

FLAME

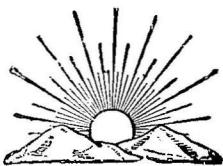
A COLLECTION OF
SHORT STORIES

BY

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FLAME AND OTHER STORIES

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Flame

Poignant memories surged through Arul's mind when a book titled "*Friend!*" caught his eye at the railway bookstall. It seemed as if Bhoopathy was standing in front of him and letting loose a shaft of derisive laughter. Trembling with emotion, Arul purchased the book and entered the compartment where he sought an obscure corner-berth and settled down.

Even the opening paragraph of the book appeared to have been written specially for him and every cell in his body felt the prick of needling pain as he read on: "Generally, friends are those who share not only our joy; but also our misery so as to mitigate the latter. Some of my 'friends', however, are cast in a different mould. They have been moving with me on intimate terms but they torture me all the same, in every manner possible. But I cannot shed them on that account since my affection for them is too deep-rooted, notwithstanding their heartless efforts to undermine the very basis of that affection. I would very much like them to be deities in the temple of my heart; but they are bent on exploding and shattering the very sanctum. I have accommodated every foible of theirs and I have not wronged them even in the region of thought. It is not as if they do not know all this. And yet they drive me to overwhelming grief, why, oh, why should I be subjected to this harsh and heart-breaking punishment!"

The words echoed in the dark of the night as the train sped on. There, in a corner of a third-class compartment, Arul was seated, with the book open in his hands, his mind a raging volcano—

More than a decade ago, Arul and Bhoopathy had been collegemates at Chidambaram. Arul came from the village nearby, called Vallampadugai, and Bhoopathy's native place was Kollidam, another village a few miles away. Bhoopathy belonged to a wealthy family and he was every inch an extrovert. Arul was of humble origin but he was rich in the qualities of heart and he was of an intellectual—bent.

How these two young men, representing diametrically opposite poles, came together was a mystery but the fact was that they were devoted to each other. Arul was all the time cautious, not to avail of any material help from Bhoopathy, lest others should attribute motives to this friendship. Their tastes were in conflict all through, but their friendship only grew more intense.

Arul had to cut short his college education and rush back to his village, on receiving news of his father's serious illness. Arul could see that his father was in his death-bed. In between fits of coughing, the old man said that his one and only desire was to see his son wedded. It was under these circumstances that Arul had to seek a bride for himself. The

girl he chose to be his wife was Prabha of Kollidam village and he stood steadfast in his choice even after he received whispered reports to the effect that Prabha's mother Gomathi could not be considered to be of clear reputation. Arul was a rationalist and social reformist and he was of the firm view that the sins of parents should not be vested on the heads of children. So the marriage was settled and needless to say, Bhoopathy arrived in state to attend the function and be the best man. Little did Bhoopathy expect that Prabha's beauty and grace would start a storm in his heart. His chagrin was all the more, since the girl was from his own village and all these years he had not even been aware of her presence.

Bhoopathy told himself a hundred times that Prabha was equivalent to his sister, now that she was the wife of his friend and that any evil design on his part would amount to betraying Arul. But the principle crumbled soon enough and in this, the ancient legends he had read came to his help. Did not the celestials indulge in extra-marital relationship in gay abandon? No less a being than the Moon-God in mythology concentrated his amorous attentions on his teacher's wife and still he did not lose his status. Sukreevan of the epic *Ramayana* lived with his brother's wife and yet he could boast of friendship from very high quarters. The ancestors had wisely accepted a certain degree of freedom where affairs of the heart were concerned and why should Bhoopathy, a mere mortal, be compelled to restrain these feelings? The

young gallant, however, was too shrewd to precipitate matters and so he returned to his village after the marriage.

Arul's father breathed his last soon afterwards and the funeral provided another occasion for Bhoopathy to visit Vallampadugai. This time he stayed on for weeks under the pretext of being a source of consolation and strength to his bereaved friend.

Arul was too simple and straightforward to form even the slightest suspicion of his friend's attitude but Prabha could see through Bhoopathy's game. The raging fire of passion in Bhoopathy's heart often made its presence felt through the windows of his eyes and Prabha shuddered every time the glare was turned on her. While alone with her husband, she suggested tactfully that it was time the wealthy guest took his leave since he could not be expected to find the amenities in their humble dwelling adequate. But the only response from Arul was an angry snarl, for he thought that his wife was being inhospitable.

Bhoopathy found his conscience becoming a burden to him on account of the inner conflict and he sought an escapist way out. He argued with himself that Nature had so fitted him out that he could not battle against his heart. The pious resolutions that he made from time to time, not to be disloyal to his friend, were torn to shreds the moment Prabha walked into his field of vision.

While food was being served,

Bhoopathy used to look up very often, under the pretext of drinking water. The ruse was to have a close look at Prabha's face but Arul was wholly oblivious of his friend's strategy.

In the total absence of any encouragement from the girl, Bhoopathy realised that he had embarked on an uphill task. With passion unquenched, he had to take leave for the second time. He returned to Kollidam and bided his time.

Through roundabout means, Bhoopathy had the information conveyed to Prabha's mother Gomathi, that Arul had not been successful as yet in securing a job and that the young couple were finding it difficult to make both ends meet. Gomathi arrived in Vallampadugai the very next day and she suggested that Prabha could come and stay in Kollidam until such time Arul secured employment. Prabha was very reluctant to leave Arul alone but he convinced her that it was the best possible course under the circumstances. Arul then set out to hunt for a job.

Bhoopathy was secretly elated to learn of Prabha's arrival and stay in Kollidam. As Arul's close friend he could now call at Gomathi's residence and enquire about her son-in-law's welfare. He made full and frequent use of the liberty. Gomathi was impressed that the scion of a wealthy family was visiting her house and his standing with her improved further when she found that he could extend financial help to her whenever she was in need.

Notwithstanding her background, Gomathi was of a pious and devout disposition. No wonder on an important day of a religious festival, she went on a short pilgrimage to Chidambaram. Bhoopathy who had been waiting for just such an opportunity knocked at the door of her residence. Finding Prabha all alone, he enquired whether any letter had been received from Arul. Even before she could answer, he had closed and bolted the door on the inside and in one swift movement he caught hold of Prabha's arm.

Prabha was scared but she did not raise an alarm lest a public scene be created. She wept and pleaded with Bhoopathy not to prove a traitor to his friend. But Bhoopathy was like one on fire and he was hardly in a mood to listen to her plaint.

The situation would have turned tragic but for a sudden knock at the door. Fear gripped Bhoopathy and



he released his hold on Prabha's arm. Self-preservation was what motivated him most and in a trice he opened the backdoor of the house and sprinted away.

It was Arul who had knocked at the front-door. Hearing the sound of heavy footsteps working their way towards the rear, Arul instinctively rushed to the side of the house and he was in the grip of conflicting emotions and grave suspicions when he identified the person on the run as being none other than his friend Bhoopathy.

By this time Prabha had opened the front-door and seeing her husband she clung to him. But Arul shook her off and his face displayed wrath and contempt as he thundered. "Don't touch me, I am not Bhoopathy". With that, he turned round and walked away, even before his wife could recover from the shock of the incident.

Caught in the whirl of memories of his past life, Arul had been drifting along and he discovered with a start that the train was nearing Chidambaram. Next was Vallampadugai and after that, Kollidam. After spending eight years in Malaya, Arul was returning to meet his wife whom he had deserted on account of a sudden burst of suspicion about his friend Bhoopathy's relationship with her. Arul was at peace with himself now. Opening his suitcase he took out a bulky letter and started reading it once again, just as he had read it sixteen times before, in the course of his journey from Malaya.

'My beloved! Prabha's obeisance to you', ran the epistle, "This letter is

the result of much deliberation. Your friend proved a traitor to you and now I have also betrayed you. By a conspiracy of circumstances, you cast a slur on my character and left me eight years ago. During these eight years, very many currents and cross-currents have affected my life and should you not know who was responsible for all this?"

"I admit I was born of a mother who could not be classified as virtuous. But like a god you came to my rescue and made me your wife. I fondly believed then that my future would be bright and fragrant. But my dreams were shattered in no time and I could not even get to know of your whereabouts."

"What had caused all this turmoil? Even at the time of your father's funeral, when Bhoopathy came and overstayed in Vallampadugai, you would recollect how I sought to warn you against his evil intentions in regard to me. But you would not take the hint. Later when I was all alone at my mother's house in Kollidam, he sneaked in, determined to overpower me and fulfil his desire. But your timely arrival saved me from a fate worse than death. Bhoopathy took to his heels. Without caring to ascertain the facts, you put a wrong construction on the incident and thought it fit to take far-reaching decisions."

"For two years I searched for you and for two years Bhoopathy was after me. You know my mother's background. Added to it, she was afflicted with tuberculosis and I had to nurse her and provide medical treat-

ment for her. As the only way out of the clutches of grinding poverty, my mother entreated that I submit to Bhoopathy's fancy. What further am I to say, my Lord and Master?"

"Bhoopathy himself showed me a letter you had addressed to him. In that letter you had blessed us both. I was still your own when I read that letter and it was only after two years of agonised waiting, that I had no option but to become Bhoopathy's mistress. He was a hard task-master but our poverty was ended at last. My mother's disease could be cured but I inherited the tuberculosis. I earned money for her treatment but I myself do not have an heir to look after me. Bhoopathy too made himself scarce, the moment he came to know of my ailment. I learn that he got married to the daughter of a Judge in Madras. He is leading a peaceful and happy life while I am wasting away, with my will to live eroded for ever."

"I have read all the letters of greetings and good wishes you wrote to your friend. It was from those letters that I got your address in Malaya. You are the embodiment of nobility, my Lord, and how much have I sinned against you! After all this, I do not ask to be accepted as your wife. I shall disappear from this world very soon but before that, if only I may have a glimpse of your face, I would be enabled to close my eyes in peace. Would you fulfil this last desire of mine, Lord?"

Having completed the reading, Arul looked up at the skies and cried out: "I have forgiven you, Prabha." The

words were lost in the rumble of the locomotive.

The train stopped at Chidambaram. Arul glanced out of the window and saw someone looking familiar in the adjoining first class compartment. Shouting "Bhoopathy!" Arul got into that first class compartment just as the train started.

Bhoopathy was confused. There was a lady sitting near him. Arul asked, "Who is this lady?" and the answer came, "My wife".

"Is that so? How is my wife, Bhoopathy?", demanded Arul.

Bhoopathy went pale. His wife was puzzled.

Arul burst out: "Why do you blink, you fellow! My wife is ill and I have come to see her. Is she no longer your mistress?—Perhaps she has become just roughage, of no further use to you".

Bhoopathy protested feebly: "Hold your tongue, Arul. What are you jabbering about?"

"Scoundrel, you separated her from me and I forgave you for that. I derived no benefit from our friendship but I made a gift of my very honour to you, as a token of friendship. How precious the gift was, but could you at least take care of it? If a silver jug is crushed, one melts and recasts it, but you, in the arrogance of your wealth, threw away the vessel that had served you and you went in for a new jug..."

Anger mounted in Arul's voice and Bhoopathy cowered and shuddered.

"You would not allow Prabha to live with me nor would you sustain her. You have ruined her... so far you were my friend but now you are my enemy, enemy," shouted Arul at the top of his voice as he pulled out a knife from his waist and stabbed Bhoopathy repeatedly.

Bhoopathy slid down to the floor of the compartment. Some one pulled the alarm-chain and the train came to a grinding halt just beyond the Kollidam bridge. Arul leapt out of the compartment and vanished in the darkness.

Arul ran and it was the sight of a burning pyre at a crematorium that slowed down his gait. By the light of the pyre he could see that his shirt

was stained with blood. So as not to arouse suspicion when he entered the village, Arul took off his shirt and flung it in the midst of the top most flame. The garment was an addition to the fuel burning the corpse.

Gomathi was seated in the frontyard of her residence. An unshielded lamp flickered inside.

"Auntie, where is Prabha?" asked Arul. The old lady started sobbing: "She expired this morning and only at 10 O' Clock to-night, did they light the pyre."

And so, Arul's blood-stained shirt had actually been cast on the flame consuming Prabha's mortal remains!

Both the flames that had been tormenting her were now extinguished....

(Translated from original Tamil by Mr. T. G. N.)

Dust Bin

I have made the place beneath the two storeyed building at the street corner my permanent abode. I am engaged in deep meditation and concentrated prayer from this place. My meditation is not meant to entreat the Gods to grant me any special boon or gift. As a rule, monarchs meditate on God and observe fasts in order that they might be blessed with the strength to conquer their enemies. Hermits meditate and fast asking the Gods to provide them with the power to curse all those who harm the good people of the world.

Only yesterday, I realised the real significance of devotional meditation. It is in fact concentrating on any one and only object, seated in one chosen place and praying earnestly to God to appear before the devotee at that place. The devotee never moves from the place of his meditation till his aim is fulfilled and is blissfully oblivious of his surroundings or his carnal needs, till his favourite Deity has the grace to appear before him and grant him all his needs. In my case apart from staying in one place, without any idea of moving or shifting from that place at any time, you cannot find any other trace of meditation or devotion in me.

Being engaged in deep meditation is by no means a simple art. In the regions above, there is a special group of divinely beautiful stars (fair young women) whose sole purpose is to have an eye on those who meditate on God! They come down on earth and allure

the devotees with their beauty, to distract their concentration. Menaka, Ramba and Thilothama belong to this divine group of 'killing' beauties. With their splendid face and figure, combined with their graceful dances, they could shatter to pieces the meditation even of the holiest of hermits. Perhaps the hermits observe fasts and prayers, just to invite these divine ladies to appear before them!

Every now and again something is thrown into my stomach by some person or the other. Yesterday a few torn pages from the ancient Vedic Literature were thrown into my belly. It was not a complete book but only a few pages torn from different parts of the book. The pages were moth-eaten and not easily readable. Still it is from those pages, that I have learnt about the powers of meditation and about the Vedic stories.

Visvamitar was a great sage and hermit. Once he was engaged in deep meditation. The beautiful Menaka from the abode of the Gods above was sent down on earth by the Gods to lead the hermit astray through her wiles. She accomplished her task fully and made him fall helplessly into the net she had spread for him. The house of worship was turned now into a centre of worldly pleasures and the place of holy devotion was converted into a hall of dancing. The love scenes that took place between the hermit and the heavenly star—I am ashamed to voice them here.

At the sea shore and underneath the fountains falling from the mountains Menaka played the game of love in the arms of the holy man. The Gods did not appear before the hermit to grant him boons. The God of Love known as "Manmatha" however used his skill and delighted himself in seeing the fair damsel in the arms of her lover. He laughed in secret when he spied the thick lips of the hermit imprinting kisses on the tender cheeks of the fair girl; and hungrily relishing the kisses she returned to him from her honeyed lips. But alas! Why should the carriages carrying dust appear before me, just at the time when I am going through the most interesting part of ancient literature? The driver of the dust carriage hastily emptied my stomach of all its contents including the torn pages from the Puranas. (Ancient Literatures) My stomach had been overloaded for four or five days together at times. Did he have the grace to clear my belly then? I wondered why he was in such great hurry now to empty and cleanse my stomach. I soon found out the solution to my doubts. Some new officer was supposed to pass through that street and it was for that matter that the streets were being cleaned? How long would this cleaning last? Like the proverbial mother-in-law who showed the true colours in her nature (Nature of an ass) after a few days of the arrival of the bride to her home this cleaning would stop after four or five days; i.e. after giving an eye wash to the officer in question.

There is a 'Bajana Madam' (a place where devotees gather together and

relate the stories of the Gods and praise them with holy hymns) I could hear the stories told there through the mike. The stories were from the Puranas. The God of rains known as 'Lord Indira' entered into the house of a hermit at a time when he was out and started making love to his wife known as 'Ahalya'. The fair young lady tasted real joy in the arms of her lover. Her husband, the hermit, could never give her such joy! At the holy place known as 'Tharuga Vanam' there were more than thousand hermits engaged in deep devotion to the Gods. Their wives were supposed to be highly virtuous. They were extremely charming, though they led very simple and dutiful lives. They offered Pujas to the Gods and worshipped them with flowers, fruits and other offerings. They were untouched roses and creeping plants in need of support. They threw thousands of flowers at the feet of the Gods and in return the Gods came down to the earth and embraced them till their hands became red. The Bagavather [or story-teller] related the story to the audience in such a way, that every one present there started admiring the hermits' wives for their spotless purity and devotion to the Gods.

All the devotees would sit down for dinner after the worship was over and then they would throw away the empty plantain leaves (used as plates) into my stomach. One such devotee could not get a plantain leaf and so he received his share of the offerings (blessed by God) on a piece of paper, and after relishing its contents threw the empty paper into my stomach. I chanced to read through the paper and I blushed

instinctively on reading its contents. You must remember, that though merely a dust bin, I too have some feelings in me and I was down-right filled with shame when I glanced through the paper. You are anxious to know why I should become so emotional on reading the page-don't you? Here is my answer. The auspicious lamp known as "Kuthu Villaku" is shedding its bright light inside the bed room of a big house. It is of course night time. A cot is visible through the light shed from the lamp. A soft bed is laid on the cot over which petals of Jasmine and Roses are spread sending out sweet fragrance ; in fact the scene for love is laid on the cot. A beautiful young lady graces the bed. She is no other than Kothai, Nampini or Andal as she was known to her friends and relations. The Puranas describe her as a maiden who was deeply devoted to God. She was so very pious that she refused to marry any ordinary human being. She was praised by men and the Gods for her piety and purity.

We go back again to the love scene. This fair maiden lies on the cot, anxiously awaiting the arrival of the one whom she adores. Some-one approaches and lies down by the side of her mango sweet breasts and locks her up in fond embrace. She draws him closer and closer to her soft flowery breasts and entreats him to open his mouth and speak one word to her. Whereas people speak in glorious language about the divine love of this young woman, I was shocked to read that the person who made love to her at her bedside was not any earthly

man, but the God himself. How could the Gods play with the sublime passions of young ladies in such an idler's fashion? I could never comprehend about this matter. A verse, containing a few lines described the love scene of the maiden with the God and these lines only filled me with such emotion.

These lines tickled my passion in such a way that I sincerely longed to have a lady dust bin by my side, so that I could make love to her too. I could address her as 'My sweet dusty gemy, thou art the apple of my eye' and she could call me 'My darling dusty binnie'. How nice that would be! Poor Kothai! She had lost her parents in her childhood and was brought up by a hermit. I cannot understand why her love for the God was blended with so much human passion! If one small verse could lower my senses to such extremes (seeking a lady companion) I am sure the mental hospital would become my permanent abode If I read through all the poems of love contained in the ancient Lyrics.

It is not often that I come across such stories from the Puranas. More often than not, the outside skins of bananas and oranges are thrown into my stomach. Dead rats are also thrown into my belly mercilessly.

Once a man tore off a letter that he took from his pocket and threw it inside my belly. I took pains to join together the torn pieces, read through them and understood something about the contents of the letter. A man had promised to secure a teacher's job to an innocent young lady and had taken Rs. 300 from her

as advance for fixing her up in the job. He had then disappeared with the money for ever, leaving her to wait for him till dooms-day as it were! Such villains in my opinion should be dealt with iron hands and no mercy at all should be shown to them.

At midnight, a servant would approach me and throw away the tops of brandy and whisky bottles into my stomach. I would then shake with fear. What would happen to me if the police came to know about it? Would they not arrest me and take me off to the prison? Well, what does it matter whether a dust bin is here or inside the prison? I am an insignificant object and no one would care about my whereabouts when I am taken away from here. I consoled myself thus.

An old man came near me once. He was dirty all over and I wished he could go away from me soon. Hiding my dislike for him, I asked him politely, "Who are you?" He replied, "Can't you guess who I am by having a look at me? I am one of the kings of this land! I should like to start ruling the land, abiding by your shade". I said "I am not a big tree to offer you shade. You are however at liberty to stay by my side for about ten days and he conducted his services to his country from there. He showed all his teeth to the passers-by and received from them the taxes needed for his reign in the form of coins or rupees. He sang merrily folk songs and cinema songs and attracted the attention of every one.

One day, this beggar, oh, no. His

Majesty, brought over to our place a Maha Rani (another beggar woman of course) and she remained by his side as his consort. She was making much fuss and was saying repeatedly, "Do let me go soon." The Maharaja placed an eight anna piece in her hand and that made her promise to stay with him for some more time. He called her "My Queen" and she responded to him by calling him back as "Yes, My King". Not heeding my huge presence there, they lay down side by side behind me and I had to close my eyes against the scene that followed. The next day, two policemen came over there to arrest him and before going with them he turned and told me, "It seems that a minister is coming from some foreign land. This Maharaja is led by the police to meet that great personage".

I said, "Where will you meet him?" He replied, "Why should I meet him? He will come over to my place and meet me there." Of course the foreign minister met the Maharaja when he paid a visit to the state prison the next day!

In our country, many poor people go without food and drink for days together. My stomach however is seldom empty. My hands also are always full. How many wedding invitations, love letters and rejected stories have I held in my hands! I receive all of them with a smile on my lips. Don't you think that in doing so, my patience exceeds that of the purest of hermits?

Alas! As I keep conversing with you, I see a young woman coming towards me with a baby in her hand.

It must be a new born baby. The baby's neck is covered over with blood. Yes I am sure it is a dead baby. The young mother must have wrung out the neck of the poor baby and now she has the audacity to throw the remains into my stomach. She has escaped and it is I who will have to answer the police for her crime.

Why is she running away so hastily? I understand all now. There is no 'Thali' (symbol of a married woman) round her neck. As an unmarried woman she had a baby and naturally the unwanted creature was killed and thrown into my stomach. How full of sins this wretched world is!

Translated from original Tamil by Mrs. VESTA HAKIM.



Three Hundred Rupees

"My mother is blind, my father a paralytic. My sister, a widow, died recently leaving her child behind," pleaded a young man with tears in his eyes. His voice faltered.

He was the only support of his family. He had been working in a betel-nut shop for ten rupees a month. Even that job was gone now. "Sir, now you alone can help me. Please show me a way, otherwise the only alternative is a rope one cubit long." That sounded both a desperate plea and an ultimatum. His name was Lakshminarayanan though he had not received any favours from Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth.

He pleaded this not at a big office or with any factory-owner, but with Thangappan, a teacher of mathematics in a high school. Thangappan himself was struggling to support his large family with his small salary of Rs. 150/- How could he take on an additional burden? But he was a man with a tender heart. He was a social reformer identified in his circle by the pseudonym "Marx." He was an orator of merit and when he addressed a meeting he roused all the best in the listeners. Some said, "He speaks so much about helping the poor, let us see if he will help us too," and went to him. They were not disappointed. He set aside a portion of his pay for the poor and the needy. Thangappan just could not bear to hear Lakshminarayanan's story. He was so touched that he said, "You had better stay with me

for ten days while you look for a job." Eight days had gone by, but Lakshminarayanan had not found a job yet.

That day Thangappan received three hundred rupees by money order from a friend who had borrowed it from him months ago. In his excitement that the money had come so unexpectedly he went away to school without putting it away in a safe place. He had left it on the table and only later in the forenoon did the thought strike him that he had been remiss. Immediately he began to feel suspicious about Lakshminarayanan and all the way home he had no peace of mind. "Lakshminarayanan may be a good boy. But three hundred rupees is three hundred rupees," he told himself. When he reached home, Lakshminarayanan who used to be at the doorstep most of the time was not there. Thangappan went in and looked around fran-



tically. The money too was not to be found. Thangappan shrugged his shoulders and went back to school.

* * * *

Lakshminarayanan took the train at Salem that afternoon and reached Erode. He went inside a shop selling ready-made clothes, and stepped out well-dressed and looking every bit a prosperous young man. He told himself, "With this money I shall open a betel-nut shop. It will be my own." As he came to the corner of the road, a dirty-looking boy, all skin and bone, came to him asking for alms.

The moment Lakshminarayanan saw the urchin, an idea struck him. "Will you come with me? Can you manage a betel-nut shop?" he asked him. The boy very happily nodded. They both walked back to the station. Lakshminarayanan walked with a swagger now. He was already the owner of a little

shop! At 10-30 they boarded the train. The poor little boy was extremely happy. He was indeed going to manage a betel-nut shop! Proudly seated in the Tiruchi-bound Express, Lakshminarayanan smoked an expensive cigarette.

* * * *

Lakshminarayanan's shop had a gala opening. His assistant was an excellent errand-boy, smart and brisk. And the shop prospered beyond expectation. In Tiruchi this was the shop of its kind that attracted the most customers.

* * * *

Lakshminarayanan suddenly opened his eyes. The train had reached Tiruchi Junction. He looked for the boy. The fellow was gone. So was the money. It seemed as if Thangappan stood smiling at him like an apparition. His only consolation was that he had at least his ticket to go out of the station with.

Temptation

The Indo-Ceylon Express was racing towards Tiruchi. The passengers sat with bowed heads and bent shoulders, struggling against overpowering weariness and sleep. They had boarded the night train at the Egmore station where a band of enterprising urchins moved about, earning their livelihood by finding berths for passengers.

Those in frantic search of some room in the train would suddenly find a little boy materialising before them like a God in mythology appearing from nowhere. "Come with me, sir, I shall show you a snug little corner," he would say. If you went with him, you would have found a comfortable spot in a railway-compartment with a sheet neatly spread on the luggage-rack. Four annas was the rent for that sleeping berth. Once a client was found and business concluded, the sheet disappeared. It became the boy's turban as he moved on to do fresh business.

Those who had been lucky enough to find favour with these urchins were comfortably stretched out in slumber now. The others who had not been so fortunate sat falling on each other, quite unable to fight the sleep that crept into their eyes and pulled their drooping eyelids shut. Some rested their sagging, wobbly heads on their knees. Some leaned on their neighbours and some on the window. It was indeed a pathetic sight.

In this land of the nod, there were also a few who were wide awake staring into the night with their big saucer eyes. In the corner of a long bench, a young man was seated quite unaffected by fatigue. But he seemed to be in the grip of some strong emotion. He was furtively looking around and then turning an intent gaze under the bench. Facing him sat Kumaresan with closed eyes but not actually asleep. His eyes were only half-closed and



he was watching his wife Chandra sleeping on the floor of the compartment and he was also watching the restless young man.

* * * *

Kumaresan, Chandra and their child had got into the train at Egmore. Soon after, the restless young man had come and sat opposite them. It was not an accident. He had walked up and down the platform twice over, examining every compartment and only then had he finally made his choice.

Chandra's child began to tug at the grey hair of an old woman seated beside her. With a toothless smile the woman extricated her hair from the child's fingers. But her interest did not stop there. Like all old women who must be babbling something or other she started a conversation with the child. "What's your name, dear?" "Murthi" came the prompt reply. "Your father's name?" she continued. "My father's name is Kumaresan" said the child and asked in turn, "What is your name?" The old woman was delighted. Chandra and her husband exchanged smiles. There was a sudden burst of laughter from the opposite seat. Laughing was the young man who had been watching Chandra surreptitiously.

Chandra who glanced up at him was evidently taken aback. She sat stockstill for a moment. Recovering herself, she started playing with her child. But her eyes kept going back to the young man again and again. He was handsome with large eyes. His fine moustache and the shimmering silk-shirt which he was wearing heightened his good looks. His attractive eyes

were dripping with passion whenever they turned to her and during those fleeting moments, he seemed to be totally oblivious of her husband's presence beside her. Chandra also looked at the young-man again and again.

Kumaresan observed all this and he was disturbed. The train speeded on. In between her desultory conversation with her husband and her affectionate attention to her child, she kept on casting secret glances at the youth. Kumaresan sat with a burning heart. With him beside her, his wife was casting admiring glances at another man! He just could not endure it.

True, Kumaresan had married her only for her beauty. But he was doubly happy when he found her remarkably intelligent also. Will this train-journey destroy the happiness of their married life? This was the conflict that raged in his mind. Chandra's glances at the youth did not stop. This increased Kumaresan's misgivings all the more. He must see it through and put an end to this, he thought, and restrained himself.

The child was fast asleep. The train was nearing Villupuram. Those in the compartment were sunk in slumber. Murthi's newfound grandmother was also asleep. Chandra took the towel from Kumaresan's shoulder and spread it under the seat. She laid herself down and put her child beside her. She looked up at her husband. Her lips parted in a sweet smile, but there was not the usual response in Kumaresan. How could she guess the seething unrest in his heart?

The man opposite had to look down now. What extra-ordinary beauty he found in Chandra's sleeping face! He was all admiration. He could not contain himself. He was like a starving man with a plateful of tasteful ghee-
rice set in front of him. Every movement of his betrayed his excitement. Chandra's responsive glances had only fanned his desire. He had searched many compartments before he found this excellent spot. It was as if he had aimed at the stars and had landed on the moon itself. He looked on at the sleeping Chandra with a relish beyond measure. Kumaresan's half-closed eyes, alternately watching his wife and the young man did not flicker. Chandra will be caught red-handed, he told himself. The man opposite threw a sly glance at Kumaresan, felt Chandra's hand gently with his toes, furtively looked around and sat back innocently for some time.

The train had crossed Nellikuppam. With her arm above her child, Chandra was fast asleep. A resolute sigh escaped the young man. He gave a piercing look at Kumaresan. Kumaresan appeared to be completely relaxed and fast asleep. The man's fingers alighted gently on Chandra's cheeks. Disturbed but not fully awake, Chandra opened her eyes. The youth was startled. He quickly pulled his trembling hand away. Chandra's sudden movement awakened the child. Mechanically she looked at her husband. He seemed to be drowned in sleep. She did not see the dangerous glint lurking behind these half-closed eye-lids. Her gentle gaze now shifted from her husband to the youth. She turned and

kissed her child and gently patting him, she slept away.

Times without number Kumaresan had seen her kiss her crying child and then settle down to sleep. But this time, it was torture beyond endurance—it was like burning him at the stake.

A few moments passed. The man's hand touched Chandra's cheeks once again. She opened her eyes and closed them again. Kumaresan could stay there no longer. He was like a rumbling volcano. He had come to a desperate decision. He picked up his child. The child cried. Chandra opened her eyes, saw Murthi in her husband's arms and fell asleep again. Swiftly Kumaresan walked five benches away with the child. The man in the opposite bench was immensely pleased, because it was just such a chance that he had been waiting for.

Holding his son, Kumaresan stood by the door looking out into the night. The train was tearing through the darkness, puffing away like an enormous demon. He was in a turmoil. Terrible thoughts were on his mind. "Why am I holding this child in my arms? Why not fling him out and thus break the tie that binds me to that harlot!" The child was now sleeping in his arms. He looked at that smiling innocent face. He looked back. His eyes fell on the young man again. Without a tremor the man's hands went near Chandra's face. They were playing with her cheeks now with intemperate desire. "Yes I shall throw this brat out!" thought Kumaresan. He watched on as if under a spell. Startled, Chandra awoke. The man smiled at her.

"You brute!" she muttered and was up in a flash. She raised her right hand and slapped him hard. She slapped him again—now with the left. Again and again she slapped him. To Kumaresan she seemed to be the avenging Goddess Kali herself. He looked on as one in a trance. The others in the compartment were awake now and there was a huge commotion. Kumaresan slowly walked back to Chandra. She turned—saw him and with a cry of relief she clung to him.

The train had reached Cuddalore. With a string of abuses and indiscri-

minate blows the passengers pushed the man out of the compartment. It was all over. Everyone settled back to sleep. Kumaresan slowly laid Murthi down on the towel. He and Chandra also settled down comfortably. "The brute!" she muttered again. "But why were you looking at him like that?" Kumaresan asked her. "He looked very much like my brother who had run away from home some fifteen years ago..." There were tears in her eyes. Kumaresan heaved a sigh of relief.

The Indo-Ceylon Express raced on.

(Translated from original Tamil by Mrs. VESTA HAKIM)

A Suspense Story

(A short joke is the source of this story)

New York—a city modern in many aspects, has always been the tourist's "wonderland". The dazzling lights from the skyscrapers would give the onlooker the impression that stars were climbing towards heaven. To enjoy the glorious sights of this gay metropolis three tourists took up a room in the topmost floor of one of the skyscrapers. The elevator brought them down to ground level every morning and after the day's jaunt it would take them back to their room.

One night, on their return the tourists were greeted by the Receptionist, who told them the sad tale, that the elevator was out of order and would they please climb the stairs to reach the room! Lord have mercy on them! How could they climb so many steps? It was a herculean task that lay before them. But there was no alternative. Together they hit on a plan to lessen their agony. They decided that while climbing up, one of them should tell a love-story, the next a story of valour and the third a suspense story.

The first story was begun by Romeo. It was about the love of Thisby and Pyramus brought forth by Ovid: "In Babylon there was a beautiful twin house with a mere wall-partition between the two portions. But it presented no barrier to the two united hearts of Thisby and Pyramus. The lovers found a crevice in the wall and through that crevice they exchanged words of love and pledged to be true to one another.

Like most lovers they found their path strewn with thorns. Their parents were set to axe their love."

"The only course left for them was to run away from the 'madding crowd' and they planned to meet under a mulberry bush on the outskirts of Babylon on a dark night."

"That night Thisby, kindled by love, reached the meeting-place before the appointed time. It was dark all around and suddenly a lion with blood dripping from its jaws—for it had just killed a deer and made a meal of it—sprang before the lonesome maid. Being a girl, with presence of mind, Thisby acted quickly and blindfolded the lion by throwing her mantle over it. Before the lion could free itself by tearing the mantle she ran out of sight. The lion too left the place."

"Pyramus came to the scene at the appointed time, only to find the blood-stained and torn mantle of Thisby. He hastily came to the conclusion that she had been attacked and had become a prey to some wild animal. His misery was too great for words and in a fit of despair he drew his sword and killed himself."

"A little while later, Thisby returned to the rendezvous in order to meet her lover but she was greeted by a sight shocking both to her eyes and heart. She naturally blamed herself for all this calamity and with the same sword that had ended the life of Pyramus she extinguished her own life. 'The hearts'

that were prevented from union in the world—were united in Death."

* * *

This story of Pyramus and Thisby had helped the three tourists to climb a thousand steps without their feeling the strain too much.

* * *

As agreed Antony began a story of valour. He said he would make it brief. "Ask not the name of the place where this took place or of any other specific 'details.'"

"Briefly this is the story. In a place far away—there was a revolution by one group of people seeking to drive out another sect, that was in power there. The leader of the revolution swore to massacre the ruling sect. But the leader of the ruling party cleverly averted the disaster by choosing one strong person from the revolutionist's side to be the Chief of State. As a natural result of this rule, the fire was drained out of the revolution."

* * *

When Antony finished his story they had almost come to the last flight of stairs. It was now the turn of Charles to narrate a 'suspense story'. He got it going in a small sharp voice: "Friends—I am now going to tell you a



true suspense story which would scare the living daylight out of you and make your bones rattle! We have got to get down the two thousand steps that we have climbed so far and then climb them once again..."

"Ah—is your story that lengthy? enquired one of the other two, with sarcasm.

"No"—replied Charles "it is not!. But you see, we have to get back to the Receptionist, as we have forgotten the key of our room!"

Truth being stranger than fiction, the suspense story did certainly make their bones rattle!

(Translated from original Tamil by Mrs. VASANTA DEVASUNDARAM)

A Man of Reputation

In the field of science he was peerless. He was a great historian too. Hear him narrate the historical facts of King Charles's period! Do you need a character-study of Emperor Shajehan? Would you like to know about the 14th Century—Chaucer's period? or of Caesar's military exploits? Here he is—a walking Encyclopaedia.

It was the same in Literature. He was up and ready for discussions and debates! A great critic of eminent poets like Kamban, Shelly, Kalidasan, Tennyson, Byron and Bharati. His own poetic skill could put him up on the same pedestal with renowned poets. He could be rightly called a messenger of Karl Marx, and he would begin a discourse on 'America's Wealth' and 'Russia's Secrets' with profound ease and grace. He was also a genius in Maths; a tiger in Geography; in Politics a veritable Plato; and a Socrates in Sociology. In his speeches he resembled Demosthenes and in writings Bernard Shaw and Shakespeare!

Hence his name Pugazhendhi meant 'FAME' *sans phrase*. People held his name sacred and were too awe-stricken to mention it aloud. He was always referred to as 'Maythai' meaning 'Genius'. It was most appropriate, because it was a combination of two words 'May+Thai'. 'May' the month in the English calendar when the May Day is celebrated; 'Thai' the month in the Tamil calendar where again earnest workers celebrate their achievements.

The fame achieved by this individual was something remarkable, for he excelled not in one field but in many, and he was very young—hardly 30 summers gone!

Students, workers and all thronged to sing his praise. His 'fame' thrilled him one moment but the next found him depressed and doleful. He was unable to avail of the common joys of life. Should he go to the sea-shore wishing to enjoy the soothing sea-breeze in solitude—he would find a crowd collecting around him in no time. His admirers would recognise and rush towards him, in order to have a close look at this 'intellectual figure'. As a result of this excessive and effusive popularity, museums, shopping centres and other places of interest were taboo for him. The delightful and colourful parks where young lovers spend delicious hours—ah! there were merely vivid descriptions flowing forth from his pen. He was deprived of such pleasures in his own life. Not for any fault of his—but the people around him made him their 'matinee idol' and he was afraid to shatter the 'public image'. His admirers had moulded and shaped his personal life and he could not run away from it. Some of his admirers said 'Oh no! This genius would never yield to the temptations and desires of the common man. No, he will never slip—never! "But how could he be flawless in character when he has wandered far and wide?" this

suspicious query of a few would be answered emphatically. He had gathered much knowledge and that would provide him with sufficient inner strength to stand upright in life.

In addition to these questions and answers, the public sent out statements periodically which he was forced to confirm, as otherwise he would fall off the pedestal on which they had placed him. "This genius has renounced even sound sleep until he achieves his goal." This he could not refute and he slept very little in order to please the public! "Our genius has proclaimed he would never enter the state of matrimony, as he is wedded to his work only,"—his admirers would pronounce, and he was constrained to admit it was his own decision!

He was unable to dress fashionably and was forced to live the life of a miniature Mahatma. It was no surprise that his heart ached for the joys of life

and he had no peace of mind. To outward appearance he was a 'stoic', but his soul was tormented by the rigid life laid before him.

One day, he had an engagement at a college to address the students on the "Frontiers of Science". The meeting was a great success and the students were amazed and spellbound by the lecture delivered by him that day. In the midst of the admiring crowd, his eye did not fail to catch sight of a young beautiful maiden. Alas! he was unable to show his true feelings!

That night, when a grand dinner in his honour was over, he went up to his room to rest. A boy who was engaged to be his attendant massaged his aching feet and he was a little calm now. The boy left him after a while. His eyes wandered across the street to the terrace on the opposite side. He was pleasantly surprised to see the girl who had attracted his attention that afternoon. And more so, because the girl was now taking the boy-attendant's (how he got there the genius knew not) hands and kissed them with reverence.

The next morning, he beckoned the boy and asked him the reason for the girl's gesture. The boy said "Master—last night did I not massage your feet? The young lady had seen it and as she herself will not get such a chance, she kissed my hands that had touched the feet of a genius!"

The genius was dumbfounded. The words of the public rang harshly in his ear: "Oh no, he will never enter the state of matrimony—he is wedded to his work!" "Woe unto this Fame,



which is killing my soul in secret",—
the genius's heart cried a thousand
times!

It was time for him to depart from the
place. The usual crowd of admirers

shouted with glee, "Long live our
genius—'Maythai!'" The young lady
was also there. But the genius waved
to them mechanically without turning
in her direction.

(Translated from original Tamil by Mrs. VASANTA DEVASUNDARAM)

The Last Scene

"Your Honour! I am the accused in this murder trial and I admit I am guilty of the crime. I am prepared to accept the punishment meted out for this crime. Ah! there is no point in my saying this. Should I refuse to accept the punishment, would you allow me to go out free? The noose around my neck would perform its duty, and the pit into which my dead body would be thrown, is also ready. I am aware of it. This town will curse my very name, and shout out: "He is a murderer, a man who had murdered his mistress."

"My kith and kin would feel ashamed to own me. My lifeless body will lie under the sod—but even then people will certainly spit on the very name—Dr. Babu."

"Permit me now to narrate the causes that led to this murder, so that this, my short life, will stand out as a lesson to other men."

"Oh! no, do not come to the conclusion that I now narrate the causes in order to seek pardon. I have neither the desire for freedom nor do these causes have the power to prove anything in my favour. I openly admit—I murdered my mistress Manjula."

"I did not kill her deliberately or intentionally. But I did it in a 'semi-conscious' state. Briefly this is my story—

"I, Dr. Babu lived in a house in Gopalapuram. My wife Kokila, was a model wife, extremely conservative in

outlook. She would never fail to make an obeisance to me and touch my feet at sunrise. However hungry she may be, she would take her meals only after I have had mine. Her respect for me was so intense that she would never even utter the syllable 'Ba', because my name began with that syllable. Yes, she was a martinet in these, like the women of the 'Purasas' who are deified for the power of their chastity. Though I have often felt she was not modern in her appearance and attitude, the fact that she worshipped me made me grow fond of her."

"The ground-floor of our house was occupied by Manjula—a belle with blue eyes, modern, vivacious and glamorous. She was staying with her father as she had quarrelled with her husband Gopal who was in Delhi."

"Living under the same roof made Manjula and Kokila great friends. This provided me with many opportunities to meet Manjula alone. Does a man have to ask bluntly 'Are you in love with me?' to know a girl's mind? Well, Manjula's attractive blue eyes could spell out the story for me. My heart trembled with joy."

"On a dark night, I returned home late to find that Manjula's father had gone out of town. My wife Kokila was asleep with a head-ache. I retraced my steps to Manjula's house and she was not at all shocked at my behaviour. This gave me adequate courage and that night was the beginning of a



perfect love-story. As the days passed, my wife Kokila came to know of my illicit love and what followed was most natural. She begged and pleaded with me to give up my affair with Manjula. She threatened to commit suicide. But all in vain."

"On the other hand, these tearful pressures from Kokila and objections from Manjula's father were only incentives to our extra-martial relationship."

"Then came the day, when Gopal arrived to take his wife back to Delhi. We spent three months under the same roof—months of agony and despair burning each heart. Secretly Manjula promised me not to rejoin her husband. I spent many happy days after this."

"However, when one day I asked Manjula if she was going back to Delhi with her husband, she playfully replied 'Yes'. At that time I did not

realise she had said it merely to tease me. I fretted and fumed and stormed out of the place. Like most lovers with unfaithful mistresses, I decided then and there to do away with Manjula with the help of my revolver."

"When I returned the servant-maid was at the door."

"'Is Gopal inside?' I shouted angrily. 'He has already left for Delhi', she replied. I rushed in and could not find Manjula. I thought she had escaped from me. I ran up to see my wife. She too was not there. But a letter lay fluttering on the table. I read it—

Dear Babu,

I have decided to get my freedom. Forgive me for this. I do not know if I should commit the same mistake you made in life. The world will not approve of this. The learned will never support me. But I am doing this in order to teach men of your calibre, a fine lesson. I am leaving behind your precious new-find and I have entwined my life with Gopal, who is taking me to Delhi. With good wishes,

Your wife,
Kokila.

"When I finished reading the letter—the room swam before me. I felt the stunning impact of an earthquake, a storm and a gale, all together. My eyes became dim and I was just 'semi-conscious'. It was then that Manjula appeared at the doorway. As my mind was confused and tormented, my vision was blurred and Manjula to me

appeared to be Kokila. It was a case of momentary insanity. I took out my revolver and fired at her—not just one shot....I continued to fire until the frenzy within me died. All of you know what followed—it was Manjula my mistress, who was killed. And here I stand arrested and charged with murder."

It was a tense moment in the courtroom. The accused finished his narration. "Do you admit you are guilty of the murder?," the Judge asked him. "Yes, your Honour! I am a murderer, a MURDERER!", screamed Dr. Babu and struck his own face several times in agony and shame. Because of his blows, his moustache fell off his face, and sheepishly he picked it up and stuck it on again in its place. Witnessing this, the crowd

in the courtroom laughed aloud. The lawyers too could not restrain their laughter. There was laughter all around!

The Judge hastily stepped down from the dais and pronounced his verdict. "Because you have been careless in attending to your 'make-up' properly before coming on to the stage, I dismiss you from this Dramatic Company. You have proved yourself unfit to 'make up' your face carefully before facing the audience—Get out."

The curtain fell!

No doubt the young actor who played the role of Dr. Babu pleaded with the Dramatic Company's Producer who played the role of the Judge, to change his verdict. The verdict in the last scene however remained the same.

(Translated from original Tamil by Mrs. VASANTA DEVASUNDARAM)



M. KARUNANIDHI

M. Karunanidhi (b. 1924) Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu and President of the ruling D.M.K. Party, combines in himself the great qualities of a Statesman, Administrator and Writer. A fearless fighter for justice and social reforms he courted imprisonment several times.

A prolific writer and a poet, he has 150 short stories, over 20 plays and scripts for over 35 films to his credit.

A founder member of the D.M.K. he came under the influence of Periar E. V. Ramaswamy, Social Reformer and the late Dr. C.N. Annadurai, in his early life.