. Velu thought she was his only hope. So he followed her.

II

Velu Had No English

Velu caught up with the girl. The two came on the road. The girl helped him cross the road with her. They walked along the side of the road. There were huge signboards above them. The writing was all in English. Velu understood nothing. This showed that he did not know English.

Central Jail

They walked for a long time. The girl pointed out to the one building with the wall around it. Velu read the Tamil sign on it. It was Central Jail. The girl laughed. She told him to be careful if he wanted not to be inside that jail. Velu said that he hadn't done any wrong. The girl said that it didn't matter. The important thing was he shouldn't be caught.

The Garbage Bin

After about an hour's walk, they stopped in front of a big building. The sign on the building read : "Sri Rajrajeshwari Prasanna Kalyana Mandapam". Velu read it as it was in Tamil like the sign on the Central Jail. Velu looked at the huge hall and the crowds of people inside. He asked the girl if they (Velu and the girl) were going to eat there. The girl ridiculed him. Then she led him to a garbage bin behind the hall.

The Food

The girl picked up a crushed banana and offered it to Velu to eat. Velu was shocked. He asked if they were going to eat the leftovers. The girl disagreed. She said that she ate only untouched food. She threw him a vada. Velu looked at it with distaste. However, he was too hungry to refuse any food. So he ate the banana as well as the vada. The girl could find only one more banana which she ate herself.

The Girl's Work

This girl's name was Jaya. She picked up a couple of bottles from the heap. She said she had to do her work. Seeing her going, Velu panicked. He followed her.

III

The Girl's Home

They walked on for half an hour. They came to a bridge across a dirty trickle of water. Jaya called it Buckingham canal. Near some puddles of water, there was a row of huts. These were the strangest huts Velu had ever seen. They were made of all sorts of things metal sheets, tyres, bricks, wood and plastic. They stood crookedly and looked as if they would fall at any moment. To Velu these huts looked strange because in his village the houses were made of mud and palm leaves.

Velu Becomes A Ragpicker

Jaya dumped her sack outside a hut. Then she picked up an empty one. She gave Velu a pair of old shoes without laces. She handed him a sack and stick also. Velu was confused. Then Jaya explained that she was a ragpicker. This was the only work she could give to Velu if he wanted any. Children like her collected paper, plastic, glass etc. Then they sell them to Jaggu of Jam Bazar. Jaggu sells them to a factory.

This time Velu hesitated. He hadn't come to Chennai to dig through garbage. However, he felt he must do it until he finds a better job. So he followed her with a sigh.