He was in an unbelievably cheerful mood. He greeted his wife with greater warmth than ever before. "Do you know there is a third cave; a sort of vault leads into it. I scraped the lime, and there you have a complete fresco of musical notations, in symbolic figures. The style is of the fifth century. I am puzzled how such a wide period-difference has come about," he said, greeting us on the veranda itself. He had pulled up a chair and was watching the valley, with papers on his lap. He held up his latest discovery. His wife looked at it with due ecstasy and cried, "Musical notations! What wonderful things! Do take me to see them, will you?"

"Yes; come with me tomorrow morning. I'll explain it to you."

"Oh, wonderful!" And she cried, in a highly affected voice, "I'll try and sing them to you."

"I doubt if you can. It's more difficult than you imagine."

She looked fevered and anxious about pleasing him. It seemed to bode no good. This all-round cheeriness somehow did not please me. He turned and asked, "What about you, Raju? Would you like to see my discovery?"

"Of course, but I have to get back to town as soon as possible. I just came to leave the lady here, because she was so anxious; and to know if you want anything and if things are quite satisfactory."

"Oh, perfect, perfect!" he cried. "That Joseph is a wonderful man. I don't see him, I don't hear him, but he does everything for me at the right time. That's how I want things to be, you know. He moves on ball-bearings, I think."

That's what I thought when I saw Rosie demonstrate to me in her hotel room, her whole movement being so much against the fixed factors of bone and muscle, walls and floor.

Marco continued his rhapsody on Joseph. "I can never thank you enough for finding me a place like this and a man like Joseph. He's really a wonder. What a pity he should be wasting his talent on this hilltop!"

"You are very appreciative," I said. "I'm sure he'll be elated to know your opinion."

"Oh, I have told him that without any reserve. I have also invited him to join my household any time he wishes to come and settle in the plains."

He was unusually loquacious and warm. His nature flourished on solitude, and cave frescoes. How happy he'd have been, I thought, to have had Joseph for a wife! My mind was busy with these thoughts as he was talking. Rosie went on like a good wife, saying, "I hope there is food to eat, and everything is okay. If there is milk may I give you all coffee?" She ran in and returned to say, "Yes, there is milk. I'll make coffee for all of you. I won't take more than five minutes."

I was somehow feeling not quite at ease today. There was a lot of suspense and anxiety at the back of my mind. I was nervous of what he would say to Rosie and really anxious that he should not hurt her. Also, at the same time, a fear that if he became too nice to her, she might not care for me. I wanted him to be good to her, listen to her proposals, and yet leave her to my care! What an impossible, fantastic combination of circumstances to expect!

While Rosie was fussing with the coffee inside, he brought out another chair for me. "I always do my work here," he said. I felt that he honoured the valley with his patronage. He took out a bundle of sheets in an album, and a few photographs. He had made voluminous notes on all the cave paintings. He had filled sheet after sheet with their description, transcription, and what not. They were obscure, but still I went through them with a show of interest. I wished I could ask questions on their value, but again I found myself tongue-tied, because I lacked the idiom. I wished I had been schooled in a jargon-picking institution; that would have enabled me to move with various persons on equal terms. No one would listen to my plea of ignorance and take the trouble to teach me as Rosie did. I listened to him. He was flinging at me dates, evidence, generalizations, and descriptions of a variety of paintings and carvings. I dared not ask what was the earthly use of all that he was doing. When coffee arrived, brought on a tray by Rosie (she had glided in softly, as if to show that she could rival

Joseph's steps; I was startled when she held the cups under my nose), he said to me, "When this is published, it'll change all our present ideas of the history of civilization. I shall surely mention in the book my debt to you in discovering this place."

Two days later I was back there. I went there at noon, at a time when I was sure that Marco would have gone down to the cave so that I might possibly get Rosie alone for a few moments. They were not in the bungalow. Joseph was there, arranging their midday meal in the back room. He said, "They have gone down and are not back yet."

I looked up at Joseph's face as if to get a sign of how things were. But he seemed evasive. I asked cheerily, "How is everything, Joseph?"

"Very well, sir.'

"That man thinks so well of you!" I said to flatter him. But he took it indifferently. "What if he does! I only do my duty. In my profession, some may curse, and some may bless, but I don't care who says what. Last month there was a group who wanted to assault me because I said I could not procure girls for them, but was I afraid? I ordered them to quit next morning. This is a spot for people to live in. I give them all the comforts ungrudgingly. It costs eight annas sometimes to get a pot of water, and I have to send cans and pots with any bus or truck going downhill, and wait for its return — but the guests will never know the difficulty. They are not expected to. It's my business to provide, and it's their business to pay the bill. Let there be no confusion about it. I do my duty and others must do theirs. But if they think I'm a procurer, I get very angry."

"Naturally, no one would like it," I said just to cut his monologue. "I hope this man does not bother you in any way?"

"Oh, no, he is a gem. A good man; would be even better if his wife left him alone. He was so happy without her. Why did you bring her back? She seems to be a horrible nagger."

"Very well, I'll take her downhill and leave the man in peace," I said, starting for the cave. The pathway on the grass had become smooth and white with Marco's

tread. I passed through the thicket and was crossing the sandy stretch when I found him coming in the opposite direction. He was dressed heavily as usual, the portfolio swung in his grip. A few yards behind him followed Rosie. I could not read anything from their faces.

"Hello!" I cried cheerily, facing him. He looked up, paused, opened his mouth to say something, swallowed his words, stepped aside to avoid encountering me, and resumed his forward march. Rosie followed as if she were walking in her sleep. She never even turned to give me a look. A few yards behind Rosie I brought up the rear, and we entered the bungalow gate as a sort of caravan. I felt it would be best to follow their example of silence, and to look just as moody and morose as they. It matched the company very well.

From the top of the veranda he turned to address us. He said, "It'll not be necessary for either of you to come in." He went straight into his room and shut the door.

Joseph emerged from the kitchen door, wiping a plate. "I'm waiting to take instructions for dinner."

Rosie without a word passed up the steps, moved down the veranda, opened the door of his room, passed in, and shut the door. This utter quietness was getting on my nerves. It was entirely unexpected and I did not know how to respond to it. I thought he would either fight us or argue or do something. But this behavior completely baffled me.

Gaffur came round, biting a straw between his teeth, to ask, "What time are we going down?"

I knew this was not his real intention in coming, but to see the drama. He must have whiled away his time gossiping with Joseph; and they must have pooled their information about the girl. I said, "Why are you in a hurry, Gaffur?" and added with bitterness, "When you can stay on and see a nice show."

He came close to me and said, "Raju, this is not at all good. Let us get away. Leave them alone. After all, they are husband and wife; they'll know how to make it up. Come on. Go back to your normal work. You were so interested and carefree and happy then."

I had nothing to say to this. It was very reasonable advice he was giving me. Even at that moment, it would have been all different if God had given me the sense to follow Gaffur's advice. I should have gone quietly back, leaving Rosie to solve her problems with her husband. That would have saved many sharp turns and twists in my life's course. I told Gaffur, "Wait near the car, I'll tell you," keeping irritation out of my voice.

Gaffur went away, grumbling. Presently I heard him sounding the horn — as irate bus-drivers do when their passengers get down at a wayside teashop. I decided to ignore it. I saw the door on the other side open. Marco showed himself outside the front veranda, and said, "Driver, are you ready to go?"

"Yes, sir," said Gaffur.

"Very well then," said the man. He picked up his bundle and started walking to the car. I saw him through the glass shutters of the hall window. It puzzled me. I tried to cross the hall and go out through the door, but it was bolted. I quickly turned, ran down the steps, and went round to Gaffur's car. Marco had already taken his seat. Gaffur had not started the engine yet. He was afraid to ask about the others, but marked time by fumbling with the switch-key. He must have been surprised at the effect of sounding the horn. God knows why he did it; perhaps he was testing it or idling or wanted to remind everyone concerned that time was passing.

"Where are you going?" I asked Marco, taking courage and putting my head into the car.

"I'm going down to the hotel to close my account there."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

He looked me up and down with a fierce glance. "I do not have to explain. I took the room and I am closing the account; that is all. Driver, you may present me your bill direct. Have a receipt ready when you want payment."

"Is no one else coming?" ventured Gaffur, looking in the direction of the bungalow.

The man merely said, "No," and added, "If anyone else is coming, I'll get out."

"Driver," I said with a sudden tone of authority. Gaffur was startled at being called "driver" by me. "Take that man wherever he may want to go and bring me back the car tomorrow — and you will make complete settlement of all your bills with him. Keep a separate account for my own trips." I could have made a further demonstration of arrogance by saying I had brought the car for my own business and so forth, but I saw no point in all that. As I stood watching Marco, a sudden impulse moved me even without my knowledge. I opened the door of the car and pulled him out of it.

For all the heavy helmet and glasses that he wore, he was frail — too much frieze-gazing and cave-visiting had emaciated him. "What? Are you attempting to manhandle me?" he shouted.

"I want to talk to you. I want you to talk. You can't just go away like this." I found his breath coming and going sharply. I calmed down and said, softening my style, "Come in and have your food and speak out. Let us talk, discuss things, and then do what you like. You can't abandon a wife in this place and go away." I looked at Gaffur and said, "You are not in a hurry, are you?"

"No, no. Have your food and come, sir. Plenty of time still."

"I'll ask Joseph to give you food," I added. I felt sorry that I had not taken charge of the situation earlier.

"Who are you?" Marco asked suddenly. "What is your business with me?"

"A great deal. I have helped you. I have given a lot of time to your business. I undertook a lot of responsibility for you, these several weeks."

"And I dispense with your service from this minute," he cried. "Give me your bill and be done with it." Even in his most excited, emotional state, he would not forget his vouchers.

I said, "Had we better not go into it calmly, sitting down and calculating? I have with me some money that you left with me before."

"Very well." He grunted. "Let us be done with everything, and then you get out of my sight."

"Easily done," I said. "But look here, this bungalow has two suites of rooms, and I can engage one perfectly legitimately."

Joseph appeared on the steps. "Will you be wanting a dinner tonight?"

"No," he said.

"Yes; I may," I said. "You may leave, Joseph, if you are in a hurry. If I am staying, I'll send for you. Open the other suite and account it to me."

"Yes, sir." He unlocked another door and I strode into it with the air of a proprietor. I left the door open. It was my room and I was free to leave the door ajar if I chose.

I looked out of the window. The sun's rays from the west were touching the tops of trees with gold. It was a breath-taking sight. I wished Rosie could see it. She was inside. I had lost the privilege of walking into their room. I sat down in the wooden chair in my suite and wondered what to do. What was it that I had done now? I had no clear program. I had no doubt successfully pulled him out of the car. But that took us nowhere. He had gone and bolted himself in his room, and I was in mine. If I had let him go, I might at least have had a chance to bring Rosie round and get her to talk about herself. Now I had made a mess. Could I go out and ask Gaffur to sound the horn again so that the man might emerge from his room?

Half an hour passed thus. There was absolutely no sign of any speech or movement. I tiptoed out of my room. I went to the kitchen. Joseph was gone. I lifted

the lids of the vessels. Food was there. No one seemed to have touched it. Heaven knew they were both starving. I felt a sudden pity for the man. Rosie must have completely faded out. It was her habit to ask for something to eat every two hours. At the hotel I constantly ordered a tray for her; if we were out I would stop all along the way to buy fruit or refreshment. Now the poor girl must be exhausted — and add to it the walk up and down to the cave. I felt suddenly angry at the thought of her. Why couldn't she eat or tell me what was what instead of behaving like a deaf-mute? Had the monster cut off her tongue? I wondered in genuine horror. I put the food on plates, put them on a tray, walked to their door. I hesitated for a second — only for a second; if I hesitated longer, I knew I would never go in. I pushed the door with my feet. Rosie was lying on her bed with eyes shut. (Was she in a faint? I wondered for a second.) I had never seen her in such a miserable condition before. He was sitting in his chair, elbow on the table, his chin on his fist. I had never seen him so vacant before. I felt pity for him. I held myself responsible for it. Why couldn't I have kept out of all this? I placed the tray before him.

"People have evidently forgotten their food today. If you have a burden on your mind, it's no reason why you should waste your food."

Rosie opened her eyes. They were swollen. She had large, vivacious eyes, but they looked as if they had grown one round larger now, and were bulging and fearsome, dull and red. She was a sorry sight in every way. She sat up and told me, "Don't waste any more of your time with us. You go back. That's all I have to say," in a thick, gruff, crackling voice. Her voice shook a little as she spoke. "I mean it. Leave us now."

What had come over this woman? Was she in league with her husband? She had every authority to ask me to get out. Probably she repented her folly in encouraging me all along. All I could say in reply was, "First, you must have your food. For what reason are you fasting?"

She merely repeated, "I want you to go."

"Aren't you coming down?" I persisted to Marco. The man behaved as if he were a deaf-mute. He never showed any sign of hearing us.

She merely repeated, "I am asking you to leave us. Do you hear?"

I grew weak and cowardly at her tone. I muttered, "I mean, you are — or he may want to go down, if it is so — "

She clicked her tongue in disgust. "Do you not understand? We want you to leave."

I grew angry. This woman who had been in my arms forty-eight hours ago was showing off. Many insulting and incriminating remarks welled up in my throat. But even in that stress I had the sense to swallow back my words, and, feeling that it would be dangerous to let myself stand there any longer, turned on my heel and went in a stride to the car. "Gaffur, let us go."

"Only one passenger?"

"Yes." I banged the door and took my seat.

"What about them?"

"I don't know. You had better settle with them later."

"If I have to come again to talk to them, who pays the fare for the trip?"

I beat my brow. "Begone, man. You can settle all that later." Gaffur sat in his seat with the look of a philosopher, started the car, and was off. I had a hope, as I turned to look, that she might watch me from the window. But no such luck. The car sped downward. Gaffur said, *'It's time your elders found a bride for you." I said nothing in reply, and he said, through the gathering darkness, "Raju, I'm senior in years. I think this is the best thing you have done. You will be more happy here-after."

Gaffur's prophecy was not fulfilled in the coming days. I cannot remember a more miserable period of my life. The usual symptoms were present, of course: no taste for food, no sound sleep, no stability (I couldn't stay put in any one place), no

peace of mind, no sweetness of temper or speech — no, no, no, a number of nos. With all seriousness I returned to my normal avocation. But everything looked so unreal. I relieved the boy at the shop, sat there and handed out things and received cash, but always with a feeling that it was a silly occupation. I walked up and down the platform when the train arrived. Sure as anything, I could always get someone to take round.

"Are you Railway Raju?"

"Yes," and then the fat paterfamilias, wife, and two children.

"You see, we are coming from . . . and So-and-so mentioned your name to us as a man who would surely help us. . . . You see, my wife is keen on a holy bath at the source of Sarayu, and then I'd like to see an elephant camp, and anything else you suggest will be most welcome. But remember, only three days. I couldn't get even an hour of extra leave; I'll have to be in my office on."

I hardly paid attention to what they said. I knew all their hnes in advance; all that I paid attention to was the time at their disposal, and the extent of their financial outlay. Even the latter did not really interest me. It was more mechanical than intentional. I called up Gaffur, sat in the front seat, took the party about. While passing the New Extension, I pointed without even turning my head, "Sir Frederick Lawley . . ." When we passed the statue, I knew exactly when the question would come, "Whose is this statue?" and I knew when the next question was coming and had my answer ready, "The man left behind by Robert Clive to administer the district. He built all the tanks and dams and developed this district. Good man. Hence the statue." At the tenth-century Iswara temple at Vinayak Street, I reeled off the description of the frieze along the wall: "If you look closely, you will see the entire epic Ramayana carved along the wall," and so forth. I took them to the source of Sarayu on the misty heights of Mempi Peak, watched the lady first plunge in the basin, the man avowing that he did not care and then following her example. I then took them into the inner shrine, showed them the ancient stone image on the pillar, with Shiva absorbing the Ganges river in his matted locks. . . .

I collected my fee, and my commission from Gaffur and the rest, and saw them off next day. I did it all mechanically, without zest. I was, of course, thinking of Rosie all the time. "That man has probably starved her to death, driven her mad, or left her in the open to be eaten by tigers," I told myself. I looked forlorn and uninterested and my mother tried to find out why. She asked, "What has gone wrong with you?"

"Nothing," I replied. My mother had been so little used to seeing me about the house that she felt surprised and uneasy. But she left me alone. I ate, slept, hung about the railway platform, conducted visitors about, but I was never at peace with myself. My mind was all the while troubled. It was a natural obsession. I didn't even know what had happened, what all the silence and unnatural calm meant. This was a most unexpected development. As I had visualized, I had thought in my dreamy- happy way that he'd present me with his wife and say, "I'm happy you are going to look after her and her art; I'd like to be left alone to pursue my cave studies; you are such a fine fellow to do this for us." Or, on the other hand, he might have rolled up his sleeve to throw me out — one or the other, but I never bargained for this kind of inexplicable stalemate. And what was more, for the girl to support him with such ferocity. I was appalled at the duplicity of her heart. I agonized over and over again, piecing together the data and reading their meaning. I deliberately refrained from opening the subject with Gaffur. He respected my sentiment and never mentioned it again, although I was hoping desperately each day that he would say something about them. On certain days when I wanted him, he was not available. I knew then that he must have gone to the Peak House. I refrained from going near the Anand Bhavan. If any of my customers wanted a hotel I sent them nowadays to the Taj. I did not have to bother myself about them unduly. Marco had said he'd settle their accounts direct — well, you could depend upon him to do it. I came into the picture only to collect a commission from them, as from Gaffur himself. But I was prepared to forgo it all. I was in no mood to make money. In the world of gloom in which I was plunged there was no place for money. There must have been some money, I suppose, somewhere. My mother was able to carry on the household as before, and the shop continued to exist. I knew Gaffur's account must also have been settled. But he never said a word about it. So much the better. I didn't want to be reminded of the life that was gone.

I felt bored and terrified by the boredom of normal life, so much had I got used to a glamorous, romantic existence. Gradually I found taking tourists around a big nuisance. I began to avoid the railway station. I let the porter's son meet the tourists. He had already attempted his hand at it before. Of course, the tourists might miss my own speeches and descriptions, but lately I had become dull-witted, and they probably preferred the boy, as he was at least as curious and interested as they in seeing places. Perhaps he was beginning to answer to the name of Railway Raju too.

How many days passed thus? Only thirty, though they looked to me like years. I was lying asleep on the floor of my house one afternoon. I was half awake and had noted the departure of the Madras Mail at four-thirty. When the chug-chug of the train died away, I tried to sleep again, having been disturbed by its noisy arrival. My mother came and said, "Someone is asking for you." She didn't wait for questions, but went into the kitchen.

I got up and went to the door. There stood Rosie on the threshold, with a trunk at her feet and a bag under her arm. "Rosie, why didn't you say you were coming? Come in, come in. Why stand there? That was only my mother." I carried her trunk in. I could guess a great many things about her. I didn't want to ask her any questions. I didn't feel like knowing anything. I fussed about her, lost my head completely. "Mother!" I cried. "Here is Rosie! She is going to be a guest in our house."

My mother came out of the kitchen formally, smiled a welcome, and said, "Be seated on that mat. What's your name?' she asked kindly, and was rather taken aback to hear the name "Rosie." She expected a more orthodox name. She looked anguished for a moment, wondering how she was going to accommodate a "Rosie" in her home.

I stood about awkwardly. I had not shaved since the morning; I had not combed my hair; my dhoti was discolored and rumpled; the vest I wore had several holes on the back and chest. I folded my arms across my chest to cover the holes. I could not have made a worse impression if I had tried hard. I was ashamed of the torn mat — it had been there since we built the house — the dark hall with the smoky walls and tiles. All the trouble I used to take to create an impression on her was gone in a moment. If she

realized that this was my normal setting, God knew how she would react. I was glad at least I was wearing my torn vest instead of being bare-bodied as was my habit at home. My mother hardly ever noticed the hairiness of my chest, but Rosie, oh —

My mother was busy in the kitchen, but she managed to come out for a moment to observe the formality of receiving a guest. A guest was a guest, even though she might be a Rosie. So my mother came up and sat down on the mat with an air of settling down to a chat. The very first question she asked was, "Who has come with you, Rosie?" Rosie blushed, hesitated, and looked at me. I moved a couple of steps backward in order that she might see me only dimly, and not in all my raggedness.

I replied, "I think she has come alone, Mother."

My mother was amazed. "Girls today! How courageous you are! In our day we wouldn't go to the street corner without an escort. And I have been to the market only once in my life, when Raju's father was alive."

Rosie blinked and listened in silence, not knowing how to react to these statements. She simply opened her eyes wide and raised her brows. I watched her. She looked a little paler and slightly careworn — not the swollen-eyed, gruff -toned monster she had seemed the other day. Her tone was sweet as ever. She looked slightly weak, but as if she hadn't a care in the world. My mother said, "Water is boiling; I'll give you coffee. Do you like coffee?" I was relieved that the conversation was coming down to this level. I hoped my mother would continue to talk about herself rather than ask questions. But it was not to be. She asked next, "Where do you come from?"

"From Madras," I answered promptly.

"What brings you here?"

"She has come to see some friends."

"Are you married?"

"No," I answered promptly.

My mother shot a look at me. It seemed to be meaningful. She withdrew her glance swiftly from me, and, looking at her guest kindly, asked, "Don't you understand Tamil?"

I knew I should shut up now. I let Rosie answer in Tamil, "Yes. It's what we speak at home.'

"Who else have you in your house?"

"My uncle, my aunt, and — " She was trailing away, and my mother shot at her the next terrible question. "What is your father's name?"

It was a dreadful question for the girl. She knew only her mother and always spoke of her. I had never questioned her about it. The girl remained silent for a moment and said, "I have ... no father."

My mother was at once filled with the greatest sympathy and cried, "Poor one, without father or mother. I am sure your uncle must be looking after you well. Are you a B.A.?"

"Yes." I corrected. "She is an M.A."

"Good, good, brave girl. Then you lack nothing in the world. You are not like us uneducated women. You will get on anywhere. You can ask for your railway ticket, call a policeman if somebody worries you, and keep your money. What are you going to do? Are you going to join government service and earn? Brave girl." My mother was full of admiration for her. She got up, went in, and brought her a tumbler of coffee. The girl drank it off gratefully. I was wondering how best I could sneak out and groom myself properly. But there was no chance. My father's architectural sense had not gone beyond building a single large hall and a kitchen. Of course, there was the front *pyol* on which visitors and menfolk generally sat. But how could I ask Rosie to move there? It was too public — the shopboy and all his visitors would come round, gape at her and ask if she was married. This was a little difficult situation for me. We had got used to a common living in that hall. It had never occurred to us to be otherwise. We never wanted anything more than this. My father lived in his shop, I

played under the tree, and we received male visitors on the outside *pyol* and left the inner room for mother or any lady that might come. When we slept we went in. If it was warm, we slept on the *pyol*. The hall was a passage, a dressing-room, drawing-room, study, everything combined. My shaving mirror was on a nail; my finest clothes hung on a peg; for a bath I dashed to a chamber in the back yard, half open to the sky, and poured over my head water drawn straight from the well. I ran up and down and conducted my toilet while my mother came into or out of the kitchen or slept or sat moping in the hall. We had got used to each other's presence and did not mind it in the least. But now with Rosie there?

My mother, as if understanding my predicament, said to the girl, "I'm going to the well. Will you come with me? You are a city girl. You must know something of our village life too." The girl quietly rose and followed her; I hoped she'd not be subjected to an inquisition at the well. The minute their backs were turned I got busy, ran hither and hither, scraped my chin in a hurry, cut myself a little, bathed, groomed myself, and changed into better clothes, and by the time they were back from the well I was in a condition to be viewed by the Princesses of the Earth. I went over to the shop and sent the boy to fetch Gaffur.

"Rosie, if you would like to wash and dress, go ahead. I'll wait outside. We'll go out after that."

It was perhaps an unwarranted luxury to engage Gaffur for an outing. But I saw no other way. I could not talk to her in our home, and I could not make her walk through the streets. Although I had done it before, today it seemed different. I felt a little abashed to be seen with her.

I told Gaffur, "She is back."

He said, "I know it. They were here at the hotel, and he went by the Madras train."

"You never told me anything."

"Why should I? You were going to know anyway."

"What, what has happened?"

"Ask the lady herself, now that you have her in your pocket." He sounded resentful.

I told him placatingly, "Oh, don't be sour, Gaffur. ... I want the car for the evening."

'I'm at your service, sir. What do I have the taxi for unless it is to drive you where you command?" He winked and I was relieved to see him back in his old cheerful mood. When Rosie appeared at the door I went and told my mother, "We will come back, Mother, after a little outing."

"Where?" asked Gaffur, looking at us through the glass. As we hesitated he asked puckishly, "Shall I drive to the Peak House?"

"No, no," Rosie cried, becoming very alert at the mention of it. "I have had enough of it." I didn't pursue the subject.

As we passed the Taj I asked, "Would you like to eat there?"

"Your mother gave me coffee; that is enough. What a fine mother you have!"

"The only trouble is she asks you about marriage!" We laughed nervously at this joke.

"Gaffur, drive on to the river," I said. He drove through the market road, honking his horn impatiently through the crowd. It was a crowded hour. Lots of people were moving around. The lights were up. Shop lights sparkled and lit up the thoroughfare. He took a sharp turn at Ellaman Street — that narrow street in which oil-merchants lived, the oldest street in the city, with children playing in it, cows lounging, and donkeys and dogs blocking the passage so narrow that any passing car almost touched the walls of the houses. Gaffur always chose this way to the river, although there was a better approach. It gave him some sort of thrill to honk his car and scatter the creatures in the road in a fright. Ellaman Street ended with the last lamp on the road, and the road imperceptibly merged into the sand. He applied the brake under the last lamp,

with a jerk sufficient to shake us out of the car. He was in an unusually jovial mood today; he was given to his own temperaments and moods, and no one could predict how he would behave at a given moment. We left him under the lamp. I said, "We want to walk about." He winked at me mischievously in reply.

The evening had darkened. There were still a few groups sitting here and there on the sand. Some students were promenading. Children were playing and running in circles and shouting. On the river step, some men were having their evening dip. Far off at Nallappa's grove cattle were crossing the river with their bells tinkling. The stars were out. The Taluk office gong sounded seven. A perfect evening — as it had been for years and years. I had seen the same scene at the same hour for years and years. Did those children never grow up? I became a little sentimental and poetic, probably because of the companion at my side. My feelings and understanding seemed to have become suddenly heightened. I said, "It's a beautiful evening," to start a conversation. She briefly said, "Yes." We sought a secluded place, away from the route of promenading students.

I spread out my handkerchief, and said, "Sit down, Rosie." She picked away the kerchief and sat down. The gathering darkness was congenial. I sat close to her and said, "Now tell me everything from beginning to end."

She remained in thought for a while and said, "He left by the train this evening, and that is all."

"Why did you not go with him?"

"I don't know. It is what I came for. But it didn't happen that way. Well, it is just as well. We were not meant to be in each other's company.'

"Tell me what happened. Why were you so rude to me that day?"

"I thought it best that we forgot each other, and that I went back to him."

I did not know how to pursue this inquiry. I had no method of eliciting information — of all that had gone before. I fumbled and hummed and hawed in

questioning, till I suddenly felt that I was getting nowhere at all. I wanted a chronological narration, but she seemed unable to provide it. She was swinging forward and backward and talking in scraps. I was getting it all in a knot. I felt exasperated. I said, "Answer me now, step by step. Give an answer to each question. I left you with him to speak about the proposal we had discussed. What did you tell him?"

'What we had agreed — that he should permit me to dance. He was quite happy till I mentioned it. I never spoke about it that whole day or till late next day. I led him on to tell me about his own activity. He showed me the pictures he had copied, the notes he had made, and spoke far into the night about their significance. He was going to be responsible for the rewriting of history, he said. He was talking about his plans for publishing his work. He said later he would go to Mexico, and to some of the Far Eastern countries to study similar subjects and add them on to his work. I was full of enthusiasm, although I did not follow everything he said. I felt after all an understanding was coming between us — there in that lonely house, with trees rustling and foxes and animals prowling around, some light glimmering in the far-off valley. Next morning I went with him to the cave to have a look at the musical notations he had discovered. We had to pass through the main cave and beyond it into a vault by a crumbling ladder. A fierce, terrifying place. Nothing on earth would have induced me to go to a spot like that, stuffy, fierce, and dark. 'There may be cobras here,' I said. He ignored my fears. "You should feel at home, then,' he said and we laughed. And then he lit up a lantern and showed me the wall on which he had scraped off the lime and discovered new pictures. They were the usual grotesque, ancient paintings of various figures, but he managed to spell out the letters around them, and take them down as musical notations. It was nothing I could make out or make use of. They were abstract verse about some theories of an ancient musical system or some such thing. I said, 'If these were about dancing, I could perhaps have tried — " He looked up sharply. The word 'dance' always stung him. I was afraid to go on with the subject. But there, squatting on the ancient floor, amidst cobwebs and bats, in that dim lantern light, I felt courage coming back. 'Will you permit me to dance?"

"Promptly came his reply, with a scowl, the old face was coming back. 'Why?"

" I think I'd be very happy if I could do that. I have so many ideas. I'd like to try. Just as you are trying to — "

"Oh, you want to rival me, is that it? This is a branch of learning, not street-acrobatics."

"You think dancing is street-acrobatics?"

" 'I' m not prepared to discuss all that with you. An acrobat on a trapeze goes on doing the same thing all his life; well, your dance is like that. What is there intelligent or creative in it? You repeat your tricks all your life. We watch a monkey perform, not because it is artistic but because it is a monkey that is doing it.' I swallowed all the insults; I still had hopes of converting him. I lapsed into silence and let him do his work. I turned the subject to other things, and he was normal again. After dinner that night he went back to his studies and I to my game-watching on the veranda. As usual, there was nothing to watch, but I sat there turning over in my head all that he had said and all that I had said, and wondering how to get through the business. I ignored all insults and troubles in the hope that if we reached agreement in the end, it'd all be for gotten. As I sat there, he came behind me, and, putting his hand on my shoulder, said, 'I thought we had come to a final understanding about that subject. Did you or did you not promise that you'd never mention it again?"

The Taluk office gong sounded eight and all the crowd had vanished. We were alone on the sand. Still I'd not learned anything about Rosie. Gaffur sounded the horn. It was no doubt late, but if I went home she would not be able to speak. I said, "Shall we spend the night at the hotel?"

'No. I'd like to go back to your house. I have told your mother that I'll be back."

"All right," I said, remembering my cash position. "Let us stay here for half an hour more. Now tell me."

"His tone," she resumed, "was now so kind that I felt I need not bother even if I had to abandon my own plans once for all: if he was going to be so nice, I wanted nothing more — I'd almost made up my mind that I would ask nothing of him. Yet as a last trick I said, encouraged by his tone, 'I want you to see just one small bit, which I generally do as a memento of my mother. It was her piece, you know." I got up and pulled him by his hand to our room. I pushed aside the chair and other things. I adjusted my dress. I pushed him down to sit on the bed, as I had done with you. I sang that song about the lover and his girl on the banks of Jamuna and danced the piece for him. He sat watching me coldly. I had not completed the fifth line when he said, 'Stop, I have seen enough.'

"I stopped, abashed. I'd been certain that he was going to be captivated by it and tell me to go ahead and dance all my life. But he said, 'Rosie, you must understand, this is not art. You have not sufficient training. Leave the thing alone."

"But here I committed a blunder. I said haughtily, 'Everyone except you likes it."

" For instance?"

' "Well, Raju saw me do it, and he was transported. Do you know what he said?"

' "Raju! Where did you do it for him?"

' "At the hotel." And then he said, 'Come and sit here,' pointing at the chair, like an examining doctor. He subjected me to a close questioning. I think it went on all night. He asked details of our various movements ever since we came here, what time you came to the hotel each day, when you left, where you kept yourself in the room, and how long, and so on; all of which I had to answer. I broke down and cried. He got from my answers enough indication of what we had been doing. Finally he said, "I didn't know that that hotel catered to such fervid art-lovers! I was a fool to have taken too much decency for granted.' Till dawn we sat there. He on the bed, and I on the chair. I was overcome with sleep and put my head on the table, and when I awoke he was gone to the caves.

'Joseph had left some coffee for me. I tidied myself up and went down in search of him. I felt I had made the capital blunder of my life. I had been indiscreet in talking to him as I had been indiscreet and wrong in all my actions. I realized I had committed an enormous sin. I walked as in a dream down to the cave. My mind was greatly troubled. I didn't want anything more in life than to make my peace with him. I did not want to dance. I felt lost ... I was in terror. I was filled with some sort of pity for him too — as I remembered how he had sat up unmoving on the bed all night while I sat in the chair. The look of despair and shock in his face haunted me. I walked down the valley — hardly noticing my surroundings. If a tiger had crossed my path, I'd hardly have noticed it. ... I found him sitting in his cave, on his usual folding stool, sketching out his copies. His back was turned to the entrance when I went in. But as I got into the narrower entrance the light was blocked and he turned. He looked at me coldly. I stood like a prisoner at the bar. "I have come to apologize sincerely. I want to say I will do whatever you ask me to do. I committed a blunder. . . .'

"He returned to his work without a word. He went on as if he had been alone. I waited there. Finally, when he had finished his day's work, he picked up his portfolio and papers and started out. He put on his helmet and spectacles and went past me as if I had not existed. I had stood there for nearly three hours, I think. He had measured, copied, noted down, and examined with a torch, but without paying the slightest attention to me. When he went back to the bungalow, I followed him. That's where you saw us. I went to his room. He sat in his chair and I on the bed. No word or speech. You came into the room again. I sincerely hoped you would leave us and go away, and that we could be peaceful between ourselves. . . . Day after day it went on. I stayed on hopefully. I found that he would not eat the food I touched. So I let Joseph serve him. I ate my food alone in the kitchen. If I lay on the bed, he slept on the floor. So I took to sleeping on the floor, and he went and lay on the bed. He never looked at me or spoke. He arranged with Joseph and went down a couple of times, leaving me alone in the bungalow. He returned and went about his business without worrying about me. But I followed him, day after day, like a dog — waiting on his grace. He ignored me totally. I could never have imagined that one human being could ignore the presence of another human being so completely. I followed him like a shadow, leaving aside all my

own pride and self-respect; I hoped that ultimately he'd come round. I never left his side even for a moment, whether in his room or in the cave. It was a strain to remain speechless in that vast lonely place. I thought I had gone dumb. Joseph was the only one to whom I could say a word whenever he appeared, but he was a reserved man and did not encourage me. I had spent three weeks thus, in a vow of silence. I could not stand it anymore. So one night as he sat at his table I said, *Have you not punished me enough?' My voice sounded strange, and like someone else's to me after so many weeks. It had a booming quality in that silent place that startled me. He started at the sound, turned, looked at me, and said, 'This is my last word to you. Don't talk to me. You can go where you please or do what you please.'

' "I want to be with you. I want you to forget everything. I want you to forgive me — " I said. Somehow I began to like him very much. It seemed enough if he forgave me and took me back.

'But he said, "Yes, I'm trying to forget — even the earlier fact that I ever took a wife. I want to get out of here too — but I have to complete my work; and I'm here for that. You are free to get out and do what you please.'

' "I' m your wife and I'm with you.'

" 'You are here because I'm not a ruffian. But you are not my wife. That's all. I don't, don't want you here, but if you are going to be here, don't talk. That is all.'

"I felt too hurt. I thought that Othello was kindlier to Desdemona. But I bore everything. I had a wild hope that in the end he'd relent, that when we left this place he might change. Once we were back in our home, everything would be all right.

"One day he started packing up. I tried to help him, but he would not let me; and then I packed up my things too, and followed him. Gaffur's car arrived. Both of us came down to the hotel. Back in Twenty-eight. The room looked poisonous to me now. He stayed for a day settling accounts; and at train time he went with the baggage to the railway station. I followed him mutely. I waited patiently. I knew he was going back to

our home at Madras. I wanted very much to go back home. The porter carried our trunks. He pointed at my portion of the baggage and told the porter, 'I don't know about these — not mine.' So the porter looked at me for a second and separated my box. When the train arrived the porter carried only his baggage, and he took his seat in a compartment. I didn't know what to do. I picked up my trunk and followed. When I tried to step into the compartment he said, "I have no ticket for you," and he flourished a single ticket and shut the door on me. The train moved. I came to your home."

She sat sobbing for a while. I comforted her. "You are in the right place. Forget all your past. We will teach that cad a lesson by and by." I made a grandiose announcement. "First, I'll make the world recognize you as the greatest artist of the time."

Within a short time my mother understood everything. When Rosie had gone in for a bath, she said, cornering me, "This cannot go on long, Raju — you must put an end to it."

"Don't interfere, Mother. I am an adult. I know what I am doing."

"You can't have a dancing girl in your house. Every morning with all that dancing and everything going on! What is the home coming to?"

Encouraged by me, Rosie had begun to practice. She got up at five in the morning, bathed, and prayed before the picture of a god in my mother's niche, and began a practice session which went on for nearly three hours. The house rang with the jingling of her anklets. She ignored her surroundings completely, her attention being concentrated upon her movements and steps. After that she helped my mother, scrubbed, washed, swept, and tidied up everything in the house. My mother was pleased with her and seemed kind to her. I never thought that my mother would create a problem for me now, but here she was. I said, "What has come over you all of a sudden?"

My mother paused. "I was hoping you would have the sense to do something about it. It can't go on like this forever. What will people say?"

"Who are 'people?' " I asked.

"Well, my brother and your cousins and others known to us."

"I don't care for their opinion. Just don't bother about such things."

"Oh! That's a strange order you are giving me, my boy. I can't accept it."

The gentle singing in the bathroom ceased; my mother dropped the subject and went away as Rosie emerged from her bath fresh and blooming. Looking at her, one would have thought that she had not a care in the world. She was quite happy to be doing what she was doing at the moment, was not in the least bothered about the past, and looked forward tremendously to the future. She was completely devoted to my mother.

But unfortunately my mother, for all her show of tenderness, was beginning to stiffen inside. She had been listening to gossip, and she could not accommodate the idea of living with a tainted woman. I was afraid to be cornered by her, and took care not to face her alone. But whenever she could get at me, she hissed a whisper into my ear. "She is a real snake woman, I tell you. I never liked her from the first day you mentioned her."

I was getting annoyed with my mother's judgment and duplicity. The girl, in all innocence, looked happy and carefree and felt completely devoted to my mother. I grew anxious lest my mother should suddenly turn round and openly tell her to quit. I changed my tactics and said, "You are right. Mother. But you see, she is a refugee, and we can't do anything. We have to be hospitable."

"Why can't she go to her husband and fall at his feet? You know, living with a husband is no joke, as these modem girls imagine. No husband worth the name was ever conquered by powder and lipstick alone. You know, your father more than once . . ." She narrated an anecdote about the trouble created by my father's unreasonable, obstinate attitude in some family matter and how she met it. I listened to her anecdote patiently and with admiration, and that diverted her for a while. After a few days she began to allude to the problems of husband and wife whenever she spoke to Rosie, and

filled the time with anecdotes about husbands: good husbands, mad husbands, reasonable husbands, unreasonable ones, savage ones, slightly deranged ones, moody ones, and so on and so forth; but it was always the wife, by her doggedness, perseverance, and patience, that brought him round. She quoted numerous mythological stories of Savitri Seetha, and all the well-known heroines. Apparently it was a general talk, apropos of nothing, but my mother's motives were naively clear. She was so clumsily roundabout that anyone could see what she was driving at. She was still supposed to be ignorant of Rosie's affairs, but she talked pointedly. I knew how Rosie smarted under these lessons, but I was helpless. I was afraid of my mother. I could have kept Rosie in a hotel, perhaps, but I was forced to take a more realistic view of my finances now. I was helpless as I saw Rosie suffer, and my only solace was that I suffered with her.

My worries were increasing. The boy at the shop was becoming more clamorous. My sales were poor, as the railways were admitting more peddlers on the platforms. My cash receipts were going down and my credit sales alone flourished. The wholesale merchants who supplied me with goods stopped credit to me. The boy's method of account-keeping was so chaotic that I did not know whether I was moving forward or backward. He produced cash from the counter in a haphazard manner, and there were immense gaps on the shelves all over the shop. The boy was probably pocketing money and eating off the stuff. With my credit at the wholesalers' gone, the public complained that nothing one wanted was ever available. Suddenly the railways gave me notice to quit. I pleaded with the old stationmaster and porter, but they could do nothing; the order had come from high up. The shop was given to a new contractor.

I could not contemplate the prospect of being cut off from the railways. I grew desperate and angry. I shed tears at seeing a new man in the place where I and my father had sat. I slapped the boy on the cheek and he cried, and his father, the porter, came down on me and said, "This is what he gets for helping you! I'd always told the boy — He was not your paid servant, anyway."

"Payment for him? He has swallowed all the cash, credit, and every consumable article in the shop. Fattened himself on it! He must pay me for all his gluttony, which has ruined my business."

"It's not he who has ruined you, but the *saithan* inside, which makes you talk like this." He meant Rosie, I'm sure; she was peeping out of the doorway of our house. My mother watched from the *pyol* in great pain. It was a most unedifying spectacle.

I did not like the porter's reference, and so said something violent and tried to attack him. The stationmaster appeared on the scene and said, "If you create a disturbance here, I'll have to prohibit your entry."

The new shopman watched the scene with detachment. A whiskered fellow — I did not like his leering look. I turned on him fiercely, leaving the porter, and cried, "Well, you'll also face the same situation, remember, some day. Don't be too sure."

He twirled his whiskers and said, "How can everyone hope for the same luck as yours?" He winked mischievously, at which I completely lost my temper and flew at him. He repelled me with a back-stroke of his left hand as if swatting a fly, and I fell back, and knocked against my mother — who had come running onto the platform, a thing she had never done in her life. Luckily, I didn't knock her down.

She clung to my arm and screamed, "Come away. Are you coming or not?" And the porter, the whiskered man, and everyone swore, "You are saved today, because of that venerable old lady." She dragged me back to the house; a few batches of paper, a register, and one or two odd personal belongings which I had kept in the shop were under my arm; with these I entered my house, and I knew my railway association was now definitely ended. It made my heart heavy. I felt so gloomy that I did not turn to see Rosie standing aside, staring at me. I flung myself in a corner of the hall and shut my eyes.

8

My creditor was the Sait, a wholesale merchant in Market Road. He called on me the next day. There was a knock on the door, and there he was. I was watching Rosie at

her practice, leaning against the wall and lounging on the mat. I felt abashed at the sight of the Sait at my door. I knew why he had come. He had brought a fat ledger wrapped up in a blue cloth. He seemed pleased at the sight of me, as if he had feared that I had run away from my post. I was at a loss to say anything for a moment. I didn't want to show confusion. After the railway-station episode, I was recovering my sense of perspective again. While watching Rosie do her practice I seemed to get a clearer notion of what I should be doing. The sound of her anklets, and the whispered music she sang, her rhythm and movement, helped. I felt that I was once again becoming a man of importance. My mother, fortunately for me, had not spoken a word to me since the previous evening, and that saved me a great deal of embarrassment and strain. My mother could not help speaking to Rosie; in spite of all her prejudice, she liked the girl really and could not help treating her kindly. She had not the heart to starve her or offend her in any way. She attended on her enough to give her food and shelter, and left her alone. Only she could not trust herself to speak to me after the scene at the railway station. I am sure she felt that I had ruined, by my erratic ways, what her husband had so laboriously built up. But fortunately she did not take it out on the poor girl, but let her alone — after her usual dose of homilies and parables, all of which Rosie took in good humor.

The Sait was a thin man with a multicolored turban on his head. He was a prosperous businessman, very helpful with credit, but, of course, expected proper settlement of debts. He was at my door. I knew why. I fussed over him, and said, "Come on, come on. Be seated. What a rare pleasure!" I dragged him and seated him on the *pyol*.

He was a good friend of mine, and he hesitated to talk about the dues. There was an awkward silence for a moment. Only Rosie's anklet-jingles could be heard for a while. He listened to it and asked, "What is it?"

"Oh!" I said casually. "A dance practice is going on."

"Dance practice!" He was astounded. It was the last thing he expected in a home like mine. He sat thinking for a while, as if putting two and two together. He

shook his head lightly. The story of the "saithan inside" had evidently reached him. He suppressed any inquiry regarding it as not his business, and said, "What has come over you, Raju? You have not paid my dues for months and months, and you used to be so regular!"

"Business conditions have not been good, old man," I said with a sort of affected resignation and cheer.

"No, it's not that. One must — "

"Oh, and that boy whom I trusted cheated completely."

"What is the use of blaming others?" he asked. He seemed to be a ruthless man, who was bent upon harassing me. He took out his notebook, opened it out, and pointed at the bottom of a column. "Eight thousand rupees! I can't let this go on very long. You will have to do something about it."

I was tired of being told to do "something" about something. My mother started it with regard to the girl, someone else about something else, the girl had started to say, "We must do something," and now this man; I felt irritated by his advice and said curtly, "I know it."

"What do you propose to do about it?"

"Of course you are going to be paid — "

"When?"

"How can I say? . . . You must wait."

"All right. You want another week?" he asked.

"Week!" I laughed at the joke. He looked hurt. Everyone seemed hurt by me at this time.

He became very serious and said, "Do you think it is a laughing matter? Do you think I have come to amuse you?"

"Why do you raise your voice, Sait? Let us be friends."

"Friendship has nothing to do with this," he said, lowering his voice. When he raised it the jingling inside could not be heard. But when he lowered it we could hear Rosie's steps in the background. A smile, perhaps, played over my lips as I visualized her figure on the other side of the wall. He felt irritated at this again. "What, sir, you laugh when I say I want money, you smile as if you were dreaming. Are you in this world or in paradise? I came to talk to you in a businesslike manner today, but it is not possible. All right, don't blame me." He bundled up his account book and rose to go.

"Don't go, Sait. Why are you upset?" I asked. Everything I said unfortunately seemed to have a ring of levity about it. He stiffened and grew more serious. The more he scowled, the more I found it impossible to restrain myself. I don't know what devil was provoking so much mirth in me at this most inappropriate moment. I was bubbling with laughter, I sup-pressed a tremendous urge to giggle. Somehow his seriousness affected me in this way. Finally, when he turned away from me in utter wrath, the profound solemnity of this puny man with his ledger clutched under his arm and his multicolored turban struck me as so absurd that I was convulsed with laughter. He turned his head, threw a brief glance at me, and was off.

With a smiling face, I re-entered the house and took up my position on the mat. Rosie paused for a second to ask, "Something very amusing? I heard your laughter."

'Yes, yes, something that made me laugh.'

"Who was he?" she asked.

"A friend," I said. I did not want her to know these troubles. I didn't want anyone to be bothered with these things. I did not like to be bothered by anything. Living with Rosie under the same roof was enough for me. I wanted nothing more in life. I was slipping into a fool's paradise. By not talking about money, I felt I had dismissed the subject — a stupid assumption. The world outside Rosie seemed so unreal that it was possible for me to live on such an assumption. But not for long.

Within a week or ten days I found myself involved in court affairs. My sense of humor had completely ruined my relations with the Sait, and he had proceeded directly to get satisfaction through a court. My mother was distraught. I had not a friend in the world except Gaffur. I sought him out one day at the fountain parapet and told him where I stood. I was returning from the court. He was all sympathy and said, "Have you a lawyer?"

"Yes. The one there over the cotton godown."

"Oh — he is the adjournment expert. He can keep the case going for years. So don't worry. Is it a civil suit or criminal suit?"

"Criminal! They have made out a case against me that, when he came to ask for his dues, I threatened to beat him. I wish I had done so!"

"What a pity! If it were a civil case, it could go on for years, and you would be none the worse for it while it lasted. Have you got that in your house?" he asked slyly. I gave him a fierce look. And he said, "How can I blame a woman for what you are? . . . Why don't you look after tourists again?"

"I can't go near the railway station now. The railway staff are going to depose against me, to prove that I beat people up."

"Is it true?"

"Hm. If I catch the porter's son, I'm going to wring his neck,"

"Don't do such things, Raju; you will not help yourself. You have brought sufficient confusion on yourself. Do pull yourself together. Why don't you do sensible things?"

I thought this over. I said, "If I had five hundred rupees, I could start a new life." I outlined to him a plan to utilize Rosie's services and make money. The thought of her warmed me up. "She is a gold-mine," I cried. "If I had money to start her with — oh!" My visions soared. I said to him, "You know Bharat Natyam is really the greatest art business today. There is such a craze for it that people will pay anything to see the best. I cannot do anything about it because I have no money. Can't you help

me, Gaffur?" He was amused at my request. It was now my turn to feel upset at laughter. I said, "I have done so much for your business."

He was essentially a man of heart. He appealed to my reason. "I'm not a rich man, Raju. You know how I borrow money for even the upkeep of the car. If I had five hundred, I'd let my passengers ride on better tires. No, no, Raju. . . Listen to my advice. Send her away and try to get back to ordinary, real life. Don't talk all this art business. It's not for us."

On hearing this, I grew so upset that I said something to hurt him. He got back into his driving seat with a serious face. "If you like a drive any time, call me; that's all I can do to help you. And, remember, I'm not asking for the old dues from you—"

"Set it off against the commission due to me for all your Peak House trips," I said haughtily.

"Very well," he said, and started his car. "Call me any time you may want the car; it's always there. I pray that God may give you better sense." He was off. I knew here was another friend passing out of my life.

Unfortunately, he was not the last. My mother's turn come soon. I was rapt, watching Rosie do a piece called "The Dancing Feet." Rosie said she had introduced a couple of variations, and wanted me to give my opinion. I was becoming a sort of expert on these matters nowadays. I watched her critically, nowadays we had to seize our romantic moments and get through with it at odd times — for instance, when my mother went to fetch water. We knew exactly how long she would be away and utilized it. It was all irksome, but very novel, and made me forget my troubles. Whenever I watched her sway her figure, if there was no one about I constantly interrupted her performance, although I was supposed to watch her from an art critic's point of view. She pushed me away with "What has come over you?" She was a devoted artist; her passion for physical love was falling into place and had ceased to be a primary obsession with her.

I had a little money still left in the savings, although I gave no hint of it to anyone. A couple of days after the Sait's coming, I drew the entire amount from the bank. I did not want it to be seized. This was keeping us. I had a small lawyer handling my case in the court. I had to give him part of my money for court fees and such things. He had his office in the attic of a cotton shop in Market Road — a choking place with one shelf of books, one table, one chair, and one bench for clients. He had spotted me on the very first day while I was loitering with terror in my eyes, obeying the first summons. He had ingratiated himself into my favor while I waited in the corridor. He asked, "Did you hit the Sait, really? Speak the truth to me.'

"No, sir. It's a lie."

"Evidently they want to bring in a criminal motive to quicken the procedure. We will dispute that first, and then the civil; we've a lot of time. Don't worry. I'll deal with all that. How much money have you in your pocket?"

"Only five rupees."

"Give it here." If I had said "two" he'd probably have been content to take that. He pocketed it, held up a sheet of paper for my signature, and said, "That's right. It fixes all your affairs up nicely."

At the court I was asked to go behind an enclosure while the judge looked at me. The Salt was there with his notebook, and he had his lawyer, of course; we glared at each other. His lawyer said something; my five-rupee lawyer said something, gesticulating in my direction; and the court servant patted my back and told me to go. My lawyer nodded to me. It was all over before I could understand anything. My lawyer met me outside. "Managed to get an adjournment. I'll tell you the next date later. Meet me at my office, over the cotton godown — come by the staircase on the side lane." He was off. If this was all the bother there was, I felt I could get through it easily. I was in excellent hands.

I told my mother on returning from the court, "There is nothing to worry about. Mother; it's going nicely."

"He may throw us out of this house. Where will you go after that?"

"Oh, all that will take a long time. Don't unduly burden your mind," I cried.

She gave me up in despair. "I don't know what is coming over you. You don't take anything seriously nowadays."

"It's because I know what to worry about; that's all," I said grandly.

Nowadays our domestic discussions were carried on in the presence of Rosie. No privacy was needed; we had got used to her. Rosie behaved as if she did not hear these domestic matters. She looked fixedly at the floor or at the pages of a book (the only things I managed to salvage from our shop), and moved off to a corner of the hall, as if to be out of earshot. She did not, even when she was alone with me, embarrass me by asking any question about our affairs.

My mother had adjusted herself to my ways as an unmitigated loafer, and I thought she had resigned herself to them. But she had her own scheme of tackling me. One morning as I was watching Rosie's footwork with the greatest concentration, my uncle dropped in like a bolt from the blue. He was my mother's elder brother, an energetic landowner in my mother's village who had inherited her parents' home and was a sort of general adviser and director of all our family matters. Marriages, finances, funerals, litigation, for everything he was consulted by all the members of the family — my mother and her three sisters, scattered in various parts of the district. He seldom left his village, as he conducted most of his leadership by correspondence. I knew my mother was in touch with him — a postcard a month, closely written, from him would fill her with peace and happiness for weeks and she would ceaselessly talk about it. It was his daughter that she wanted me to marry — a proposal which she fortunately pushed into the background, in view of recent developments.

Here entered the man himself, standing at the door and calling in his booming voice, "Sister!" I scrambled to my feet and ran to the door. My mother came hurrying from the kitchen. Rosie stopped her practice. The man was six feet, darkened by the sun from working in the fields, and had a small knotted tuft on his skull; he wore a

shirt with an upper cloth, his dhoti was brown, not white like a townsman's. He carried a bag of jute material in his hand (with a green print of Mahatma Gandhi on it), and a small trunk. He went straight to the kitchen, took out of the bag a cucumber, a few limes, and plantains and greens, saying, "These are for my sister, grown in our gardens." He placed them on the floor of the kitchen for his sister. He gave a few instructions as to how to cook them.

My mother became very happy at the sight of him. She said, "Wait, I'll give you coffee."

He stood there explaining how he came by a bus, what he had been doing when he received my mother's letter, and so on and so forth. It was a surprise to me to know that she had written to him to come. She had not told me. "You never told me you wrote to Uncle!" I said.

"Why should she tell you?" snapped my uncle. "As if you were her master!" I knew he was trying to pick a quarrel with me. He lowered his voice to a whisper, pulled me down by the collar of my shirt, and asked, "What is all this one hears about you? Very creditable development you are showing, my boy. Anybody would be proud of you!" I wriggled myself free and frowned. He said, "What has come over you? You think yourself a big man? I can't be frightened of scapegraces like you. Do you know what we do when we get an intractable bull calf? We castrate it. We will do that to you, if you don't behave."

My mother went on minding the boiling water as if she didn't notice what went on between us. I had thought she would come to my support, but she seemed to enjoy my predicament, having designed it herself. I felt confused and angry. I walked out of the place. This man attacking me in my own house, within five minutes of arrival! I felt too angry. As I moved out I could overhear my mother speaking to him in whispers. I could guess what she was saying. I went back to my mat, rather shaken.

Rosie was standing where I had left her with her hip slightly out, her arm akimbo. She was like one of those pillar carvings in the temples. The sight of her filled me with a sudden nostalgia for the days when I took people to see the old temples and I

sighed for the variety of life and contacts and experience I used to have. Rosie looked a little scared. "Who is he?" she asked in a low tone.

"Don't bother about him. He must be crazy. You don't have to worry."

That was enough for her. My guidance was enough. She accepted it in absolutely unquestioning faith and ignored everything else completely. It gave me a tremendous confidence in myself and seemed to enhance my own dimensions. I told her, "You need not stop your dance. You may go on with it."

"But, but — " She indicated my uncle.

"Forget his existence completely," I said. I was in a very challenging mood, but inside me I trembled still to think what my uncle might have to say. "You don't have to bother about anyone except me," I said with sudden authority. (My uncle used to be called in to frighten me when I was a boy.) "This is my house. I do as I please here. If people don't like me, they need not visit me; that is all." I laughed weakly.

What was the use of pouring out all these challenging statements to this girl? She resumed her song and dance, and I sat observing her, with extra attention as if I were her teacher. I observed my uncle peep out of the kitchen, and so I made my-self more deliberately teacher-like. I issued commands and directions to Rosie. My uncle watched my antics from the kitchen. Rosie went on with her practice as if she were in her private room. My uncle presently came over to watch, his eyes bulging with contempt and cynicism. I ignored him completely. He watched for a moment, and let out a loud "Hm! So this is what is keeping you busy! Hm! Hm! Never dreamed that anyone in our family would turn out to be a dancer's backstage boy!"

I remained silent for a while before mustering courage and resolution to attack him. He mistook my silence for fear and brought out another of his broadsides. "Your father's spirit will be happy to see you now, literally groveling at the feet of a dancing girl."

He was out to provoke me. I turned round and said, "If you have come to see your sister, you had better go in and stay with her. Why do you come where I am?"

"Aha!" he cried, delighted. "Good to see some spirit in you. There is still hope for you, although you need not try it on your uncle first. Did I not mention a moment ago?" He was squatting on the floor now, sipping his coffee.

"Don't be vulgar," I said. "At your age too!"

"Hey, wench!" he cried to Rosie, addressing her in the singular, or something even lower than singular. "Now stop your music and all those gesticulations and listen to me. Are you of our family?" He waited for an answer. She stopped her dance and simply stared at him. He said, "You are not of our family? Are you of our clan?" He again waited for her to answer and answered himself. "No. Are you of our caste? No. Our class? No. Do we know you? No. Do you belong to this house? No. In that case, why are you here? After all, you are a dancing girl. We do not admit them in our families. Understand? You seem to be a good, sensible girl. You should not walk into a house like this and stay on. Did anyone invite you? No. Even if you are invited you should go on staying where you belong, and not too long there. You cannot stay like this in our house. It is very inconvenient. You should not deserting your husband. Do you follow?" She sank down at this onslaught, covering her face with her hands. My uncle was evidently gratified at the success of his efforts, and proceeded to drive home his point. "You see, you should not pretend to cry at these things. You must understand why we say such things. You must clear out by the next train. You must promise to go. We will give you money for your railway ticket."

At this a big sob burst from her. I was completely maddened by it. I flew at my uncle and knocked the cup out of his hand, shouting, "Get out of this house."

He picked himself up, saying, "You tell me to get out. Has it come to this? Who are you, puppy, to ask me to get out? I'll make you get out. This is my sister's house. You go out if you want enjoyment with dancing girls — "

My mother came running out of the kitchen with tears in her eyes. She flew straight at the sobbing Rosie, crying, "Are you now satisfied with your handiwork, you she-devil, you demon. Where have you dropped on us from? Everything was so good

and quiet — until you came; you came in like a viper. Bah! I have never seen anyone work such havoc on a young fool! What a fine boy he used to be! The moment he set his eyes on you, he was gone. On the very day I heard him mention the 'serpent girl' my heart sank. I knew nothing good could come out of it." I didn't interrupt my mother; I allowed her all the speech she wanted to work off feelings she had bottled up all these weeks. She then catalogued all my misdeeds down to my latest appearance in the court, and how I was going to lose even this house, so laboriously built by my father.

The girl looked up with her tear-drenched face and said amidst sobs, "I will go away. Mother. Don't speak so harshly. You were so good to me all these days."

My uncle now interrupted to tell his sister, "This is your mistake, sister. That wench is right in a way. Why should you have been so good to her? You should have told her at the beginning what was what."

I seemed powerless to suppress this man or send him away. He said what he liked and stayed where he liked. Unless I physically pushed him out, there was no way of saving poor Rosie; but he could knock me flat if I laid hands on him. I was appalled at the somersault in my mother's nature the moment she got support in the shape of a brother. I went over to Rosie, put my arm around her to the shock of the two (my uncle cried, "The fellow has lost all shame!"), and whispered to her, "Shut your ears to all that they say. Let them say what they like. Let them exhaust themselves. But you are not leaving. I'm going to be here, and you are going to be here. Others who don't like the arrangement are welcome to leave."

Thus they went on a little longer, and when they could say nothing more they retired to the kitchen. I never spoke a word more. I learned a great secret, that of shutting my ears, and I felt happy that Rosie too could put herself through this hardening process, absolutely relying on my support. She lifted her head and sat up, watching the household coldly. My mother called me in to eat when food was ready. I took care to see that Rosie was also fed. My mother didn't call us until she had fed my uncle on the vegetables he had brought and had cooked them according to his

specifications. After food he went over to the *pyol*, spread out his upper cloth, sat on it munching pan, and then lay down on the cool floor to sleep. I felt relieved to hear his snores. The calm after the storm was absolute. My mother served us food without looking at us. A great silence reigned in the house. It continued until three-thirty in the afternoon.

My uncle renewed the fight by coming in to announce to all whom it might concern, "An hour more for the train. Is the passenger ready?" He looked at Rosie sitting below a window and reading. She looked up, disturbed. I never left her side that whole afternoon. Whatever people might say, I wanted to be near at hand to support her. As long as my uncle remained in town there could be no relaxation of. the vigil. I'd have given anything to know when my uncle would be leaving. But he was a man of independent notions and was not affected by my genuine desire to have him go.

Rosie looked up, slightly scared. I held a hand up to give her courage. My mother came out of her corner and, looking kindly at Rosie, said, "Well, young woman, it has been nice having you, but you know, it is time for you to go." She was trying new tactics now, of kindliness and a make-believe that Rosie had agreed to leave. "Rosie, girl, you know the train is at four-thirty. Have you packed up all your things? I found your clothes scattered here and there."

Rosie blinked unhappily. She did not know how to answer. I intervened to say, "Mother, she is not going anywhere."

My mother appealed to me. "Have some sense, Raju. She is another man's wife. She must go back to him."

There was such calm logic in what she said, I had nothing more to do but repeat blindly, "She can't go anywhere, Mother. She has got to stay here."

And then my mother brought out her trump card. "If she is not going, I have to leave the house," she said.

My uncle said, "Did you think she was helpless, and only a dependent on you?" He thumped his chest and cried, "As long as I am breathing, I will never let down a sister."

I appealed to my mother. "You don't have to go. Mother."

"Then throw that wench's trunk out and give her a push toward the railway, and your mother will stay. What do you take her for? You think she is the sort that can keep company with all kinds of dancing — "

"Shut up. Uncle," I said, and I was taken aback by my own temerity. I feared he might repeat his threat. Fortunately, he said, "Who are you, puppy, to say if I am to shut up or speak? You think I notice you? Are you sending that . . . that . . . out or not? That's all we want to know."

"No; she is not going," I said very calmly.

He heaved a sigh, glared at the girl, looked at my mother. "Well, sister, you must starting packing, then. We will go by the evening bus."

My mother said, "All right. I can pack in a minute."

"Don't go, Mother," I pleaded.

"See that girl's obstinacy. She watches it all so calmly," said my uncle.

Rosie pleaded, "Mother, don't go."

"Oho!" said my uncle. "She has reached the stage of addressing you as Mother. Next she will be calling me Uncle-in-law, I suppose." He turned to me with a horrible grin and said, "Your mother needn't quit really. This house is hers for her lifetime. If I had had her cooperation, I'd have shown you a few nice tricks today. She would have stayed on till the end. My brother-in-law was no fool. He made you master of only one-half of the home. ..." All of a sudden he entered into legal complexities, arising from my father's will, and described how he would have tackled the whole situation if he had been in my mother's position, and how he would have disputed every inch of

the ground and taken the matter to the Supreme Court, and how he would have shown the world what to do with scapegraces who had no respect for family traditions but yet tried to enjoy their ancestors' hard-earned wealth. I was relieved as long as he waxed eloquent over legalities, as it helped him forget Rosie for the time being. True to the tradition of the landed gentry, he found litigation an engrossing subject. But the spell was broken when my mother came in to say, "I'm ready." She had picked up a few clothes here and there. Her large steel trunk, which had never been moved from its place in a comer for decades and decades, was packed and ready to be lifted out. She had a basket with a handle into which she had thrown a few copper and brass vessels. My uncle announced, "These belong to our house, given by my father when this girl, my dear sister, married and was going to set up her own family. It's our gift to her, and so don't gaze on it with such a look."

I looked away and said, "She certainly can take what she likes. Nobody will say anything."

"Aha, you are proud of that, are you?" he said. "You are showing a lot of liberality to your mother, aren't you?"

I had never in my life seen him so unpleasant. We had always been in terror of him when we were children, but this was the first occasion I had seen so much of him as an adult. My mother looked saddened rather than angry, and seemed almost ready to come to my rescue. She interrupted him sharply to say with extraordinary consideration in her voice, "I need nothing more. This will do." She picked up several small prayer-books, which she read every day of her life before her midday meal, sitting before the pictures of the god, in meditation. I had seen her for years at the same time sitting with closed eyes in front of the niche in the wall, and it now filled me with sadness that I would not see her there anymore. I followed her about the house as she picked out her articles and packed. My uncle, as if to keep an eye on me, followed my steps. Apparently he feared I might induce my mother to stay on.

In spite of his supervision, I asked, "Mother, when will you be back?"

She hesitated to answer, and said finally, "I'll — I'll — let us see.

"The moment she gets a telegram that the line is clear," said Uncle and added, "We are not the sort to let down our sisters, remember. That house in the village is always hers to return to; so that she has not got to be at anybody's mercy. Our house belongs to our sister as much as to us," he added boastfully.

"Don't fail to light the lamps in the god's niche," said my mother, going down the steps. "Be careful with your health." Uncle carried the trunks and she carried the basket. Soon they were at the end of the street and turned the corner. I stood on the step watching. At the threshold stood Rosie. I was afraid to turn round and face her, because I was crying.

We were a married couple to all appearances. Rosie cooked the food, and kept the house. I seldom went out except to do a little shopping. All day long she danced and sang. I made love to her constantly and was steeped in an all-absorbing romanticism, until I woke up to the fact that she was really getting tired of it all. Some months passed before she asked me, "What are your plans?"

"Plans!" said the sleeper, awakening. "What plans?"

She smiled at this and said, "There you are, always lying on the mat watching me or holding me in your arms. I have now good practice — I can manage a show of four hours, although with accompaniments it would have been much more helpful—"

'I'm here, accompanying and marking time for you. What other accompaniment do you want?'

"I need a full orchestra. We have stayed indoors long enough, ' she said. I found her so earnest that I had not the courage to joke any more.

I said, "I'm also thinking. Very soon we must do something."

" Rosie' is a silly name," I said as a first step after two days of hard thinking. "The trouble with you is that although your people are a traditional dance family, they didn't know how to call you. For our public purpose, your name must be changed. What about Meena Kumari?"

She shook her head. "It's no better. I see no reason to change my name.

"You don't understand, my dear girl. It's not a sober or sensible name. If you are going to appear before the public with that name, they will think it's someone with cheap tricks, such as those we see in gambling side-shows. For a classical dancer, you should call yourself something that is poetic and appealing."

She realized that there was a point in what I said, and she picked up a pad and pencil and noted down all the names that came into her head. I added my own. We wanted to see how they sounded and also how they looked on paper. Sheet after sheet was filled up and discarded. It became a sort of joke. We seemed to be forgetting our main job in enjoying the fun. Each name had something ridiculous about it, comic-sounding or an impossible association. At dead of night she sat up to ask, 'What about . . . . ?'

"The name of the wife of a demon-king — people will be frightened," I said. Eventually, after four days of hard thinking and elimination (a labor which gave us the satisfaction of being engaged in professional duties), we arrived at "Nalini," a name that could have significance, poetry, and universality, and yet be short and easily remembered.

With the attainment of a new name, Rosie entered a new phase of life. Under the new name, Rosie and all she had suffered in her earlier life were buried from public view. I was the only- one who knew her as Rosie and called her so. The rest of the world knew her as Nalini. I bestirred myself, began to go out and meet people in the town. I attended meetings of various groups — at the University, the town hall, and the Club, and watched for a chance. When the Albert Mission boys had their annual social, I mixed in their affairs through the slender link of the clerk in the Union, who had once read with me at the old *pyol* school, and I suggested, "Why not a dance recital instead of the usual Shakespeare tragedy?" I held forth on the revival of art in India so vehemently that they could not easily brush me aside, but had to listen. Heaven knew where I had found all this eloquence. I delivered such a lecture on the importance of our culture and the place of the dance in it that they simply had to accept what I said. Someone doubted if a classical dance would be suitable for a student assembly. I

proved that the classical dance could be viewed as the lightest of entertainments, considering its versatility. I was a man with a mission. I dressed myself soberly for the part in a sort of rough-spun silk shirt and an upper cloth and a handspun and hand-woven dhoti, and I wore rimless glasses — a present from Marco at one of our first meetings. I wore a wrist-watch — all this in my view lent such weight to what I said that they had to listen to me respectfully. I too felt changed; I had ceased to be the old Railway Raju and I earnestly wished that I too could bury myself, as Rosie had done, under a new name. Fortunately it didn't make much difference. No one seemed to bother about my affairs as those in the immediate railway colony did, and even if they knew they seemed to have other things to remember than my career and its ups and downs. I never knew I could speak so fluently on cultural matters. I had picked up a little terminology from Rosie and put it to the best use. I described "The Dancing Feet" and explained its significance word by word and almost performed the dance act myself. They watched me in open-mouthed wonder. I threw a further bait to the committee: if they liked, they could go with me and see a sample of the show. They enthusiastically agreed. I mentioned her as a cousin who was on a visit, and who was famous in her own place.

The next morning Rosie had tidied up the hall so that it did not look too bad. She had decorated the place with flowers from a gold mohur tree. She had stuck the bunch in a bronze tumbler, and kept it in a corner; it touched up our little home with some sort of beauty. She had also pushed away our rolls of bedding and other boxes, stools, and odds and ends to the farthest corner, thrown a dhoti over the heap, and covered it again cunningly with a striped carpet pulled from under a bed. This gave it a mysterious look. She had shaken the old mat and rolled it up so that the tattered portions were invisible. She managed to have ready cups of brown, steaming coffee. All this was an excellent preparation, calculated to win a public for her. The men, two of them, came and knocked on the door. When I opened it there they stood. Rosie had hung a printed sheet over the kitchen doorway and was behind it. I opened the door, saw the men there, and said, "Oh, you have come!" as if I had thought they wouldn't. Somehow I felt it would be good to give it all a casual air. They smirked foolishly, realizing they had come on an agreeable errand to watch a possible beauty.

I seated them on the mat, spoke to them of world politics for a moment, and said, "You can spare a little time, I suppose? I'll ask my cousin if she is free."

I walked through the kitchen curtain and she was standing there. I grinned at her and winked at her. She stood stock still and grinned back at me. We were enjoying this piece of stage-management; we felt we had already begun to put on a show. She had tied her hair into a knot, decorated her forehead with a small vermilion dot, lightly sprinkled a little powder on her face, and clad herself in a blue cotton sari —an effect of simplicity produced with a lot of preparation. After five minutes of silent waiting, I nodded, and she followed me out.

The Secretary and the Treasurer gaped. I said, "These are my friends. Sit down." She smiled, and seated herself on a small mat — modestly away. I knew at that moment that her smile was an "open sesame" to her future. There was an awkward pause for a moment and then I said, "These are my friends. They are having a variety show in the College Union, and were wondering if you would do anything for them."

She asked, "Variety? What other items are you having?" and puckered her brow in a superior way.

They said apologetically, "A few fancy-dress items, mimicry and such things."

She said, "How can you fit my program into that? How much time do you want to give me?" She was taking charge of their program.

They said, greatly flustered, "One hour, an hour and a half — anything you like."

Now she delivered them a homily. "You see, a dance program is not like variety, it needs time to be built up. It's something that has to develop even as one is performing and one is watching."

They agreed with her sentiments absolutely. I interrupted to say, "Their main idea in coming now is to see you, and to see whatever bit of your art you can show them. Would you oblige us?"

She made a wry face and grumbled, looked hesitant, and gave us no reply.

"What is it? They are waiting for a reply from you. They are busy men."

"Oh, no. No need to hustle the lady. We can wait."

"How, how to — manage now — no accompaniments — with- out accompaniments I never like — " she was saying, and I said, "Oh, this is not a full-dress show. Just a little — When there is a full-dress show we shall have accompaniments. After all, you are the most important item." I cajoled her and the other two happily joined me; and Rosie agreed hesitantly, saying, "If you are so keen, I can't refuse. But don't blame me if it is not good." She went behind the curtain once again, returned bearing coffee on a plate, and set it down.

Out of formal politeness the gentlemen said, "Why bother about coffee?" I pressed them to accept it.

As they sipped their coffee, Rosie began her dance, to the accompaniment of a song that she lightly sang. I ventured to beat time with my hands, like a very knowing one. They watched in fascination. She suddenly paused, wiped the perspiration from her brow, took a deep breath, and, before resuming again, said to me, "Don't beat time; it misleads me."

"All right," I said, awkwardly grinning, trying not to look snubbed. I whispered, "Oh, she is so precise, you know." They shook their heads.

She finished her piece and asked, "Shall I go on? Shall I do The Dancing Feet'?"

"Yes, yes," I cried, glad to be consulted. "Go on. They will like it."

When they recovered from the enchantment, one of them said, "I must admit I have never cared for Bharat Natyam, but watching this lady is an education. I now know why people are in raptures over it."

The other said, "My only fear is that she may be too good for our function. But it doesn't matter. I'll reduce the other items to give her all the time she wants."

"We must make it our mission to educate the public taste," I said. "We must not estimate the public taste and play down to it. We must try to raise it by giving only the best."

"I think up to the interval we shall have the variety and all such tomfoolery. After the interval this lady can take up the entire show."

I looked up at her for a second as if waiting for her approval, and said, "She'll, of course, be pleased to help you. But you must provide the drummer and accompanists," and thus acquired at last the accompanists Rosie had been clamoring for all along.

9

My activities suddenly multiplied. The Union function was the start. Rocket-like, she soared. Her name became public property. It was not necessary for me to elaborate or introduce her to the public now. The very idea would be laughed at. I became known because I went about with her, not the other way round. She became known because she had the genius in her, and the public had to take notice of it. I am able to speak soberly about it now — only now. At that time I was puffed up with the thought of how I had made her. I am now disposed to think that even Marco could not have suppressed her permanently; sometime she was bound to break out and make her way. Don't be misled by my present show of humility; at the time there was no limit to my self-congratulation. When I watched her in a large hall with a thousand eyes focused on her, I had no doubt that people were telling themselves and each other, "There he is, the man but for whom — " And I imagined all this adulation lapping around my ears like wave- lets. In every show I took, as a matter of right, the middle sofa in the first row. I gave it out that that was my seat wherever I might go, and unless I sat there Nalini would be unable to perform. She needed my inspiring presence. I shook my head discreetly; sometimes I lightly tapped my fingers together in timing. When I met her eyes, I smiled familiarly at her on the stage. Sometimes I signaled her a message

with my eyes and fingers, suggesting a modification or a criticism of her performance. I liked the way the president of the occasion sat next to me, and leaned over to say something to me. They all liked to be seen talking to me. They felt almost as gratified as if they spoke to Nalini herself. I shook my head, laughed with restraint, and said something in reply; leaving the watching audience at our back to guess the import of our exchanges, although actually it was never anything more than, "The hall seems to have filled."

I threw a glance back to the farthest corner of the hall, as if to judge the crowd, and said, "Yes, it's full," and swiftly turned round, since dignity required that I look ahead. No show started until I nodded to the man peeping from the wings, and then the curtain went up. I never gave the signal until I satisfied myself that everything was set. I inquired about the lighting, microphone arrangements, and looked about as if I were calculating the velocity of the air, the strength of the ceiling, and as if I wondered if the pillars would support the roof under the circumstances. By all this I created a tenseness which helped Nalini's career. When they satisfied all the conditions a performance began, the organizers felt they had achieved a difficult object. Of course, they paid for the dance, and the public was there, after paying for their seats, but all the same I gave the inescapable impression that I was conferring on them a favor by permitting the dance. I was a strict man. When I thought that the program had gone on long enough I looked at the watch on my wrist and gave a slight nod of the head, and Nalini would understand that she must end the show with the next item. If anyone made further suggestions, I simply laughed them off. Sometimes slips of paper traveled down from the back of the hall, with requests for this item or that, but I frowned so much when a slip was brought near me that people became nervous to pass on such things. They generally apologized. "I don't know. Someone from the back bench — it just came to me — " I took it with a frown, read it with bored tolerance, and pushed it away over the arm of the sofa; it fell on the carpet, into oblivion. I made it look as if such tricks should be addressed to lesser beings and that they would not work here.

One minute before the curtain came down, I looked for the Secretary and nodded to him to come over. I asked him, "Is the car ready? Please have it at the other

door, away from the crowd. I'd like to take her out quietly." It was a false statement. I really liked to parade her through the gaping crowds. After the show, there were still people hanging around to catch a glimpse of the star. I walked ahead of her or beside her without much concern. At the end of the performance they presented her with a large garland of flowers, and they gave me one too. I accepted mine with protest. "There is really no reason why you should waste money on a garland for me," I said; I slung it carelessly on my arm or in the thick of the crowd dramatically handed it over to Nalini with "Well, you really deserve two," and made her carry it for me.

It was a world of showmanship till we reached the privacy of our house, when she would throw off the restraint and formality of hours and give me a passionate hug with "Even if I have seven rebirths I won't be able to repay my debt to you." I swelled with pride when I heard her, and accepted it all as my literal due. Methodically she started wrapping the flowers in a wet towel so that they might remain fresh in the morning.

On program days she cooked our supper in the afternoon. We could easily have afforded to engage a cook, but she always said, "After all, for two people, we don't need a cook moping around the house. I must not lose touch with my womanly duties." She spoke of the evening show all through dinner, criticizing some arrangement or the background accompaniment, how so and so just failed to catch up. She lived entirely in the memory of her evening show. Sometimes after food she demonstrated a piece. And then she picked up a book and read on till we went to bed.

In a few months I had to move out of my old house. The Salt managed to score a point of law and secured an attachment of the property before judgment. My lawyer came to me and said, "Don't worry about it; it only means he will have to pay the house tax, with arrears, if any. Of course, your mother's signature may be required too, but I'll get it. It is just like mortgaging the house to him. You may have to give him rent — a nominal one if you stay here.'

"Paying rent for my own house!" I said. "If I have to pay rent I prefer a better house." For our growing stature the house was inadequate. No visitor could be

entertained. No privacy. No place for any furniture. My father had designed this house for a shopkeeper, not for a man of consequence and status who had charge of a growing celebrity. "Moreover, where is the place for you to practice in?" I asked Nalini when she demurred at the notion of moving out. Somehow she was deeply attached to the house, the place which first gave her asylum.

The lawyer went to the village and returned with my mother's signature on the document. "How did she take it?" I could not help asking.

"Not badly, not badly," said the adjournment expert. "Well, of course, we cannot expect elderly people to take the same view as we do. I had to argue and persuade her, though your uncle proved a difficult man."

Four days later my mother's letter came; she had written on a yellow paper with a pencil: "... I gave my signature not because I was happy about it but because otherwise the lawyer would not go from here, and your uncle would not let him stay in peace. It is all confusing to me. I'm sick of everything. I signed without your uncle's knowledge, when he was away in the garden, so that the lawyer might leave this place with- out any damage to his person. Anyway, what does it all mean? Your lawyer mentioned that you are looking for a new house for that woman. If it is so, I'll come back to live in my old house. After all, I wish to spend the rest of my days in my own house." It was good of my mother to have set aside her own anger and written to me. I felt touched by her solicitude. I was troubled by her desire to come back. I could understand it, but I resisted the idea. It seemed best to let the Sait take the home and be done with it once for all. Who wanted this ram-shackle house anyway? To have Mother live in the house, I should have to pay a rent to the Sait. Who would look after her? I was so busy. I rationalized in all possible ways and put away her letter without a reply. I moved to another house and became very busy, and in all the rush quietened my conscience. I felt sorry, but I rationalized: "After all her brother is dear to her, and he will look after her. Why should she come here and live all alone?"

The stylish house at New Extension was more in keeping with our status. It was two-storied, with a large compound, lawns, garden, and garage. On the upper floor we

had our bedrooms and a large hall where Nalini practiced her dances. It was carpeted with a thick deep blue spun-silk carpet at one end, leaving a space of marble tiles for her to dance on. I had managed to fix up a pedestal and a bronze image of dancing Nataraja in one corner. It was her office. I had now a permanent group of musicians — five of them, a flautist, a drummer, etc. She had a "dance-master" whom I discovered in Koppal, a man who had steeped himself in the traditional dance for half a century and lived in his village home. I ferreted him out and brought him over to Malgudi and gave him an out- house in our compound to live in. All kinds of people were always passing in and out of our house. I had a large staff of servants — a driver for our car, two gardeners for the garden, a Gurkha sentry at the gate with a dagger at his waist, and two cooks because our entertainments were beginning to grow. As I have said, a miscellaneous population was always passing in and out of the compound: musicians, their friends, those that came to see me by appointment; the servants, their friends, and so on. On the ground floor I had an office with a secretary-in-waiting, a young graduate from the local college, who dealt with my correspondence.

I had three or four grades of visitors. Some I received on the veranda; these were musicians or aspiring musicians who wanted a chance to accompany Nalini. I was offhand with them. About ten such asked for an interview with me every day. They were always waiting on the outer veranda to have a chance to speak to me. I went in and out, hardly noticing them. They respectfully rose at the sight of me and saluted, and if they intercepted me I kept up a show of giving them a hearing, and then said, "Leave your address with my clerk there. If there is anything that can be done, I'll ask him to call you up." When they flourished a batch of testimonials I snatched a brief look at them and said, "Good, good. But there is nothing I can do now. Leave your name in the office" — and I passed on. My outer veranda was cluttered with benches on which people sat and waited all day to have a chance to speak to me. I treated them with the scantiest attention. I left them to guess when I would come to my table. Sometimes obscure composers turned up with new songs especially created for Nalini's benefit. Sometimes when I sat at the office table I did not mind if they peeped in and took their chance to speak to me. I never offered this class of visitor a chair, but did not mind if he pulled one up and sat down. When I wanted to dispose of him, I pushed my

chair back and went in abruptly, leaving it to my secretary to see him off. Sometimes I observed how big a crowd waited for me outside, through the glass window in the hall, and I made a strategic exit through a side door, straight on to the garage, and from there dashed to the gate, while the visitors looked on helplessly. I felt vastly superior to everyone.

Apart from those that came as supplicants, there were others who approached me with genuine offers of engagement. They were the higher grade of visitors. I received them on the hall sofa and rang the bell for coffee. I offered my inner circle of visitors coffee day and night. Our coffee bill alone amounted to three hundred a month, enough to maintain a middle-class family in comfort. The appointments in the hall were all expensive — brass inlaid trays, ivory knickknacks, group photo- graphs with Nalini in the middle. Sitting in that hall and looking round, I had the satisfaction of feeling that I had arrived.

Where was Nalini in all this? Away out of sight. She spent a great part of the day in her rehearsal hall with her musicians. One could hear the stamping of feet and the jingle of anklets on the upper floor. After all, she was living the life she had visualized. Visitors had always a hope that they might get a glimpse of her passing in or out of the house. I knew what they were looking for, with their shifty looks darting at the inner doorway. But I took care to see that no one saw her. I had a monopoly of her and nobody had anything to do with her. If anyone ventured to ask for her I said, "She is busy," or "No need to trouble her. You have told me; that is enough." I resented anyone's wanting to make a direct approach to her. She was my property. This idea was beginning to take root in my mind.

There were, however, a few friends of the inner circle whom I took upstairs to her room. It was a very eclectic group. They had to be my intimates; I had had no friends at all formerly; my friendship was now sought after by others. I was on back-slapping terms with two judges, four eminent politicians of the district whose ward could bring ten thousand votes at any moment for any cause, and two big textile-mill owners, a banker, a municipal councilor, and the editor of The Truth, 2. weekly, in which an appreciation of Nalini appeared from time to time. These men could come

into my hall without appointment, demand coffee, and ask loudly, "Where is Nalini? Upstairs? Well, I think I'll see her for a moment and go." They could go up, talk to her, order coffee, and stay on as long as they pleased. They addressed me as "Raj," familiarly. I liked to hobnob with them because they were men of money or influence.

Apart from them, sometimes musicians or actors or other dancers called on Nalini and spent hours and hours with her. Nalini enjoyed their company immensely, and I often saw them in her hall, some lying on carpets, some sitting up, all talking and laughing, while coffee and food were being carried to them. I occasionally went up and chatted with them — always with a feeling that I was an interloper in that artistic group. Sometimes it irritated me to see them all so happy and abandoned. I signaled to Nalini to come over to the bedroom, as if for a big, important aside, and when she closed the door I whispered, "How long are they going to stay.'

"Why?"

"They have been here the whole day and may go on till night—"

"Well, I like their company. It's good of them to visit us."

"Oh, as if we had no one else to visit us."

"It's all right. How can I tell them to go? And it makes me happy to be with them."

"Surely; I'm not denying it. But remember, you have to rest and we have a train journey ahead. You will have to pack up, and also practice. Remember you have promised new items for the Trichy show."

"That's easy to manage!" she said, turning round and going back to her friends, shutting the door on me. I silently fretted. I liked her to be happy — but only in my company. This group of miscellaneous art folk I didn't quite approve. They talked too much shop and Nalini was likely to tell them all our business secrets. She never missed a chance to get a gathering of such friends, wherever she might be. She said, "They are

people with the blessing of Goddess Saraswathi on them, and they are good people. I like to talk to them."

"You don't know the world — they'll be a jealous lot. Don't you know that real artists never come together? These people come to you because they are your inferiors."

"I'm tired of all talk of superior and inferior. What is so superior about us?" she asked in real indignation.

"Well, you know, you have more engagements than a hundred of them put together," I said.

"That's more money," she said. "I don't care much for that sort of superiority."

Gradually arguments began to crop up between us, and that, I said, put the final husband-wife touch on our relationship. Her circle was widening. Artists of the first and second rank, music teachers, dilettantes of the town, schoolgirls who wanted ideas for their school functions, all kinds of people asked to see her. Wherever possible I turned them back, but if they managed to slip through and get upstairs, I could do nothing about it. Nalini kept them for hours and would hardly let them go back.

We had calls from hundreds of miles away. Our trunks were always packed and ready. Sometimes when we left Malgudi we did not return home for nearly a fortnight. Our engagements took us to all corners of South India, with Cape Comorin at one end and the border of Bombay at the other, and from coast to coast. I kept a map and a calendar and tried to plan out our engagements, I studied the invitations and suggested alternative dates, so that a single journey might combine several engagements. Arranging an itinerary for each period took up a lot of my energy. We were out of town for about twenty days in the month, and during the ten days we were in Malgudi we had one or two dates nearer home, and whatever was left over could be counted as rest. It was a strenuous program, and, wherever I might be, my secretary kept me informed of the mail arriving each day and received instructions by phone. I was committed three months ahead. I had a large calendar on which I marked in red the

dates of engagements, and hung it up at first in her rehearsal hall, but she protested, "It's ugly. Take it away!"

"I want you to keep an idea before you of where you are going next."

"Not necessary," she cried. "What am I going to do, looking at those dates?" She rolled it up and put it in my hand. "Don't show it to me. It only frightens me to see so many engagements," she said. When I told her to get ready for the train, she got ready; when I asked her to come down, she came down; she got in and out of trains at my bidding. I don't know if she ever noticed what town we were in or what *sabha* or under whose auspices a show was being held. It was all the same, I think, whether it was Madras City or Madura, or a remote hill town like Ootacamund. Where there was no railway, a car came to fetch us from the railhead. Someone met us at the platform, led us to a limousine waiting outside, and drove us to a hotel or a bungalow. Our circus of accompanying musicians was taken away in a bunch and berthed comfortably somewhere. I kept this lot in good humor by fussing about their comfort. "They are our accompanists. I hope you have made proper arrangements for them too."

"Yes, yes, sir. We've reserved two large rooms for them."

"You must send them a car later to bring them over to our place." I always made it a point to collect them and keep them handy two hours ahead of a show. They were a timeless lot, those instrumental players; they slept, or went shopping, or sat around playing cards — never looking at a clock. Handling them was an art — they had to be kept in good humor; otherwise they could ruin a whole evening and blame it on mood or fate. I paid them well. I kept up a show of looking after them, but I kept aloof. I was careful to see that they assumed no familiarity with Nalini.

If the show was at six, I generally insisted upon Nalini's resting until four o'clock in the afternoon. If we were guests in a house, she generally liked to sit around with the women folk and chat endlessly with them. But I went up to her and said with a good deal of firm kindness, "I think you had better rest a while; the train journey last night was not very comfortable," and she finished the sentence she was uttering or hearing and came up to our guest room.

She felt annoyed at my interference. "Why should you come and pull me out of company? Am I a baby?" I expostulated with her that it was for her own good that I did so. I knew it was only a partial truth. If I examined my heart I knew I had pulled her out because I did not like to see her enjoy other people's company. I liked to keep her in a citadel.

If there was a train to catch after the show, I managed to have a car waiting ready to take us to the station. I had food brought to us on the train in silver or stainless-steel vessels, and we had our supper in the privacy of our compartment. But it was a brief, short-lived relief, as it soon began all over again, getting down at another station, going through another performance, and off again. When we visited places of importance, she sometimes asked to be taken to see a famous temple or a shop or some local sight. I always replied, "Yes, yes. Let us see if we can fit it in," but it was never done, as I always had to catch another train so as to fulfill another engagement. We were going through a set of mechanical actions day in and day out — the same receptions at the station, fussy organizers, encounters, and warnings, the same middle sofa in the first row, speeches and remarks and smiles, polite conversation, garlands and flash photos, congratulations, and off to catch the train — pocketing the most important thing, the check. Gradually I began to say, not "I am going to Trichy for a performance by Nalini," but "I am performing at Trichy on Sunday, on Monday I have a program . . ." and then, "I can dance in your place only on ..." I demanded the highest fee, and got it, of anyone in India. I treated those that came to ask for a show as supplicants, I had an enormous monthly income, I spent an enormous amount on servants and style, and I paid an enormous amount of income tax. Yet I found Nalini accepting it all with a touch of resignation rather than bouncing contentment. She had seemed such a happy creature in our old house, even when my uncle was bullying her.

Nalini cherished every garland that she got at the end of a performance. Usually she cut it up, sprinkled water on it, and preserved it carefully, even when we were in a train. She said, holding up a piece of garland and sniffing the air for its fragrance, "To me this is the only worth-while part of our whole activity."

We were in a train when she said it. I asked her, "What makes you say so?"

"I love jasmine."

"Not the check that comes with it?"

"What is one to do with so much? All day long and all through the week you are collecting checks, and more and more often. But when is the time coming when we can enjoy the use of those cheques?"

"Well, you have a big household, a big car and what not — is that not enjoyment of life?"

"I don't know," she said, remaining moody. "How I wish I could go into a crowd, walk about, take a seat in the auditorium, and start out for an evening without having to make up or dress for the stage!"

Some dangerous weariness seemed to be coming over her. I thought it best not to prod too much. Perhaps she wanted fewer engagements, but that was not possible. I asked, "You are not saying that your legs are aching, are you?"

It had the desired effect. It pricked her pride and she said, "Certainly not. I can dance for several hours at each show. Only you want me to stop."

"Yes, yes; true," I cried. "Otherwise you would be fatiguing yourself."

"Not only that; you also want to catch the train — though what will be lost if we catch the next day's, I don't know — '

I didn't allow her to finish her sentence. I called her flatteringly a shrewd girl, laughed and enjoyed it as a joke, fondled her, and made her forget the subject. I thought it was a dangerous line of thought. It seemed absurd that we should earn less than the maximum we could manage. My philosophy was that while it lasted the maximum money had to be squeezed out. We needed all the money in the world. If I were less prosperous, who would care for me? Where would be the smiles which greeted me now wherever I turned, and the respectful agreement shown to my remarks when I said some- thing to the man in the next chair? It filled me with dread that I should be expected to do with less. "If we don't work and earn when the time is good, we commit

a sin. When we have a bad time no one will help us." I was planning big investments as soon as possible — as soon as we could count on a little more margin. As it was, the style of living and entertaining which I had evolved was eating up all our resources.

Sometimes she said, "Spending two thousand a month on just two of us. Is there no way of living more simply?"

"Leave that to me; we spend two thousand because we have to. We have to maintain our status." After a good deal of thought, I ran the bank account in her name. I didn't want my creditors to get at me again. My adjournment lawyer was proceeding at his own pace, sometimes coming to me for a signature or funds, and managing things without bothering me. Nalini signed any check I asked her to sign. One thing I must add: whenever I was in town I gathered a big circle of friends and we played cards practically twenty-four hours at a stretch. I had set apart a room for the purpose and I had two personal servants serving tea and coffee and even food on the spot; and we had surreptitious drinks too, although there was prohibition in force — well, the prohibition law was not for a man of my influence. I had managed to get a medical certificate to say that I needed alcohol for my welfare. Although I myself cared very little for drink, I hugged a glass of whisky for hours. "Permit-holder" became a social title in our land and attracted men of importance around me, because the permit was a difficult thing to acquire. I showed respect for law by keeping the street window shut when serving drink to non-permit folk. All kinds of men called me "Raj" and slapped my back. We played Three-Cards sometimes for two days at a stretch; I changed a two-thousand-rupee check for the purpose, and expected those who came there to meet me on equal terms. Through my intimacy with all sorts of people, I knew what was going on behind the scenes in the government, at the market, at Delhi, on the racecourse, and who was going to be who in the coming week. I could get a train reservation at a moment's notice, relieve a man summoned to jury work, re-instate a dismissed official, get a vote for a cooperative election, nominate a committee man, get a man employed, get a boy admitted to a school, and get an unpopular official shifted else- where, all of which seemed to me important social services, an influence worth buying at the current market price.

In the glow of this radiant existence, I had practically over- looked the fact that Marco still existed. We hardly mentioned his name. I never took note of the fact that he still inhabited the globe, and I took the only precaution needed — I avoided any engagement near his house. I didn't want to run the risk of facing him again. I had no idea what Nalini had in mind. I believed she still felt embittered at the thought of him, and would rather not be reminded of him. I supposed that all associations with him were dim, fossilized, or had ceased to exist. I also thought that under her name Nalini she was safely out of range, but I was mistaken. We played for a whole week at Malgudi. The post one day brought us a book. Generally I received a miscellaneous collection of mail— catalogues, programs, verse, and what not, all of which was seen and disposed of by my secretary. Some Tamil and English illustrated journals meant for Nalini were sent up. I hardly looked at anything except letters offering engagements, and certainly never at books and journals. I was a man of many preoccupations, and I found it impossible nowadays to sit down with any book and had instructed my secretary not to bother me with them. But one day he brought a packet, saying, "Would you look at this, sir. I thought it might be of special interest."

He held the book open. I snatched it from him. It was a book by Marco, a book full of illustrations and comments. "See page 158" said a penciled message. I turned it over, and there it was, the heading "Mempi Cave Pictures." At the head of the chapter was a brief line to say, "The author is obliged to acknowledge his debt to Sri. Raju of Malgudi Railway Station for his help." The book was from a firm of publishers in Bombay, with their compliments, sent by instructions of the author. It was a gorgeous book costing twenty rupees, full of art plates, a monograph on The Cultural History of South India. It was probably an eminent work on the subject, but beyond me.

I told the secretary, "I'll keep it. It's all right." I turned the pages. Why did the boy bring it up as a special matter? Did he know who was who? Or — ? I dismissed the idea. It must have been because he was rather taken by the blue and gold of the binding and the richness of the material. He must have feared that if he didn't draw my attention to it, I might probably demand an explanation. That was all. So I said, "Thank you, I'll read it." And then I sat wondering what I should do about it. Should I take it

upstairs to Nalini or — ? I told myself, "Why should she be bothered with this? After all, it is a piece of academic work, which has bored her sufficiently." I turned it over again, to see if there was any letter enclosed. No. It was impersonal, like the electricity bill. I turned to page 158 and re-read his note. It was thrilling to see my name in print. But why did he do it? I lost myself in speculating on his motives. Was it just to keep his word because he had promised, or could it be to show that he'd not forgotten me so lightly? Anyway, I thought it would be best to put the book away. I carried it to my most secret, guarded place in the house — the liquor chest, adjoining the cardroom, the key of which I carried next to my heart — stuffed the volume out of sight, and locked it up. Nalini never went near it. I did not mention the book to her. After all, I told myself, "What has she to do with it? The book is sent to me, and the acknowledgment is of my services." But it was like hiding a corpse. I've come to the conclusion that nothing in this world can be hidden or sup-pressed. All such attempts are like holding an umbrella to conceal the sun.

Three days later Marco's photograph appeared in the *Illustrated Weekly of Bombay,* on the middle page. The *Illustrated Weekly* was one of the papers Nalini always read — it was full of wedding pictures, stories, and essays she enjoyed. The photograph was published along with a review of his book, which was called "An epoch-making discovery in Indian cultural history." I was looking through my accounts in the hall, free from all visitors. I heard footsteps clattering down in a great run. I turned and saw her coming with the magazine in her hand, all excitement. She thrust the page before me and asked, "Did you see that?"

I showed appropriate surprise and told her, "Calm yourself. Sit down."

"This is really great. He worked for it all his life. I wonder what the book is like!"

"Oh, it's academic. We won't understand it. For those who care for such things, it must seem interesting."

"I want so much to see the book! Can't we get it somewhere?" She suddenly called my secretary, an unprecedented act on her part. "Mani," she said and held the picture up to him, "you must get me this book."

He came nearer, read the passage, brooded for a moment, looked at me, and said, "All right, madam."

I hurriedly told him, "Hurry up with that letter, and go in person to the post office and remember to add a late fee." He was gone. She still sat there. Unless she was called to meet visitors, she never came downstairs. What was this agitation that made her do these things? I wondered for a moment whether I ought not to bring the book out to her. But she would ask me for so many explanations. I simply suppressed the whole thing. She returned upstairs to her room. I noticed later that she had cut out the photo of her husband and placed it on her dressing mirror. I was rather shocked. I wanted to treat it as a joke, but could not find the right words, and so left it alone. I only averted my eyes when I passed the dressing mirror.

It was a long week in town; otherwise we should have been fully occupied in moving about, and probably would have missed that particular issue of the Illustrated Weekly. On the third day, while we were in bed, the very first question she asked me was, "Where have you kept the book?"

"Who told you about it?"

"Why bother? I know it has come to you. I want to see it."

"All right, I'll show it to you tomorrow." Evidently Mani must be responsible. I had made it a convention in our establishment that my secretary should have no direct access to her, but the system was breaking down. I decided to punish him properly for his lapse.

She sat reclining on her pillow with a journal in her hand, to all appearances reading, but actually preparing herself for a fight. She pretended to read for a moment and suddenly asked, "Why did you want to hide it from me?"

I was not ready for this, and so I said, "Can't we discuss it all tomorrow? Now I'm too sleepy."

She was out for a fight. She said, "You can tell me in a word why you did it and go to sleep immediately."

"I didn't know it would interest you."

"Why not? After all—"

"You have told me that you never thought his work interesting."

"Even now I'll probably be bored. But anything happening to him is bound to interest me. I'm pleased he has made a name now, although I don't know what it is all about."

"You suddenly fancy yourself interested in him, that's all. But the book came to me, not to you, remember."

"Is that sufficient reason why it should be hidden from me?"

"I can do what I please with my own book, I suppose? That's all. I'm going to sleep. If you are not reading, but are merely going to think, you can as well do it in the dark, and put out the light."

I don't know why I spoke so recklessly. The light was put out, but I found that she was sitting up — and crying in the dark. I wondered for a second whether I should apologize and comfort her. But I decided otherwise. She had been bottling up a lot of gloom lately, it seemed to me. It would do her good to have it all out without my interference. I turned over and pretended to sleep. Half an hour passed. I switched on the light, and there she was, quietly crying still.

"What has come over you?"

"After all, after all, he is my husband."

"Very well. Nothing has happened to make you cry. You should feel pleased with his reputation."

"I am," she said.

"Then stop crying and go to sleep."

"Why does it irritate you when I speak of him?"

I realized it was no use trying to sleep. I might as well meet the challenge. I replied, "Do you ask why? Don't you remember when and how he left you?"

"I do, and I deserved nothing less. Any other husband would have throttled me then and there. He tolerated my company for nearly a month, even after knowing what I had done."

"You talk about a single incident in two different ways. I don't know which one I should take."

"I don't know. I may be mistaken in my own judgment of him. After all, he had been kind to me."

"He wouldn't even touch you."

"Should you taunt me with that?" she asked with sudden submissiveness. I couldn't understand her. I had an appalling thought that for months and months I had eaten, slept, and lived with her without in the least understanding her mind. What were her moods? Was she sane or insane? Was she a liar? Did she bring all these charges against her husband at our first meeting just to seduce me? Would she be leveling various charges against me now that she seemed to be tiring of me — even to the extent of saying that I was a moron and an imbecile? I felt bewildered and unhappy. I didn't understand her sudden affection for her husband. What was this sudden mood that was coming over her? I did my best for her. Her career was at its height. What was it that still troubled her? Could I get at it and find a remedy? I had been taking too much for granted in our hectic professional existence.

"We must go on a holiday somewhere," I said.

"Where?" she asked in a businesslike manner.

I was taken aback. "Where? Anywhere! Somewhere."

"We are always going somewhere. What difference is it going to make?"

"We'll go and enjoy ourselves, on our own, without any engagement."

"I don't think it's going to be possible until I fall sick or break my thighbone," she said and giggled viciously. "Do you know the bulls yoked to an oil-crusher — they keep going round and round and round, in a circle, without a beginning or an end?"

I sat up and told her, "We'll go as soon as the present aceptances are finished."

"In three months?"

"Yes. After they are finished we'll pause for a little breath." She looked so unconvinced of this that I said, "Well, if you don't like an engagement, you can always say no."

"To whom?"

"Why, of course, to me."

"Yes, if you would tell me before you accept and take an advance."

There was something seriously wrong with her. I went over to her bed, sat on it, shook her by the shoulder a little just to make it look personal, and asked, "What is the matter with you? Are you not happy?"

"No. I'm not happy. What will you do about it? '

I threw up my arms. I really could not say anything. "Well, if you tell me what is wrong, I can help. As far as I can see, there is nothing for you to be sorry about — you are famous, you have made money, you do what you like. You wanted to dance; you have done it."

"Till the thought of it makes me sick," she added. "I feel like one of those parrots in a cage taken around village fairs, or a performing monkey, as he used to say — "

I laughed. I thought the best solvent would be laughter rather than words. Words have a knack of breeding more words, whereas laughter, a deafening, roaring laughter, has a knack of swallowing everything up. I worked myself into a paroxysm of laughter. She could not remain morose very long in the face of it. Presently she caught the contagion, a smirk developed into a chuckle, and before she knew what was what her body rocked with laughter, all her gloom and misgivings exploded in laughter. We went to sleep in a happy frame of mind. The time was two hours past midnight.

Our life fell into a routine after this little disturbance. After a break of only three days, during which time I steeped myself in the card game, avoiding all discussions with her, our encounters were casual and slight. She was passing through a period of moodiness, and it was safest to keep out of her way and not to rouse her further. The engagements for the next three months were all-important, running, as they did, into the season of music and dance in South India, for which I had taken heavy advance payments. We had ahead of us a travel program of nearly two thousand miles, from Malgudi back to Malgudi, and if we went through with it there was ample time for her to get over the mood, and then I could push her into another quarter-year of activity. I had no intention of slackening this program. It seemed so unnecessary, so suicidal. My only technique was to keep her in good humor to the best of my ability from quarter to quarter.

We were getting through our engagements uneventfully. We were back in Malgudi. Mani was away for a couple of days, and I was attending personally to an accumulation of correspondence on my table. Offers of engagements I piled up on one side. I had some misgivings about accepting any of them right away as I normally would. I felt I should do well to speak to her before replying. Of course she'd have to accept them, but I wanted to give her a feeling of being consulted. I sorted them out.

Suddenly I came upon a letter addressed to "Rosie, alias Nalini." It had bn it the address of a lawyer's firm in Madras. I wondered what to do with it for a while. She was upstairs, probably reading one of her inexhaustible journals. I felt nervous about opening the letter. I had half an impulse to take it to her — a sensible part of me said, "It must, after all, be her business. She is an adult, with her own affairs. Let her tackle it, whatever it may be." But this was only fleeting wisdom. The letter had arrived by registered post some days ago and Mani had received it and kept it on the table. It had a big seal on its flap. I looked at it with misgiving for a while, told myself that I was not to be frightened by a seal, and just cut it open. I knew she would not mind my seeing her letters. The letter came from a lawyer and said, "Madam, under instruction from our client, we are enclosing an application for your signature, for the release of a box of jewelry left in safe custody at the Bank of ...., in the marked place. After this is received we shall proceed to obtain the other signature as well, since you are aware that the deposit is in your joint names, and obtain the release of the said box, and arrange to forward it to you under insurance cover in due course."

I was delighted. So this was going to bring in more jewelry for her? Of course she would be elated. But how big was the box? What were the contents worth? These were questions that agitated my mind for a while. I looked through the letter for some clue; but the lawyer was sparing of words. I took the letter and turned to go and give it to her. But on the staircase I paused. I returned to my room and sat in my chair, thinking. "Well, let me think it over. Where is the hurry?" I asked myself. "She has waited for this box so long. Just a couple of days more is not going to matter. Anyway, she never mentioned it, perhaps she doesn't care." I took the letter to my liquor casket and locked it up. A good thing Mani was not there. Otherwise he might have created a mess.

I had some visitors after this. I talked to them and went out in the evening to see a few friends. I tried to distract my mind in various ways, but the packet bothered me. I returned home late. I avoided going upstairs. I heard her jingles upstairs, and knew that she was practicing. I returned to my office table with the letter from the liquor chest. I opened it carefully and read it again. I looked at the enclosed

application. It was on a printed form; after her signature was going to be Marco's. What was the man's purpose in sending it now? Why this sudden generosity to return her an old box? Was he laying a trap for her, or what was it? Knowing the man as I did, I concluded that it might not be anything more than a correct disposal of his affairs, similar to his acknowledgment of my help in his book. He was capable of cold, machine-like rectitude; his vouchers were in order; he saw probably no sense in being responsible for Rosie's box any more. Rightly, too. The right place for Rosie's box was here. But how to release it? If Rosie saw this letter she would do God knew what. I had a fear that she would not view it calmly, in a businesslike manner. She would in all likelihood lose her head completely. She was likely to place the wildest interpretation on it and cry out, "See how noble he is!" and make herself miserable and spoil for a fight with me. There was no knowing what would set off the trigger nowadays. His mere photo in the *Illustrated Weekly* drove her crazy — after that book incident I was very careful. I never showed her the book at all.

Next day I waited for her to ask for it, but she never mentioned it again. I thought it'd be safest to leave it there. I was very careful. I kept her in good humor and engaged, that was all; but I was aware that some sort of awkwardness had developed between us, and I kept myself aloof with extreme care. I knew that if I allowed more time she would be all right. But I felt that to show her this letter would be suicidal. She might refuse to do anything except talk about his nobility. Or (who could say?) she might insist on talking the next train to his place, throwing up everything. But what was to be done with the letter? "Just let it rest in the company of whisky bottles till it is forgotten," I told myself and laughed grimly.

During dinner, as usual, we sat side by side and spoke of things such as the weather, general politics, the price and condition of vegetables, and so on. I kept the subject rigorously to inconsequential affairs. If we held on for another day, it'd be perfect. On the third day we should be on the move again, and the bustle and activity of travel would shield us from troublesome personal topics.

After dinner she sat down on the hall sofa to chew betel leaves, turned over the pages of a journal on the hall table, and then went upstairs. I felt relieved. The swing

was coming back to normal. I spent a little time in my office, looking into accounts. The income-tax statement was due to be sent in a couple of weeks. I was poring over my very personal account book just to see where we stood, and how to prepare our expense accounts. After brooding over this mystic matter for a while, I went upstairs. I knew I had given her enough time either to be steeped in the pages of a book or to sleep. Anything to avoid talk. I was becoming uncertain of my own attitude nowadays. I feared I might blurt out about the letter. I laid my head on the pillow and turned over, with the formula, "I'll sleep, I think. Will you switch off when you are done?" She grunted some reply.

How much jewellery might be in the box? Was it his present to her or her mother's or what? What a girl! She never gave it a thought! Perhaps they were antiquated and she did not care for them. If so they might be sold now and converted into cash, and no income-tax officer would ever dream of its existence. Must be a substantial lot if it had to be kept in safe custody. But who could say? Marco was eccentric enough to do strange things. He was the sort of fellow to keep even a worthless packet at the bank, because that was the right thing — to — do — the — r— right thing to — do — I fell asleep.

Soon after midnight I awoke. She was snoring. An idea bothered me. I wanted to see if there was any time limit mentioned. Suppose I kept the letter secret and some serious consequences arose? I wanted to go down and examine the document at once. But if I got up, she would also wake up and ask questions. Or if I took no notice at all of it, what would happen? The box would continue to remain in safe custody — or the lawyer might write a reminder, which might come in when I was out and slip its way through to her, and then questions, explanations, scenes. This was proving a greater bother than I had at first thought. Nothing that that man did was ever quiet or normal. It led to unbelievable complexities. As I kept thinking of it, it magnified itself until I felt that I had dynamite in my pocket. I slept fitfully till about five o'clock, and then left my bed. I lost no time in going to the liquor casket, pulling out the document, and examining it. I carefully read through the document, line by line, several times over. The lawyers said, "Per return post," which seemed to my fevered mind an all-

important instruction. I took it over to the office desk. I found a scrap of paper and made a careful trial of Rosie's signature. I had her sign so many checks and receipts each day that I was very familiar with it. Then I carefully spread out the application form and wrote on the indicated line: "Rosie, Nalini." I folded it and put it in an addressed cover which the lawyers had enclosed, sealed it, and I was the first to appear at the window when our extension branch post office opened at seven-thirty

The postmaster said, "So early! You have come yourself!'

"My clerk is sick. I was out for a morning walk. Please register this." I had walked down for fear that opening the garage door might wake her up.

I had no clear idea as to when or how the jewel box might arrive, but I looked for it every day. "Any parcel in the post, Mani?" I asked constantly. This almost threatened to become a habit. I expected it within the next two days. No signs of it. We had to go out of town for four days. Before leaving I instructed Mani, "There may be an insured packet coming. Tell the postman to keep it in deposit till we are back on Tuesday. They keep such things, don't they?"

"Yes, sir. But if it is only a registered parcel, I can sign for you."

"No, no. This is an insured parcel and it will have to be signed for by one of us. Tell the postman to bring it again on Tuesday."

"Yes, sir," said Mani, and I left him abruptly; otherwise he might have started expanding on the subject.

We were back on Tuesday. The moment Rosie went up- stairs I asked Mani, "Did the parcel arrive? "

"No, sir. I waited for the postman, but there was nothing."

"Did you tell him that we were expecting an insured parcel?"

"Yes, sir, but there was nothing."

"Strange!" I cried. "Per return," the lawyers had written. They probably wanted the signature, that was all. Perhaps Marco planned to appropriate the box himself and had tried this ruse. But as long as that lawyer's letter was with me, I could hang them; none of their tricks was going to succeed. I went to my liquor chest and reread the letter. They had committed themselves clearly. "We shall arrange to dispatch, under insurance cover . . ." If it meant nothing in a lawyer's letter, where was it going to mean anything? I felt somewhat puzzled, but told myself that it would ultimately arrive — banks and lawyers' offices could not be hustled; they had their own pace of work, their own slow red-tape methods. Slow-witted red-tapeists — no wonder the country was going to the dogs. I put the letter back and locked it up safely. I wished I didn't have to go to the liquor chest every time I wanted to read the letter; the servants, knowing the contents, might begin to think that I took a swill of whisky every few minutes. My desk would be the right place for the letter, but I'd a suspicion that Mani might see it; if he caught me studying the letter so often, he was sure to want to take a look at it by stealing up at my back and pretending to have some question to ask. Awful cunning! He had worked for me for months and months without my noticing anything against him, but now he and everyone around appeared sinister, diabolical, and cunning.

That evening we had an engagement at Kalipet, a small town sixty miles away. The organizers were providing a van for the musicians, and a Plymouth for me and Nalini, so that we might fulfill the engagement and return home the same night. It was a benefit show for building a maternity home, and they had collected seventy thousand rupees. The price of tickets ranged from two hundred and fifty rupees in a kind of fancy scale, and officials persuaded businessmen and merchants to contribute. Businessmen ungrudgingly paid up on condition that they were given the nearest seats in the first row. They wanted to sit as near the performer as possible, with a chance of being noticed. In their thoughts, Nalini, while dancing, noted their presence and later inquired, "Who were those important men in the front row?" Poor creatures, they hardly knew how Nalini viewed her audience. She often remarked, "They might be logs of wood for all I care. When I dance I hardly notice any face. I just see a dark well in the auditorium, that's all."

This was a very large-scale function because of official interest in it; the officials were interested because the chief man of the place, who was behind all the shows, was a minister of the state cabinet, and it had been his ambition in life to build a first-rate maternity center in this area. Knowing the circumstances, I had moderated my demand to a thousand rupees for expenses, which meant it was free of income tax. After all, I too liked to contribute to a social cause, and certainly we would not come out of it too badly anyway. But it was all the same for Nalini. Instead of traveling by train, we were going by car, that was all. She was pleased that we should be returning home the same night.

The show was held in an immense pavilion specially constructed with bamboos and coconut matting and decorated with brilliant tapestry, bunting, flowers, and colored lights. The stage itself was so beautifully designed that Nalini, who generally ignored everything except the flowers at the end, cried, "What a lovely place. I feel so happy to dance here." Over a thousand people were seated in the auditorium.

She began her first movement, as usual, after a signal from me. She entered, carrying a brass lamp, with a song in praise of Ganesha, the elephant-faced god, the remover of impediments.

Two hours passed. She was doing her fifth item — a snake dance, unusually enough. I liked to watch it. This item always interested me. As the musicians tuned their instruments and played the famous snake song, Nalini came gliding onto the stage. She fanned out her fingers slowly, and the yellow spot-light, playing on her white upturned palms, gave them the appearance of a cobra hood; she wore a diadem for this act, and it sparkled. Lights changed, she gradually sank to the floor, the music became slower and slower, the refrain urged the snake to dance — the snake that resided on the locks of Shiva himself, on the wrist of his spouse, Parvathi, and in the ever- radiant home of the gods in Kailas. This was a song that elevated the serpent and brought out its mystic quality; the rhythm was hypnotic. It was her masterpiece. Every inch of her body from toe to head rippled and vibrated to the rhythm of this song which lifted the cobra out of its class of an under- ground reptile into a creature of grace and divinity and an ornament of the gods.

The dance took forty-five minutes in all; the audience watched in rapt silence. I was captivated by it. . . . She rarely chose to do it indeed. She always said that a special mood was needed, and always joked that so much wriggling twisted her up too much and she could not stand upright again for days. I sat gazing as if I were seeing it for the first time. There came to my mind my mother's remark on the first day, "A serpent girl! Be careful." I felt sad at the thought of my mother. How much she could have enjoyed watching this. What would she have said if she could have seen Rosie now, in her shining costume and diadem? I felt a regret at the rift that had developed between me and my mother. She occasionally wrote me a postcard, and I sent her small sums of money now and then, dashing off a few lines to say I was well. She often asked when I'd get back the house for her — well, that involved a big sum and I told myself I'd attend to it as soon as I had some time. Anyway, what was the hurry? She was quite happy in the village; that brother of hers looked after her very well. Somehow I could never fully forgive her for her treatment of Rosie on that fateful day. Well, we were now on cordial terms, but far away from each other, the best possible arrangement. I was watching Nalini and at the same time thinking of my mother. At this moment one of the men of the organization came up to me unobtrusively and said, "You are wanted, sir."

"Who wants me?"

"The District Superintendent of Police."

"Tell him I'll be with him as soon as this act is over."

He went away. The District Superintendent! He was one of my card-playing mates. What did he want to see me about now? Of course, the officials were all here, expecting the Minister (a sofa was kept vacant for him), and extra police were posted to control the crowd and the traffic. After this act, when the curtain came down, thunderous applause broke out, and I went out. Yes, the District Superintendent was there. He was in plain dress.

"Hello, Superintendent, I didn't know you were coming; you could have come with us in the car," I cried.

He plucked my sleeve and drew me aside because there were too many people watching us. We went to a lonely spot under a lamp outside, and he whispered, "I'm awfully sorry to say this, but I've a warrant for your arrest. It has come from head-quarters."

I smiled awkwardly, partly disbelieving him. I thought he was joking. He pulled out a paper. Yes, it was a true and good warrant for my arrest on a complaint from Marco, the charge being forgery. When I stood ruminating, the Inspector asked, "Did you sign any recent document for — for the lady?"

"Yes; she was busy. But how can you call that forgery?"

"Did you write 'For' or just write her name?" He plied me with questions. "It's a serious charge," he said. "I hope you will pull through, but for the moment I have to take you in custody."

I realized the gravity of the situation. I whispered, "Please don't create a scene now. Wait until the end of the show, and till we are back home."

"I'll have to be with you in the car, and after the warrant is served you can arrange for a surety bond till the case is taken up. That will leave you free, but first I'm afraid you will have to go with me to the magistrate. He has to sanction it. I have no powers."

I went back to my sofa in the hall. They brought me my garland. Somebody got up and made a speech thanking the dancer and Mr. Raju for their help in getting the collection to over seventy thousand rupees. Incidentally he spun out a lot of verbiage around the theme of the dance in India, its status, philosophy, and purpose. He went on and on. He was a much- respected president of the local high school or some such thing. There was tremendous applause at the end of his speech. More speeches followed. I felt numb, hardly hearing anything. I didn't care what they said. I didn't care whether the speech was long or short. When it was over, I went to Nalini's dressing-room. I found her changing. A number of girls were standing around her, some waiting for autographs, and some just looking on. I said to Nalini, "We will have to hurry.'

I went back to the Superintendent in the corridor, composing my looks, trying to look cheerful and unconcerned. A lot of the first-row men surrounded me to explain their appreciation in minute detail. "She just towers above all others," someone said. "I have seen dancers for a half-century — I'm the sort of man who will forgo a meal and walk twenty miles to see a dance. But never have I seen," etc., etc. "This maternity home, you know, will be the first of its kind. We must have a wing named after Miss Nalini. I hope you will be able to come again. We would like to have you both for the opening ceremony. Could you give us a photograph of her? . . . We'd like to enlarge it and hang it in the hall. . . . That'll be a source of inspiration for many others, and, who knows, in this very building may be born a genius who may follow the footsteps of your distinguished wife.'

I didn't care what they said. I simply nodded and grunted till Nalini came out. I knew that the men surrounded and talked to me only in the hope of getting a close view of Nalini. As usual, she had her garland; I gave her mine. The Superintendent led the way unobtrusively to our Plymouth waiting outside. We had to walk through a crowd buzzing around us like flies. The driver held the door open.

"Get in. Get in," I said impatiently to Nalini. I sat beside her. Her face was partially illuminated by a shaft of gaslight from a lamp hanging on a tree. Thick dust hung in the air, churned up by the traffic; all the vehicles, cars, bullock carts, and *jutkas* were leaving in a mass, with a deafening honking of horns and rattle of wheels. A few policemen stood at a discreet distance and saluted the Superintendent as our car moved away. He occupied the front seat next to the driver. I told her, "Our friend, the District Superintendent, is coming back with us to the city."

It was about two hours' journey. She talked for a while about the evening. I gave her some comments on her performance. I told her something of what I had heard people say about her snake-dance. She said, "You are never tired of it," and then lapsed into silence and drowsiness, only waiting for our destination, as our car whizzed along the country highway, past long rows of bullock carts with their jingling bells. "They sound like your anklets," I whispered to her clumsily.

The moment we reached our home, she threw a smile at the Superintendent, murmured, "Good night," and vanished into the house. The Superintendent said to me, "Let us go now in my jeep." It was waiting at the gate.

I sent away the Plymouth. I said, "I say. Superintendent, give me a little time, please. I want to tell her about it."

"All right. Don't delay. We must not get into trouble."

I went up the staircase. He followed. He stood on the landing while I went into her room. She listened to me as if I were addressing a stone pillar. Even now I can recollect her bewildered, stunned expression as she tried to comprehend the situation. I thought she would break down. She often broke down on small issues, but this seemed to leave her unperturbed. She merely said, 'I felt all along you were not doing right things. This is karma. What can we do?" She came out to the landing and asked the officer, "What shall we do about it, sir? Is there no way out?"

"At the moment I have no discretion, madam. It's a non-bailable warrant. But perhaps tomorrow you may apply for reconsideration of bond. But we can do nothing till tomorrow, till it's moved before the magistrate." He was no longer my friend, but a frightful technician.

10

I HAD to spend a couple of days in the lock-up, among low criminals. The District Superintendent ceased to be friendly the moment we were in the Central Police Station. He just abandoned me to the routine care of the station officer.

Rosie came to see me in the police lock-up and wept. I sat for the first time with my eyes averted, in the farthest corner of the cell. After a while I recovered my composure and told her to go and see our banker. All that she asked was, "Oh, we had so much money! Where is it all gone?"

I went back home three days later, but the old, normal life was gone. Mani worked in a mechanical manner, with bowed head, in his own room. There was no

work for him to do. Fewer letters arrived for me. There was a sepulchral quietness about the house. Nalini's feet were silent upstairs. No visitors came. She had had to scrape up a bail bond for ten thousand rupees. If I had lived as a normal man of common sense, it would not have been difficult to find the amount. As it was, I had tied up whatever was left over in several foolish share certificates, on which the banks would not advance any money, and the rest I had spent in showy living, including the advances taken for future engagements.

I suggested to Rosie, "Why don't you go through with your engagements for the next quarter? We should receive the balance of the fees." I caught her at dinner, because nowadays I spent all my time downstairs and left her alone. I lacked the confidence to face her alone in her room. I even spent my sleeping hours on the hall sofa.

She did not answer. I repeated my question, at which she muttered, when the cook went in to fetch something, "Must we discuss it before the cook?" I accepted the snub meekly.

I was now a sort of hanger-on in the house; ever since she had released me from police custody, the mastery had passed to her. I fretted inwardly at the thought of it. When the first shock of the affair had subsided, she became hardened. She never spoke to me except as to a tramp she had salvaged. It could not be helped. She had had to scrape together all her resources to help me. She went through her act of help in a sort of cold, businesslike manner. I ate my food in silence. She deigned to spend some time in the hall after food. She came and sat down there. She had a tray of betel leaves by her side on the sofa. I pushed it off and dared to seat myself by her side. Her lips were reddened with betel juice. Her face was flushed with the tingling effect of betel leaves. She looked at me imperiously and asked, "Now, what is it?" Before I opened my mouth, she added, "Remember, you should speak nothing before the cook. The servants are gossiping too much. On the first of the month I'm going to send one of them away."

"Wait, wait. Don't rush," I began.

"What should I wait for?" Her eyes glistened with tears; she blew her nose. I could do nothing about it but just watch. After all, the mastery had passed to her and if she thought fit to cry, it was her business. She had enough strength in her to overcome it if she thought it necessary. It was I that needed comforting. I was overwhelmed with a sudden self-pity. Why should she cry? She was not on the threshold of a prison. She had not been the one who had run hither and thither creating glamour and a public for a dancer; it was not she who had been fiendishly trapped by a half-forgotten man like Marco — an apparent gazer at cave-paintings, but actually venomous and vindictive, like the cobra lying in wait for its victim. I can now see that it was a very wrong line of thought to adopt. But how could I help it? It was only such perverse lines of thought and my excessive self-pity that enabled me to survive those moments; one needed all that amount of devilry to keep oneself afloat. I could give no time for others. I could not bother to think of her own troubles, of the mess she had been led into, of the financial emptiness after all those months of dancing and working, of the surprise sprung upon her by my lack of — what should we call it, judgment? No, it was something much lower than that. Lack of ordinary character! I see it all now clearly, but at that time I still clung to my own grievances, and could watch without much perturbation her emotional tantrums. I allowed her to have her cry as usual. She wiped her eyes and asked, "You said something when we were eating?"

"Yes; but you wouldn't let me proceed," I said petulantly. "I was asking why you should not go through with the programs, at least those for which we have received an advance."

She remained in thought for a while and said, "Why should I?"

"Because we received only an advance, while what we desperately need is the full fee in every case."

"Where is all the money?"

"You should know. The account is all in your name, and you may see the bankbook if you like." It was a cruel thing to say. Some devil was wagging his tongue within my

skull. I was suddenly racked with the feeling that after all I had done for her she was not sufficiently sympathetic to my cause.

She spurned continuing this perverse discussion. She merely said, "Please tell me what those engagements are and I'll return them all their money."

I knew that this was just a brave statement. Where would she find the amount to refund? "Why should you? Why should you not go through with them?"

"Is money your only consideration? Don't you see how I can't face the public again?"

"Why not? If I'm under arrest, I'm under arrest; that is all. Not you. Why should you not go about your business normally?"

"I can't; that is all. I can say nothing more."

I asked coldly, "What do you propose to do in future?"

"Perhaps I'll go back to him."

"Do you think he will take you back?"

"Yes; if I stop dancing."

I laughed in a sinister manner. "Why do you laugh?" she asked.

"If it were only the question of dancing, he might."

Why did I talk like this? It hurt her very much. "Yes; you are in a position to say such a thing now. He may not admit me over the threshold, in which event it is far better to end one's life on his doorstep." She remained moody for a while. It gave me a profound satisfaction to see her imperiousness shattered after all. She added, "I think the best solution for all concerned would be to be done with this business of living. I mean both of us. A dozen sleeping pills in a glass of milk, or two glasses of milk. One often hears of suicide pacts. It seems to me a wonderful solution, like going on a long holiday. We could sit and talk one night perhaps, and sip our glasses of milk, and

maybe we should wake up in a trouble-free world. I'd propose it this very minute if I were sure you would keep the pact, but I fear that I may go ahead and you may change your mind at the last second."

"And have the responsibility of disposing of your body?" I said, which was the worst thing I could have said. Why was I speaking like this again and again? I think I was piqued that she would not continue her dancing, was a free creature, while I was a jailbird.

I said, "Is it not better to keep dancing than think these morbid thoughts?" I felt I must take charge of her again. "Why won't you dance? Is it because you think I won't be there to look after you? I'm sure you can manage. And it may after all be only for a short time. Oh, there is nothing in this case of ours. It'll just break down at the first hearing. You take my word for it. It's a false charge."

"Is it?" she asked.

"How can they prove anything against me?"

She merely ignored this legal rambling and said, "Even if you are free, I'll not dance in public any more. I am tired of all this circus existence."

"It was your own choice," I said.

"Not the circus life. I visualized it as something different. It's all gone with that old home of yours!"

"Oh!" I groaned. "And you wouldn't let me rest then. You drove me hard to help you come before the public, and now you say this! I don't know, I don't know, you are very difficult to satisfy."

"You don't understand!" she cried, and got up and went upstairs. She came down a few steps to say, "It does not mean I'm not going to help. If I have to pawn my last possession, I'll do it to save you from jail. But once it's over, leave me once for all; that's all I ask. Forget me. Leave me to live or die, as I choose; that's all.'

She was as good as her word. A sudden activity seized her. She ran about with Mani's help. She sold her diamonds. She gathered all the cash she could, selling under par all the shares. She kept Mani spinning around. She sent him to Madras to pick up a big lawyer for me. When the stress for cash became acute and she found we would have a lot to make up, she became somewhat more practical-minded. She swallowed her own words and went through her engagements, shepherding the musicians herself, with Mani's help, making all the railway arrangements, and so forth. I taunted her as I saw her moving around. "You see, this is what I wanted you to do."

There was no dearth of engagements. In fact, my present plight, after a temporary lull, seemed to create an extra interest. After all, people wanted to enjoy a show, and how could they care what happened to me? It hurt me to see her go through her work, practice, and engagements unconcernedly. Mani was very helpful to her, and those that invited her gave her all assistance. Everything went to prove that she could get on excellently without me. I felt like telling Mani, "Be careful. She'll lead you on before you know where you are, and then you will find yourself in my shoes all of a sudden! Beware the snake woman!" I knew my mind was not working either normally or fairly. I knew I was growing jealous of her self-reliance. But I forgot for the moment that she was doing it all for my sake. I feared that, in spite of her protestations to the contrary, she would never stop dancing. She would not be able to stop. She would go from strength to strength. I knew, looking at the way she was going about her business, that she would manage — whether I was inside the bars or outside; whether her husband approved of it or not. Neither Marco nor I had any place in her life, which had its own sustaining vitality and which she herself had underestimated all along.

Our lawyer had his own star value. His name spelled magic in all the court-halls of this part of the country. He had saved many a neck (sometimes more than once) from the noose, he had absolved many a public swindler in the public eye and in the eye of the law, he could prove a whole gang of lawless hooligans to be innocent victims of a police conspiracy. He set at naught all the laboriously built-up case of the prosecution, he made their story laughable, he picked the most carefully packed evidence between his thumb and forefinger and with a squeeze reduced it to thin air; he

was old-fashioned in appearance, with his long coat and an orthodox-style dhoti and turban and over it all his black gown. His eyes scintillated with mirth and confidence when he stood at the bar and addressed the court. When the judge's eyes were lowered over the papers on his desk, he inhaled a deep pinch of snuff with the utmost elegance. We feared at one stage that he might refuse to take our case, considering it too slight for his attention; but fortunately he undertook it as a concession from one star to another — for Nalini's sake. When the news came that he had accepted the brief (a thousand rupees it cost us to get this out of him), we felt as if the whole case against me had been dropped by the police with apologies for the inconvenience caused. But he was expensive — each consultation had to be bought for cash at the counter. He was in his own way an "adjournment lawyer." A case in his hands was like dough; he could knead and draw it up and down. He split a case into minute bits and demanded as many days for microscopic examination. He would keep the court fidgeting without being able to rise for lunch, because he could talk without completing a sentence; he had a knack of telescoping sentence into sentence without pausing for breath.

He arrived by the morning train and left by the evening one, and until that time he neither moved off the court floor nor let the case progress even an inch for the day — so that a judge had to wonder how the day had spent itself. Thus he prolonged the lease of freedom for a criminal within the available time, whatever might be the final outcome. But this meant also for the poor case-stricken man more expense, as his charges per day were seven hundred and fifty rupees, and he had to be paid railway and other expenses as well, and he never came without juniors to assist him.

He presented my case as a sort of comedy in three acts, in which the chief villain was Marco, an enemy of civilized existence. Marco was the first prosecution witness for the day, and I could see him across the hall wincing at every assault mounted against him by my star lawyer. He must have wished that he had not been foolhardy enough to press charges. He had his own lawyer, of course, but he looked puny and frightened.

The first part of the comedy was that the villain wanted to drive his wife mad; the second part of the comedy was that the wife survived this onslaught, and on the

point of privation and death was saved by a humble humanitarian called Raju, who sacrificed his time and profession for the protection of the lady and enabled her to rise so high in the world of the arts. Her life was a contribution to the prestige of our nation and our cultural traditions. When the whole world was thirsting for Bharat Natya, here was this man slighting it, and when she made a big name for herself, someone's gorge rose. Someone wanted to devise a way of blowing up this whole edifice of a helpless lady's single-handed upward career. Your Honor. And then the schemer brought out the document — a document which had been forgotten and lain in concealment for so many years. There was some other motive in involving the lady by getting her to sign the document — he would go into it at a later part of the argument. (It was his favorite device to make some-thing look sinister; he never found the opportunity to return to it later.) Why should anyone want to trot out a document which had been kept back for all those years? Why did he leave it alone so long? Our lawyer would leave the point for the present without a comment. He looked about like a hound scenting a fox. The document. Your Honor, was returned without signature. The idea was not to get involved, and the lady was not the type to get caught by jewelry; she cared little for it. And so the document was unsigned and returned, the good man Raju himself carrying it to the post office in order to make sure of its dispatch, as the postmaster would testify. So it was a big disappointment for the schemer when the document went back unsigned. So they thought of another trick — some — one copied the lady's signature on it and took it to the police. It was not his business to indicate who could have done it; he was not interested in the question. He was only interested to the extent of saying categorically that it was not his client who had done it; and unhesitatingly he would recommend that he should be immediately discharged and exonerated.

But the prosecution case was strong, though unspectacular. They put Mani in the box and examined him till he blurted out that I was desperately looking for an insured parcel every day; the postmaster was cross-examined and had to admit that I had seemed unusual, and finally it was the handwriting expert who testified that it could reasonably be taken to be my hand- writing — he had detailed proofs from my writings on the backs of checks, on receipts and letters.

The judge sentenced me to two years' imprisonment. Our star lawyer looked gratified, I should properly have got seven years according to law books, but his fluency knocked five years off, though, if I had been a little careful . . .

The star lawyer did not achieve this end all at once, but over a period of many months, while Nalini worked harder than ever to keep the lawyer as well as our household going.

I was considered a model prisoner. Now I realized that people generally thought of me as being unsound and worthless, not because I deserved the label, but because they had been seeing me in the wrong place all along. To appreciate me, they should really have come to the Central Jail and watched me. No doubt my movements were somewhat restricted: I had to get out of bed at an hour when I'd rather stay in, and turn in when I'd rather stay out — that was morning five and evening five. But in between these hours I was the master of the show. I visited all departments of the prison as a sort of benevolent supervisor. I got on well with all the warders: I relieved them in their jobs when other prisoners had to be watched. I watched the weaving section and the carpentry sheds. Whether they were homicides or cutthroats or highwaymen, they all listened to me, and I could talk them out of their blackest moods. When there was a respite, I told them stories and philosophies and what not. They came to refer to me as Vadhyar — that is, Teacher. There were five hundred prisoners in that building and I could claim to have established a fairly widespread intimacy with most of them. I got on well with the officials too. When the jail superintendent went about his inspections, I was one of those privileged to walk behind him and listen to his remarks; and I ran little errands for him, which endeared me to him. He had only to look ever so slightly to his left, and I knew what he wanted. I dashed up and called the warder he was thinking of calling; he had only to hesitate for a second, and I knew he wanted that pebble on the road to be picked up and thrown away. It pleased him tremendously. In addition, I was in a position to run ahead and warn warders and other subordinates of his arrival — and that gave them time to rouse themselves from brief naps and straighten out their turbans.

I worked incessantly on a vegetable patch in the back yard of the superintendent's home. I dug the earth and drew water from the well and tended it carefully. I put fences round, with brambles and thorns so that cattle did not destroy the plants. I grew huge *brinjals* and beans, and cabbages. When they appeared on their stalks as tiny buds, I was filled with excitement. I watched them develop, acquire shape, change color, shed the early parts. When the harvest was ready, I plucked them off their stalks tenderly, washed them, wiped them clean to a polish with the end of my jail jacket, arranged them artistically on a tray of woven bamboo (I'd arranged to get one from the weaving shed), and carried them in ceremoniously. When he saw the highly polished *brinjals*, greens, and cabbage, the superintendent nearly hugged me for joy. He was a lover of vegetables. He was a lover of good food, wherever it came from. I loved every piece of this work, the blue sky and sunshine, and the shade of the house in which I sat and worked, the feel of cold water; it produced in me a luxurious sensation. Oh, it seemed to be so good to be alive and feeling all this — the smell of freshly turned earth filled me with the greatest delight. If this was prison life, why didn't more people take to it? They thought of it with a shudder, as if it were a place where a man was branded, chained, and lashed from morning to night! Medieval notions! No place could be more agreeable; if you observed the rules you earned greater appreciation here than beyond the high walls. I got my food, I had my social life with the other inmates and the staff, I moved about freely within an area of fifty acres. Well, that's a great deal of space when you come to think of it; man generally manages with much less.

"Forget the walls, and you will be happy," I told some of the newcomers, who became moody and sullen the first few days. I felt amused at the thought of the ignorant folk who were horrified at the idea of a jail. Maybe a man about to be hanged might not have the same view; nor one who had been insubordinate, or violent; but short of these, all others could be happy here. I felt choked with tears when I had to go out after two years, and I wished that we had not wasted all that money on our lawyer. I'd have been happy to stay in this prison permanently.

The superintendent transferred me to his office as his personal servant. I took charge of his desk, filled his inkwells, cleaned his pens, mended his pencil, and waited outside his door to see that no one disturbed him while he worked. If he so much as thought of me, I went in and stood before him, I was so alert. He gave me file boxes to carry to his outer office; I brought in the file boxes that they gave back to his table. When he was away the newspapers arrived. I took charge of them and glanced through their pages before taking them to him. I don't think he ever minded; he really liked to read his paper in bed, after his lunch, in the process of snatching a siesta. I quietly glanced through the speeches of world states-men, descriptions of the Five Year Plan, of ministers opening bridges or distributing prizes, nuclear explosions, and world crises. I gave them all a cursory look.

But on Friday and Saturday I turned the last page of the Hindu with trembling fingers — and the last column in its top portion always displayed the same block, Nalini's photograph, the name of the institution where she was performing, and the price of tickets. Now at this corner of South India, now there, next week in Ceylon, and another week in Bombay or Delhi. Her empire was expanding rather than shrinking. It filled me with gall that she should go on without me. Who sat now on that middle sofa? How could the performance start without my signal with the small finger? How could she know when to stop? She probably went on and on, while others just watched without the wit to stop her. I chuckled to myself at the thought of how she must have been missing her trains after every performance. I opened the pages of the paper only to study her engagements and to calculate how much she might be earning. Unless she wrote up her accounts with forethought, super-tax would swallow what she so laboriously piled up with all that twisting and writhing of her person! I would have suspected Alani of having stepped into my shoes, and that would have provided more gall for me to swallow, but for the fact that in the early months of my stay Mani came to see me on a visitor's day.

Mani was the only visitor I had in prison; all other friends and relatives seemed to have forgotten me. He came because he felt saddened by my career. He wore a look of appropriate gloom and seriousness as he waited for me. But when I told him, "This

is not a bad place. You too should come here, if you can," he looked horrified and never saw me again. But in the thirty minutes he was with me he gave me all the news. Nalini had cleared out of the town, bag and baggage. She had settled down at Madras and was looking after herself quite well. She had given Mani a gift of one thousand rupees on the day that she left. She had a hundred bouquets of garlands presented to her on the railway platform. What a huge crowd had gathered to see her off! Before her departure she had methodically drawn up a list of all our various debts and discharged them fully; she had all the furniture and other possessions at our house turned over to an auctioneer. Mani explained that the only article that she carried out of the house was the book — which she came upon when she broke open the liquor casket and had all the liquor thrown out. She found the book tucked away inside, picked it up, and took it away carefully.

"That was my book. Why should she take it?" I cried childishly. I added, "She seems to think it a mighty performance, I suppose! . . . Did it please him? Or did it have any useful effect?" I asked devilishly.

Mani said, "After the case, she got into the car and went home, and he got into his and went to the railway station — they didn't meet."

"I'm happy at least about this one thing," I said. "She had the self-respect not to try and fall at his feet again."

Mani added before going away, "I saw your mother recently. She is keeping well in the village." At the court hall my mother had been present. She had come on the last day of the hearing, thanks to our local "adjournment lawyer," who was my link generally with her, as he continued to handle the tortuous and prolonged affair of half my house being pledged to the Sait. He had been excited beyond words at the arrival of the glamorous lawyer from Madras, whom we put up at the Taj in the best suite.

Our little lawyer seemed to have been running around in excitement. He went to the extent of rushing to the village and fetching my mother — for what purpose he alone knew. For my mother was overcome with my plight as I stood in the dock; when Rosie approached her to say a few words in the corridor, her eyes flashed, "Now are

you satisfied with what you have done to him?" And the girl shrank away from her. This was reported to me by my mother herself, whom I approached during the court recess. My mother was standing in the doorway. She had never seen the inside of a court hall, and was overwhelmed with a feeling of her own daring. She said to me, "What a shame you have brought on yourself and on all known to you! I used to think that the worst that could happen to you might be death, as when you had that pneumonia for weeks; but I now wish that rather than survive and go through this . . ." She could not complete her sentence; she broke down and went along the corridor and out before we assembled again to hear the judgment.

11

Raju's narration concluded with the crowing of the cock. Velan had listened without moving a muscle, supporting his back against the ancient stone railing along the steps. Raju felt his throat smarting with the continuous talk all night. The village had not yet wakened to life. Velan yielded himself to a big yawn, and remained silent. Raju had mentioned without a single omission every detail from his birth to his emergence from the gates of the prison. He imagined that Velan would rise with disgust and swear, "And we took you for such a noble soul all along! If one like you does penance, it'll drive off even the little rain that we may hope for. Begone, you, before we feel tempted to throw you out. You have fooled us."

Raju waited for these words as if for words of reprieve. He looked on Velan's silence with anxiety and suspense, as if he waited on a judge's verdict again, a second time. The judge here seemed to be one of sterner cast than the one he had encountered in the court hall. Velan kept still — so still that Raju feared that he had fallen asleep.

Raju asked, "Now you have heard me fully?" like a lawyer who has a misgiving that the judge has been woolgathering.

"Yes, Swami."

Raju was taken aback at still being addressed as "Swami." "What do you think of it?"

Velan looked quite pained at having to answer such a question. "I don't know why you tell me all this, Swami. It's very kind of you to address at such length your humble servant."

Every respectful word that this man employed pierced Raju like a shaft. "He will not leave me alone," Raju thought with resignation. "This man will finish me before I know where I am."

After profound thought, the judge rose in his seat. "I'll go back to the village to do my morning duties. I will come back later. And I'll never speak a word of what I have heard to anyone." He dramatically thumped his chest. "It has gone down there, and there it will remain." With this, he made a deep obeisance, went down the steps and across the sandy river.

A wandering newspaper correspondent who had come to the village picked up the news. The government had sent a commission to inquire into the drought conditions and suggest remedies, and with it came a press correspondent. While wandering around he heard about the Swamiji, went to the temple across the river, and sent off a wire to his paper at Madras, which circulated in all the towns of India. "Holy man's penance to end drought," said the heading, and then a brief description followed.

This was the starting point.

Public interest was roused. The newspaper office was besieged for more news. They ordered the reporter to go back. He sent a second telegram to say "Fifth day of fast." He described the scene: how the Swami came to the river's edge, faced its source, stood knee-deep in the water, from six to eight in the morning, muttering something between his lips, his eyes shut, his palms pressed together in a salute to the gods, presumably. It had been difficult enough to find knee-deep water, but the villagers had made an artificial basin in sand and, when it didn't fill, fetched water from distant wells and filled it, so that the man had always knee-deep water to stand in. The holy man stood there for two hours, then walked up the steps slowly and lay down on a mat in the pillared hall of the temple, while his devotees kept fanning him continuously. He took notice of hardly anyone, though there was a big crowd around. He fasted totally.

He lay down and shut his eyes in order that his penance might be successful. For that purpose he conserved all his energy. When he was not standing in the water, he was in deep meditation. The villagers had set aside all their normal avocations in order to be near this great soul all the time. When he slept they remained there, guarding him, and though there was a fair-sized crowd, it remained totally silent.

But each day the crowd increased. In a week there was a permanent hum pervading the place. Children shouted and played about, women came carrying baskets filled with pots, firewood, and foodstuffs, and cooked the food for their men and children. There were small curls of smoke going up all along the river bank, on the opposite slope and on this bank also. It was studded with picnic groups, with the women's bright-colored saris shining in the sun; men too had festive dress. Bullocks unyoked from their carts jingled their bells as they ate the straw under the trees. People swarmed around little water-holes.

Raju saw them across his pillared hall whenever he opened his eyes. He knew what that smoke meant; he knew that they were eating and enjoying themselves. He wondered what they might be eating — rice boiled with a pinch of saffron, melted ghee — and what were the vegetables? Probably none in this drought. The sight tormented him.

This was actually the fourth day of his fast. Fortunately, on the first day he had concealed a little stale food, left over from the previous day, in an aluminum vessel behind a stone pillar in the innermost sanctum — some rice mixed with buttermilk, and a piece of vegetable thrown in. Fortunately, too, he was able on the first day to snatch a little privacy at the end of the day's prayer and penance, late at night. The crowd had not been so heavy then. Velan had business at home and had gone, leaving two others to attend on the Swami. The Swami had been lying on the mat in the pillared hall, with the two villagers looking on and waving a huge palmyra fan at his face. He had felt weakened by his day's fasting. He had suddenly told them, "Sleep, if you like; I'll be back," and he rose in a businesslike manner and passed into his inner sanctum.

"I don't have to tell the fellows where I am going or why or how long I shall be gone out of sight." He felt indignant. He had lost all privacy. People all the time watching and staring, lynx-eyed, as if he were a thief! In the inner sanctum he briskly thrust his hand into a niche and pulled out his aluminum pot. He sat down behind the pedestal, swallowed his food in three or four large mouthfuls, making as little noise as possible. It was stale rice, dry and stiff and two days old; it tasted awful, but it appeased his hunger. He washed it down with water. He went to the back yard and rinsed his mouth noiselessly — he didn't want to smell of food when he went back to his mat.

Lying on his mat, he brooded. He felt sick of the whole thing. When the assembly was at its thickest, could he not stand up on a high pedestal and cry, "Get out, all of you, and leave me alone, I am not the man to save you. No power on earth can save you if you are doomed. Why do you bother me with all this fasting and austerity?"

It would not help. They might enjoy it as a joke. He had his back to the wall, there was no further retreat. This realization helped him to get through the trial with a little more resignation on the second day of his penance. Once again he stood up in water, muttering with his face to the hills, and watching the picnic groups enjoying themselves all over the place. At night he left Velan for a while and sneaked in to look for leftover food in his aluminum vessel — it was really an act of desperation. He knew full well that he had polished the vessel the previous night. Still he hoped, childishly, for a miracle. "When they want me to perform all sorts of miracles, why not make a start with my own aluminum vessel?" he reflected caustically. He felt weak. He was enraged at the emptiness of his larder. He wondered for a moment if He could make a last desperate appeal to Velan to let him eat — and if only he minded, how he could save him! Velan ought to know, yet the fool would not stop thinking that he was a savior. He banged down the aluminum vessel in irritation and went back to his mat. What if the vessel did get shattered? It was not going to be of any use. What was the point of pampering an empty vessel? When he was seated, Velan asked respect- fully, "What was that noise, master?"

"An empty vessel. Have you not heard the saying, "An empty vessel makes much noise'?"

Velan permitted himself a polite laugh and declared with admiration, "How many good sentiments and philosophies you have gathered in that head of yours, sir! "

Raju almost glared at him. This single man was responsible for his present plight. Why would he not go away and leave him alone? What a wise plan it would have been if the crocodile had got him while he crossed the river! But that poor old thing, which had remained almost a myth, had become dehydrated. When its belly was ripped open they found in it ten thousand rupees' worth of jewelry. Did this mean that the crocodile had been in the habit of eating only women? No, a few snuffboxes and earrings of men were also found. The question of the day was: Who was entitled to all this treasure? The villagers hushed up the affair. They did not want the government to get scent of it and come round and claim it, as it did all buried treasure. They gave out that only a couple of worthless trinkets had been found inside the crocodile, although in actual fact the man who cut it open acquired a fortune. He had no problems for the rest of his life. Who permitted him to cut open the crocodile? Who could say? People didn't wait for permission under such circumstances. Thus had gone on the talk among the people about the crocodile when it was found dead.

Velan, fanning him, had fallen asleep — he had just doubled up in his seat with the fan in his hand. Raju, who lay awake, had let his mind roam and touch the depths of morbid and fantastic thought. He was now touched by the sight of this man hunched in his seat. The poor fellow was tremendously excited and straining himself in order to make this penance a success, providing the great man concerned with every comfort — except, of course, food. Why not give the poor devil a chance? Raju said to himself, instead of hankering after food which one could not get anyway. He felt enraged at the persistence of food-thoughts. With a sort of vindictive resolution he told himself, "I'll chase away all thought of food. For the next ten days I shall eradicate all thoughts of tongue and stomach from my mind."

This resolution gave him a peculiar strength. He developed on those lines: "If by avoiding food I should help the trees bloom, and the grass grow, why not do it thoroughly?" For the first time in his life he was making an earnest effort; for the first time he was learning the thrill of full application, outside money and love; for the first time he was doing a thing in which he was not personally interested. He felt suddenly so enthusiastic that it gave him a new strength to go through with the ordeal. The fourth day of his fast found him quite sprightly. He went down to the river, stood facing upstream with his eyes shut, and repeated the litany. It was no more than a supplication to the heavens to send down rain and save humanity. It was set in a certain rhythmic chant, which lulled his senses and awareness, so that as he went on saying it over and over again the world around became blank. He nearly lost all sensation, except the numbness at his knees, through constant contact with cold water. Lack of food gave him a peculiar floating feeling, which he rather enjoyed, with the thought in the background, "This enjoyment is something Velan cannot take away from me."

The hum of humanity around was increasing. His awareness of his surroundings was gradually lessening in a sort of inverse proportion. He was not aware of it, but the world was beginning to press around. The pen of the wandering journalist had done the trick. Its repercussions were far and wide. The rail- ways were the first to feel the pressure. They had to run spe- cial trains for the crowds that were going to Malgudi. People traveled on footboards and on the roofs of coaches. The little Malgudi Station was choked with passengers. Outside the station buses stood, the conductors crying, "Special for Mangala leaving. Hurry up. Hurry up." People rushed up from the station into the buses and almost sat on top of one another. Gaffur's taxi drove up and down a dozen times a day. And the crowd congregated around the river at Mangala. People sat in groups along its sand bank, down its stones and steps, all the way up the opposite bank, wherever they could squeeze themselves in.

Never had this part of the country seen such a crowd. Shops sprang up overnight, as if by magic, on bamboo poles roofed with thatch, displaying coloured soda bottles and bunches of bananas and coconut toffees. The Tea Propaganda Board opened a big tea stall, and its posters, green tea plantations along the slopes of blue

mountains, were pasted all around the temple wall. (People drank too much coffee and too little tea in these parts.) It had put up a tea bar and served free tea in porcelain cups all day. The public swarmed around it like flies, and the flies swarmed on all the cups and sugar bowls. The presence of the fly brought in the Health Department, which feared an outbreak of some epidemic in that crowded place without water. The khaki-clad health inspectors sprayed every inch of space with DDT and, with needle in hand, coaxed people to inoculate themselves against cholera, malaria, and what not. A few youngsters just for fun bared their biceps, while a big crowd stood about and watched. There was a blank space on the rear wall of the temple where they cleaned up the ground and made a space for people to sit around and watch a film show when it grew dark. They attracted people to it by playing popular hits on the gramophone with its loud speakers mounted on the withering treetops. Men, women, and children crowded in to watch the film shows, which were all about mosquitoes, malaria, plague, and tuberculosis, and BCG vaccination. When a huge close-up of a mosquito was shown as the cause of malaria, a peasant was overheard saying, "Such huge mosquitoes! No wonder the people get malaria in those countries. Our own mosquitoes are so tiny that they are harmless," which depressed the lecturer on malaria so much that he remained silent for ten minutes. When he had done with health, he showed a few Government of India films about dams, river valleys, and various projects, with ministers delivering speeches. Far off, outside the periphery, a man had opened a gambling booth with a dart board on a pole, and he had also erected a crude merry-go-round, which whined all day. Peddlers of various kinds were also threading in and out, selling balloons, reed whistles, and sweets.

A large crowd always stood around and watched the saint with profound awe. They touched the water at his feet and sprinkled it over their heads. They stood indefinitely around, until the master of ceremonies, Velan, begged them to move. "Please go away. The Swami must have fresh air. If you have had your darshan, move on and let others have theirs. Don't be selfish." And then the people moved on and enjoyed themselves in various ways.

When the Swami went in to lie on his mat in the hall, they came in again to look at him and stood about until Velan once again told them to keep moving. A few were specially privileged to sit on the edge of the mat very close to the great man. One of them was the schoolmaster, who took charge of all the telegrams and letters that were pouring in from, all over the country wishing the Swami success. The post office at Mangala normally had a visiting postman who came once a week, and when a telegram came it was received at Aruna, a slightly bigger village seven miles down the river course, and was kept there until someone could be found going to Mangala. But now the little telegraph office had no rest — day and night messages poured in, just addressed, "Swamiji," that was all. They were piling up every hour and had to be sent down by special messengers. In addition to the arriving telegrams, there were many going out. The place was swarming with press reporters, who were rushing their hour-to-hour stories to their papers all over the world. They were an aggressive lot and the little telegraph master was scared of them. They banged on his window and cried, "Urgent!" They held out packets and packed-up films and photographs, and ordered him to dispatch them at once. They cried, "Urgent, urgent! If this packet does not reach my office today . . ." and they threatened terrifying prospects and said all sorts of frightening things.

'Press. Urgent!" "Press. Urgent!" They went on shouting till they reduced the man to a nervous wreck. He had promised his children that he would take them to see the Swamiji. The children cried, "They are also showing an Ali Baba film, a friend told me." But the man was given no time to fulfill his promise to his children. When the press men gave him respite, the keys rattled with incoming messages. He had spent a fairly peaceful life until then, and the present strain tore at his nerves. He sent off an SOS to all his official superiors whenever he found breathing space: "Handling two hundred messages today. Want relief."

The roads were choked with traffic, country carts, buses and cycles, jeeps and automobiles of all kinds and ages. Pedestrians in files with hampers and baskets crossed the fields like swarms of ants converging on a lump of sugar. The air rang with

the music of a few who had chosen to help the Swami by sitting near him, singing devotional songs to the accompaniment of a harmonium and tabala.

The busiest man here was an American, wearing a thin bush shirt over corduroys. He arrived in a jeep with a trailer, dusty, rugged, with a mop of tousled hair, at about one in the afternoon on the tenth day of the fast and set himself to work immediately. He had picked up an interpreter at Madras and had driven straight through, three hundred and seventy-five miles. He pushed everything aside and took charge of the scene. He looked about for only a moment, driving his jeep down to the hibiscus bush behind the temple. He jumped off and strode past everyone to the pillared hall. He went up to the recumbent Swami and brought his palms together, muttering, 'Namaste' — the Indian salute, which he had learned the moment he landed in India. He had briefed himself on all the local manners. Raju looked on him with interest — the large, pink- faced arrival was a novel change in the routine.

The pink visitor stooped low to ask the schoolmaster, sitting beside the Swami, "Can I speak to him in English?"

"Yes. He knows English."

The man lowered himself onto the edge of the mat and with difficulty sat down on the floor, Indian fashion, crossing his legs. He bent close to the Swami to say, "I'm James J. Malone. I'm from California. My business is production of films and TV shows. I have come to shoot this subject, take it back to our country, and show it to our people there. I have in my pocket the sanction from New Delhi for this project. May I have yours?"

Raju thought over it and serenely nodded.

"Okay. Thanks a lot. I won't disturb you — but will you let me shoot pictures of you? I wouldn't disturb you. Will it bother you if I move a few things up and fix the cable and lights?"

"No; you may do your work," said the sage.

The man became extremely busy. He sprang to his feet, pulled the trailer into position, and started his generator. Its throbbing filled the place, overwhelming all other noises. It brought in a huge crowd of men, women, and children to watch the fun. All the other attractions in the camp became secondary. As Malone drew the cables about, a big crowd followed him. He grinned at them affably and went about his business. Velan and one or two others ran through the crowd, crying, "Is this a fish market? Get away, all of you who have no work here!" But nobody was affected by his orders. They climbed pillars and pedestals and clung to all sorts of places to reach positions of vantage. Malone went on with his job without noticing anything. Finally, when he had the lights ready, he brought in his camera and took pictures of the people and the temple, and of the Swami from various angles and distances.

"I'm sorry, Swami, if the light is too strong." When he had finished with the pictures, he brought in a microphone, put it near the Swami's face, and said, "Let us chat. Okay? Tell me, how do you like it here?"

"I am only doing what I have to do; that's all. My likes and dislikes do not count."

"How long have you been without food now?"

"Ten days."

"Do you feel weak?"

"Yes."

"When will you break your fast?"

"Twelfth day."

"Do you expect to have the rains by then?"

"Why not?"

"Can fasting abolish all wars and bring world peace?"

"Yes."

"Do you champion fasting for everyone?"

"Yes."

"What about the caste system? Is it going?"

"Yes."

"Will you tell us something about your early life?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"Er — for instance, have you always been a Yogi?"

"Yes; more or less."

It was very hard for the Swami to keep up a continuous flow of talk. He felt exhausted and lay back. Velan and others looked on with concern. The schoolmaster said, "He is fatigued."

"Well, I guess we will let him rest for a while. Fm sorry to bother you."

The Swami lay back with his eyes closed. A couple of doctors, deputed by the government to watch and report, went to the Swami, felt his pulse and heart. They helped him to stretch himself on the mat. A big hush fell upon the crowd. Velan plied his fan more vigorously than ever. He looked distraught and unhappy. In fact, keeping a sympathetic fast, he was now eating on alternate days, confining his diet to saltless boiled greens. He looked worn out. He. said to the master, "One more day. I don't know how he is going to bear it. I dread to think how he can pull through another day."

Malone resigned himself to waiting. He looked at the doctor and asked, "How do you find him?"

"Not very satisfactory; blood pressure is two hundred systolic. We suspect one of the kidneys is affected. Uremia is setting in. We are trying to give him small doses of saline and glucose. His life is valuable to the country."

"Would you say a few words about his health?" Malone asked, thrusting his microphone forward. He was sitting on the head of a carved elephant decorating the steps to the pillared hall.

The doctors looked at each other in panic and said, "Sorry, We are government servants — ^we cannot do it without permission. Our reports are released only from headquarters. We cannot give them direct. Sorry."

"Okay. I wouldn't hurt' your customs." He looked at his watch and said, "I guess that's all for the day." He approached the schoolmaster and said, "Tell me, what time does he step into the river tomorrow?"

"Six a.m."

"Could you come over and show me the location?" The schoolmaster got up and took him along. The man said, "Wait, wait. You'll not mind understudying for him for a minute. Show me where he starts from, how he goes up, and where he stops and stands."

The teacher hesitated, feeling too shy to understudy the sage. The man urged him on. "Come on; be cooperative. I'll take care of it, if there is any trouble."

The teacher started from the pedestal. "He starts here. Now follow me." He showed the whole route down to the river, and the spot where the Swami would stop and pray, standing in water for two hours. The crowd followed keenly every inch of this movement, and someone in the crowd was joking, "Oh! The master is also going to do penance and starve!" And they all laughed.

Malone threw a smile at them from time to time, although he did not know what they were saying. He surveyed the place from various angles, measured the distance from the generator, shook the schoolmaster's hand, and went back to his jeep. "See you tomorrow morning." He drove off amidst a great roar and puffing of his engine as his jeep rattled over the pits and ditches beyond the hibiscus, until he reached the road.

The eleventh day, morning. The crowd, pouring in all night, had nearly trebled itself because it was the last day of the fast. All night one could hear voices of people and the sound of vehicles rattling over the roads and pathways. Velan and a band of his assistants formed a cordon and kept the crowd out of the pillared hall. They said, "The Swami must have fresh air to breathe. It's the only thing he takes now. Don't choke the air. Everyone can have his darshan at the river. I promise. Go away now. He is resting." It was an all-night vigil. The numerous lanterns and lamps created a crisscross of bewildering shadows on all hedges, trees, and walls.

At five-thirty in the morning the doctors examined the Swami. They wrote and signed a bulletin saying: "Swami's condition grave. Declines glucose and saline. Should break the fast immediately. Advise procedure." They sent a man running to send off this telegram to their headquarters.

It was a top-priority governrr.ent telegram, and it fetched a reply within an hour: "Imperative that Swami should be saved. Persuade best to cooperate. Should not risk life. Try give glucose and saline. Persuade Swami resume fast later."

They set beside the Swami and read the message to him. He smiled at it. He beckoned Velan to come nearer.

The doctors appealed, "Tell him he should save himself. Please, do your best. He is very weak."

Velan bent close to the Swami and said, "The doctors say — "

In answer Raju asked the man to bend nearer, and whispered, "Help me to my feet," and clung to his arm and lifted himself. He got up to his feet. He had to be held by Velan and another on each side. In the profoundest silence the crowd followed him down. Everyone followed at a solemn, silent pace. The eastern sky was red. Many in the camp were still sleeping. Raju could not walk, but he insisted upon pulling himself along all the same. He panted with the effort. He went down the steps of the river, halting for breath on each step, and finally reached his basin of water. He stepped into it, shut his eyes, and turned toward the mountain, his lips muttering the prayer. Velan

and another held him each by an arm. The morning sun was out by now; a great shaft of light illuminated the surroundings. It was difficult to hold Raju on his feet, as he had a tendency to flop down. They held him as if he were a baby. Raju opened his eyes, looked about, and said, "Velan, it's raining in the hills. I can feel it coming up under my feet, up my legs — " He sagged down.