

THAKAZHI SIVASANKARA PILLAI

Sahitya Akademi Award Winner  
Author of CHEMMEEN

# THE IRON ROD









**Published by  
Sterling Publishers Private Ltd**



# **THE IRON ROD**

**THAKAZHI  
SIVASANKARA  
PILLAI**

**A Sterling Paperback**



***The Iron Rod***

**© Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai**

**First Published in India in Paperback, 1974**

**by Sterling Publishers Pvt Ltd**

**AB/9 Safdarjang Enclave**

**New Delhi 110016**

**PRINTED IN INDIA**

**Text at : Sterling Printers, New Delhi**

**Cover at : Mehta Art Press, New Delhi**

**Cover Design : Narain Barodia**

**Rs 5.00**



# 1

**H**e woke up abruptly as one kicked in sleep. It was several hours before dawn. He wondered why he rose so early and how he would spend the rest of the night. Now, hard to get another wink of sleep.

Chellappan took a beedi. The stock was running out. He had only two more. He struck a match and found Bhavani lying by her side, the two kids fast asleep, clinging to one another. He struck a second match to light his beedi.

He recalled the heavy drinking session he had the previous evening with Gopal. It turned out to be rather expensive. Gopal, however, footed the bill. But why did he ? The man had sought him out on purpose, led him by the nose to the tavern and made him drink bottle after bottle, against consistent protests. He couldn't take a drop more, he had told him persistently. Something fishy about that excessive solicitude. After the orgy, Gopal had followed him, as he was waddling home.

Indeed, he was waddling, he remembered. "You shouldn't go alone, brother." Gopal's words were still fresh in his memory. And he followed him, though Chellappan had particularly desired to be left

alone. They plodded along for a while and Gopal broke into laughter, brandishing a new bottle. Gopal drank some of it and handed it over to Chellappan who consumed the rest in no time.

Chellappan jogged his befuddled memory to recollect what followed but he could not. He might have blabbered much, but Gopal just laughed. Laughed and laughed. It was an empty stupid laughter.

That laughter of Gopal still echoed in Chellappan's ears. The more it did, the more it sounded sly and spurious. It disturbed him. He got up and struck another match. Bhavani lay in the same pose. The children had separated themselves from one another.

Ah, it came to mind now. Gopal was only goading him on to drink, more and more, himself studiously refraining. Chellappan tried to recollect the entire farce. Gopal ordering the bottles after whispering something to the waiter. Obviously conspiring to make his bottle stronger, mixing *arrack*, while Gopal himself had only a diluted safe modicum. The sordid truth slowly dawned upon him !

A pang shot through his frame. He must know more of the treachery. He struck another match and lighted the oil lamp. He looked at his sleeping wife and wondered how she slept undisturbed.

He gave her a kick. She woke up and looked at him, scared. It took her a minute to shake off the stupor. She scrambled to her feet. Chellappan scanned her from head to foot, fiercely. As if he had caught a thief red-handed. She stared at him in confusion

"Did Gopal come here ?" he asked.

The question conveyed little sense to her. She gave

no answer. Clenching his teeth, he repeated :

“I ask you, he slept here, didn’t he ?”

“Who ?”

He snarled. “Who ! I’ll kick you to pulp !”

She snapped : “Oh, still sizzling ?”

He made a grunt. She got up, muttered something defiantly and went out.

Chellappan remembered through the mist of foggy visions that he had specifically asked Gopal to go back three or four times when they both had reached the alley branching off from the road. He didn’t want the foul tavern-mate inside his house. Still, didn’t Gopal show a persistence in accompanying him to the hut ? And did he really come against his express desire ? His memory failed him again.

Did Bhavani keep awake ? Or had to be woken up ! Can’t remember a thing. Not even whether he had his grub. He groped under the pillow. Thank heavens, he had not lost his previous day’s earning.

Perhaps, his fears were true. Gopal might have come and stayed, taking advantage of his unconscious state. That lavish generosity of his at the tavern might all be a ruse to get him sunk in an alcoholic coma.

Bhavani came back and said : “Look here, it is still midnight. Why do you keep awake ?”

Chellappan asked : “Suppose you tell me, it was your scheme asking him to get me drunk ?”

She didn’t seem to comprehend. “What are you blabbering about ?”

Innocence ? Or all a mask ?

Oh, if he could only know the truth of what followed of which his mind was a blank. That secret lay

shrouded in the darkness. His eyes bored into hers as if to search for it. Did Gopal make that clandestine visit ?

He knew that his wife and Gopal were both currently employed in an earth work. He couldn't restrain a question darting out of him : "How long have you and Gopal been there ?"

"Ten or twelve days. Why do you ask ?"

See, how she answers. Without a qualm, without tremor in her voice.

Rocking on uncertainty Chellappan looked at her intently and said : "Will you come closer ?"

"What for ?"

"I want to see you better."

"To see me better, phoo !" She made a scowl of scorn.

He remained silent, discomfited.

The children were awake. The first born lay motionless, with eyes wide open.

Chellappan was lost in doubts. Perhaps Gopal did not come inside the house. Was it an illusion then ? The man might truly have parted at the junction. O the tyranny of doubts ! How to get at the truth ? Well, he would straightaway ask Gopal. But would he speak the truth ? He must know the truth, all the same, he thought. Can't stand the torture any longer. He must know if he had been deceived. If Gopal had been here, this woman that plays the sweet angel before him, is a downright devil !

It might have all been a calculated scheme. As he was about to leave for home from the work-site, he learnt from several persons that Gopal had been

making feverish enquiries about him, ostensibly over an urgent matter. And when they met, Gopal lured him into the toddy shop. This reminded him of the trick he had himself played years back inveigling that old fool, Karimba's father, from out of his house. It was Karimba herself who had given the tip. "Dip him in toddy and he would get out of our way !"

The same game was played by another person now. Only this time he himself was the victim !

But was it really so ? Perhaps not. For he knew Gopal had honest business too to talk with him. He had undertaken a tank work and wanted Chellappan to be his partner. Between sips of liquor, they had discussed the matter.

Chellappan's thoughts got confused. A smoke he thought would put him at ease, but the stock of beedis had run out. He asked his wife :

"You didn't buy beedis for me ?"

Listlessly she pointed out where she had kept them.

Chellappan lighted one and idly watched the curls of smoke. His wife was sitting on her hunches on a mat, lost in her own thoughts. What was she thinking about ? If she were really guilty of infidelity, could she remain so calm and unperturbed ? Totally insensitive to the storm raging within him, she seemed to be on the verge of dropping off into sleep. She yawned off his suspicious looks. Obviously nonchalant about his searching questions. May be, she is deliberately guarding her expressions against betraying herself.

He had several times, in the past, occasions to suspect her fidelity. And had often beaten her up.



But she would ascribe it all to the jealous drunkard of a husband listening to vile gossips.

But in the affair of that evening, if his suspicions proved true, he could not allow her to get away with it. It was one thing to be deceived when one was away, unaware of being so deceived as on the previous occasions but it was another thing to be deceived this way, downright, barefaced, a husband lying like a log, his wife, at arm's length, having a good time with a secret bed-mate. She should be doubly amused !

He asked her in a tone tactfully softened. "Do you think I was quite unconscious ?"

"Crawling on fours, that was how you were :"

"And then ?"

"Then what ?"

"Did the two of us eat anything ?"

Bhavani was silent for a moment and then replied: "Two ? Whom do you mean ?"

"Me and Gopal."

"Don't be silly !"

And she continued : "Put out that lamp and allow me a wink of sleep, won't you ?"

Chellappan ignored her. He lit another beedi. After a while he asked her about buying rations the next morning. "How much do you have ?"

"Not a copper."

"But what did you do with your wages ?"

She swung round and asked : "What are you talking about ?"

"Can't see sense in it ?"

"Fat lot of sense ! Don't you know it is days since you flung a nickel into the home ? Well, true to the

tradition of starving children to death ! Have any idea how I have been managing ?”

Jolted by the straight-to-the-jaw charge of neglecting the home Chellappan flared up. “Don’t I know how ? You think I didn’t know what you were doing here ?”

Cut to the quick by the insinuation, she retorted.

“Oh you know, do you ? Serves you right ! Shows that stupid husbands shall not have smart wives !”

“Ah, then, that is the truth, eh ?”

Chellappan sprang forward, gave her a kick, and caught her by the throat. He growled. “So you did it, didn’t you ?”

She started screaming and beating against her own chest. The children got up and began to cry.

Kuttappan, the elder boy, raised a loud alarm that woke up the neighbours. They came up running.

Chellappan’s steel fingers sank into her windpipe. Strangled almost to suffocation, tongue sticking out, eyes rolled back, Bhavani ceased wriggling in his hands, dead beat. One of the women rushed forward and helped her extricate herself from his clutches.

Confronted by a crowd gathered there, Chellappan silently slid out of the hut.

The women enquired of Bhavani what it was all about. But could she tell them of her husband’s disgraceful insinuations ?

“He knows best !” was her answer.

And between sobs, she told a yarn. Chellappan came into the house heavily drunk. She berated him for being a cad and neglecting the home. He kicked her. A fitting tale but she was not sure they had

swallowed it.

"Well, I came in time to save her from being strangled to death," said Kutty, the woman who had braved the assailant.

She explained to the others her own struggle against the man in that life-saving act. "The brute's claws had been dead dug into the girl's throat, so that he couldn't himself let go the grip. I have had to force out the fingers one by one !"

"O the beast !" Said Karthi.

"It is hell to have a husband like him ! You can't be sure he wouldn't strangle you in sleep."

Nani said philosophically that one has to put up with fate.

Kuttappan lay upon his mother's lap, still sobbing. His mother caressed his head. Kumari the younger one just sat blinking.

The boy stroked the mother's neck and asked : "How do you feel, mother ?"

Bhavaṇī kissed him and said : "I am all right, Child."

That was a touching scene.

Bhavani told them : "Only this one is attached to me. The other, O the imp ! You should see her running up to her sweet father with mouthful of lies about me."

"That is true," asserted a woman familiar with the inner atmosphere of the home. The son never got anything better than a good beating from the father.

Bhavani continued raining kisses upon her son.

Kochukali, hitherto a silent listener to all the comments denouncing Chellappan as a brute, hastened to show the other side of the picture :

“The man is no doubt a ruffian but Bhavani is not innocent either. She has a nasty tongue that wags a bit too much.”

The others knew that she was being truthful about the facts.

The atmosphere brightened up with the glow of dawn and the neighbours dispersed. Before leaving they, however, advised Bhavani to mend her tongue.

Chellappan returned rather late that morning. Kumari snuggled up to him and hung on to his arm. But Kuttappan, stomach distended and buttocks pointed, stood aside, frightened of his father. He informed his mother : "There he comes."

Bhavani was toileting. Yes, quite a toileting, preparatory to going out.

The daughter whispered something into the father's ears. He tilted his head to receive it in full. Chellappan stalked towards his wife and asked : "O, getting ready to go flirting ?"

After a pause, he decreed : "Look here, you won't go out !"

After a moment, she asked : "You don't want me to work, eh ?"

"Exactly", replied Chellappan firmly.

She went in to undo all the toileting—assailing the hair-do, and rubbing off the *tilak* on her forehead.

Chellappan aimlessly strolled round the compound, with the daughter still in his arms. And then he went out with her.

Kuttappan, left cruelly alone, moaned to his mother : "Father has taken Kumari to the tea-shop."

He asked his mother plaintively for leave to join

them. He smacked his lips, in anticipation.

"No. Your father will give you only blows. You have a nice father, haven't you?"

Weeping, he said he was hungry. His thoughts still enviously lingered on an imaginative picture of his sister filling up her belly, while he languished at home. And he asked, half to himself: "Why doesn't he like me?"

The mother was lost for an answer. His next question was more shuddering: "Am I not his son?"

Bhavani couldn't ignore this, and said: "Sure, you are."

"Then why does he treat me badly?"

She gave no answer.

Chellappan didn't go to work. Back from the tea-shop, he left the child at the hut and silently went out again.

Bhavani was grappling with the problems of the day. There was just a little rice and half a rupee of cash—all told. She would, thought she, buy tapioca for the cash and thus scrape up a meal. But what about the dinner? Well, she and the kids should skip the midday meal to save up for the night as the monster would be back at night. He would not appreciate missing his dinner. And Bhavani knew it too well!

Outside, Kuttappan was getting details of his sister's rich breakfast. His own breakfast was plain water, nothing sweeter than that.

"But couldn't you have brought me a little of it?" He asked her.

"O I ate it up myself."

Later the mother took the girl to task for being so

selfish. "You thought little of your brother, when you were stuffing your pot-belly ? Does he ever do that to you, little devil ?"

The child stood motionless, biting her nails.

But her brother himself came to her defence.

"But the poor thing herself got very little, mother."

Bhavani set out to buy some tapioca. She powdered the face, combed the hair, parting it at a side, changed her dress, looked into the mirror. Then took leave of the son.

The boy, as usual, went to the house of Kesava Pillai, a landlord of the neighbourhood. Whenever his breakfast drew blank, he would go there and get some crumbs of their leavings.

As Kuttappan presented himself before the mistress of that well-to-do home, she wanted to know details of the morning's row. The boy gave an account of all he knew.

Kesava Pillai was also listening. His wife said : "If these undesirables could only be driven away from here, we would have peace around."

But her husband pointed out that it was idle thinking. "Times have changed. And that fellow is a terrible Communist. The whole country will flock round him if we do anything."

At the instance of the lady, the maid gave the boy a little gruel. Kuttappan called out to his sister, who came up running avidly.

It was a delight to see the little brother and sister sharing the scanty meal and toddling back home arm in arm with pleased satiety.

The little hut of theirs had a woeful tale about it. It had witnessed the checkered life of a soul. A



poor old woman. She had a husband whose attentions on her as the lord of the house were confined to the night's bed. And he missed not a night. Her reward was rich ; a new child every year. That figure of the woman with a protuberant belly, toiling in the fields would be missed by the people only during short annual spells of maternity. Twelve issues came out of her but only one survived, the rest dying in childhood, victims of stark poverty. Chellappan amazingly survived through all the travails of infancy. The father died in an accident, and the mother, of illness. Chellappan, now orphaned, weathered all storms and lived on and grew into a sturdy man. He married and started a new life.

Chellappan sauntered along aimlessly. He had no work that day, as he had been sacked from where he was working the previous day. It was an earth work, only half finished. He was the only labourer to be dismissed. Why was he alone sacked ? As an undesirable ? A trouble maker ? Possibly so. There was a slight rustle of a stir among the labourers about the price of rice shooting up, while the wages stay put. A paltry three rupees. All talked of demanding wage increase but it was Chellappan who came forward to bell the cat. The employer might have overheard. Paying him three rupees, he told Chellappan : "Say, you need not bother about coming here tomorrow."

Chellappan had at first an urge to ask why, but pride held him back. He saw the others, whose case he championed, remaining mute and letting him down.

The prickles of the night's row with his wife on

his mind, he was not disposed to seeking work elsewhere. He could have got one if he wanted.

Chellappan's thoughts again slid back into the events of the night. Those very questions about his wife and Gopal again assailed him and he floundered about on the suspicions. At any rate there was something about Bhavani making herself attractive. Right from the start of their married life, he had never been quite sure of her faithfulness, but he could never catch her red-handed. It was bruited among the womenfolk that his first born was positive proof of her infidelity but he could never be sure. He wished he could.

Head sunk down in a dejected stoop, he was squatting on the roadside, tortured by these thoughts, when an elderly woman who was returning from the ration-shop, approached him and accusingly asked : "What is it I hear of you, boy, getting drunk to the nozzle and playing the killer ?"

A cousin of his, she was the only living relation outside home and so had the right to upbraid him.

"If she had croaked on the spot, where do you think you would now be ?"

Chellappan was lost for an answer. A mumble of words dropped out of him. "She is not true to me."

"Then pack her off. That is what a man should do," she said. "But what wrong did she do yesterday to make you run amuck ?"

He gave no reply.

"You couldn't have got this from your father. Indeed he never cared for home but he never assaulted the wife either."

Chellappan did not stay. He thought of the days

preceding his marriage with Bhavani. He met her accidentally, a girl who believed in making herself prim and lovely. And he fell for her greeting smiles and did not even press for a dowry.

His thoughts drifted further backward. The days of his amorous affairs with Karimba, who accused him of betraying her. But could she have made a better wife than Bhavani? Probably not, as she was one that blatantly asked him how to finish her father.

Chellappan was walking along the lane that led to the sea shore. In fact he should have avoided that lane infested with his creditors.

But the person he ran into was none other than Chacko, the employer who had burnt his boats behind him. A tremor of vengeance passed through his frame. No one was about and he decided to settle the score with him.

"You there, a moment please. Want to have a word with you."

Chacko felt a shiver down his spine. Chellappan asked: "Suppose you tell me what makes you think I am not wanted for work?"

Chacko had a ready answer: "Well, I thought I don't need you."

More furious was Chellappan's next question: "And why would you not need me?"

"I deemed it fit not to have you any more."

"Think I am unfit?"

"Precisely so."

Chellappan's temper blazed up.

"Who says so?"

"Myself."

“And who are you to say so ?”

Chacko saw the menace not only in the ribald way of questioning him but also in the man's eyes. He found he was going to be assaulted.

“I don't like bandying words with you.” He side-stepped to slip past the man. Chellappan obstructed and said : “Stay, man. I haven't finished.”

Chacko looked around and saw that he was alone against this ruffian who was flaunting the steel balls of his right arm muscles and clenching his teeth.

“Who told you, man, that I am unfit for work ?” He repeated.

Chacko found no escape. The lane was too narrow. To raise an alarm would be a cry in the wilderness. He found the only way out :

“Well, you can come back to work. All right ?”

“Oh, can I? But I don't want your blasted work!”

Chacko dived past the worker and took to run.

Chellappan burst out laughing. It was the laugh of a monster, and it boomed beyond the horizon.

**W**ith Chellappan's food laid by her side, Bhavani was yawning off the weary hungry hours of the night, waiting for his return. No sign of her husband. She was mumbling curses into the cold air. With folded hands pressed against her chest, she fervently prayed that the dawn would bring her the news that Chellappan was found dead on the road. She kept awake only for fear of him. She dared not let her windpipe stand the fury of his steel fingers again.

She sat leaning against the wall and dozed. At every stir or rustle outside, she would wake up, step out on the yard, and peer over the stakes into the lane and return disgusted. Cursing him, cursing herself, she would stretch her back on the mat beside the children. Finally, she did doze off.

The strong shrill crow of a cock woke her up and she got up in panic. The East was aglow with the smile of dawn. But Chellappan had not turned up. She felt a tremor of relief. God be blessed ! Chellappan's food was there untouched. It would come handy for a nice breakfast for the children.

Come what may, I am going to work. Should have defied him yesterday when he ordered me to

stay home. Obeyed him only for fear, or there would have been kicks and blows again.

The children also got up. Kumari was the first to enquire : "Hasn't my father come yet ?"

Bhavani ignored her. But as the son also put the same question, though a shade less anxious in tone, she snapped : "Find out yourself, if you are so fond of him !"

A moment later, she muttered. "Father ! May such fathers fill hell !"

The children stood agape,

A part of the absentee's meal was given to the children, Bhavani helping herself to the residuary liquid. The remainder was set aside for their lunch. She transferred it to two pans, a precaution to prevent the greedy younger one getting a larger share at the expense of the generous and acquiescing brother.

Bhavani set out. As usual, she powdered her face, put a *tilak* on the forehead and did the hair neatly. The idea of going out had brought back her cheerfulness. Having done up her face, she briskly walked out of the house.

An inner voice asked her : "Whither thou ?" She abruptly stopped as though physically arrested and proceeded a moment later. The inner questioner was at once given an unhesitant answer. "Why, to the work spot of Gopal, to work with him."

She quickened her pace. Someone seemed to call out to her. Someone ? It was none other than Gopal himself. She readily responded.

There he is, in the company of other workers. Bhavani ran up to them, a broad smile on her face.

She hastened to give an excuse for this running :

"Thought I was late."

It was Gopal who spoke to her first. "We were waiting for you."

A female worker asked her : "Where were you yesterday ?"

"O, it is a long story."

Gopal, as the head worker called out to all. "Anyone yet to come ?"

Bhavani felt a weight taken off her heart. Her face already lit up by a smile shone brighter in that merry company. She had a lot to tell them.

Nani asked :

"Had your tea ?"

"No. Had a little of gruel."

Gopal came near, and said : "Time is up. Skip your tea if you haven't had it."

In feigned resentment of that discourtesy, she coyly wrinkled her eyes and said with a laugh :

"Here is the man who caused all the havoc and now plays the saint !"

"Havoc ? What havoc ?"

"Just listen to him ! He knows nothing !" After a pause, she said, "God be blessed that I lived to be here."

Gopal, his close anxiety whipped up, walked up to her. Standing to her, his body touching hers, he asked seriously : "Tell me what happened."

She jerked away her head and said : "What happened ! You shall hear all."

The small knot of workers merrily walked along towards the workspot. Their zeal and joy gave the balm to Bhavani's sore soul. The horrors of the night sped away.



It was the same earth-work in which Gopal and Bhavani were working together. She had to carry the baskets of gravel. Gopal filled the baskets and helped it on to her head. She carried it to a low lying plot and dropped the gravel down and walked back to him. And during the short spells of time she waited for him to fill a fresh basket, she told him all that happened between herself and her husband.

"I am fed up with him, brother, quite fed up."

Gopal watched her going with the head load and on her return for the next load, he asked her : "As such, I guess your working here is going to get you into trouble ?"

With a cold firmness in her eyes, she said : "No, no more of troubles. I am determined no longer to receive it lying down. Blows for blows and I mean it !"

Gopal lifted another load on to her head. She returned to receive the next, audibly muttering something. It was about the regret of the error of her life, her consenting to be married to Chellappan.

As the listener was lifting another load on to her head, she explained the misfortune :

"My people thought they were getting a priceless bridegroom for a song. A young man of brawn, a tireless labourer. He was sniffing after me and demanding neither jewels nor dowry. I fell for it too. We didn't know we were making a big mistake."

Her eyes welled up, but the sobs were reserved for the next trip.

"My fate ! Had my mother been alive then, I wouldn't have been thrown into the jaws of this bear."

She continued pouring out her sorrows. Gopal knowing the family at close quarters, was already aware of most of them.

He wasn't just listening to the woeful tales of a woman. His mind was drifting on the rough waters of another shuddering thought. Bhavani was decided to defy her husband. The cold determination in her eyes showed it. She had been repeating it more and more firmly. Gopal wasn't sure how far she would go. But he could sense the storm approaching. The whole web of that tangle centred round him and he was inextricably caught in it. O that he chose Chellappan of all persons as partner for the tank construction work he had undertaken! He regretted seeking him out, spending a part of the advance money he received in the way he did. But he didn't have an inkling it was all going to shatter a home.

Reading his thoughts, Bhavani said consolingly : "That worries you ? Forget it. This is bound to happen even otherwise."

"But I am in it knee deep, no gainsaying that."

"Are you afraid ?"

"Not afraid."

The torrent of Bhavani's complaints continued. Chellappan is a green-eyed monster. Doubts her fidelity. There are a few vipers of gossiping women here hissing lies about me into his ears in reward for the share of the booties of the Party funds. You know, don't you ? Such outfits of banditry called Mahila Sangh ?\* Bhavani mentioned the names of some of those women workers of the Party. Gopal knew them all. They represented the cultural front

---

\*Women's Wing of the Party

of the Party, played vital roles in the fund collection programme, led *jathas* and so on.

"And a man who flirts with these bitches dares question my powdering my face a bit !"

Gopal put on a smile and remarked : "Chellappan perhaps feels that a married woman oughtn't use make-up."

"But I feel there is nothing wrong in being tidy !"

On her trip back for receiving the next load, a derisive curl had usurped the smile on her lips.

"This Union, Party and fiddlesticks are said to be for making decent humans of us, aren't they ? Would you say untidiness is decency ?"

And violently spitting, she went on : "Uplifting of mankind indeed ! A man who doesn't care for his own children ! And a man sniffing after lecherous bitches frowns at his wife taking a bath !"

Gopal grinned. He seemed to rejoice in her growing disgust of her husband. He watched her going back with the head load, poring over the elegance of her hips rhythmically swaying, a sight his eyes had been repeatedly feasting on.

On her return, Gopal egged on : "But Bhavani don't you know what he was to you ?"

"Whatever he was, I can now call my soul my own though there are the two kids of course."

Gopal was convinced that the rift was complete. He had not, till then, conceived of this situation developing so quick. They had been working together for some days now. He would stand delightedly watching her hips in a rocking gait, chit-chatting with her at times, tacitly expressing his desire, she responding in monosyllabic sounds of consent. All

these were being noticed by others though they had not, as yet, made it a subject of gossip.

When lunch time came Gopal found Bhavani had not brought food with her.

"You think you can work on an empty stomach?"

"O that shouldn't be difficult."

"Oh!" Gopal invited her to share his food. She politely declined.

"Don't be stupid. Come on, girl." After much persuasion bordering on compulsion, she yielded.

"All right. But you may take first and leave a little for me."

Gopal put on a smile: "Oh it has come to that so soon?"

She didn't fail to grasp it. But she pretended as if she had not.

"What do you mean?"

"So soon you have made up your mind to eat out of my plate?"

"Well, why not?"

"Oh!"

As they walked on, she said: "This is bound to reach his ears anyway."

Without turning back he said: "Looks like it."

After a few more paces, Gopal said: "A savage and ruthless man. I am earning his enmity."

"As if you haven't earned it already!"

"Only suspicions now. It's going to be worse."

Gopal took only half of his food and left the remainder for her to help herself to.

After lunch, they resumed their work. But a heavy silence engulfed them. The jobs became mechanical. They looked like strangers. He was just lifting the

gravel basket on to her head, she receiving it silently.

Was it the sharing of lunch that brought about this sudden change ? An uneasy consciousness of a new relationship taking shape ?

Hours wore on. Gopal couldn't contain himself. He fondly called her : "Bhavani, little thing."

"Yes ?"

"Talk something, girl."

"Talk what, brother ?"

"Tell me, what were you thinking of ?"

"What were you ?"

"To say the truth, I was thinking of my late wife. A good one she was."

Bhavani retorted : "I was thinking of my husband. But a bad one he was !" They both laughed hilariously. When the ripple of the laughter subsided, she asked : "You are lying. You were not thinking of that."

"You were lying too, weren't you ?"

"I wasn't. I have nothing else to think of but the miseries of my life with him."

"But since this morning your mouth was munching nothing else. So what is there in particular to think about him now ?"

"O I just kept thinking of it all the same." A moment later she asked : "Well, speak up, what were you thinking of ?"

"I was just thinking."

Reading his mind, she said teasingly :

"Then keep thinking !"

"I can't do anything better perhaps."

"You can, if you know. May I now tell the truth ? I was thinking of just what you were think-

ing of.”

Gopal’s face lit up.

“I guessed so.”

After a few moments, he asked : “Bhavani, don’t you think our tree will bloom ?”

“It will bloom. Or else, it should be made to.”

That evening while disbursing the wages of the day, Gopal gave her an extra rupee and smiled at her.

**W**orkers' Unions and political parties were warming up for an agitation. Prices of essentials had spiralled up. Living had become a problem. Even the hitherto dumb driven government officials braced themselves for a strike. The imminence of an attempt to paralyse all activity was discernible in the general trend.

There had been, for some time past, an anxiety among the people. Indeed there were those little stirs here and there. But it was long since the country witnessed a nation-wide explosion. The time was ripe for that.

The Unions had been lying low with no more activities than their monthly programmes and anniversaries. Few paid the subscriptions. Individual cases of industrial disputes used to be there, but they were scarcely tumultous as the Government's labour department would at once tackle them. And, occasionally, the elections would provide some spectacular fireworks. And now the present crisis of a near-famine marked the end of a lull.

In Chellappan's village too, there was a demonstration under the auspices of the Agricultural Workers' Union. The rally that followed was sizable



but the demonstration was an apology. After the meeting was over they launched a house to house propaganda as dictated by the party. It was all being done with an eye on the forthcoming elections.

Kutty, who had just returned after seeing the demonstration, gave a gloomy picture of it to Bhavani. It was, she said, conspicuous in one thing: The absence of Chellappan at its head with the big red flag in hand. A *jatha* in that village was not just a procession; it was another term for the abounding zeal of Chellappan. Donning a red cap and wearing a red uniform, holding aloft a big red flag, thundering slogans, spitting fire, he used to siphon off passion and zeal for the thousands trailing behind him.

Kutty said to Bhavani : "A lifeless *jatha*. It couldn't be better, you know, without Chellappan."

Bhavani considered it of no account but she didn't show her scorn. The *jatha* and all that were not her cup of tea. Yet she didn't want Kutty to feel she had slighted her choice subject and said : "No wonder the fugitive wasn't there. A man that runs riot with daggers drawn cannot come into sunlight."

Kutty agreed. But knowing him from childhood, she had much to say about him. "He was so even as a child. Goes mad sometimes. Once, a few years back, about twenty of us were hired by a landlord for his transplanting work. A rat of a man. He went back on his word about the wages. It was his son, a fat punk, who came to disburse. Chellappan showed his mettle. He sprang barking at him. The fattie took to his heels, Chellappan wildly running behind. We all called him back in vain. He was one against many and we thought he was doomed,

but none of that niggard's band dared advance. And he led us all back unscathed."

Kutty went on.

"Do you want to know of another happening ?"

"It was when he was just a boy. A scorching March. No work for anyone of us. No one had anything to keep the wolf away. Chellappan went around all the huts. And, believe me, you know what he did ? He made bold to get down to a landlord's field and made a quick good harvest and distributed the loot amongst each one of us. Broad daylight plunder! We were all scared".

Bhavani found these tales of exploits revolting. She said : "My father knew nothing of the nature of this man before agreeing to my marriage with him."

Missing what Bhavani was referring to, Kutty said: "But after the marriage, he became a different man. Absolutely quiet. But, then, those days of troubles are all gone and of late nothing happens that makes mad dogs of boys like Chellappan. I wonder how he stays quiet in his hiding place."

"As if he dares coming out ! He knows the police are after his bones to make sauce of them."

Kutty said he was quite accustomed to the prison life. He did a three year term after the Punnappa firing. Why a strike anywhere around would mean Chellappan going to jail. Kutty ended up. "He is not a white livered mouse !"

Bhavani wished she could cut short the disgusting conversation, but Kutty continued showering praises on Chellappan. Finally she blurted : "Well, you folks have lifted him sky high and have

made a monkey of him, pranking on tree tops !”

Stung to the quick Kutty said indignantly : “You shouldn’t say so. If we had been lifting him high, he deserved it. He was always a friend of the poor. Rain or Sunshine, day or night, you could always look for him in times of need. He doesn’t even stint his money if he has it, for someone who needs it.”

After this torrent of eulogy on Chellappan, Kutty seemed to pause for breath and proceeded : “Who do you think was responsible for the higher wages you and I get ? It was Chellappan. But for him, there wouldn’t have been these Unions. What do you know of these landlords ?”

Kutty had a host of stories about Chellappan’s altruism, of championing the cause of the poor. And she rounded off, with a snap in her voice :

“Whether you like it or not he is our darling.”

Bhavani wouldn’t admit defeat. She said : “But, my dear, my experience is just the opposite. We sit starving without his caring the least.”

Kutty kept silent for a while. She had something else to talk about but wondered whether to mention it or not. Finally she triggered it off : “You Bhavani, you wouldn’t like it, but I can’t help speaking out. You have a bad tongue. We all know it too well. You neither know discipline nor how to keep the man happy and satisfied. Also, are you sure you are loyal to him?”

Kutty grimaced, in triumph. But Bhavani hit back, straight and swift : “Ah I see it all now. It is these and filthier tales that people like you have been spewing. And why blame that poor man for hating his own wife and children ?”

And with tears flowing from her eyes, she asked painfully : "What wrong have I done to you all ?"

That made it difficult for Kutty to stay on and rejoice over her verbal triumph. She left abruptly.

"Where is my father ?" Was the question Kumari often put to her mother. She always ignored it. She herself did not know. But she had been maintaining the even tenor of the house with the wages she got regularly, plus the extra rupee Gopal favoured her with.

She pined to find someone to talk to about what Kutty had told her. Her suspicions had been proved true. The neighbourhood was hostile towards her. They all belonged to Chellappan's bandwagon. She was, however, still not certain whether Kutty was aware of her relationship with Gopal. Perhaps not. Had she known it, she would have spread the word around and it would have become a major scandal and gossip point.

Next day, Bhavani's work was at a paddy field. Gopal was there too, but it was not a pairing job. At lunch time, they sat down under a tree and Bhavani told him every syllable of what Kutty had said. "And aren't you convinced now that it is these vipers who drove the wedge between him and me ?"

Gopal was unwilling to give much weight to the gossip, and said : "The world is such. People know how to make heroes of cowards. Just forget about it."

Bhavani cautiously made a reference to the vital part of it: "But they haven't yet known this."

"This ?" He pretended not to have understood.

She coyly flung a furtive glance at him. Her smile was bewitching. And she lisped: "Oh, you don't

know !”

Gopal still pretended ignorance.

She put up an air of seriousness and pointing her index finger, said : “Look here. Thieving is one thing. But thieving all night is another matter.”

“What does it imply ?” Gopal asked, smiling and still teasing her.

“Don’t you understand it still ?”

“No.”

“It is like this,” she explained. “There are two policemen now at my house looking for him. They might choose to be absent for a day. And if he happens to sneak into the house the very same day, what do you think would happen ?”

Gopal understood it now. Bhavani said : “The policemen may be withdrawn before long. And what will you do then ?”

“Oh, then it is also possible Chellappan would get into their hands. And we don’t have to face him.”

Bhavani was again lost in thoughts. A shadow of graveness crawled across her face and a moan escaped out of her : “Indeed, this is outrageous !”

“What ?”

“A husband forced to quit his house for fear of the police, the wife taking advantage of it and admitting a secret lover inside !”

The gold flake in her neck, the sacred symbol of her marriage quivered in the throbs of the disturbed heart.

But before long they were lost in the mist of silence, staring at one another without making any sound whatsoever.

In the evening, the secretary of the union with two

escorts came to Bhavani. Bhavani knew them but pretended to be busy and continued with her work for the dinner.

"We hope you know the reason of our coming", asked Damodaran—one of the three fellows. The other one also made a comment but the Secretary, Mr Kurup seemed hesitant to make a comment. Bhavani was still quietly continuing with her work and made no effort to welcome the guests. She went to the kitchen with a rude nonchalance. The visitors, amazed, stared at one another. Kurup was more apprehensive and sensed the reason of her silence. A while later Bhavani came in again, looked at them, and asked : "Well, what can I do for you ?"

Kurup did not want to talk much. So he simply said : "I need hardly tell you of the demonstration and the meeting held the other day. The prices of things are shooting up. Price control and wage increase are our demands. We have to stand united. We may have to resort to a strike."

Kesavan interposed : "No need for such a lengthy explanation under this roof !"

Bhavani ignored the tacit flattery and spoke straight to the Secretary : "And tell me who will feed us if we stop work ?"

The two lieutenants were shocked but not the Secretary. He was, however, looking for an answer.

Bhavani explained her stand :

"Look here. I am the only bread earner in this house. To talk of strike is easier in a house where there are two to earn, as they can always build up resources for such a contingency."

Damodaran pointed out that putting up with

hardship was a part of the struggle ahead.

Bhavani didn't argue. But she had a barrage of questions to ask them.

"Tell me, is this the only concern of the Union and the Party, calling for strike and demand wage increase?"

The Secretary laughed. He appeared to have read her thoughts.

"You seem to have something at the back of your mind," Damodaran said.

"You are right, I do. Here is a man who doesn't even care to feed his wife and children. And he visits the hosue only to bludgeon her. Haven't the Party and the Unions anything to do with that?"

What crossed the minds of the junior unionists was the regret that Chellappan had a wife with no revolutionary spirit in her. But the Secretary fumbling for a suitable rejoinder, said: "We would often remind him of his duties to his family."

"Oh, you did, did you?"

The more garrulous of the other two spoke: "Ours is a struggle for a better tomorrow, sister. And no struggle is easy."

In bitter scorn, she burst out: "That is a nice thing to say! Until that happy tomorrow, the wife and children are to starve, aren't they?"

A moment later, she said again: "Leave alone the wife. One who can't feed his own children goes up-lifting mankind!"

Damodaran had eloquence to meet that outburst, but that would not be answering her questions.

The Secretary again took up the mediator's role: "Not that we were not aware of these things. We

have told Chellappan a number of times.”

Bhavani said : “Does just being aware solve all the problems ?”

A silence followed. After a while the Secretary broke it again, and said : “We have had to face numerous questions and we admit we fail to give answers to all of them. With all our failures, we have to carry out the programme of the Union, haven’t we ?”

Bhavani did not reply for a while. Discreetly she said : “I wasn’t opposing the Union’s programme. I was only giving vent to my feelings.” And turning to the other two, she said : “My dear brothers, you wouldn’t understand a wife’s feelings. I am in a hell.”

The Secretary now found the atmosphere more congenial, and said : “Look here, sister, as we said before, we ought to suffer a bit, till we win our battle. We have come to ask for your contribution to the Fund.”

Bhavani went inside and came out with a rupee. Handing it to the Secretary she said : “This is all I have.”

The unionists left the hut. After walking a few paces, Damodaran opined : “That woman is a black-leg.”

Kesavan agreed. Kurup remained silent. Kesavan asked : “Did you note one curious thing ? She did not ask where Chellappan is !”

It had occurred to Kurup too.

Damodaran firmly repeated his ideological analysis : “A black-leg. That is why the class-conscious Chellappan couldn’t get on smoothly with her.”



Inside the house at that moment, Bhavani's daughter, who was listening to the dialogue, asked her mother : "Where did they say my father is ?"

Bhavani yapped : "Go after them and ask for yourself."

# 5

That monstrous, maniacal laughter Chellappan made when the landlord Chacko took to flight, was the outburst of an inner diabolical fury. It continued for some time. Like one possessed, he was just moving forward, propelled by the fury, he knew not whither.

Set adrift by the storm inside he found himself at the coconut plantations of Ouseph, another landlord. He trespassed into the extensive grove, and stood amidst the multitude of trees. Enormous bunches hung enticingly low within an easy reach. A mad frenzy surged within him. He pulled down two bunches. He felt he had a right over it. It was he who had planted them, watered them, fostered them. Yet, wasn't it daylight plunder? Within hours, two criminal cases were registered against him. One for attempted murder of Chacko, another for stealing Ouseph's coconuts. Both the plaintiffs were strong and influential. The police set out in search of the runaway culprit.

The Union gave Chellappan refuge. The President helped him flee secretly with a letter of introduction to somebody at Manakunnam a few miles

away. He reached the village at night. He could not see the addressee until the next morning.

The benefactor to be introduced to was the President of the Agricultural Workers' Union. Chellappan found himself standing in front of a massive building with high compound walls. Apparently belonging to a man of affluence. Chellappan wondered if the bird living in that stately mansion could be the President of the Workers' Union. For neither in his own village nor in the neighbourhood had he known of a Union worker living in a palatial building. Indeed, there were a few who rolled in luxury. The Alleppey leader for one had a big house but it was not of such appalling proportions.

Chellappan went in past the gate. There was a garden in the courtyard with bounteous flower pots and plants. The front doors were open but a silky curtain screened the doorway. The owner, thought Chellappan, should be richer than Ouseph.

There was none in the frontyard. He could hear voices from within. A baby crying. After a while a man in a loin cloth came up. Chellappan asked :

"The President in ?"

"The who ?"

"The President of the Agricultural Workers' Union."

"Still in bed. Wouldn't be up before eight." And he went about his way. Chellappan thought he would stay and wait. He was not sure if it was safe outside. Indeed no one knew him in that village, but a stranger is likely to rouse curiosities, leading to enquiries and troubles.

After some time, a man came from outside. He

looked like a worker. May be another like Chellappan himself seeking some favours from the Party boss inside. Chellappan had no difficulty in befriending him. He was, the man said, a tenant now facing the wrath of his landlord who threatened to throw him out with a pair of tongs. A false case of stealing coconuts had been foisted on him. And the *Netha*\* living here had offered to mediate. "This is my business. But what about you? Where do you come from?" he asked Chellappan.

"I live near Alleppey."

"Our *Netha* here gets little time for his sleep or food. Streams of visitors from sunrise to sunset. And what is your affair?"

"To deliver a letter."

"Not yet time for him to be up. The unhappy man has to run about here and there for the workers and the downtrodden. And some rich men also visit him. Government matters. He was the M.L.A. here and has never known defeat in elections."

Chellappan asked: "Very rich?"

"Rich? By Jove! A lakh of coconuts a season. Paddy fields right under his nose is five hundred "paras," not to speak of the crops in two other villages. Add to all these the estates in the east. Then what do you think of the income from fishing?"

Chellappan felt a nettle of uneasiness in his mind. A number of questions bubbled up from within. But he did not know what to ask. He had sometimes looked askance even at the bonafides of the Alleppey *Netha*, a man he knew intimately. Once, Chellappan reflected, when he was representing a matter of utmost

\* *Netha*=party chief.

urgency, the leader's answer was that "he would see to it after taking his meal" and Chellappan had no hesitation to lash out : "Oh, those that have enough to eat shouldn't be too late at the table !" A few more of such occasions came up in his mind.

Kochunni, the newcomer, added : "His father is alive. Owns all these. Dreadfully harsh and stern. He hates the ways of the son. O, that is a long story. He sent him to college, but the son had other ideas, organising strikes and going to prison. Back home, he stuck to the same lines and was ordered off the house by the father. Too ready to help anybody, he is such a darling. He contested the elections on the Party's ticket and became an M.L.A. The father softened only after that. Now he is the President of everything around here."

Chellappan thought this was almost identical to the history of the Alleppey *Netha*. He felt an irresistible urge to fling a question. It almost glided down to the tip of his tongue. But he restrained himself. He wanted to ask : "Not a rogue, I suppose ?"

A little later, a poor woman with an infant slumped on the shoulder, appeared. Kochunni walked up to her and said :

"He's still in bed."

And he asked her : "Your affairs are still unsettled ?"

"Yes. He had been away for some days. I am told he has come back. I have come to inform the *Netha* of this."

Kochunni turned to Chellappan, and said : "A poor woman ! She hails from Udayamperur. She has a beast of a husband who wouldn't give her any-

thing. A regular loafer. He was a close associate of the *Netha* but has now fallen foul of him. The scoundrel would be skinned alive if he came this way."

Chellappan felt a stab of pain. He scanned the woman. Did she resemble Bhavani? But no make up, nor that deceptive smile. The infant was a girl.

Kochunni said: "Such beasts of husbands do exist."

It struck Chellappan like an arrow. As Kochunni began another spell of talk with the woman, Chellappan silently stepped away from them. Perhaps he couldn't stand hearing a woman's woes akin to Bhavani's.

A door upstairs opened. Kochunni exclaimed: "He is getting up."

A slim tall man smoking a beedi appeared on the balcony. He wore a gold-lined dhoti. Kochunni made a ponderous bow. The woman, in modesty and reverence, stepped behind an overgrown plant. Chellappan stood motionless.

The *Netha* climbed down the staircase. As he appeared at the door, Chellappan walked up to him and handed over the letter. Kochunni resented the misdemeanour. Should he not have shown some respect? To stalk up haughtily, head held high and throw one's arm straight is not being humble. But the *Netha* didn't appear resenting the insolence.

He opened the cover and read the letter. And he scanned Chellappan from head to foot. A hard stare. But Chellappan didn't flinch. The leader beckoning him, walked towards a corner of the yard. Chellappan followed.

He said in a low tone : "From now on, you are not Chellappan, your name is Prabhakaran."

Chellappan kept up the silence.

"Got it right ?"

"Yes."

"Well, you go to the Union office. At ten, I shall be there. I am making arrangements for your stay."

"I don't know where the Union office is."

The *Netha* turned to Kochunni.

"Say, you first take this man to the Union office and come back."

Kochunni led Chellappan out.

At the Union office, Ravindran—that was the name of the *Netha*—gave instructions to Chellappan. He asked :

"Have you been underground before ?"

"Yes."

"So I guess, I needn't tell you anything more."

It was at the humble house of one Kochitti, a labourer that Chellappan was to stay in hiding. Kochitti was an elderly man, yet of stocky build, capable of two men's work. His wife Kotha, too was green old age. They had a daughter and a son, both unmarried. The daughter Parvathi was about twentyfive. All the four worked to earn a livelihood. A blessed happy home, each seemed content and satisfied.

Chellappan was welcomed in the household. Bidding him to take rest, they all went to their work. Chellappan had not had a wink of sleep the previous night. He went off to sleep immediately and woke up only when they all had returned for lunch.

The father, son and the guest sat down for the

lunch. The menu was modest, but Chellappan found it extraordinarily delicious. He helped himself to a hearty meal.

After lunch, they went out again. Left alone, Chellappan sat reflecting on the deliciousness of the meal. Never in his life had he experienced such an exquisite sense of contentment. He felt like relaxing. Life was full of peculiarities, such as this one. For once he now had an opportunity to rest.

Chellappan's thoughts sailed along nostalgic memories. The days of his childhood, when his mother would give him tapioca and gruel, which he would avidly consume. But avidly consuming was just filling the belly. Contentment was another matter. In later years, when he was growing on the crumbs of kindness of others, he had, at times, occasions to get palatable food, followed by a sleep of weariness. But this smugness of a relaxation without the pang of weariness had never been experienced before.

Chellappan again fell asleep. His hosts came back in the evening. They gave him a cup of black coffee, which too was unique in its taste.

After supper, the father, the mother and the son sat round their guest. Parvathi was inside a room behind the door.

The old woman asked :

"Where is your home, Prabhakaran ?"

Chellappan lied : "Out there at Aripad."

They asked him about his kith and kin. He said he had none. But in reply to the next question he fumbled for a while : "Marriage, well-er-no."

From out of the maternal heart of Kotha, came out a censor : "So you have been spending away all



your earnings."

"Yes. That is so."

"That won't do, son." Before she came out with a counsel to get married, her husband interrupted.

"But why is the police after you?"

He had a right to be assured that it wasn't theft, murder or rape.

Chellappan gave him a full account of his encounter with Chacko.

"I did not so much as lift my hand. And the case is for that."

Kochitti, scrutinising the wanted man's face, thought his story could be true. He said: "All these landlords are like that. Things are not different here, but after the *Netha's* return, there is much relief. He is rich himself and the others dare not defy him."

Chellappan said: "Over there in our village, we don't have the type. The Union takes up everything."

Kotha asked: "I see, you are a Unionist then."

"I was at first in the Congress. Later, I joined the Union. It is a long time now."

Kumaran asked: "Oh, you were in the Congress?"

"When everyone was."

Kotha now found the explanation for his remaining a bachelor. "Didn't have time for marriage and all that, eh?"

Chellappan was silent. Kochitti, thoughtful for a while, said: "So you have to stay hiding here?"

"Not at all. I can go for work. I wouldn't be a bird in the cage."

Kumaran opined that it was safe as the cops there

wouldn't recognise him.

The father said, half aside : "Hell of a jam !"

Chellappan said he would like to go along with him for work. Any work.

Kumaran warned : "But you shouldn't say you belong to Aripad. Trump up some other story about yourself."

Kotha had a brainwave : "I will make it known he is my brother's son who has come down to stay with us for some time."

"We will get on like that till they lay hands on me, which I wouldn't be sorry for."

Kumaran said : "That is right. Some day or the other you have to let yourself get into the noose and then slip out. Or else it will be always on your head."

"But if I give in right now, they would bribe the police to break my bones. But after sometime, matters will get cold and coming out will be easy."

Kochitti observed : "This is the lot of all the Unionists"

Kumaran said : "See, even our *Netha* has been to jail several times."

Kotha looked at it from another angle.

"How the boy was brought up ! He was bathed in gold. And we used to wonder why he should go to jail."

It was a difficult night for Chellappan. Sleep cruelly evaded him. It was not because of the sound sleep he have had earlier in the day. Nor was it because he was bothered about any specific thing. In fact, thinking hard on anything, thinking on the possible consequences, was against his nature. Yet,

most unusually that night, he saw marching before his eyes a prodigious procession of the events of his life. He couldn't shout 'halt' to the unending procession. No pause for regrets or remorse, though occasionally he would feel spurts of anger.

He heard a cough. Not the old man's, to be sure, nor of his wife. Unmistakably one produced by a youthful throat. That girl? May be she announces she is awake. He sat up. Kumaran snored. Chellappan expected another cough, but she didn't oblige. He lay down again.

The breakfast was the liquid remains of the night. Chellappan shared it with others and accompanied them to work, introduced to others as Kotha's cousin.

The wages were three rupees a day. In his own village, they had already started agitating for an increase. But this village lagged behind. Another strange feature here was the longer hours of work. The workmen toiled more. Chellappan summed it up as lethargy in the Union activities. But he made no move.

When he got the money, he gave two rupees and fifty paise to the old woman who accepted the sum hesitantly, and asked : "Why this, son?"

"Don't I stay here?"

"Don't pay for it, unless the *Netha* asks you to do so."

Chellappan found a way out.

"Then you keep this with you till I ask him about it."

The proposition was acceptable to Kotha. She opined it would come in handy when he would be defending his case.

“We are not greedy, son.”

No one called him “son”. That sweet sound of his mother calling him “son” had long ceased echoing in his memory. Kotha’s fondly calling him “son” tickled some unknown part of his heart. And he shrank within.

Kotha informed her husband of the money Chellappan gave her. Kochitti did not relish it : “You meant paying us for your stay here, did you ?”

Chellappan said nothing.

“Look here, you won’t do any such thing. I won’t take a penny from you. That is what I have decided as I heard your story.”

Kochitti continued : “You may entrust your earnings to the mother. It will be treated as your savings.”

Chellappan again kept quiet. But that reference to the old woman as “mother” stirred another part of his heart.

Chellappan got himself acquainted with the local Union workers. They were also aware of the agitation sweeping the country for price control and wage increase. It came to be discussed at a committee meeting. The details for action were to be worked out at another session. Divakaran, the Secretary of the Agricultural Worker's Union, said : "The President gets little time and that is the handicap. He has to run after a thousand things."

Chellappan felt a shiver run through his frame. But he controlled himself. He knew not how. A novel experience in his life. Yet, the words that dropped from him were not quite becoming : "But this is *our* affair."

The urge to add "and not his" was quickly stifled. It came out in lukewarm words : "And we must make him find time."

"I used to remind him and he would say 'All right'."

"How do you think we will respond in the event of a call for a state-wide strike ?"

"Why, we will all strike work too. Half the landlords will also join. That's the way it's here."

Chellappan felt things were not in proper shape.

The Secretary himself admitted he did not know the number of members in the Union. Subscriptions were not being regularly collected. Committee meetings were also irregular. When there was a shortage of funds, the President would provide the finance ! Not the right way of Union work.

But Chellappan found he was not his old self. Though now fully aware of the dismal working of the Union, he had refrained from speaking out his views. Decidedly, a big leap forward. Self-restraint had never been one of his strong points.

He used to meet Ravindran off and on but would no more than exchange greetings. He had often wondered why he shouldn't discuss the lethargy of the Union with him. Not only did he not get an occasion, but he had also, of late, scaled down to an attitude of total indifference. He had explained to the local Unionists how he and his comrades in his village used to conduct the Union work, but it had no effect on them.

His hosts had only one complaint about him, that after the day's work at the field, he would not come home, but would straightway go to the Union office or any such place of resort of the Party workers. And would be back late in the evening. Kochitti didn't mind the late coming as he knew that for the Union workers home was of secondary importance. Nevertheless, Chellappan was careful not to cause them inconvenience with his late return.

Within days, Chellappan had put on flesh. A freshness and vitality brightened his face. He acquired a capacity to distinguish the good from the bad, the tasty from the insipid. This was another leap

forward, to be able to separate the grain from the chaff. He also learnt prudent thrift and his personal expenses were limited to the half rupee he would retain out of his wages, the balance being regularly entrusted with the old woman.

Chellappan himself was conscious of his getting into a new mould. To begin with, to feel being a man of hearth and home ! That was a radical transformation. The erstwhile impulsive ruffian had learnt to bridle his tongue, to restrain his fast-acting arms and to cap it all, to pause to think, a faculty he had never possessed.

Parvathi got over the modest girl's aloofness towards the guest. She called him "brother" and moved more freely with him. Chellappan was called "brother" by the girls in his own village, but Parvathi's calling him "brother" had, Chellappan felt, a sweeter ring. She seemed to prize his views about the curries she prepared ; a word of admiration lighting up her face and an adverse remark darkening it. She was not very pretty but was, nevertheless, fairly attractive.

At the after-supper assembly of the family, Kotha would say : "My son, you would do well to think of getting married."

A hackneyed counsel, it sounded stale to others, but Chellappan would beam at it. Parvathi sitting inside at the door would at once draw in her head. Next morning when she brought him the pail of water for washing the face, he would notice a smile in her eyes, which made a flicker of a glance at him.

Chellappan's thoughts rolled back to the day when he had first met Bhavani. There was a strange stay-

ing smile on her face, a smile that wouldn't fade even in her frowns. Wasn't it that smile alone which had ensnared him ?

There was no one in those days who would so fondly advise him : "Get yourself married, my son." And now after all these years, there appeared, into his life, a motherly woman to give such an advice. Chellappan had often wondered why he had at all married. Just to have the satisfaction of eating twice a day and lead a settled life ? He had never thought on those lines. Then was it for the company of a woman ?

Would Bhavani have frowned if he had made a tart jibe about a culinary flop of hers ? He was not sure, for he had never cared to express how he felt about the food. But as for her attentions on him, he couldn't remember a single instance of earnestness on her part. Neither had he ever demanded it. In striking contrast, here, in this new home, he got fond attentions, voluntary service.

Chellappan began to feel, with extreme satisfaction, that he was no longer the sluggard type he once was. He had a new abounding zeal. Had the prowess too. He did not feel the fatigue or inertia. There were days when he abhorred work. But now he loved it. When Kumaran told him that the landlord held Chellappan in high esteem for his matchless ardour for work, Chellappan marvelled at this change in his own nature, and said : "But I was never like this. I was always lazy and rebellious."

One day he did not get up due to fever and headache. Feeling his forehead, Kochitti said he had high fever. Kumaran hurried for medicine. Kotha



applied some balm on his forehead. Anxiety engulfed the little home.

Kochitti said it was nothing serious.

Kotha enquired : "Can you sit up, son ?"

"I can," Chellappan struggled to get up.

Kochitti upbraided his wife : "You wouldn't ask him to run, I suppose ! Can't you see he is really ill ? It is rest that he needs." And bringing a thick rug, he asked Chellappan to wrap himself with it and sleep.

Parvathi too was on her toes. When her parents were out of sight, she enquired : "How is your headache, brother ?"

Chellappan fixed his eyes on her face. She did not smile. He answered : "Very bad."

Kotha stayed home that day. She administered the medicine at regular intervals. She prepared liquid food for him. Chellappan's sickness had robbed him of his appetite. Kotha compelled him to eat : "But you should take a little or else it is going to be worse."

He declined, but she persisted.

And like a child, he was made to take a whole plate of food.

At noon, the father, son and daughter stood around the sick man. Fever has subsided a little. Parvathi stealing an opportunity to be left alone with Chellappan, asked : "How do you feel now, brother ?"

For him sickness never meant being bed-ridden. He had fallen ill before, sometimes very ill lasting even for weeks, but he had never made any fuss about it. Chellappan desired a stroll and got up

from the mat.

"Where are you going ?" asked Kotha.

"Just for a stroll," was the answer he gave and he remembered how he used to reply to Bhavani, on such occasions : "None of your business !"

After a pause, he told the old woman : "I am now all right, mother."

"Mother !" It enthralled him to utter the word. He did not remember having called his own mother : "Mother !" That word dropped out of him unconsciously. And when it did, he felt a soothing sensation within. He repeated it for the sheer pleasure of it. "Mother !"

Kotha said in the parental peremptory tone : "But you are not stirring out !" She walked upto him and holding his arm, took him inside.

Chellappan obeyed with a child's docility and stood leaning against a wall. He was inwardly chanting the holy word : "Mother, Mother." Mother is an anchor, mother is a refuge. As though self-hypnotised by the repeated intonation of the magic word, Chellappan suddenly dwindled into a baby and lay down on the mat, swaddled in the rug, feeling weary and sick, waiting to be tended and fondled. After some time, Kotha came back, and asked : "Are you sleeping, son ?"

"No."

"You won't sleep during the day, when you have fever."

"I won't sleep." And like an obedient son, he got up.

The more he thought of it, the more he felt aghast about his calling the old woman "Mother." Why

did he ? May be because he willingly responded to her calling him "son." There was an inexplicable joy in being called "son." But the reciprocal demand, for recognising her as his "mother," carried with it the obligation of obeying her commands, abiding by her strictures.

Kotha brought the medicine. It tasted bitter. But he willingly gulped it down his throat.

The other members of the family returned after work. Kotha hastened to inform them that she had to use force to compel him to submit to her nursing strictures.

Reaching down to feel his temperature with his hands, Kochitti remarked : "Getting better. Still, you ought to be careful."

Chellappan said, as though into the void : "Careful, my left foot ! Orphaned in childhood. Grew up as a straw in the wind. Stuffed the belly with anything that I thrust into the mouth. And I had never, never been sick. And, in later years, it was all Union and picketing and what not. Had little time for food or bed. They were days of kicks and blows and prison. Seasoned in rain, hail and shine, this body was disease proof. But this velvety life here has made my body buttery like that of the landlords' kids. And no wonder this slight illness. If I had only ignored it, the fever would have flown off."

Kotha said stiffly : "You are ignoring nothing so long as you are here."

Chellappan made a soft chuckle. Kotha again harped on the marriage string : "Ah, don't you feel the need now ?"

Chellappan produced a sound of "Oh," suggesting

that he could do without it.

Chellappan had often referred to the miseries of his past, but had never spoken of it so forcefully. Perhaps his ideas might have been a hazy mass. And now as he learnt to cultivate the habit of thinking, the vague impressions might have taken recognisable shapes and he found words to express them. He continued : "I was born poor. Without God or guardian. My only refuge was the Union. Where else ? That all I went through were stark miseries is realised only now. It is here under this roof that I first tasted the sweetness of filial love, felt the presence of a father, a mother, a brother and a sister. But don't know that I am not cut out to be a man of home. My calling is in the Union."

Kochitti interrupted : "Stop, Prabhakaran. Talking will get you a headache. You can talk after you recover."

Kotha was overwhelmed with pity. She said : "Forget the past, my son. It is one of those little things. Who has not suffered ?"

Kochitti scolded his wife for being a Job's comforter. "Won't you leave him alone ?"

"But, by God, what did I say ?" she fumed.

Next day, Chellappan was better, though he was made to stay home. Kotha administered the medicine at the right hours. In the afternoon, she allowed him a stroll outside.

On the fifth day, Chellappan found himself fully recovered. He felt much relieved for not only had he been a drain on the meagre income of those labourers, but had also caused one of them to stay home for his sake.

When Chellappan started for work, he again faced forbidding voices. He couldn't stand the strain, he was warned, and that would mean the fever relapsing. Chellappan found it wiser to take another day's rest in their own interest.

Chellappan stayed behind. So did Kotha to attend on him. At lunch time, he asked her straight :

"You are being so nice to me. May I ask why ?"

She didn't have to look up an answer. She had an excellent reason why she was tending him : "Because, my son, I am myself a mother ; and we are human beings !"

Eating his food, Chellappan silently repeated those words two or three times. Did he understand the full meaning of those words ? He did not utter a word, though.

Two days later, he got the permission to go to work.

For more than a week, he had earned nothing for his adopted home and instead was sponging on their excessive kindness. He had also robbed it of a woman's eight days wages. He made up his mind to recoup their loss.

He undertook a contract work of digging pits for coconut saplings. This was in addition to the daily work during the day.

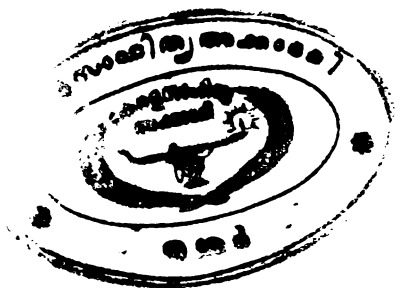
One night, when Chellappan was away for the contract work and the son and daughter were asleep, Kotha told the old man, broaching the subject of getting Parvathi married.

"I have in mind this Prabhakaran here as a good bridegroom. Fine boy. Works well. And he would stay with us too."

Parvathi inside had not been asleep. She was listening to the conversation.

Kotha went on : "And so long as he is with us I am sure he wouldn't be the trouble-maker he says he was."

Kochitti, listening attentively to all these, spoke at last : "It had occurred to me too as a good idea. But that blasted case is still dangling over his head !"



**B**havani's life went on undisturbed except for the fact that she, and Gopal too, were haunted by the unpredictability about Chellappan. Who knows when he would pounce upon them? For all they knew he had gone "underground". But where did he hide? Gopal made secret enquiries, to no avail. The initial zeal of the police investigations also wore off. Their visits to Bhavani's house became less frequent.

Gopal was getting disgusted with being a clandestine lover. He would ask her: "No end to all this shame?" A question she herself used to put to him. If Chellappan would only come straight, she could take the bull by the horns and call it a day. But the encounter would not be a smooth sail, Gopal said.

"I am going to tell him I am through," she said: "Well, why shouldn't I?"

"And kid yourself he would pat you on the back and go away wishing you good luck?"

"He wouldn't? I like that! What else would a man do when a woman shows him the way out?"

"But what would you do if he insists on the way in?"

"If he does, we'll think of it then."

Gopal refused to share that confidence. He said :  
"Bhavani, it is easier said than done."

"But I am determined to speak out. I don't want him, and I mean telling him. Come what may. I have my teeth and nails for his kicks and fists."

Bhavani hoped that once she met the man, she could settle account with him. But Gopal was still doubtful. He wanted to be out of the woods without fuss and furore. But how ?

Bhavani too, at heart, yearned to find a peaceful way out. Her little home was getting into a groove. She went for her work regularly. Gopal also shared her brunt a bit. Hope trickled into her hut. She herself and the kids had put on flesh. Oh, if only this uncertainty about Chellappan would come to an end !

A sense of disgust was discernible in Gopal. But he was not to blame. That earlier infatuation for Bhavani had almost ebbed away. Bhavani, for that matter any woman of that stamp, could easily perceive such waning of masculine passion. Of late, he made himself scarce. Once he stayed away continuously for four days. She waited up in vain till late in the night. And on the fourth day, she tracked him down at his work site.

He gave a candid explanation : "You see, I don't like the idea of prowling around and sneaking in. And even if I get in, the fear of being detected wouldn't allow a wink of sleep."

He added : "Yet, I was thinking of coming to-night."

And he took out some money and gave it to her. That gesture put Bhavani in a spot.



He was not a whit to be blamed, she felt. Every visit to her would rob him of a night's sleep, having to wait until all the neighbours got to bed, before he could stealthily get in. And once in, sleep was out of the question for fear of Chellappan barging in. At this rate, Gopal might cease coming at all.

And one night she frankly asked him : "Tell me, do you intend backing out ?"

It had come out of the depths of her soul. With a long sigh and stroking his back, she continued : "I am afraid you might."

In the darkness of the night, Gopal did not see her eyes wetting, nor could he see her stricken face.

He replied irritably : "What are you talking about ?"

She ignored it, and said :

"Familiarity breeds contempt, doesn't it ?"

"Tell me what exactly you want me to do," he said as if annoyed to the hilt.

"Am I to tell you what you should do ? And who am I but a stupid helpless goose ? You will do what you deem best. I will stand by you stiff-necked."

Gopal said nothing. Bhavani went on : "Suppose he comes right now. I will boldly face him. You have only to stand behind me. And I should be stronger."

"He is a devil." Gopal said.

"That is exactly why I said we should face him boldly."

"You are his wife and he has the right over you. My standing by your side is no good. He will ask me 'Who are you ?' "

"The wife will answer."

Gopal still rocked in doubts about the efficacy of the course suggested. "See," he said, "in the present position, no one will back us."

"Neither do we expect it."

"People will speak of me as one who nabbed the wife of a friend, of a man evading the police, at that."

"That's precisely the point."

"They will call you a bitch, too."

Bhavani felt he was groping for a subterfuge. In despair, she blurted out : "Then what are you going to do ? Push me down into an abyss and get away ?"

And a moment later she added : "It looks like that."

Gopal became angry : "Look here, I don't like that tone. Now I know it wasn't for nothing that you were getting those kicks from Chellappan !"

That fledgling love received its first jolt.

"Ah ! showing the cloven hoof ! Why this mask again ?"

She was shouting. He placed his palm over her mouth and whispered.

"Hush ! Let not the children hear."

"Let them hear. Why shouldn't they ?"

Gopal thought it wiser to keep silence. They were lying on the same mat but away from each other. And plunged into their own thoughts they seemed oblivious of the others' presence. Gopal was her sole hope now. She would be lost without that hold. She could, of course, understand his reasoning but she didn't want to take risks.

Gopal, too, could appreciate her predicament. He

harboured no hard feelings towards her. He had already accepted her as his spouse, only it should get recognition. It was on that basis that he took liberties with her. He was, therefore, inclined to ignore her recalcitrance. His thoughts were to explore the safest course to be adopted.

She thought aloud : "Oh if he comes here now !"

Gopal echoed : "A murder is what would follow. One of us would be instantly dead."

"Even that is welcome, for it will straighten out matters."

Stunned, he asked her : "Gone mad, girl ?"

She said nothing.

She nestled up towards him and locking him in an embrace, faces almost rubbing, she asked him : "Are you cross with me ?"

Her face was wet with tears. He drew her on to his bosom and tightening his embrace, he said consolingly : "No."

"I am sorry I talked that way. But you hurt me when you said I deserved his kicks. Doesn't it mean I was a bitch ?" She said tearfully.

"Not at all," he said, again consolingly.

"Trust me, I am not that bad. I have had only sufferings. Might have said a thing or two when the heart is hurt. I would never be an annoyance."

"Always ignore trifles. Can't you do that ?"

Pressing her face against his, she swore again : "Never will I speak so in future."

He hugged her passionately.

She continued : "Ever since I first felt the warmth of this breast, I have hungered for it. And I went crazy when I missed you for four days. I was afraid

I was losing you."

"Why should you be afraid ? I will never desert you."

He had often said that before and she trusted him. Yet she couldn't get over the feeling that he couldn't possibly trust her, a woman who had betrayed her husband. But that had never bothered him. And he said reassuringly :

"You know I still trust you. Did you think I was paying you for the sake of a week's pleasure in bed ?"

"Of course not."

A moment later, she spoke the home truth :

"That man fell for me and married me. I liked him too. But we never had a moment like this. Married life means a little merry-making, doesn't it ? Even dogs have that instinct for wooing, coaxing and all that ! Indeed I bore two children for him, God ordained it."

With consuming passion she kissed him.

"To tell you the truth, I had never before got a kiss, nor the tickles of playful fingers nor a husband's hungry hugs, till I got all these richly from you !"

Gopal pressed his body against hers more vigorously. She had not finished her say : "They say I am a flirt. And that even my son is born on the other side of the blanket."

Gopal interposed : "Stuff ! They hate seeing you tidy. Ignore such green spits."

"But believe me," she said with warmth, "honestly, only you have touched my body, that man apart. And he is no man, but a mere lifeless log."

Gopal laughed.

A silence followed. Bhavani had the satisfaction that she had said all she wanted to say. Yet, something was still lurking somewhere in her mind. Something vague. Tightening her clasp, she asked : "You don't believe me ?"

"I do and I have already told you."

Her next say was more heartfelt.

"You love me ?"

A warm kiss was the answer. Thrilled by its warmth, she cooed : "I am alone in this world."

"You have me." A manly gallant assurance.

Bhavani heaved a sigh of relief.

She sank into a sweet sleep in his arm. But he didn't get sleep. He kept awake, pricking up his ears for some footsteps, rustle of fallen leaves or the snapping of dry twigs. If Chellappan comes. . . !

A dog barked somewhere. A long bark. At some stranger. May be Chellappan. Gently freeing himself from Bhavani's clasp Gopal scrambled to his feet. She also woke up.

"What is the matter ?" she asked.

"Somebody seems to be coming."

"Coming indeed ! Dreaming ?"

"No. A dog barked."

Unnerved, she said :

"He should be in hell now, for all we know. Forget him."

Bhavani went out to look for herself and returned.

"No one."

She added : "Pull yourself together, can't you ? No guts ! If he comes, let him. Let us see how the cat jumps. Scared ?"

"Not scared. But there will be a row. Disgrace."

"Why disgrace ? It is our affair and we have decided it this way."

"When the news spreads..."

"The die is cast. And the news ought to spread. Let it be known that there was a row."

She went on : "Anyway, it is already there as a scandal. And they have spun yards of yarn about me. If he is anywhere here, he will have known it already. A row will be a matter for a few days' gossip. Nothing worse."

Gopal didn't say anything. Bhavani repeated she wasn't a whit afraid : "We have got to meet the situation one day or the other. The earlier the better."

Gopal said that was true : "But..."

"Well ?"

"This is his house. His own. He comes up with that right."

Bhavani had not thought of it, but was inclined to dismiss that also as inconsequential. She said : "Well, if he asks us to get out, we will."

"You still don't get me. If I had a house of my own, I would have readily taken you there ; and then, let him come there, if he dares. I will break his shin bones. I can boldly tell him to look for his wife in his own house. But here things are different."

Her brain was impervious to such logic and arguments. It was obsessed with the single desire of Gopal staying with her. She said the answer to such an ass should be just "Get out !"

"You are out of your senses. What are you talking about ?"

"Well then, find out a house for yourself."

As if one can acquire a house overnight ! See, the

girl's feverish anxiety. Gopal laughed.

He said : "Don't be so stupid ! You know, don't you, these days no one will oblige leasing out an inch of ground. What is more, do you know what it is to build even a hut ? Have any idea of the cost of thatching, bamboo, wood and coir ?"

Bhavani did not have a ready answer. Gopal cornered her : "Well, do you have the money ?"

Bhavani frowned : "You know I don't."

"And you know, I haven't either."

She asked in despair : "So what are we to do ?"

They should both strive to buy a small plot after the next harvest. Erecting a hovel was easy. "Till then can't we find somebody to allow us a little piece of land for scraping up a shed ?"

"But who is there to oblige ?"

Bhavani called to mind the names of a few landlords. One is already busy evicting his tenants. Another is knee-deep in litigation against him. A third is too greedy. Gopal said at last : "See, no use getting fits about it till the harvest is over. And till then we shall get on like this, meeting each other as often as possible. Only, you shouldn't get panicky if I am not seen for a day or two."

Bhavani was relieved, but not quite happy. Some inexplicable doubts and anxieties still bothered her mind. She felt an urgency for suddenly becoming Gopal's acknowledged spouse. If Chellappan intercepted, she was prepared to face the music. But before that she should already be Gopal's wife.

One day she met the Union Secretary Kurup. She made a tactful ingratiating approach : "How does my subscription account stand, comrade ?"

He couldn't say off-hand without consulting his books.

"Well, wish to pay anything rightaway?"

She handed him a rupee and said: "Me and the children have to get on with the pittance I get. How do you think we can keep body and soul together?"

Then lowering her voice, she asked:

"Won't you tell me where he is?"

"Chellappan is at a safe place." Kurup said, "He is all right. The police may spread their widest net and move mountains but they can't get a smell of Chellappan. So don't worry about him."

"I am relieved to hear that," Bhavani said, "but can't you tell me where he is?"

Kurup refused to oblige her. She wouldn't get it from him. She swore she wouldn't divulge it.

"Forget it, comrade," Kurup stood stubborn.

"Well, when will he come back? Sure, he is somewhere here, isn't he?"

"Nowhere here. And he won't be back for some time to come."

She looked aggrieved.

"How then am I to feed the children?"

"You must put up with the odds of life. But I could help you send a message for him."

Bhavani declined the favour.

"Poor man!" she lamented. "I don't want to add to his worries. He may feel obliged to reply but wouldn't have a penny with him."

And then feigning anxiety, she asked,

"You are sure the police wouldn't lay hands on him?"

"I am."



Next day, she met Gopal. She was exuberant.

"You needn't bother about him for some days," she told him exultantly.

"Why ? Caught by the police ?"

"I was not lucky there, though I tried to pave the way for it. But Kurup refuses to divulge. Nevertheless, rest assured, he won't be back for a long time."

And she gave a full account of what she learnt from the Secretary of the Union.

"You can have a good sleep."

Bhavani was showing symptoms of pregnancy. Vomits and regular fits of nausea. Gopal was at first perplexed. She made a hearty chuckle. He still stood agape. She told him : "You will come to know what it is ! Make haste about your house."

"What for ?"

"The little thing in here that causes this nausea, must be born in his rightful home."

"Little thing ! Really ?"

"This is the second or the third month."

Gopal did not show a particular exultation but his inner rejoicing was manifest. As she said, his child was not to be born at Chellappan's, it didn't have the right. The lighthearted Bhavani made a flippant remark : "If you fail to own a house before that, we may as well say the child is his. For a joke."

Gopal brushed it aside. "Not at all. If the child is mine, it must be mine."

"Oh, so soon with that 'mine' stuff ?"

"That is how the world is," said Gopal philosophically. "One becomes possessive after begetting a child."

Bhavani's feverish urgency about owning a house

now seemed to have been transferred to Gopal. He approached a few landowners and moneyed men. Offered to give any written undertaking. But no one obliged. He enquired about the availability of fragments of plots put on sale. There were few but the price demanded was fabulous. Even for barren and desolate lands. He feared he could hardly raise the wind even after the harvest. For two of them to move to Kuttanad and live there in the harvest season would appear to be a way out, but it would cost him much and the anticipated saving would be nullified. Towards harvest time, the pregnancy would be at an advanced state and the woman would cease to be an earning partner. The confinement would follow soon after. He was worried under the devastating spell of such feverish thoughts.

Gopal wondered why she didn't appear worried about it.

"What are we to do?" he asked.

"Tell me how I can help," she said in despair.

"Weren't you repeatedly saying that we must have a house of our own?"

"I was, but what can we do?"

"I am determined on one thing. My child shall not be born on this alien soil."

"That should be so."

That had become a trite maxim in that house and it pulled Gopal down into long hours of brooding.

The tenancy of that household dated back to the days of Chellappan's father. The landlord had been for a long time seeking the assistance of the neighbour, Kesava Pillai to prevail upon the tenants to vacate. Kesava Pillai, himself disgusted with having

a pugnacious family next door, had already been thinking of doing something on those lines. Chellappan was now gone, yet Bhavani needed to be driven out, as she continued to be a nuisance, quarrelling with the neighbours.

One day Kesava Pillai sent for Bhavani.

"The landlord wants your household to be vacated."

Bhavani was rudely shocked.

"Where am I to live then?"

"That is another matter. If you refuse to vacate, there is the court. Would you like to go to the court or quit accepting what he offers as reasonable compensation?"

Bhavani did not pause long to think.

"Reasonable? Well, I shall quit."

Kesava Pillai counselled her: "That is good, But see that this doesn't reach another ear. Is that understood?"

"Yes."

Kesava Pillai essayed elaborating the point.

"Chellappan did not turn up ever since that day's row, did he?"

She said, no. Not paid her a penny. Kesava Pillai, turning a well-wisher of Bhavani waxed eloquent on Chellappan's conduct. That gutter-blood is not cut out for decent family life. Brawls, brick-bat throwing and jail going are his vocation. "Don't I know how you suffered!"

Bhavani said she had already cut off her moorings with him.

"Living with Gopal now, aren't you?" It was Mrs Pillai who asked.

With a shy smile, head hung down, her toe making patterns on the ground, she produced a subdued sound in the affirmative.

Kesava Pillai went on patronisingly:

"You did well. But look here, keep this matter away even from Gopal."

His wife pointed out : "Hardly fair that she should keep her bread-winner in the dark about it." Pillai agreed it shouldn't be stretched so far. "All right, tell him then but no one else should know of it." Kesava Pillai continued ! "You have two little ones, I suppose ? Remember you are their only support. They have nothing else to fall back upon than what you will be getting out of this deal."

He paused. Then asked : "Got it ?"

She got it right. Kesava Pillai continued showering homilies : "And the amount shouldn't be thrown to the wind but should be used to buy a plot right away. Erect a hovel for the present to be improved upon later on and thus establish a shelter for the future."

He hastened to explain the first few steps up that path to prosperity.

"Ask your Gopal to find out a suitable plot right away. And inform me at once so that I can help you in the transaction. Mind you, straightaway ! Before you spend a paisa for anything else."

Bhavani agreed. Pillai once again emphasised the need for secrecy. Those men of the Union or others should not get the wind of it. "And I tell you, it is all in the interest of your two little ones. Well, now what is your price ?"

She could not make a ready estimate.

Pillai said: "Don't expect a fortune. Neither are they offering you much. In fact, they were not inclined to pay at all but I stoutly stood for you. And you know you are getting it out of thin air for you have no right over the household. And the man who has, is no longer yours."

Bhavani saw the point.

"Well," Kesava Pillai urged on, "how much?"

"I don't know."

Pillai thought for a while and then said. "All right, if you mean Gopal has the say, get him here right now."

Bhavani did not stay. She hurried to where Gopal was at work.

He saw her at a distance and noticed the panic on her face. He had a shuddering thought that Chellappan might have returned. With anxiety clouding his face, he walked towards her and found to his great relief her face all aglow.

"Stop work," she said. "Kesava Pillai wants you to go over to him at once."

"What for?"

She gave a full picture of the position.

Gopal fidgeted.

"You told him I am the man to speak to?"

"Everyone knows that. He asked me to get you there right away."

Gopal mused. Most unexpected stroke of luck. The transaction will be run through in no time. But he had his own apprehensions.

"But how do I come in it?"

"Who else then?"

"Somebody's household is not my affair."

"Somebody's?"

"Then what? What is Chellappan to me?"

"But I am the occupant. They are paying me to vacate the house."

"If they ask me 'What are you here for?' "

"But who is there to ask you so?"

Gopal was in a fix. Though his relations with Bhavani were no longer furtive, this request for advocating an affair of hers in public needed hard thinking. He fumbled for excuses.

"But I have already got down to work here and can't leave."

"Say that you have an urgent matter on hand and come away."

"The landlord wants broadcasting to be done today. It's not a thing to be put off."

"But when you have an urgent matter?"

Silenced, he struck from another angle.

"It is all right your vacating and getting money for it. But is it square?"

"Why? What is wrong in it? He deserted me and in despair, I left the house. Not square?"

"But am I the man to plead so?"

He was obviously struggling to back out. She could see through the subterfuges.

"I see you are still playing fast and loose."

Gopal got offended.

"You are always a pest."

Bhavani's eyes welled up: "I should have known I would be!"

Gopal shifted to another strategy, regretting the hot brick he had dropped.

"Did you think of those at the Union? Chellappan

is their own man."

"What about them? I don't care for whatever they say."

Gopal still went on parrying. She explained: "Listen, there is no one to ask, no one to answer to. You go over there. Square up accounts with them and receive the sum. And I will bid good-bye to that house. Who will compel me to stay on to look after the house of one who left me in the lurch?"

"Do you think the Union men will leave you alone?"

"What do you think they will do to me? When he returns, let *him* fight it out with the landlord."

Gopal still feared that this deal, shady as it was, might be the thin end of the wedge. Just asking for troubles. He could not say how it would end up.

"If you still get the creeps about it," she said, "you may see him in private, when no one is around."

She continued: "We wouldn't see such an amount in lump in our lifetime. A gift from the gods, it's a sin to spurn it. Comes in just when we need it to buy a plot. Let it slip and you will be sorry for ever."

Gopal said nothing. She was dead right on every point. Yet that nagging feeling was there that the transaction was not straight.

Her logic flowed: "In a way, they are being sort of charitable. Don't they know the household is not mine?"

Gopal seemed to have exhausted all his avenues. Having been outtalked, he said: "Well, how much do they offer?"



"They didn't mention a figure. I said you were to speak for me."

"But what is your figure?"

"A sum that will help us buy a plot and put up a house on it."

Gopal agreed to go with her. With the employer's permission, he left the field and trudged along, reluctantly. She felt relieved.

"A perfect laggard!" she remarked.

"Needs to be carried on the shoulders!"

He muttered: "Who knows to what hell all these are leading to?"

"Don't keep cursing when you set out for a matter like this."

Kesava Pillai cheered Gopal for having become her man. Saved a forsaken woman and two little souls. He asked him if Gopal had any particular plot of land in mind? No, yet to make serious enquiries. Well, there were two plots Pillai knew of. Interested?

The interview thus patronisingly prefaced Pillai got down to brass tacks:

"Now, suppose you tell me how much you expect for this woman's household?"

"Meaning you have an amount in mind?" Gopal asked.

Kesava Pillai wanted him to take into account the troubles that Chellappan might create and the amount ultimately payable to him.

"They offer two hundred rupees. You could take away the belongings. The amount will be paid out in cash right away."

It was Bhavani who replied.

"I am afraid that is not enough. It must be something to help us buy another plot. And I suppose that was your promise."

Pillai said the amount offered would serve her purpose.

"When Chellappan returns," Bhavani contended, "they wouldn't have to pay him anything, as the tenancy stands registered in my name at the village office. Chellappan has no right to demand anything."

"Oh, so you know the laws, do you? But I am not arguing with you on that. This is the amount you are getting for vacating. Agreed?" He turned to Gopal for the answer.

Bhavani stuck to her demand, and Kesava Pillai to his offer. Both sides haggled for a while and finally it was fixed at four hundred and fifty rupees.

The very next day, another transaction was legalised, Gopal purchasing a plot of ground a mile away. And on the next morning Bhavani's neighbours saw the wonder. Her house had vanished. Not a trace of the plinth. Where had Bhavani gone? The neighbours stood flabbergasted.

The same day they found the groundwork for a huge building being launched.

Gopal constructed a six pole hut. It was a great event for Bhavani.. Not merely because she had become the owner of a five cent plot, indeed a stupendous achievement—but chiefly because she could henceforward stay perpetually with Gopal. They would both be returning together from the work spot to live in a house of their own and with the combined earnings of the two, have a better living.

The world of love and trust would give them greater longing for one another and the desire to sleep, clinging to one another.

"I never imagined," Bhavani said, transported with delight, "that God would so quickly bless my prayers."

Gopal voiced the same feelings. Bhavani said he didn't have to be scared any longer.

Gopal couldn't, however, share that complacency. They couldn't hope, he firmly believed, to have peaceful sleep till the troubled waters settled. Chellappan was bound to return as a rabid dog, with all the fury of one doubly outraged—first robbed of the wife and now of the home.

"But what right has he to come here?" Bhavani asked, undaunted: "It was for that reason I wanted the registration to be in your name."

"You are right," Gopal said, "he has no lawful reason to come here. But an elephant running amuck knows no laws."

"Oh, then, peace-loving people should quit the earth!"

"Exactly. No hope of peaceful living."

The two children were delighted at this change of home. But they had a feeling of discomfort in the new company of the children of the neighbourhood. Kuttappan was particularly worried and he consulted his little sister.

"Kumari, where are we to go to when we feel hungry?"

Quite a problem. Out here there was no charitable neighbour like Kesava Pillai.

Kumari's ache was different.

"When father comes, what will he do?"

"He would go over there and wouldn't find us," Kuttappan said. 'And after thinking for a while, he continued : "Perhaps he will then come here."

Kumari had another doubt. Why does this uncle Gopal stay here ?

"So soon forgot what mother said?" The boy reminded her of the mother's instructions that the uncle should be looked upon as their father.

The new neighbours were not total strangers to Bhavani and Gopal. They knew all about their past. But it was after a few days that they learnt about Chellappan's flight and the subsequent events. None of them countenanced what they did. "Deceived Chellappan downright," was the unanimous verdict. If Bhavani wanted Gopal, she could have gone with him all right, but not in this treacherous way, selling Chellappan's household.

There were variegated speculations on the possible repercussions. That Gopal was the chief architect of the perfidy, was the general pronouncement. Bhavani too received stings. She tried in vain to justify herself. They all said that a wrong was wrong.

"Not a soul on our side, no friend, see?" Gopal said to her.

But Bhavani had no fears.

"So what ? If all are foes, are we to hang ourselves ? What if they were friends ?"

Gopal's fears were growing more and more intense. He spent sleepless nights in the new home, taking the precaution of keeping a chopper underneath the pillow.

Nightmarish images of the dreadful eventualities

would haunt him as he lay down. Chellappan storming in at night, rage-maddened and setting fire to the house ? Plausible. He cared not for the police. Or murdering them both ? He might. No one on their side to raise a little finger. Even day time was not secure.

“He will come ? Tell that to the marines !” Bhavani said, still scornful of his stupid fears.

But Gopal on his part was still tortured by the thought.

“We’d have been better off without all this !”

After his routine work at the field in the evening, Chellappan would go straight to his own contract work. He would be back for his supper but would immediately leave and return only after midnight. This extra labour increased his savings and his deposit with the old woman steadily swelled.

Parvathi was trying to steal an opportunity to talk to Chellappan in private. He sensed it. One day as she happened to walk past him, she mumbled without looking at him. "I want to talk to you."

He was alone, but the sudden appearance of her father robbed them of that chance. Chellappan didn't show any particular anxiety to know what she wanted to speak about, nor, to her dismay, create another opportunity. She expected him to feel it was his onus to create an opportunity as she, a girl, had to keep within the bounds of modesty, but she did not find that insistence in him.

The next day was his weekly off and Chellappan came out with a shovel in hand to work on the vegetables in the compound. Parvathi obtained her mother's consent to assist him and thus created the longed for opportunity herself.

They were alone. Gathering green leaves for

manuring the plants, she said. "I want to tell you something."

"Well?"

"Just this. You are wrecking your health by overwork."

"I am only earning my living."

That doesn't need this grinding of one's bones."

The dialogue did not continue. Chellappan had an urge to ask : "What does it matter to you?" But he checked himself. He could have carried it on along a heart-tickling line. Who would then share his brunt of earning his livelihood? Perhaps she might say : "Why, myself." Maybe, her fond reproof about his overworking had a tacit suggestion that the body ought not to be so badly tortured as she had a right over it. Whether those thoughts had crossed Chellappan's mind or not, they suspended further talk and set down to their work. Kotha called out to him to have his lunch.

It was perhaps what she overheard in the night that emboldened Parvathi to talk to Chellappan in that vein. But he was not aware of the whispered discussion between the old couple. He was baffled by Parvathi's stricture on him about overworking. No one had ever shown such concern. No one had given him a hope that he could live without toiling. It was another enthralling experience of his life.

After lunch Kotha asked him to have a good sleep for he had none for days.

Chellappan lay down to stretch his limbs for a while. The girl's question haunted him.

In the afternoon, Chellappan left for his contract work. Parvathi felt an impulse to get her mother

forbid him. But she did not want to rouse her parents' suspicions as to why she should be so fervently solicitous. But she also knew there was nothing reprehensible in it.

"Mother," she said with effort, "this brother here is terribly overworking, isn't he?"

"That is right."

"How long can one get on like that, working day and night?"

"I thought so, too. I must tell him."

That night when he came for his supper, Kotha broached the subject. Kochitti and Kumaran also shared her views. And they all sternly told him he should not break his back like that. Chellappan was taking his food without uttering a word in reply. His eyes accidentally fell on Parvathi who stood behind the door inside secretly gesticulating with her index finger and shaking her head and smiling triumphantly.

Chellappan had no choice but to yield to that combined opposition. But he craved their leave to let him finish the work already undertaken and which was halfway through. They agreed.

Chellappan marvelled at the radical remoulding he had gone through. There was a fair girl in that house. He didn't dare even to lift his eyes towards her. Had he been his former self, how would he have acted in such a fair weather? He thought of the piping days when he had been a gay Lothario. How easily he had drawn those girls into his lusty arms! But here before this girl, he felt he was an imbecile. She seemed to be pining for him to make overtures, but he could not bring himself to make advan-



ces. Lost the former prowess, had he? In the past, he recollected, his girls were themselves paving the way for a rendezvous. So does this girl too create opportunities for him to talk to her. Maybe, she should be thinking of ways to get him in secretly too. But unlike those days he felt something arresting his limbs.

The next day, Chellappan and Parvathi were engaged in a pairing work outside. It was the first occasion they were together. The two were alone. Chellappan struck with a crowbar against a mound and beat down big clumps of earth. She bent to crush those clumps into dust and scatter them around evenly. He went on striking, striking fiercely, big chunks crumbling under his mighty strokes and thudding down to her feet. He allowed her not a moment's respite. She accepted the challenge, crushing and scattering at a terrific speed, and keeping pace with him, determined to give him no rest. A furious competition between the two. Two machines in full swing, not two human bodies at work. And for hours they went in that frenzy without a word being spoken as though strangers, two rivals competing, intent on defeating the other.

Kotha, working at a distance, came up towards them. She asked them: "What is this, working like the devil?"

But they went on undeterred as if they had not seen or heard her.

Kotha realised that it was a competition. She asked:

"What is the matter with you two?"

Chellappan stopped, resting on the crowbar.

Parvathi straightened up.

"What competition is this?" Kotha asked indignantly "No, no! There is no need for this stupid trial of strength. You would both go to pieces."

Chellappan and Parvathi had no answer.

Kotha advised: "Working hard is not working your inside out. You are both young. Stop this foolish competition."

They heeded the old woman's fond chiding. As she left, Parvathi said smiling:

"Don't you see now that you can't beat me?"

"Oh, that is what you meant when you asked me not to exert too much!"

She didn't reply. He continued: "You haven't known me as yet. I am a bum."

"Indeed?" she said, taunting him. "I guessed so, too."

"You are joking, but I am telling you the truth, I am a beast of a bum."

"I am also speaking the truth!"

When she bent down to crush the clumps, Chellappan's lusty eyes would swiftly steal a glance into her blouse. When he enjoyed the feast several times, he couldn't contain himself. He made a lewd crack.

"Big ones."

She stood up and asked: "What?"

He didn't reply. She looked at his face. The smile on his face had been extinguished. Instead there was something she couldn't fathom. Both stopped working for a while.

They resumed. The beast in Chellappan was already afoot.

"I want to ask you something," he said.

"Well?" She asked without lifting her head.

"Ever since I came, I have been wondering about where you sleep in the house."

Parvathi felt she was getting a wind of it. She said nothing.

"You seem to have little sleep in the night. I used to hear you cough and groan."

"That is right, I used to, since my infancy. You too sleep little?"

He felt encouraged. "How do you know?"

"I always hear the sound of striking the match, when you smoke."

"You—sleeping by the side of mother?"

"Mother on the cot and me on the floor."

"There is a bamboo partition I suppose?" These words of his rose from out of some unknown inner recess.

She gave no reply. In a tremulous voice, he brought himself to ask: "Will you see that the kitchen door is not latched from inside?"

She kept mum. Feeling encouraged, he got down to details of the surreptitious entry he planned up.

"I shall make a gargling sound. And you will then come into the kitchen silently."

She sharply raised her head and asked: "What for?"

"Oh come, come—"

"Forget it."

In the next split second, she lashed out.

"You thought so low of me? Well! I never imagined you are of this type."

It was a bolt from the blue. He couldn't ever

expect it of a girl who had been taking liberties with him. He said: "Then why the hell were you groaning and grunting in the nights if it was not for letting me know you were awake?"

"If I was awake, does it mean I should keep the back door open? Never heard of it before! And not my line either."

Chellappan was beaten hollow. In the past, a setback never bothered him, but this stunning snub stiffened him. Was he deceived by those amorous glances of the girl? Still not sure of her true colours, he aimed from another point. "At dusk you will meet me at the temple tank, will you?"

She again lifted her head and said sharply: "Tush, tush! My dear brother, do you know what filthy things you let come out of your mouth? I don't like to hear all these. Had I known you right, I wouldn't have worked with you alone. I am through and am going. I shall send mother over here to help you. Mother too got you wrong."

Chellappan shrank bone-deep. He said: "All right, all right, I said nothing, I won't say anything, not a word more."

"Why can't you speak of good things?" She asked.

"Good or bad, I wouldn't utter a word more. I made an error."

"You are angry?"

Chellappan held his lips tight.

"I only meant," she continued, "that you should not utter silly things."

Chellappan refused to open his mouth. For a while, they remained reticent. Then she asked: "Cross

with me?"

He didn't answer. She again asked: "Offended?"

He remained resolutely tongue tied.

"Even if you are angry," she said, "I won't dislike you for that."

Chellappan finally opened his mouth.

"You won't? Then why did you say you were leaving?"

She spoke candidly: "It is because I hate to hear evil."

It was all a riddle to Chellappan.

"See," he said, "We lie on the opposite sides of the hut both awake, squealing and squeaking. All I said was we could get to each other. And I thought you would like it."

"Oh, you are again at it! Why are you in such a hurry?"

He said: "Hurry? All right, we will have it tomorrow or the day after."

"No, no, no. You get it wrong." She shook her head. He didn't grasp it. The girl wondered why he couldn't grasp so simple a thing.

"The other day," she said, "I overheard mother telling father. He didn't oppose."

"Oppose what?" Chellappan asked.

"Don't get it?" She asked without lifting her head.

"No."

"God, what a man! Are you a baby?"

You speak riddles and blame me for not grasping."

"It's so simple that anyone can grasp. If you don't get it, I don't want to explain."

Yet, she endeavoured to explain. "Listen, my mother spoke to father, he said all right, only wait till you are through with the case."

Before he attempted to open his mouth, she added : "And after that there is no need for any back door business !"

Chellappan asked : "Marriage ?"

Parvathi nodded. Chellappan felt a stunning sensation inside. His tongue went dry. His heart hammered. For a moment he stood motionless like a statue, the crowbar in his hand. When the clumps of earth ceased falling, Parvathi straightened up and looked at him. His face was terribly livid. She shuddered : "Stopped working ?" she stammered.

Chellappan awoke from the stupor. He got down to work. The crowbar rose and descended. Chunks of earth fell flying down.

She bent down, crushed them into dust and levelled down the heaps. Once again they went on working mechanically.

Who knows how Parvathi's mind was working ! After a while she brought herself to ask : "Tell me, brother, you don't like marrying me ?"

Chellappan said nothing, seemed to have not heard her, or felt impotent to give an answer.

What harassing thoughts should be strangling his mind ! His life a mess of knotty problems, he lay inextricably embroiled in mysterious tangles. And how could he find answer to such a straight question ? And this life here, in the house of Kochitti has steered him into another jam.

Parvathi made her position plain : "I like the marriage."

She seemed to be fumbling for another word to be added.

Her life spotless and straight, she could put it in such simple and plain words. Chellappan felt his own reticence suffocating. He must say something.

"Parvathi," he found words, "I am a Union worker. Have been so since my boyhood. For the present I am keeping aloof, as I am in hiding."

"Oh that?" She didn't consider it a hindrance and said: "My parents know it already."

She knew a way out. "The *Netha* can square up matters. Appeal to him in person."

He shook his head in disapproval and gave his reasons: "Think this will be the last? Troubles and jail-going are my habit. A home for me ha! I am not cut out for it."

"Well!" bang shot a sharp shaft from out of the simple unsophisticated girl. "Cut out only for the back door?"

Chellappan had no answer, but he stood unmoved by that question for he was struggling within with another question: "Should he tell her his secrets? If he hadn't kept back the truth at the very outset, he wouldn't have been in this embroglio. That old woman wouldn't have called him "son". And this girl would have cautiously stood aloof. He concealed it, no doubt, with an axe to grind—this girl.

Parvathi didn't repeat her question nor expatiate on the matter. She perceived his inner struggling and said: "Something at the back of your mind, I am sure. Can't you be frank with me?"

She went on: "That case I suppose? Too simple. Our *Netha* will help you out. The other day, a man

was stabbed to death and that case went into thin air. He likes us very much. And yours is a silly Union case. The Unionists here have themselves been through cases and come out without a hair hurt."

She went on :

"If you are not so close to him, I will make father speak for you to him."

Chellappan still kept silent.

She went on : "As for me, I am prepared to wait. Till you come out of all the cases, even those coming in the future. You may stay years in jail. We can marry after you come out of it."

He did not say anything. She feared that he was much exercised over the snub she dealt him and said soothingly lowering her voice, head hung down : "My stuff about the back door was not for want of love for you. But I feel that it is not the right way in. We must have patience, a few days more of patience."

She continued : "First kitchen door and then marriage, Ah !—Looks fine, does it ? Not at all. Brother dear, believe me, I love you. But sneaking in is just not marriage."

They saw Kotha striding up at a distance. She came near and said : "Well, that is the way to work. Not working your inside out."



# 10

The *Netha* was out of station. He wouldn't be back for a day or two. Kurup sat on the pedestal built around the banyan tree, anxious to have an interview. His purpose was to meet Chellappan. To make enquiries about him without the *Netha's* help was just not possible as he would have assumed a false name, and held back his true particulars. As Kurup was thus sitting on tenterhooks: a man came to him straight. It was Chellappan.

Kurup did not know how to break the terrible tidings without raising a storm. If he dropped it like a hot brick, anything might happen. Chellappan accosted that Union dignitary at a distance! "Hallo, comrade." And walking up, he asked: "What is the news?"

"O nothing."

"But this visit?"

"Nothing, Chellappan. Thought I would just drop in. We didn't hear of each other for some time."

"I am not Chellappan now. Prabhakaran is the name. And my home is at Harippad."

Kurup observed the old friend had put on flesh. He radiated a newly acquired vitality. And he told

him so.

"Indeed, not the old Chellappan, comrade," Chellappan said, "not the tramp that used to fritter away his earnings. Neither the sluggard that I was. But a new man toiling and earning honestly. No frets, no fists, but accepting any pittance as wages. And through with Unions and all that!"

Then he gave a detailed account of where he lived, with whom and how—holding back his affairs with Parvathi.

"You feel now that I had been better sent to prison, eh?"

Kurup laughed.

Chellappan continued: "From the way you scowl, I thought as much. You bet I would turn the landlord's goonda within months! And I will strangle a slow worker even if he is a consumptive."

"Go thus far? Good progress!" Kurup said, laughing.

Chellappan enquired about the affairs of his village one by one.

"Police still on hunt?"

"Very much. A bit hotter these days. A peasants' struggle is on the cards. The transplanting will be stopped. And the police know that. So, they have a particular reason to intensify this hunt for you. And when their wives ask for a new saree, they fleece Chacko and Ouseph!"

A struggle! Invigorating news. It was during the transplanting season that the female workers would get their wages refixed at least at two rupees. A strike would be inevitable.

"But," Kurup lamented, "the Party's exhortation

for a nationwide strike falls on deaf ears. Well, how is it here?"

"Here?" Chellappan said with disdain. "Not different here. Union is there, no doubt, only it sleeps. Everyone dumb. The party here has also called for strike and demonstration. The *Netha* is the President. To this day women get a rupee and a half and the men get three rupees. Six to six are the working hours."

Kurup said: "But Ravindran is a good *Netha*."

Chellappan scornfully said: "A big *Netha* indeed. Only, nothing gets moving here."

He braced up for a fierce verbal onslaught. "See, comrade, I will be frank. You may not like it. Every blessed party in our land has split. The Communist Party into two, Congress into two, PSP into two, RSP into two. And following suit the Workers' Union too will have a split. Why so?"

The answer should be a theoretical analysis. Kurup clutched at a handy phrase. "For historical reasons."

"I can explain it better," Chellappan said. "It is due to every party having leaders of this sort."

Kurup opposed. "Tush, you are being too harsh on Ravindran. Count from the Independence struggles, do you know how many he has led? The man who built up the AITUC, one of the founders of the Communist Party. The workers of this land can never forget him."

Chellappan got his monkey up.

"They needn't forget them. Have their portraits hung up on walls. Worship them. But is forgettability all? Then why do you deride Gandhi?"

Kurup didn't get any idea of what Chellappan was driving at. Obviously, this erstwhile hidebound diehard had become turncoat. How strange! He had never been heard speaking in this vein. Had he got into the fold of any counter-revolutionaries? Or, got remoulded by the placid, methodical life of his new home?

Chellappan had not finished. "Comrade, like to hear what I feel? This is a sordid truth. All our so called leaders of this trade union or that are all golden kids of wealthy homes. They got good education, turned to a good cause, suffered for our sake and became our leaders. They are not of course rogues. But still remember they belong to those castles. And then, they start getting the call of the cosy home, you know, wife and kids. And they quit, see?"

Kurup stood agape at Chellappan's passion-packed verbosity. Chellappan went on:

"You asked how it is here. There are five Unions, not on the members' subscriptions but on the charity of the so called leaders. You pay only, when you want anything done for yourself. The man most charitable is the *Netha*, the supreme boss. Another Union has a leader who uses the subscriptions and funds for himself and doles out what he chooses for the Union work. Boys born with sweetmeats in the mouth can't help, eh?"

Kurup had never before faced such a fierce, outspoken criticism. He wanted to rebut all, but felt impotent. Chellappan proceeded.

"They of course suffered and went to jail in the past, but now seek recompense by being an MLA

or an MP. No thought of anything but fine cars and good homes. The worker and the downtrodden, deceived and driven to despair, see through the game. They protest. The parties split. And the leaders fly at one another will. I-am-more-revolutionary-than-you stuff."

"What are you talking about, man?" Kurup snapped.

"Just the bitter truth."

As though resuming after a respite Chellappan again continued. "And I on my part have taken a decision."

"What decision? To quit in despair?"

"Too early to divulge it now."

They relapsed into silence for a while. Then suddenly recollecting something, Chellappan asked:

"Well, comrade, we spoke much on things high up in the sky. Nearer home, did you see my child, Kumari?"

Kurup was himself coming to that big matter.

"Yes," he said. "I had been to your house for collecting contribution to the Struggle Fund. The child ran up towards me and eagerly asked about you."

"And her mother?"

"She was there too." Then with a slight hesitation, he gently broke the unsavoury news.

"Comrade... Your house is gone."

"What! Gone?"

"The hut has been demolished."

"By whom?"

"The landlord."

Chellappan couldn't comprehend. He was stand-

ing stupefied. He woke up after a moment's numbness.

"And Bhavani?" he asked.

"She is with Gopal. They have moved to another place purchasing a plot at the back-waters."

"You mean Bhavani has left after vacating my place?"

"It is said that she got a compensation of five hundred rupees and bolted away overnight."

Chellappan sat down and sank into thoughts. Perhaps he was running it over in his mind again wearing it into a story in his own way. Kurup had not imagined him to sink resignedly into a calm reflection but had feared it would send him flying thundering in a blood-thirsty fury.

"And what did you all do about it?" Chellappan asked.

Kurup was afraid he would vent his fury against him and the Union.

He said in a moan: "When the landlord's men started work on the new building, we all went there, about two hundred of us. All the comrades in the neighbourhood were with us. We tried to obstruct his construction. The police came to the site. Bhavani had executed a deed relinquishing her tenancy rights. So there was nothing for us to do. We argued it was yours by right, but in vain."

After a while, Chellappan asked: "You didn't consult the leaders?"

"We did. They too said they were helpless if Bhavani had voluntarily given up the rights in writing."

Chellappan curled his lips in scorn and said: "Oh

they are the lawmakers and cannot overlook the law.”

Kurup wanted Chellappan to see another facet of the matter. “But,” he said, “when we made such a mass agitation, some of those INTUC men appeared on the scene taking sides with Gopal. But Gopal refused to have any truck with them. And he gave us two rupees as his contribution to our Struggle Fund.”

A gesture indeed. To spurn the benevolent hand of a rival organisation is being devoutly principled. But Chellappan smiled it off as inconsequential, a wise man’s smile.

Kurup said at last that his chief mission of this visit was to inform him of this. He thought it was not proper to keep him in the dark.

Had this happened some time back, Kurup mused, Chellappan would have run amuck. That rage lay dormant in him now. This veneer of calmness would be cast off and it might explode any moment. Kurup attempted to dampen the explosiveness.

“Bhavani has had her own suffering. It was Gopal who helped her. She was desperate.”

Chellappan said nothing. Kurup went on. “To speak the truth, she cannot be blamed.”

Then he hurled a question at Chellappan accusingly.

“Now tell me comrade—don’t take it amiss—why couldn’t you have sent her some money? How did you imagine she and her children would keep body and soul together? You had never cared for her and she used to complain to the Union. Can’t you see this is all the outcome of your disregard of your responsibilities?”

Chellappan was listening attentively. May be he was making a retrospective self-criticism.

"You can't say you were busy with the Union, for you were not. Yet you forgot her and the children," Kurup ended up.

They were forceful words as far as Chellappan was concerned.

A heavy silence settled between them. And they remained silent for a long time, both getting lost in their own thoughts.

Taking a liberty with him, Kurup said beseechingly: "Bhavani and Gopal live a miserable life, tortured by the fear that you will confront them one day. May I make an appeal to you?"

Chellappan enquiringly lifted his eyes.

Kurup continued. "Leave them alone, won't you?"

Chellappan put on another smile. Kurup could not assess the significance of that smile. He went on: "I came over here only to make this appeal."

Kurup had his mission fulfilled. He had nothing more to say. He was taking leave.

Chellappan asked: "Got money for your journey back?"

"Yes."

"Can't you come to the place I live in? You needn't go into the house."

Without a word being spoken, they walked towards the house. Chellappan went in and got fifteen rupees from Kotha out of his money deposited with her.

"You may meet your bus fare and expenses out of that," Chellappan said, giving Kurup the amo-



unt. "The remainder is my contribution to your Struggle Fund. This is all I have.

Kurup thanked him and left.

Chellappan walked on. Unhindered, the long narrow lane enticingly stretched before him. It seemed to trail off into the horizon. The long winding lane of his life also loomed before him. The image of Bhavani a lithe girl with her ensnaring smile vividly appeared on the mind's screen. It was at once eclipsed by another image—the simple Parvathi dutifully doing his chores. Bhavani had now rubbed herself clean off his life. That boulder now cleared off the track, he could steer forward. Parvathi's words flocked to his mind again. You can get out of the criminal case hanging above you. The *Netha* will help you. Or even if you couldn't, you can return to me after you come out of the prison and I shall be waiting for you, even if it take years.

Bhavani, his own wedded wife, had switched over to another spouse. He marvelled how he could tame a tempest within his heart. But, then, he asked himself, how many girls he had himself seduced only to trample upon their love! Many of them were encouraged to foster a hope of his marrying them. The image of Karimba, the most unforgettable of them, rose before him. Her tearful sobs still echoed in his memory : "Love, love, is this what you call love ?"

Chellappan trudged along that desolate lane with no aim, with no thought of any destination. Months back in his own village, he was walking aimlessly along a desolate lane, when he ran into the landlord

Chacko. It was a fortuitous prelude to a violent reshaping of his life. Does this aimless journey along a similar desolate lane presage setting the stage for another pattern of life? His wandering thoughts settled on his children. His? Gossip was divided on the legitimacy of the firstborn, Kuttappan, a section affirming that the boy took after his grandfather, another looking down upon him as a shame. Chellappan could not bring himself to take kindly to the boy and he doted on the daughter Kumari. Anyway, they are both human children. May they live. . . . He remembered his own four brothers who died in infancy, in spite of his mother's struggles to keep them alive. He alone survived as the fittest. Let Bhavani and the children live too, live in peace.

He had told his hosts he was not cut out for family life. But they didn't take him seriously, much less Parvathi. Couldn't he really run a family? Why, he worked hard, earned, did not live on charity. Couldn't he maintain this tenor of life? Speak out the true facts about himself, and if they would waive the shadowy sides, why not accept the new life served on a plate before him?

Rocking on the seesaw of thoughts, Chellappan went on pelting at himself questions which had no obvious answers. He could meet some, but not all. He was now at life's crossroads. Must take a decision about which way to turn. Here was a moment, the greatest moment of his life, pausing for and urging him to pronounce his option—which way?

Chellappan walked on, and on, like a sleepwalker. He found he had reached a village he was a stranger

to. It was already sunset. Where was he going ? What was his purpose? He did not know. He learnt from a passer-by the name of the village. How far was it from Manakunnam?

“By a short cut, it is about ten miles.”

There was a temple there with a banyan tree nearby. Chellappan sat upon the pedestal of stones built round the tree. The turbulent waves of thoughts had petered out. A storm had quietened. Why had he come there, traversing all those forlorn alleys? What was the mysterious force that hauled him up this far?

He was all at sea. Dismissing all others, one single question stayed staring at him. Should he return to Manakunnam? The sudden instinctive answer that rose from inside was “No.” Then where should he go? He was at a loss. Well, walk on and on. He got down the pedestal and walked. A good road. And he wended his way.

At night, he found he had reached Ernakulam. He had been to the city two or three times before. Once to take part in a rally in connection with an election. It was in a lorry with more than a hundred party comrades. Another occasion was the AITUC conference. It was a great occasion for him for he had led the massive procession from his village with banner in hand towards the venue of the three-day conference, which instilled in him the consciousness of the invulnerable might of the working class.

He continued trekking along that road. He did not feel hunger or fatigue. The wayside tea-shops were tempting but he resisted and walked on.

This aimless walk was not in quest of life. It was

only a life activity. Was it then in quest of death ? Possibly not. For though he was caught in circumstances that usually push people towards death, he did not hate life. Did he love or hate life? He was not certain. He had just discarded the choicest offerings of life that would compel him to love it. At the same time, he put aside the idea of committing suicide. But why did he discard those offerings of life and leave that shrine of love at Manakunnam? Was it because Bhavani went away with Gopal? Who knows!

Those simple loving souls, Kochitti, his wife, the son and daughter all kept awake till late in the night waiting for Chellappan. At last, one after the other, they went to bed, Kotha the last. But Parvathi wouldn't sleep. She was lying awake pricking up her ears for approaching steps, hoping against hope that Chellappan would be back any time in the night and she should be ready to serve his food.

A sudden thought flitted across Chellappan's mind, without any provocation. Why not surrender to the police? The thought at once grew into an irresistible, feverish desire. He must get imprisoned!

He was not sure that the Ernakulam police would accept him, as he rightly belonged to the Alleppey station as an accused. But was that a problem? He would straightaway go to the police here and confess his attempted assault on Chacko. And they would have only to contact their counterparts at Alleppey. But where was the Ernakulam police station? Well, he would enquire and find out.

But he walked on without making any enquiries. The thought of the two charges rankled him. Why didn't he surrender to the police immediately after the crime was committed? But, then, did he commit any? Indeed Chacko did get frightened, but whoever had frightened him? In fact, the fellow deserved to have been given a good shakeup. The other charge of stealing Ouseph's coconuts was only a half truth. That extensive coconut plantations owed its green opulence to Chellappan's labours. Particularly those four trees he had plucked coconuts from were, by

any norms, his own. For it was he who, by lavishing his exclusive care, and even money on them, had resurrected the near dead saplings. It was a combat between his hand and nature.

The fateful visit to the plantations, years after his quitting Ouseph's service, was just an accident. After the encounter with Chacko, he straightaway went into the grove. Why did he go there of all the places? He had no reasons. He just reached there, climbed the four trees fostered by himself and plucked a few coconuts, without pausing for second thoughts of propriety. Hardly a crime.

Was he a fugitive in the right sense? When one is sought after by the police, one instinctively takes to flight. But was it to be equated with hiding? The Union men showed him a comfortable refuge to keep himself under cover. He accepted it. No one would wish to be beaten up by the police. But he had not meant making Kochitti's home a perpetual cover, had he? He would have left it any day. Kurup's visit was just the immediate cause for leaving the place.

He saw two constables hauling up a fellow handcuffed. Stray policemen were also about. Chellappan didn't want to be precipitous. It had risen into his consciousness that the case against him was chiefly for stealing the coconuts, the assault case apart. He pleaded to himself total innocence about both. The alleged attempt of assault on Chacko was not premeditated but only an accidental show of his ire towards a man who had sacked him. The other case was for stealing, but stealing with a difference. It was only an act of inner pleasure. At any rate, he didn't

want to bear the cross for a disgraceful felony like stealing.

As he had walked some distance, dragged along by these zigzag thoughts, that burning desire to hand over himself to the police had died down. No, not as a thief admitting to this disgraceful crime of stealing. But on what other score? He should go to the jail all the same. He couldn't think of any other sphere of life for the moment.

Life was at a standstill. He felt all outlets closed. He could not go back to Manakunnam, that golden cage of oppressive love in which limbs thirsting for action were shackled, all spirits stifled. He had to stay there all his life inert and imbecile, a docile wage-earner enslaved to love, good dishes the only excitement, and getting that cosy sickness. Well, back to his own village? Never. There he had already lost a battle. But a binding force was there—his daughter's sonorous cackling: "Father!" that would subdue him even as Kotha's call "son!"

Chellappan was not sure what he was looking for. He did not want to go anywhere, had nothing on hand. He could work, earn, eat and sleep. But they were not his immediate needs. Then what was his immediate need?

He went on walking. Night and day. At times he would go in for some work. He wouldn't bargain for wages. With whatever he got, he would meet his daily needs.

It was days since he had talked to anybody, apart from the few words exchanged during the work. No fixed place for rest. Sleep cruelly avoided him.

At times he could see little *jathas* of workers rais-

ing slogans, demanding this or that, as part of their agitation. There used to be sporadic demonstrations of striking workers. A particular slogan attracted his special attention. "We will settle accounts with the landlords' goondas."

Goondas ! He would like to meet one. It was fun for him to go along with such *jathas*. And he would trail behind them for long. That was the only activity of that dead life. He wanted to join them, join the thunderous chorus of slogan-raising. All his life was entwined with such demonstrations of the working class. Yet something forbade him. Reluctance ? Or a feeling of having no right ? Perhaps a painful consciousness that he had forfeited the right to feel one with them. He had degenerated into something lower.

One day he saw a "Satyagraha" that was going on in front of a factory in Mattanchery. Workers donning red garlands were shouting slogans. A vigorous struggle, he thought. He stood all day witnessing the scene. In the evening, the satyagrahis came out in procession and went round the city. The next day also Chellappan went there. The satyagraha was continuing. A batch of satyagrahis marching in and squatting before the factory gate, rending the air with slogans. The workers going to the factory stopped at the gate, joined the slogan-raising for a while before they got into the factory. There was of course a negligible herd of black sheep that sneaked in, heads down as if oblivious of the struggle.

Chellappan stood by the side of a betel-nut shop on the roadside, opposite to the factory and was watching the proceedings. It was most exciting and



thrilling. Their Union seemed to be well organised. It was, he thought, bound to grow into a gigantic conflagration. Listening to the slogans, Chellappan got an idea of what their demands were. Wage increase and arresting the price rise. The Government should resign. Some workers had been dismissed and they should be taken back. Apart from these demands there were a few others which particularly attracted his attention : "Down with the goondaism of the factory owner !" followed by the demand for judicial enquiry into the death of one Poulose. Blood for blood.

Chellappan had witnessed scores of workers' struggles in his own village and in Alleppey. He had taken active part in most of them. But in recent years he had not seen so exciting a demonstration. This struggle he was witnessing now had the excitement of his past. The struggles of his own village were cold, perfunctory, but, then, it was after all a village, that had only agricultural workers who were living on the small mercies of the landlords, and for whom a violent rising meant their extinction. But even in Alleppey where the workers were a formidable united force, one did not see the dust and din of the past. Since the splitting of the parties, that unity and strength had vanished. But this struggle he was now witnessing was fully reminiscent of those good old days.

He listened attentively to what people talked at the betel-nut shop. He learnt that the owner was a sympathiser and was of the view that the struggle was going to be explosive. The shopkeeper would say :

"It's likely there will be lathi-charge or even shooting. But can I run away for fear of it? This is my living."

Shooting? Chellappan stood waiting for that excitement in prospect.

"Tell me, brother," he asked the shopman with an ingratiating smile: "What is this Poulouse affair?"

"O, that is a long story, man," he replied. "Poulouse is just one. There are a number of such Poulouses. That is the game here."

Chellappan was burning with curiosity to know more of it. But the shopman did not oblige. He asked: "Who are you, man? You have been standing here for two days."

Obviously the shopman was suspicious of him, Chellappan thought. He had better tell him all about himself to win his confidence.

"I belong to Alleppey," he said. "A worker. Member of the Mararikulam Agricultural Workers' Union."

He added to allay all the residuary fear of his new acquaintance: "I am myself a product of workers' struggles."

"Well, why are you here?"

Chellappan didn't have a ready answer. But he was too ready to speak all about himself. He crumpled his history in a few words: "I am wanted by the police because I made a pass at the landlord. My wife gone—with another man."

The shopman suddenly suspended his beedi-making and made a quick scrutiny of the strange guest. Here was a chap with a funny story. Chellappan didn't flinch before his stare. He had no need to

flinch.

"Well," the shopman asked, "in that case why do you stand right before the jaws of the police?"

"O, I am not afraid. Let them take me if they choose."

"Then why did you go underground?"

"That day I chose to."

"I see," the shopman said with a sneer. "Don't feel like hiding now!"

His next was a bit more biting: "Lost the wife and so you are broke. You don't mind the worst?"

"That is not true," Chellappan said. "I have never been in want of girls."

Hamza, the shopman said: "Losing the wife is one thing, having dozens instead is another thing. Coming out in the open is out of dsepair, isn't it?"

Chellappan was lost for an answer.

"I am not a rogue, brother. Believe me I was telling you the truth," was all he could say.

The whole web of that story was shady, Hamza thought. Chellappan explained: "Not that I am afraid of the jail. But presently I am wanted for pilfering. And that is a disgrace. It is for a fake case. I did nothing, in fact."

Hamza asked what he lived by. Did odd jobs. Did not have a fixed dwelling place. It was nearly fifteen days since he was there. Chellappan told him all about his discarded cosy life at Manakunnam. Hamza found it exhilarating.

Chellappan once again asked him about the Poulose affair. Hamza had no compunction to tell that, yet he thought he should be sure of the bonafides of the man he was talking to before he hazard-

ed telling the story that centred round one of the local bigwigs. Hamza was not fully convinced. The fragments he had already got did not fit together. He was therefore chary of giving him the details. Yet he began to feel Chellappan was trustworthy. As Chellappan repeated his question what the blood-for-blood slogan meant, Hamza said : "There is a habitual killer here, a *muthalalee*.\* Mighty rich. Butchers at least two a year. He has the police with him. He was a Congressman."

Chellappan didn't get the Poullose story.

"Well, what about Poullose?"

"Oh, that? Poullose had a daughter. A fine girl, but a bit loose. The *muthalalee* spirited her away. Poullose went to question him. And, well, the girl has come back, but Poullose is missing now. They say he was buried alive. Who knows the truth? But no scent of him now. The Union would keep calling blood-for-blood, every time a man disappears."

Hamza took out a choice beedi, and asked, taking in an exultant puff : "Do you have such *muthalalees* in your place?"

No, not in his village, but there were a few in Alleppey.

Hamza went on: "The *muthalalee* has men, trained goondas. Can lift you off before you know where you are and you wouldn't be heard of."

A moment later, Hamza asked.

"Want to die? You say your wife has bolted away after another bloke. You don't have to buy

---

\*MUTHALALEE=Literally it means a rich man. Generally used to mean a capitalist, a trader, a landlord, employer etc.

a rope to hang yourself with nor take poison. You have a simple way."

Chellappan couldn't bring himself to believe the savage story. He had heard of such strain among those estate owners out in the east. But not seen one in person. At Alleppey there were those paid goondas employed by the *Muthalalees*. But they were not used for anything more than foiling a strike.

Poulose buried alive!

Hamza went on: "Maybe he is not dead. Maybe a tactics. When the strike is at its height Poulose will appear right at the satyagraha shed. And the strike now going on in his name will fizzle out. This *muthalalee*, Ouroz by name, has some such practical jokes."

He had still some more of such practical jokes. He sanctioned wage increase in a benevolent way, reinstated the workers since dismissed, or paid higher rate of bonus than was agreed upon.

"Those who have been now sacked", Hamza went on, "are relatives of Poulose. The action is a penalty for what they said about the *muthalalee*. And Ahmed says that it is another joke of the man. After these fellows get tired of dancing about, Poulose will return and all the dismissed men will be taken back. See, this is his sport."

"Who is this Ahmed?" asked Chellappan.

"The landlord's bodyguard. A good boxer."

"Then why all this nonsense?"

"Man, the *muthalalee* is rich. He just gets the kicks. All a joke for a good laugh."

A moment later Hamza continued: "But he is a man of vengeance too. Would eat you alive." All

these sounded so bizarre to Chellappan. He had never heard of one like that. He yearned to meet this *muthalalee*.

The satyagraha went on gathering momentum. Chellappan would go to witness it everyday. Police-men had been stationed at the factory gate to prevent any untoward happening. One day he saw a heavily built man walking along the road. An enormous moustache on his face. Wore a *lungi* and baniyan. A turban on his head. Looked like a baby elephant astray.

Hamza said: "There comes Pappu. We will have great fun now."

"Who is Pappu?" Chellappan asked.

"A noted roughneck. The *muthalalee's* man."

Pappu stalked up in cavalier fashion and took position at the gate. He made a circumspection and bawled out: "You dogs! still barking?"

The satyagrahis raised slogans at the top of their voice. Pappu shouted still louder: "Dogs! You want the boss to go on paying you? He should pay you even for barking abuses at him. You dogs."

A policeman came up and asked Pappu to leave.

He stayed there for a moment and said condescendingly: "All right, if you so desire."

"Fine."

How considerate the policemen were towards Pappu!

Chellappan asked Hamza: "Did he say the *muthalalee* pays for this Struggle?"

"As I said, this is all his game. He even gives his contribution to the Struggle fund."

Chellappan stood nonplussed.

Hamza explained: "If you approach the *muthalalee*, he will pay you, direct, or, as in this case, through an agency. Don't understand?"

"No."

"Tactics. No one can understand it."

"These policemen—"

"Yes. Paid regularly by the *muthalalee*."

The next day, the Struggle took a serious turn. Strike. And picketing at the gate.

Chellappan was jailed. Not as a fugitive hunted down, as he had feared. But as one of the trouble makers rounded up at the gates of the A.D.K.F. Company.

The satyagraha had taken a serious turn, the strikers resorting to obstructionist tactics. Most workers were on strike, but there was a small loyal section. They, led by the goondas Pappu, Mohamed etc., forced themselves in elbowing out the picketers standing at the doorway.

The next day, the picketers lay flat at the entrance. Pappu and others had no hesitation to tread over them. The policemen were just silent watchers. Human heads, human limbs, human bodies were being ruthlessly trampled upon. Chellappan standing by Hamza's shop, witnessed the spectacle. A band of hirelings making a wooden plank of human bodies ! He could not contain himself, and he sprang forward, growling. Next moment saw Pappu and a few others being lifted off their feet and hurled yards off to the ground. Panic prevailed for some moments. The policemen rushed into the fray, swinging their lathis.

The Company gates were at once closed. The



workers ran helter-skelter. But Chellappan and four satyagrahis were rounded up and thrown into the police van. In the melee that followed one of the goondas-in-chief of the *muthalalee* received a violent kick from Chellappan in his face and he fell down on his back. Blood gushed out of his nose and mouth.

And Chellappan found his way into his coveted haven—the prison.

The Union found itself in a quandary. The company declared a lock-out for fear of loss of property following the outbreak of lawlessness. Most unexpected turn of events.

The Action Council of the Struggle met the same day. It was held most secretly. For, anyone among them might be an accused.

The convenor made a survey of the situation. As he dwelt on the events of the day, his voice became more grave. As the man that steered the struggle, it was a lapse on his part and had to offer a satisfactory explanation. He defended himself on these lines : “class conscious worker couldn’t contain himself when he saw the comrades being trampled upon by goondas. It has of course caused a temporary setback to the Struggle and we are in the soup. But then, this is bound to happen in all struggles.”

But he met with stiff opposition. A member made a passionate speech : “No. That man must be a hireling of the *muthalalee* employed deliberately to prove that the picketing was not peaceful and thus torpedo the struggle. Or you think that the mighty Pappu and Mohamed could be physically thrown over the stakes so easily ? Another strategy of the

*muthalalee*. The convenor ought to have foreseen the possibility of such a vile conspiracy among the goondas. A grave lapse, and you ought to explain. You are trying to escape by deifying the hireling into a class conscious comrade.

Georgé, another member, voiced the same feelings. "You know him personally ?" he asked.

Gopi, the convenor, admitted he didn't.

"If so, what makes you say he is a class conscious worker ?" Another sent down a hot one

Gopi fumbled for an answer. He embarked upon a lengthy speech to counter the opposition only beating about the bush. As he was floundering about, he tripped upon a strong point in his favour. He asked : "Pappu, Joseph and the others are too proud and conceited to feign defeat in a fight, even farcically at the instance of the *muthalalee*. Their assumed super-strength is their forte, their very livelihood and they wouldn't stand the mortification of being humbled so openly as they will henceforward cease to be the terror folks believe they are. That is why I affirm that the stranger is not a hireling, nor his show stage-managed. Would a goonda willingly allow himself to be a beaten by another goonda ? Never heard of it before."

This was a formidable argument but the critics were still not disarmed. No, the goondas of the landlord are not that high-principled, had often quarrelled among themselves and got beaten up by one another.

A mediator rose in the polemics. Ismail. He asked them to come to real things instead of wasting time. "Tell me, what are we here for ? To find out

who that chap is ?”

“To decide on the next step.”

“Well, let us discuss that, forgetting the rest. How do we proceed ?”

“We must, as the first step,” Gopi said, with determination, “give a statement to the press. The *muthalalee* might have bribed the newspapers. The police are already on his side.”

“Then, Ismail said, “write up a draft of the statement.”

“I was coming to that. But the doubt is how should we describe that man ? A worker or a hireling ?”

George gave an outline of the draft. A hireling suddenly dropped into the scene, deliberately created disturbance, where workers were on a peaceful struggle. The *muthalalee's* henchmen, the police, used unwarranted force. This should be the line of the statement. Or else we wouldn't get public support.

Padmanabhan supporting him, said : “That is right. The man can't be described as a worker because it will then appear that the disturbance was created by the workers. There is no worker among us who could pick up Pappu as you would pick up a chicken and throw over the stakes. It is bound to be a boomerang as they will say we had ourselves engaged a goonda.”

That line of argument was gaining approval from all quarters. The convenor was almost left alone. But one of the opposers consoled him : “You needn't be bothered anyway, comrade. We know you couldn't have averted such an unexpected event.”

But George dissented. “You both needn't be

ganging up now. The convenor ought to have foreseen things."

Gopi said indignantly. "All right, I am prepared to resign. And you, comrade, can readily take over !"

Ismail chided them to be quiet. But Gopi didn't yield.

"See, what I learnt of the eye witnesses is that the man is a worker and that he sprang forward rage-maddened by the trampling. If that is true, it's hardly fair he should be painted as a hireling. Hardly."

"Is he a member of our Union ?" Padmanabhan enquired.

"No."

"So what is there in disowning him ? A worker ought to be sensible too. A Struggle goes on and he should have thought what effect his slap-dash would cause on the Struggle. A man so thoughtless doesn't deserve to be protected even if he were a Union member."

Divakaran held similar views.

"That is right. It is not the heart that should rule on such occasion but the head. And a true worker should only admire us as good strategists even if he were described as a hireling."

Gopi said : "I do not desire a cleavage. If you think it is a wise strategy, you win."

Ismail said : "Well, pass on to the next question."

"The question of the arrested comrades."

"What can we do to them ?"

"Getting them out on bail is the first step."

There were no dissenting voices, but it was decided

that the matter be left to the Working Committee.

The conscientious convenor refused to write up the statement in the line voted for. But George came forward to do it. Within one hour the committee reassembled. George read out the draft. The committee suspected the unknown troublemaker, a trained wrestler, to be a new recruit to the band of goondas hired by the *muthalalee* who must be still having a number of such unknowns. The workers have nothing to do with him. They don't know him from Adam.

The Action Council approved it in toto. A report on the events of the day was submitted to the Working Committee of the Union. Chellappan was decidedly a hired goonda. Gopi didn't advance his views before the Committee. George who drafted the statement to the press, spoke justifying it. It is a stratagem, he explained. He received general applause. The Committee decided upon continuing the satyagraha before the locked-up gates. The next item in the agenda led to another controversy—the release of the arrested men on bail. Those in the Committee who represented the shade of opinion that Chellappan was a genuine worker couldn't agree to singling him out from being released.

“Your stratagem is all right.” One of them said. “But if the man later turns out to be a real worker, would it be fair?”

“Having committed ourselves to the statement that he is a hireling, how can we ask for his release on bail?”

“You are perhaps right. But can we disown a man of guts, a class conscious worker like him?”

All is fair in love and war.

A middle-of-the-road-er suggested a way out. The man in question can be got out on bail by somebody among ourselves. Not as one of the satyagrahis, but as just one outside our pale. George agreed to it but on the condition that the true history of the man must be ascertained first. He asked : "Is it enough if we know that he is just a worker ?"

The question was difficult to grasp. The questioner made himself clear.

"I mean, we should not be content with his being just a worker. But should know whether he belongs to AITUC, INTUC or UTUC."

Another member wouldn't be satisfied even with that. He said : "We are affiliated to UTUC. If he belongs to INTUC he will have his own people to bother about his affairs. If he is of the AITUC..."

"That is right, we should know whether he is a leftist or rightist."

The questioner was outspoken about it. "That must be gone into. We have our own politics. No gainsaying that."

Another man said that they must be objective. If he is a leftist, let the leftists go to his help. And if he is a rightist, he is a burden of the rightists.

Ismail who had been only a listener to all these doctrinaire bandying, shouted, "What is all this nonsense, you revolutionaries ? Does it matter what ever TUC he belongs to ?"

Somebody opposed : "We can't help reckoning those points in the present circumstances."

Another, more politic, advised Ismail to bear up with these transitory conflicts in trade unionism.

“We have, if nothing, a fun in them, don’t we ?”

An extremist blurted : “Fun ? Fanciful views !”

The theoretical debate was put a stop to by the committee which decided to hold another session to explain matters and situations better.

Chellappan gave his own true name and address at the police station. Before long, they learnt he was a wanted man of the Alleppy station, who did a bunk. Thus he stood charged with three cases.

His role in the events at the factory gate was being glorified as an act of chivalry and valour, by the people of the town. The belief that Chellappan was a trained wrestler gained currency. Pappu was footballed to the air. Mohamed dropped like a heavy jack fruit. Gopal took to flight. That all these celebrities of the wrestling world could be made short work of in a moment unquestionably needed more than an amateur’s brave or brute force. The way his kick smashed John’s face was by itself an entertainment to the onlookers.

Who was he ? No one knew. The whole incident gradually came to be talked about as a wrestler’s amazing feat. But why did he interfere ? The only apparent reason was that he couldn’t tolerate the brutal sight of a band of hirelings stamping over breathing human bodies. Where did he come from ? No one knew that either. A dirty dhoti and a baniyan and a towel were all he had on. A prospective recruit to the *muthalalee*’s band in the near future, sure.

Hamza was the only known acquaintance of the unknown wizard. And Hamza suddenly loomed into prominence. A man who saw everything that took

place at the gate, the only person who witnessed the miracle of the wrestling stalwart's tumbling down. Even for this eye witness seeing was not believing and he richly embellished his account.

"Who says," he asked, "the *muthalalee* can buy him off? Moonshine! He wouldn't get him for his weight in gold."

Hamza believed it was Chellappan's knowledge of the secret techniques of duel that did the trick of worsting the mighty men so soon. Must have been to the north to learn the art.

Hamza said: "But he had not told me of such things. He had only said that he was wanted by the police for intimidating some landlord in his village for this or that."

Oh, he was then underground? Hamza brushed off the query, a shade reddening. Chellappan wasn't a bit afraid of the police. On the other hand, he was offering himself to the police. He was wondering why Chellappan was a regular visitor to the satyagraha scene and now he knew, Hamza said.

Men swarmed around Hamza anxious to hear of Chellappan and his feat. Hamza rose to be a star.

"The fellow was squatting here, like a stricken cat. Did I know there was a bison in him?"

Some commercial poetaster wrote a ballad on the epic story of the satyagraha and Chellappan's wizardry and sang it at market places. His printed song booklets sold like hot cakes. Hamza too was a character in the story.

A large public meeting was held. An All-Kerala leader on the chair. He flayed the *muthalalee* bone-deep. And he depicted the Struggle against the



background of his nefarious ways.

He spoke eloquently on the non-violent struggle and the peaceful picketing.

"...And then, the *muthalalee* threw a spanner on the works. One of his hired goondas rushed on to the scene and created disturbance at the peaceful picketing of the workers."

A man from the midst of the large gathering rose up and growled.

"Stop this nonsense."

That was Hamza. That cry was repeated by thousands. The leader had never before had this experience. He appealed to the audience to be calm. But no one heeded. A section demanded his apology. The meeting could not be carried on. The chair made an apology of a sort and the mob was somehow made to calm down. He essayed to drive home to them that class consciousness and valour, devoid of discipline and order are bound to wreck the interests of the working class.

The meeting came to an end with his exhortation to keep order.

**I**t was long since Chellappan had been to prison. Unlike the past occasion, he was not kept for more than a day in the lock-up. A new salutary reform. One knew what a lock-up was !

But now the lock-up was, Chellappan found, no longer the hell it was. A policeman just slapped him once. A recognised penalty for kicking a man in the face—violence while under arrest. He got one more from another policeman, a conventional strike following a growl : “You dared defy the *muthalalee* ?” A third only abused him. Revolutionary reforms in police behaviour !

A few days later he was taken to the Alleppey station. Chellappan feared that the hidings short-supplied here were to be lavished at his home station. The afflicted parties Chacko and Ouseph might be waiting there to bribe the police into smashing his bones. But nothing happened. No one even talked to him. He was presented before the Inspector who asked him what he did with the coconuts stolen by him. Chellappan told the truth. The Inspector seemed to have believed it. He proceeded to ask about the threatening of Chacko and Chellappan gave him the truth again.

“You are a rowdy. Trade Unionism is not rowdism.”

Chellappan said nothing. He was taken back to the sub-jail.

There were four inmates in a cell. Slightly better than the lock-up. It didn't have the stench. There was a man sleeping in a corner who attracted his attention. Chellappan's eyes dilated. He went near him and looked down.

It was Gopal. Chellappan was taken aback. Next moment he felt a biting sensation crawl up his veins. A momentary shiver shot through his frame. He forgot himself. Darkness filled his eyes. But all these died away in a flash and he was himself again. Did he do anything terrible ? No, nothing. He was relieved. Gopal was fast asleep.

One of the other three asked : “What is the matter? You know him ?”

Chellappan walked towards them and sat down.

“You know him ?” asked one.

“Yes.”

“Your home ?”

“Mararikulam.”

“Now coming from ?”

“Ernakulam.”

“What is the case ?”

“A workers' struggle.”

“Struggle again ! We have a lot of these struggles here.”

Chellappan showed interest.

“Where do you say that struggle is ?”

“Out at Kuttanad. Transplanting season, you know. Women too in it.”

The man, Paramu, said : "That man sleeping there is one of them. And these two here belong to the same batch.

Chellappan turned to those two who introduced themselves as Govindan and Ulahannan. They named their villages.

Ulahannan asked : "What is the struggle at Ernakulam ?"

Chellappan was not tranquil enough to give an account but he didn't betray his feelings.

"It is in a Factory."

"You working there ?"

"No."

"Then ?"

Chellappan evaded it for fear of having to drag in all the details. He digressed.

"Tell me about your struggle. Going fine ?"

"Fine ? what a question to ask ! You should see it to believe it. Kuttanad is seething !"

Chellappan wanted to know more. But he couldn't bring himself to ask. His mouth was dry. Words don't form. Ulahannan described the nature of the struggle : "No worker gets down to the field. The landlords too stand firm."

After a moment, he went on :

"At this rate, Kuttanad will not have the trouble of a harvest next season. There will be no rice even if you have sacks of money."

Govindan took up the thread : "Next year the fields will be left fallow. The big shots wouldn't mind but the smaller ones will go to pieces. They are inwardly on our side."

Ulahannan wondered why the Government was

insensitive to the state of affairs.

“O the Government ! What does it care ? The Government is a body of people who know only asking for more. Once you get a Government job you cease to be what you were !”

“Anyway, this Government should be toppled. Or else there will be trouble for us.”

Paramu was sitting aloof from this conversation which was all over matters he loathed. He came to the prison as an accused in a boundary dispute. A small play of knives, but no serious injuries on either side. He was awaiting release on bail.

Chellappan was occasionally darting glances at Gopal who was sleeping soundly. What a sleep !

Gopal awoke and stretched his limbs, when Govindan called out to him : “Get up man, look here for a friend of yours.”

Gopal still lying, looked. He couldn't believe his eyes. He scrambled to his feet as if fear-stricken. Yes, Chellappan himself, as large as life. He was about to cry “Help !” but the word got jagged in his throat.

His nerves froze with fright.

Paramu asked Chellappan : “Your name ?”

“Chellappan.”

Ulahannan called out to Gopal : “A man of your village is here and you stand there blinking ?”

Gopal's limb did not move.

“Come on man,” Govindan said, “and tell us about the Struggle.”

Govindan continued, taunting : “The poor chap has wife and kids. Doesn't even have a proper house. Joined the INTUC for small favours. Now this

mishap. And he worries his head off over the wife and children."

Ulahannan completed it : "Poor soul ! Didn't want to get into the hands of police, but they nabbed him."

Gopal stood as if stuck in the ground. Chellappan neither looked at him nor uttered a word.

In a tremulous, guttural voice, Gopal stammered like one horrified by the sight of a ghost.

"My—my—enemy—He will kill me." All stood dumbfounded. Chellappan remained mute. After a moment, Govindan asked. "Enemy ? He will kill ?"

"Who ? Whom ?"

Ulahannan asked : "Really ?"

Paramu said : "Delirium. One gets nightmares in the jails "

"But he is awake," Govindan said

Gopal squeaked : "Call in the warden. I must get out at once."

The others saw this was no delirium or nightmare. The silence of Chellappan was eloquent.

"I think there is something between these two," Paramu said.

"If there is," said Ulahannan, "we should help patch up the rift."

Govindan turned to Chellappan. "What do you say ?"

Chellappan's reply was only a smile.

Ulahannan insisted : "Speak, comrade, what it all about ?"

Chellappan's lips showed a motion.

"You... You'd better ask him "

That reminded Paramu. Gopal had told him his wife was another's. With her two children, she ha

switched over to him.

Paramu asked Chellappan : "You are married ?"

"Yes."

"Wife with you ?"

"No."

"Dead ?"

"No."

"Then ?"

"Ask him."

Gopal moaned, weeping, terrified.

"I took her."

And like one possessed he threw himself at the feet of Chellappan, and he wailed : "Kill me ! I am a sinner :"

Ulahannan and Govindan endeavoured to lift him up. He was grovelling at Chellappan's feet.

Chellappan's face was like a bust in granite. And he was sitting like a statue. There was no shadow of rancour on it. Nor the glow of pardon. He didn't seem even to have understood what this melodrama was about. But when one prostrates and whimpers at your feet—Well, what is it ?

He unclasped Gopal off his ankles and lifted him up, himself unmoving. Paramu, appearing the wisest among them, asked : "What is the quarrel between you two ? I will ask you one by one. You Chellappan had a wife and two children ?"

Gopal on his toes to do recompense hastened to say : "I shall give her back to him and shall leave this place."

Out shot a question in a voice as if its source was unrecognisable ; "What for ?" It was from Chellappan.

Paramu said. "Wife isn't a commodity to be exchanged. What are you talking about, Gopal?"

Govindan opined : "But he voluntarily offers to return her. We had one such case in our village."

Chellappan flatly said : "I don't want. I didn't run after her. She went with him."

Chellappan's nerves had been benumbed. They seemed to be slowly getting back to life.

"All right," Paramu went on, "So she—what is her name?"

Gopal said : "Bhavani."

"Well. Bhavani went with the man who sought after her. And Chellappan has no objection, right?"

It was Ulahannan who answered it : "Hasn't he?"

Govindan pointed out. "The accepted way is that Chellappan should have divorced Bhavani and Gopal should have married her."

Paramu agreed. Chellappan said nothing. It was Gopal who gave rejoinder to Paramu's first question.

"It so happened. It wasn't a deliberate scheme. And I am looking after them. I do my best to make them happy."

"But that is only your duty," Govindan said, "and not one you should trumpet about."

Paramu again turned to Chellappan.

"What do you say?"

"What do I have to say?"

"Nothing?"

Govindan put it more straight : "Do you want Bhavani back?"

The answer was effortlessly flung down.

"I don't."

"And the kids?"



That did take him a moment for formulating an answer, but it was a resolute answer : "No."

Ulahannan was surprised : "How can you speak so ? Aren't they part of your flesh and blood ?"

Gopal slipped in : "He says the first born is not his."

"I see," Paramu seemed to be discovering a missing link. He nodded his head : "She is so bad ?"

Neither Chellappan nor Gopal gave an answer. Paramu said aphoristically : "Licentious woman is a potential headache. See, an affair of a woman has had to be settled inside a prison cell."

Gopal was too ready to admit to all the errors on his part. And he would willingly accept any terms.

"Of all the guilts, there is yet one that stands out as the worst. But that was really not mine. Chellappan's tenancy was sold out. She did it, but didn't throw away the money. She purchased a plot of ground, but it is registered in my name. I will transfer it to Chellappan the moment I step out of this cell."

Chellappan curtly answered.

"Why to me ? I don't need it."

"Oh," said Paramu, "then it is all over, isn't it ? No further disputes. No need for the wife, nor the children nor the property. What else remains between you two ?"

Govindan said : "What are you talking about ? Is this all a matter to be bargained and settled so quickly ?"

"But every matter needs a finality. And this one here is very simple. Let them come to terms this way."

Chellappan and Gopal said nothing.

Ulahannan, running over the whole thing in his mind, said : "Chellappan seems to be holding back something in his mind."

Chellappan did not say anything to it, his face still stolid.

"In a way," Govindan said, "It is better for all concerned to wipe everything off the mind. Only a downpour drives the clouds away. This is making your heart too heavy. I am sure matters would have been easier, if Chellappan had only given vent to his feelings by giving Gopal a slap or two on the face."

Paramu also agreed. But Chellappan remained stone stiff.

Gopal spoke out candidly : "I tell you I have been living a miserable life since she came over to me. Scared to the bones, no sleep, always watching out, never stirring out at nights—afraid of Chellappan. Why so ? I know I have wronged him."

He continued : "I am happy otherwise ? The two children hate me, especially the girl. She makes faces at me, and pelts pebbles. What is worse, they don't take kindly to my child. I cannot leave home for fear of these two harming the little one. As for the woman, she goes off her senses when she gets the goats."

Paramu found it amusing : "Ah, serves you right !"

Ulahannan said : "Is it possible she would make another switchover ?"

"She is not that bad," Gopal said. "Only she is ill-tempered."

Ulahannan asked : "Now what are you driving

it ? Want to unload and pass on the burden to Chellappan ?”

All but Chellappan chuckled. Gopal too put on a smirking grin.

“Not at all. Chellappan is spiteful of me. If he gets over the spite, I am blessed. My burden, I can carry on myself.”

Govindan turned to Chellappan.

“What do you say ?”

“What do you want me to say ?”

Govindan explained : “You spiteful of him ? Say that now and here.”

Paramu didn’t savour putting it so bluntly. He asked if it was possible for anyone to cleanse one’s mind at a short notice. Time heals all sores : “We shall talk of something else for a change.”

“What is that something ?” asked Ulahannan.

“Who is that *muthalalee* of Mattancherry you spoke of, Chellappan ?” Paramu asked.

“He is a devil, a perfect devil. Killing is his vocation. Buries people alive. That is the man.”

Ulahannan expressed his surprise.

“And such a man is still allowed to live ?”

“They are all poor souls, the people over there. Or the devil wouldn’t be alive. Somebody should give the start. But there is none with guts.”

“Oh, who will stake his life and home ?”

Chellappan echoed the same feelings.

“That is right. Cutting of life’s bonds is a prerequisite for action.”

The conversation warmed up. The erstwhile reticent Chellappan found flow of words when drawn into the subject of the incidents at Ernakulam.

Gopal had a sleepless night. Chellappan already a man without sound sleep, had a struggle frequently getting up and lying down. Gopal was watching out all night, plagued by the fear of Chellappan strangling him in sleep. One never knew.

Gopal had only one desire. To be shifted from that cell. Yet, he rejoiced inwardly that the encounter did not pan out the way he had feared. He had expected a bison charging in and ripping him to pieces. But nothing happened. Yet he could not trust Chellappan.

The fifteen days of simple imprisonment were not much to speak of as a term but it was a big event for Gopal. Not because it was his first jail going but because of the coincidence that brought about the meeting with Chellappan. They had been together within the same cell for a week. Chellappan moved with him in the same way as he moved with others. He was not much communicative, and talked only on matter of trade union activities. Absolutely detached from, nay even disdainful of, matters of family and children and the like. He appeared to have wiped out even the faintest impressions of Bhavani and the children off his mind. The prison food was abominable to the others but Chellappan found himself quite at home. Lost the palate, as it were. He was indifferent to his daily routine. Appalling indifference, Gopal thought.

Chellappan did not seem to harbour any ill feeling. He spoke freely to Gopal of Manakunnam and its inert, spineless working class. Of their *Netha*. He spoke—but not much—about those people he lived with. Indeed, kind and generous folks, but a pack of vigourless sheep.

That short association of a week brought changes in Gopal too. After a week, Chellappan was sent back to Mattancherry. The snapping of the new bond was disconcerting to Gopal. But he secretly heaved a sigh of relief.

At the farewell Gopal told him that immediately after his own release, he would arrange for Chellappan's defence.

Don't!" Chellappan refused the offer with vehemence. "No one need bother about my release."

The past history of Chellappan flitted across Gopal's mind. Chellappan, the orphaned urchin weltering through the streets. Chellappan the militant party zealot leading *jathas* and demonstrations. Chellappan the seasoned jail goer—that long rough climbing had come up thus far. And Gopal gave a full account of that complex life to his mates in the cell. Paramu asked : "Climbed up ? What the hell has he gained ?"

"Nothing."

"Wrecked his own life," Paramu remarked.

Govindan too said that "wrecked his own life" would about aptly describe it.

Ulahannan said : "He is a brave soldier of the working class."

Something more than that, Gopal thought, though he was vague about what exactly it was. He held Chellappan in high esteem, but was not sure why he admired him.

Paramu said to Gopal. "You must be grateful to him that he didn't kill you."

The other two echoed it. Gopal fully agreed with them. "Exactly. And that is why I said he was

now not what he had been."

His maxim is one shouldn't have wife, children or home. And he has renounced all."

Paramu said, "He is a Man." But Govindan opposed him. "Man indeed! he is a stinker in a way."

Gopal said : "He is essentially a noble soul."

"In my view," Ulahannan said, "he is a gone coon. Despair has turned him into a desperado. Gopal and his wife are responsible for it."

Govindan said that whatever it was, he had never had a good sleep for fear of Chellappan slaying Gopal in sleep.

Paramu and Ulahannan said they too had been under that affliction. Gopal said nothing.

After fifteen days, Gopal was released from the jail. The struggle of the agricultural workers of Kuttanad had been continuing. Those coming out of the prison used to get a rousing reception, organised by their respective Trade Unions. Gopal has recently joined the INTUC which had arranged for a carpet welcome. But he went straight to his home and not to the Union office. Bhavani rushed forward with a refulgent smile.

"I was counting the days. You are a day earlier."

"No, it is the sixteenth day. They have their own way of counting days."

"Been to the Union office?"

"O, no, I didn't."

"But why? They want you to go there straight. There is a reception."

"But I am not going."

"Well, why?"

"All rogues. I am through with them."

Bhavani stood dumbfounded. He was being ungrateful, wasn't he ? Rogues indeed !

"When the local Union and our neighbours forsook you, it was they who came to your rescue. Forgot it all so soon?"

He answered gallantly : "Grateful, my left foot ! Rogues!"

"What has come over you?" she asked in consternation.

"Why do you ask?"

"How do you imagine we can live here?"

"We just live here."

"Without INTUC behind us?"

"All men born on earth have to live."

"Do you know why our neighbours are hostile?"

"I don't care. I am a worker, first and last. Neither INTUC nor AITUC nor anything of that sort."

Bhavani stood still, lost for a rejoinder. Gopal took the baby in his arms and fondled it. Then he enquired about Kuttappan and Kumari.

"Do you realise we have had a grave lapse?" he asked.

"What is that?"

"Those two children should have been put to the school"

"But I myself had been telling you about it," Bhavani said accusingly. "You never cared. And the boy has been pestering me to send him to school. Every boy of his age does."

Gopal admitted it was a lapse on his part. Bhavani asked him how he got the brainwave now.



"We shall come to it presently. I have a lot to tell you," he said.

She was eager to hear it. Waiting in vain for a while for the pronouncement, she asked impatiently.

"Well, what is the big news?"

Gopal, eyeing her askance, said : "Henceforward we can live peacefully without any fear and loss of sleep. Isn't it big news?"

The explanation was inadequate. She stood glowering.

Gopal went on : "Chellappan has recognised our relationship. The only condition he stressed was that the children should be put to school."

Bhavani's curiosity soared high.

"Chellappan? You saw him? Where? When?"

Gopal told her all about his meeting with Chellappan inside the prison down to the moment of his parting.

"He has turned a *sanyasi*," Gopal concluded.

"*Sanyasi*?"

"Yes."

"You mean saffron robes, *rudraksha*, a bag and..."

"You ass, don't be so stupid! I didn't mean a monk or mendicant."

"Why can't you put it straight?"

Gopal cleared his throat to explain the spiritual transformation of Chellappan he was alluding to.

"He has made up his mind to dedicate himself to the cause of the working class. He has abandoned home, wife and children."

Bhavani slipped in : "Good riddance !"

"Shut up!" he reproached and went on : "Chellap-

pan takes the view that it is wrong for such a committed man to have a family."

Bhavani wasn't worried about such lofty ideals. She expressed what her anxiety was :

"You mean he wouldn't come back here?"

"He might. He would go anywhere and might come here too."

Why should he come here?"

"What if he comes here? No harm in it. He will come and go."

"Gopal went on: "Chellappan has completely changed. He eats food only if he gets it, no matter what it is. Like a perfect ascetic."

"But, then, he had ever been so," Bhavani scoffed.

"You are still speaking like the blockhead you are! Just imagine, if he hadn't been so lofty, what do you think would have happened? Tell me."

"O, nothing would have happened."

"Nothing! You fool!"

"I repeat, nothing. A man who couldn't feed his wife and children can do nothing. The fact is you were scared of him and you feared he might harm you. The boot is on the other leg. He was embarrassed to see you."

Obviously she did not understand. It was hard to drive home to her that she got it all wrong. Gopal repeated the episode of the jail all over again. Bhavani lent her attentive ears. Yet, Bhavani failed to feel the same awe and reverence which Gopal felt about the magnanimity of an arch enemy. Chellappan's transformation in outlook might, after all, be an offshoot of his rudimentary nature. That change loomed large before Gopal as an example of saintly

nobility. But Bhavani did not see anything extraordinary in it. She could see only one thing remarkable: Gopal had overcome his fear psychosis. Infinitely refreshing.

Just then there came a man of INTUC padding up, panting and profusely sweating. His errand was to take Gopal for the reception. Panic was writ large on his face. He said that the AITUC had fifteen heroes released from jail. The UTUC had ten. With twenty the INTUC had demonstrated superiority. But no one had turned up at the Union office for the reception! Wide publicity had already been given regarding the rousing reception to be given to those released from the jail at the maidan in front of the Kuttanad Congress Committee office. But not a single hero had presented himself so far to accept the great public honour.

"For God's sake," implored the Trade Union worker, "please do come. We will have the satisfaction that at least one person will be there to be given a reception."

Gopal gave a cold, dead reply: "I am not coming."

The Union representative felt his head reeling.

"Oh, be a pal, don't say so," he begged.

"What shall I say then?"

"Say you will come."

The weary unionist turned to Bhavani and with folded hands appealed to her.

"Sister, you will kindly prevail upon him. I have been to the other nineteen. No one is available. Four of them were spirited away by the AITUC by bribing them with a free transport in their boat. Three were

roped in by UTUC. The others are out of station. Now we draw blank. Your husband is the only one who can save us."

Bhavani turned to Gopal and asked him in a way peremptory in words, though not in tone.

"Why can't you go?"

Gopal said nothing. He seemed to have made up his mind on something.

"The District Congress President has already arrived," the Union man continued frantically. "The State President is on his way. They will do anything for this. It's a matter of prestige. We proposed to have a mammoth meeting. Entertainments at the end."

Gopal said flatly: "I said I don't want any reception."

The representative indicated by a gesture to call him aside and speak in private. Bhavani motioned to him to be patient.

She turned to Gopal again: "O, why can't you go? See how anxious they are. Matter of prestige he says."

Gopal said in a stand-offish manner.

"See, I want to have a sleep. It is days since I have had a sound sleep."

Bhavani felt a rude shock. What a drastic change had come over her husband!

"What!" she exclaimed.

"Yes?"

"Possessed by the same devil?"

"Why? Is it being possessed to say I want to sleep?"

"Now, now, whither with this new light, pray?"

No reply. Bhavani said; "Look here, they will pay."

Bhavani squinted at the representative. He caught the hint and asked: "How much? You have only to state the figure. And we shall pay you in advance."

Gopal replied: "I don't want a penny."

The unionist begged desperately.

"O please—there is a good patriot..."

"Young man, don't waste your time here. Rope in somebody else."

That line of talk, poise and mien of Gopal, Bhavani thought, were stamps of Chellappan's influence upon him. She shuddered to think that in few days of prison life Chellappan had cast a spell on Gopal, had stuffed stupid ideas into his head. He and his foul philosophy! It boded evil if anything. Bhavani made up her mind to face this disaster in the making. This should be nipped in the bud. Never before had he been so obstinate. She could always twist him round her little finger. It was she who persuaded him to go for the Struggle when he had at the first said he wouldn't. He yielded reluctantly. A man who acceded to all her requests was now here adamantly refusing to yield in this matter.

She said sternly: "I demand you go for the reception."

He said nothing. He sat down on a mat, leisurely lighted a beedi and began taking in lungfuls of cheering smoke.

She raised her voice: "I am asking you to go for the reception!"

"And I am telling you I am not going."

Bhavani was out-marshalled. She fumbled.

"You seem to be making a start after him?"

"He is a good example in certain respects."

"Perhaps in kicking me for instance?"

Gopal did not give a reply.

Bhavani went on: "If that is the lesson you mean putting into practice, let us be frank about it."

"Frank about what?"

She knew what. But she didn't mention it. For if she did—from Gopal's present mood—he was quite likely to say: "All right." And once he made bold to say so, he would have no qualms to repeat it at every future row.

Bhavani and the representative came out and talked for a while. Gopal must be persuaded to accept the reception. A huge, elaborately arranged reception without at least one to be so honoured would be the most severe blow to the mighty organisation. The unionist gave a suggestion. Bhavani went in and woke up Gopal who had in the meantime already fallen asleep.

"O please, get up," she adopted subtle diplomacy  
"Want to tell you something."

"Well?"

"You have already worn the clown-cap of the INTUC. You may throw it away if you want, immediately after this reception. And be done with it. We have to play square, haven't we?"

That went home, Bhavani felt encouraged: "No use in antagonising every one," she said.

And she went on: "They will pay you anything you demand. And it will come in handy for our present difficulties."

Bhavani spoke effectively on the stupidity of

spurning a lucrative offer. Here was a hero-starved organisation frantically on the look-out for hiring a head to put their crown upon.

Gopal got up cursing.

“You may curse and swear after just stepping in there. Then shoot off bidding farewell to them!”

Finally Gopal agreed to go for the reception. “But one hundred rupees is my price.”

Infinitely relieved at the triumph in the bargain the INTUC man catapulted himself to the Union office for getting the money.

Bhavani had a hearty laugh. She said: “He has had a hell of a job to get you round.”

Panic had engulfed the placid home of Kochitti. The worst stricken were Parvathi and Kotha. The girl had manifestly pulled down. Kochitti asked his wife in a tone of alarm : "What is wrong with the girl ? She is reduced to a skeleton. Were they in love ?"

Kotha had the same suspicion but was certain that the intimacy was not beyond fondness.

Kumaran made extensive enquiries about Chellappan. No one had seen him. Perhaps he had fallen into a police trap or something. The household was certain that they did nothing to offend or provoke him to disappear like that. But they did not close their eyes to the possibility that something on their unconscious part might have offended him. Parvathi participated in the talk but never uttered a word. She was apprehensive. She thought perhaps she knew the secret of Chellappan's sudden disappearance—a possible reason but she was not convinced that could be the reason. Moreover, she felt it was too disgraceful to mention it to others.

She lamented she did wrong to him. She shouldn't have given that harsh rebuff. She loved him, had dedicated herself body and soul for him, and as such



could she not have acceded to his demand for letting him surreptitiously ? May be, if she had, he would not have gone away. It was a grave mistake. Oh, if he would only come back ! And give her an opportunity to correct the mistake. All those reasons with which she had shunned him were, she regretted, stupid excuses. The greatest blunder of her life !

Kotha asked her one day : "Did you happen to say anything that might have hurt him ?"

"No. Why do you ask ?"

"Oh. I just asked."

On the sixth day of Chellappan's disappearance, having made all possible enquiries which proved futile, the family assembled in gloom. What would they tell the *Netha* who had entrusted Chellappan's safety into their hands ?

Well, the first thing to be done the next day was to inform the *Netha*, who could easily find out his whereabouts.

Kotha said it was not enough if Chellappan was tracked down. He should be brought back here.

"That is right." Parvathi made bold to say : "He owes us an explanation."

"He does indeed."

"But," Kumaran said, "if the poor man was nabbed by the police ?"

"He still could have sent a word through somebody," Kotha replied. "His money is with me and we could have arranged to get him out on bail."

The next morning, Kochitti met Ravindran. The *Netha* had not known of Chellappan's disappearance. He promised to make enquiries.

"If he has been imprisoned, we shall be obliged if

you would take steps to get him out." Kochitti respectfully appealed to the *Netha*.

Ravindran promised he would.

For a few days Ravindran could give no happy news to the old man.

Then one day he heard about the Mattancherry incident and Chellappan's involvement in it.

The local Union office-bearers were much relieved to hear Chellappan had people to get him out on bail and defend his case. For, they had planned to pass on the onus of defending his case to the Party unit of his own village, who in turn, disowned responsibility in respect of the present case. It was, they argued, in connection with the Struggle led by the UTUC at Mattancherry and so it was their funeral. It was at this stage of wrangling that a caretaker fortuitously appeared on the scene.

Ravindran went to the prison to interview Chellappan. The prisoner had a nonchalant air about him and the *Netha* unaccustomed to insolence, felt it disconcerting : "I have come to get you released on bail."

"Don't bother," the reply was sharp and quick.

Ravindran had neither anticipated such a reply nor such a harsh tone : "Why ?"

"For the simple reason that I don't want to come out on bail."

Ravindran got angry, and said : "I hope you will speak a little more politely."

He got no reply to that. The *Netha's* next was more serious. "Listen. It was I who arranged a lodging for you. Wasn't it elementary courtesy that you should have said a word either to me or to your

hosts before you left ?”

“I wasn’t sponging on them. Was adequately paying them for my stay there.”

Ravindran did not relish it, and said : “I would call it insolence.”

“I wouldn’t.”

“Insolence is insolence.”

“You feel it so because you are not in the habit of being spoken to straight in the face.”

Ravindran did not speak for a while. He held Chellappan in a hard stare, but Chellappan did not flinch before it.

Ravindran continued : “Kochitti and his family are good folks.”

“That is right.”

“You think so too ?”

“Yes.”

“Then why didn’t you take leave of them ?”

“I just thought I should leave. And I left.”

“Do you know the amount of distress you caused them ?”

Chellappan avoided a straight answer, and said : “I felt I should escape from those exceedingly good people.”

“You did ?” Ravindran showed surprise.

“Yes.”

Ravindran said with a smile : “Never heard before that people want to escape from good people !”

“But I felt so.”

“Well, I can’t beat it, Chellappan !” A moment later Ravindran said again : “I came here at the instance of Kochitti. He has some money with him which is yours. He and his people are keen on gett-

ing your released on bail, no matter what the cost is."

"It is not true. They have no money of mine with them."

"But Kochitti says they have."

"That is the amount I paid for my lodging."

"May be ! I know nothing of the terms or the nature of your relationship with them."

Ravindran taking leave asked again : "So this is final that you don't want bail ?"

" at is final."

"I will tell them so." This stance of Chellappan was conveyed to Kochitti and his people. They discussed it among themselves at night. Kotha did not agree with the view of the *Netha* that Chellappan was insolent. Kochitti said that he might have made an inadvertent slip of the tongue which the *Netha* could not reconcile himself to. "After all he is one who suffers within a cell. One who had only sufferings in his life cannot always guard his tongue."

Parvathi felt bitter about the *Netha*. But she said nothing.

"He is too proud," Kotha said, "and sets off his money against his lodging. He does not want us to spend it on his bail."

Kochitti's thoughts were drifting in another direction. Chellappan wanted to escape because he was among good people !

"I don't understand that," he said to his wife.

"Neither do I."

The husband and the wife were both exercised over that riddle. Their thoughts were running along the same line. But they could not discuss it in the presence of the girl. She was sitting by their side,

tormented by the same thoughts.

May be Chellappan did not like the marriage. And in that case he must have thought it embarrassing to turn down the offer right away, on their faces as he felt that they were good people. Parvathi held the opposite view. She was sure he wanted to marry her but left as she was nasty to him about secret meetings.

Kochitti went out, asking Kotha to follow him. He then asked her quietly : "Did you speak to him of that ?"

Kotha got offended, and said : "Do you think I am a fool ? Where did you get that idea I would only talk things I shouldn't ?"

"In that case he might have guessed it. Feared it would come out of us sooner or later. So he quitted."

Something like that, perhaps. I didn't utter a word."

Kochitti was relieved. It would not be bruited about that Chellappan bolted away because his hosts tried to palm off their daughter upon him against his wishes.

"All right, forget it," he said.

But Kotha chided him : "You can forget it all right. Still mean sitting here like a stuffed dummy ? The girl should be married off."

"I know. I let it linger on because I thought we had this fellow here."

"So did I. And the fellow was all right too," Kotha said.

But Chellappan had fallen in Kochitti's esteem : "I wouldn't go that far. After all, a tramp."

"Yet he was quite good. But it's our bad luck."

"Do you think she did not like him ?"

"I thought she did. Look at her. She is getting pale and thin. Always dreaming about him, I think. Only she does not speak out."

We should make haste to find another bridegroom for her."

Kochitti set out. He went to a few villages. Parvathi was aware of a feverish activity throbbing inside the house. Her mother told her : "It's all for your sake."

She felt a thorny pain pricking her vitals. She had already set her heart on one and to detach it from there and plug it in elsewhere, was just beyond her. Her hopes on Chellappan were sinking lower and lower but commensurate with it, her pangs grew more and more. Oh, if she could meet him and ask him straight ! She would then decide whether she should accept the man to be imposed upon her by her parents or remain celibate for life. She was inclined to choose the latter. She should look for some subterfuge when her father would bring somebody from somewhere. Her vitals cracked when she attempted to stifle the memory of Chellappan.

Kochitti was back home after extensive enquiries for a bridegroom. And he placed before his wife and son an account of the trip. Parvathi was in the kitchen, but she could overhear : "I came across a boy, quite good, works well, has only an old mother to hang on. The hag may not live long and he can leave his home and settle here. This is my best find."

Kumaran said : "I think that chap had been here once before."

"That's right. He has seen the girl."

"Their terms ?" asked Kotha.

"Not yet mentioned. But we shouldn't stint about jewels. It's our honour."

Parvathi wanted to shout aloud : "I don't want him!" But the words, vehemently discharged from the depths of the soul got choked down in the throat. That stifled explosion had a painful impact on her heart.

Kochitti continued : "They have promised to pay us a visit.

He then proceeded to catalogue of all his finds one by one but the best was the one mentioned first.

Parvathi was in a fix. Silence was liable to be interpreted as consent. And to speak out would mean distress to her parents. The aged father would start afresh on finding a fellow. And the same refusal would have to be repeated. She fervently prayed to her goddess that no one paid a visit. And that Chellappan might appear suddenly.

The bridegroom's party came on the appointed day. Parvathi peeped out and saw a young man among a horde of old men. He had a limp. The mother noticed it too.

Kotha held a private council with her husband. "The boy has a limp ?"

"O, a slight one. Must have had a fall from a bus or something."

"But you had not noticed it earlier ?"

"Is that so serious ?"

"Not serious ? Nice thing to say ! Our girl isn't a freak that we should pack her off with a cripple !"

"But the boy is a good labourer."

"Look here. We don't want him."

Kochitti got wild : "Well, you fetch an angel for your daughter !"

But Kotha triumphed, as the son also supported her. And Parvathi heaved a sigh of relief. "My goddess be blessed !"

Another proposal came. Good on all counts but he had quite a platoon of unmarried sisters. Not a congenial atmosphere. And the proposal fell flat.

Yet another. But after the formalities were over, the man wrote to Kochitti that he was on the lookout for a modern girl.

Parvathi was being continually blessed by her goddess.

There was a lull for sometime in the bridegroom-hunting. Parvathi was relieved but she was not sure when the activity would be revived.

As the days went on, Kochitti came one day with a strange news.

"Did you hear, Kotha ? That fellow Prahakaran isn't really what he had told us he was. He was married and had two children."

Parvathi stood thunderstruck. All the castles she built in the air crumbled down. Kotha was stunned too.

Kochitti continued : "But his wife had run away after another man."

"How did you know?" Kotha asked, unbelievably.

"The *Netha* told me."

Parvathi felt an unknown voice whispering within that she did the life's wisest thing in not yielding to his request for leaving the back door open. God be blessed ! If she had...she shuddered to think more of it.

Kotha said to Kochitti : "So we did well not to have put it to him."

"Indeed we did the correct thing."



The name of Chellappan itself provided an uncomparable thrill to Hamza, the owner of the stall in front of which Challappan used to stand. He managed to ingratiate himself with the jailor and saw to it that Chellappan did not suffer the cruel onslaught of the policemen. He regularly sent him tea, coffee and meals which Chellappan was courteous not to refuse, though it would not have been surprising if he had done so. He radiated a pleasant smile whenever Hamza visited him in the jail. Hamza kept Chellappan informed about the developments outside, including the Struggle Committee's decision to label him as a stooge of the rich man. This, however, did not disturb Chellappan. Hamza had expected him to look disturbed and angry but Chellappan simply produced a smile on his dry lips.

But Hamza demonstrated his resentment over the decision of the Union which had put him off saying it was being done in the interest of the Union. Chellappan uttered no word and replied with his usual smile.

"Do you think they are right?" Hamza asked.

"Perhaps they are."

"Are they ? But I don't like their round-about way. Why can't they be straight and truthful ?" Hamza went on : "But the people know the truth. They have seen through the game of the Union. Do you know how many of them pine to see you ?"

And then he gave a graphic account of the episode at the public meeting. He then asked him if he would like to come out on bail. Chellappan politely declined the offer.

Hamza's business had been running fairly well. But the Chellappan affair caused a sudden decline. Yet he pulled along, making beedis.

Chellappan got two months' imprisonment for the Mattanchery case. Another four months for the earlier Alleppey case. Thus six months in all. He was being taken to Trivendrum where he was to undergo the imprisonment. Hamza learnt from the authorities that Chellappan was likely to get a remission.

Choked with emotions, Hamza said to his parting hero, that he would be visiting him there. His eyes welled up as Chellappan was gone.

The struggle at the factory seemed fizzling out. No doubt a few, holding red flags, continued to squat at the gate raising slogans, but it has already become a stale affair. It was unfortunate that the public meeting which was organised to whip up dying passions ended in a fiasco. Gopi and his group blamed the die-hard section which had insisted on denouncing Chellappan as a goonda of the *muthalalee*. The Union Chiefs hurled allegations and counter-allegations against one another. And that weakened the Union itself.

They had begun to wish they could somehow get out of the impasse. But the factory owner did not oblige. He refused to give consent to the dispute being referred to the State Labour Department. The other Unions fought shy of supporting them as the general consensus was that the methodology of the leadership was erratic. Some of those sacked by the management deserted the struggle and went away seeking jobs elsewhere.

The forces of Pappu and his gang reigned supreme. They went to every worker's house and terrorised him and his family. Chellappan had become a legendary hero and people wished him well. They were eager to see him. Hamza told his admirers that he would be out of prison in six months. But would he come there straight? It was not his nature to stick to a particular place, yet he would be persuaded to come there, Hamza promised.

The Union, disillusioned and disgraced, blamed Chellappan for its present perilous state; but not in public—to save their own skin. Chellappan was now being projected as the class conscious, gallant crusader of the working class. But his foolhardiness in throwing himself into the fray was most inopportune. Restraint was the need of the moment. Without which, the cause itself was likely to be frustrated. They brandished it as a glowing example of how wild adventurism proves ruinous to the working class. The man should have first consulted the Union. He didn't. His impulsive, misdirected zeal had demolished an epic struggle.

The Union Chiefs were girding up their loins to resuscitate the Union activities. The workers too

had no other refuge to look to for protecting themselves from the vendetta of the *muthalalee* and his minions. But what was gone was gone.

The man who emerged hero out of the debris was Gopi, the Convenor, as it was his view that ultimately proved true.

True to his promise, Hamza did go to Trivandrum, but he could not see Chellappan. He tried to bribe his way into the Central Jail premises but in vain. A good part of his earnings went down the drain. He returned home disappointed. Now he was counting the days for the return of the mighty hero of an unforgettable epic.

"Are you crazy?" asked somebody. Hamza admitted he was. "This is of course a craze, one we need now. The craze for teaching a thing or two to that devil of a *muthalalee*."

Somehow, Ouroz happened to hear of this man. A puny beedi-maker, running a small shop in front of his factory, engineered to import a trained wrestler to insult his bodyguards. This was how the *muthalalee* had been informed about Hamza. And the rich man decided to settle scores with him.

One day, Hamza was at his work making beedis. Pappu, in his distinctive apparel that proclaimed the man, appeared in front of the shop. Curling his lips in a fake smile, Pappu said to him in a haughty shout: "You there, get me a beedi. A lean long one, see?"

Hamza ignored him. A little later, Pappu said again: "Do you not hear me?"

That was too hot to be ignored. Yet, Hamza didn't bother.

He said coldly : "You may come near and have it."

"Why, you can't come down to me ?"

"Quite so. Can't."

"What ? Grown so big ? Well, I shall have you ?"

Hamza asked : "Why do you come asking for a fight, Pappu ?"

"I know all, you louse ! Beware."

Pappu walked away. Hamza felt sure that he was in some kind of trouble, though he couldn't guess what. But who was there to seek help from ?

The shop was a four-poled erection. The next morning what he saw of it was a heap of shivers. Splinters of glass jars of sweets, bottles and the like lay scattered around, their contents removed. Decidedly the heroic work of Pappu and his men.

The shop was all he had on earth. And it lay razed to the ground. Like a man in a frenzy, Hamza watched the sight, his eyes emitting embers.

"I'll fix you !" A strange, strident sound of words accompanying the growl. Passers-by wondered if a petty shopman could produce that.

"Fix whom ?" asked someone.

"Ouroz."

The onlookers did not suppress their laughter. He says he will fix the mighty *muthalalee* !

Hamza broke down, dead beat, and wailed aloud. The women said compassionately : "Poor man, seems to have gone mad. Look, he roars and then weeps."

There was no commiserating soul. His friends could understand his plight. The ruthless hand of

Ouroz behind this atrocity was unmistakable. And for that very reason no one dared openly express sympathy for the destruction of the poor man's sole means of livelihood.

That day, a petition from Hamza, owner of a betelnut shop, was ceremoniously registered at the Mat-tanchery police station. One or two days later, two policemen made a gracious on-the-spot-enquiry. The depredators, the petition went, were Ouroz and his gangsters, Pappu, etc. The police prepared an elaborate report. They added a footnote. The poles of the structure were old, weather-beaten, parts eaten away by white ants. They read out the report to the petitioner, but skipped the footnote. Hamza signed it.

The enquiry was thus promptly performed. How it was followed up was Hamza's most hopeful guess. He would go to the police station every day for fresh information. But he never turned to the place where his shop had stood, for the debris lay there symbolising a life shattered. There was nothing of value to be salvaged out of what represented the earnings of years of struggle.

One day, as he went to the police station, he was asked : "What is the matter ?"

"To know what happend to my petition."

"Your petition has been filed." 'Filed' was a term beyond his ken.

"I would like to know what it means."

"Man, it was a stormy day. The harbour office keeps weather reports. Know that ?"

Hamza did not know. The policeman explained : "It is a fact that your shop-shed had been wrecked.

But that was due to the storm. An old structure, wasn't it ? An accident, though unfortunate. But how dared you drag in gentlemen in your petition ?"

Hamza was stunned.

The policeman went on : "The Inspector has made a report that the shop-shed was felled by a storm."

Momentarily, forgetting where he was standing, Hamza let his wrath gush out : "No, no, it is false, Sir. It was deliberately destroyed by Pappu."

The policeman's face turned red. He yapped : "Get out, fool, if you don't want your spine smashed !"

For a moment, Hamza wavered debating in his mind whether to get out or stay on. He did not mind his spine smashed or his life ended at the police station. For he had no means of living. For years he had been living on that shop. He knew no other trade. Death was welcome. But another thought at once dominated him. Why die without avenging himself ? Let Chellappan come back and he would wait till then. Hamza silently left the police station.

He trudged along aimlessly. When he walked some distance, he saw a meeting going on. Ouroz was speaking from a platform to a sizable gathering. The sight of the man, with his fat neck and tummy, stirred up in Hamza the hunger of a wild beast spotting its quarry, but he suppressed it.

Well-wishers counselled forbearance. Some asked him : "Why did you defy the *muthalalee* ? You know the lot of those who defied him. Ouroz is rich and influential !"

Some mentors chided him : "You had been carrying that Chellappan on your head a bit too much.

And paid dearly for it !”

Another group advised him to go to the *muthalalee* and beg pardon. He was sure to do recompense.

Hamza listened, to all such homilies but gave no reply.

His was an uneventful life running in a groove. He lost his parents in childhood, but thanks to the help of one of his father's friends, he was initiated into the beedi making trade. He started on a capital of ten rupees. Initially it was a street-hawking, an open box slung down from the neck, the commodities displayed in it. Slowly he scaled up to the setting up of a shed in front of the factory of Ouroz. His business was soon making spectacular strides. The humble shop promised to grow into a store of sweets, biscuits, toilets and fanciful things. And he began thinking of marriage and home. It was at this blossoming juncture that Chellappan dropped in. The acquaintance was only a few days old but that brought about a great change in his outlook. Chellappan's life pattern was akin to his own. Was that the factor which made him gravitate to Chellappan ? Or was it his abounding admiration for the bewildering prowess with which his hero made chicks of those giant goondas ?

Hamza was at crossroads. Should he fawn before Ouroz ? Or prosecute his war ? When he looked at the decaying heap of the ruins of his erstwhile source of livelihood, he could not contain himself. The more he thought over it, the more stubborn he grew and firmly decided not to yield or beg for mercy.

Oh, the crimes he had perpetrated ! Hamza re-



collected them one after another. Murders, rapes, extortions, savage body tortures—and, yet he paraded himself as a pillar of the society !

Ouroz might be lying in wait to liquidate him too, not satisfied with the havoc already done. He could do that with ease, with no qualms. But he should not be allowed to have his sway any longer.

He knew the persons afflicted by the cruelties of the man. Why not organise them into an association ? It should be a mighty devastating flame if the sparks of vengeance of all those were combined and organised.

Hamza thought of Poulouse. It was on the score of his daughter that the recent struggle at the company took place. Poulouse was old but he had young sons who would be lying low. They would come forward. There was then Ayyappan whose brother was said to have been buried alive. There were a good number of the like who were thirsting for retribution.

Hamza met Poulouse. But he asked what they, weak men, could do : “I have only the Almighty to appeal to.”

“If we organise, we can do something to remove this pest off the earth. Can’t we ?” Hamza asked.

“What do you think we can do ?”

Hamza had no clear-cut ideas about the possible mode of action. Ayyappan and the others also spoke with the same diffidence. Some of them even warned : “If we combine, he will pick us up one by one.”

Hamza lost his mission. Well, he would wait for another month and a half. Chellappan would be

back. He would be the best guide.

After wandering here and there for some days, he got himself employed in a beedi manufacturing shop. The last resort. For he had abandoned all hopes of reviving his own business as the remnants of his shop had already turned into dust.

Chellappan got a remission of a week. The authorities granted his request of being set free at Mattanchery. A prisoner of good conduct was entitled to such privileges.

He had only one place to go to—Hamza's shop. But what greeted him there was a decaying heap of bamboo-stumps and splinters of glass scattered around.

What had happened ? Where was Hamza ? There was no one about, whom Chellappan knew. It being a Sunday, Ouroz's factory was also closed. Chellappan lingered there for a while.

An old beggar sitting under a shady tree saw him. He asked what he was looking for.

"The man who was running the shop." Before he finished the sentence, the old man gave him the information Chellappan wanted : "O that fellow ? He got an itching to bump his head into a boulder. And the result ? See his shop and shed in a neat heap of rubbish !"

Chellappan could not get it right. The old man went on : "You blink ? That owner of a few rusty tins and bottles thought he grew a tusk on his nose and made a fly at Ouroz—Ouroz, d'you hear, of all

persons ! He should thank his stars that he lost just this and not his life."

The old man continued after a pause : "Does it do any good grudging God for blessing a few ? This *muthalalee* is born to have his way."

He then went on to tell the whole story of the ill-fated shop-shed.

"It was here that Hamza started making a living. Out of nothing. Soon he began getting a little jingle of coppers. His top bloated. Thought he could have a rub against anyone. Remember the trouble we had at that factory gate some time back ? Hamza poked his nose. Brought a chap from somewhere. Quite a bull. Out here, there was no one to stand a sneeze from him. He knocked out Pappu and Mohamed all right. But what followed ? There lies this fool's shop in a neat heap ! Why stick your neck out in things you have no business in ? By the way, who are you ? His relative ?"

"That is true. But where is Hamza now ?"

"He is employed on daily wages in a shop near the castle."

"You say this is the work of Ouroz ?"

"Do I ! The *muthalalee* had only to bat his eyelids and a hundred men would rally round him. They do things for him. The four poles of the shed were just lifted off the ground. And there it fell flat, shop, stock and shed."

And pointing out a building at a distance he continued the eye-witness account : "I was lying there. It was a stormy night. Strong winds blowing. At night four stocky blokes came up. And they did it. What a terrible sound ! All the jars and bottles were

smashed. The blokes went away as they came. I didn't dare stay a second and legged it at once."

"And no enquiries held?"

"The police or somebody did come. But you know money makes the mare go round."

The old man repeated that Hamza was still lucky as he escaped death. If the *muthalalee* had said dip him in the sea, they would have done that. Anyway, Hamza got it in the neck. Fellow had been a bit too puffed up.

Chellappan ruminated. He had an axe to grind when he demanded of the authorities to be set free at Mattanchery. A definite clear cut purpose. The product of six months' hard, hard thinking inside the prison. Now, on hearing of what they did to Hamza for siding with him, close on the heels of himself causing disastrous end of a workers' struggle, that purpose he had set his heart upon, had gained added resoluteness. And he bit his lips.

The old man was babbling on: "Hamza's man had no equals here. And the *muthalalee* cleverly got him into the prison. Hamza is eagerly looking forward to his return to decide what to do next.

Chellappan walked away saying nothing. His name had been on everybody's lips in Mattanchery for sometime. But no one knew him! A blessing in disguise, for if he was recognised as the wizard who had made a pebble of Pappu and others, people would soon be swarming around him. He turned to a by-lane, away from the main road.

He was sauntering along abstractedly, head drooped. Suddenly as he happened to lift his head, there stood Hamza before him. Forgetting all his

weariness and despondency, Hamza flung himself forward and clasped him in an embrace: "Chellappan !" Hamza kissed him. Chellappan got swamped under that flood of love. He had never had such a soul-stirring experience. The pleasure of a friend's embrace. Why, of love itself ! A joy never felt before. Chellappan too kissed Hamza, lost in that ecstasy.

For some moments, they stood there clasped in the embrace, forgetting the surroundings. Suddenly Chellappan became aware of them. He said : "Stand back, we would be seen."

"What if we are seen ? It's an embrace between two males."

"Not that. They will start asking questions who I am and they will know. People will gather and there will be trouble."

"Let them all know. They ought to know. We intend arranging a reception," Hamza said.

"No, no reception and all that. It would only be a stumbling block in our path."

"I wouldn't allow you to have your way in this matter. All the people over here are anxious to see you in person. A reception appearing in the papers with your photo in it, ah !"

"Hamza, please listen. I don't like it at all."

"People are pouring in enquiries after you. The money can be collected in no time."

"Collect money for something good."

"Isn't this good ?"

"No."

"Who says that ?"

"I say."

Like a vivacious child stung by the reproach of his father, Hamza peevied. He had lost all; yet he wanted to arrange a reception. He knew he could collect the money. Chellappan said sternly he did not want any reception. All the castles Hamza built in the air had tumbled to pieces.

"Oh Chellappan !" he cringed.

"Hamza, you want reception and publicity or to get things done ?"

That touched Hamza on the right spot. He asked : "Well, getting things done, of course. But getting what done ?"

"Have patience till I can tell you."

Suddenly Hamza burst into sobs : "My shop is gone."

Hamza had never felt his heart so heavy as now—not even when he first saw his shop in shivers, or was having a distant, stricken look at the sad remains. He had only one man to talk to about the demolition of his life's sole buttress. That man stood before him and he hoped he would understand it. Now he had told him.

"I saw it. I am coming straight from there."

"It is the work of that fiend."

"Relax, we will even the score."

Hamza pressed Chellappan's hand and stared into his eyes : "You will, will you ?"

"I will !" Chellappan uttered it in a tone of rocky stubbornness.

"Oh, how happy I am now !"

Heavy moments wore on.

Hamza said : "Come on, Chellappan, let us have some tea."

They walked on, a heavy silence settled between them. Chellappan was the first to speak : "How goes the Union ?"

"Unions be blowed ! Can they do anything ? For some time the Union lay loose. That Convenor Gopi ran here and there. The rot stemmed from that blasted statement that you were a hireling."

Chellappan did not believe it.

On the other hand, he said : "I am responsible for the whole trouble. It was a dumb act on my part."

Hamza was too naive to understand it, to realise that his hero's adventurism was a mistake. He was not inclined to accept the theory. He knew an act of valour when he saw one. But he avoided a wordy wrangle over it.

"We must strengthen the Union. That is what is presently required," Chellappan said.

"After all, is that the decision you have made ?" Hamza asked sullenly.

Chellappan framed his answer thus : "If all workers stand united, no *muthalalee* can touch them."

Hamza was manifestly disillusioned. He said : "To try getting them united is trying to rope in a mountain." He went on : "You haven't yet sized up the devil of the *muthalalee*. He is a cut-throat."

Chellappan smiled : "What else do you want then?"

"Putting an end to their atrocities is what I want, though I don't know how."

"No use just wishing. Tell me exactly how you would like to have it done."

"He should die, whatever sort of death it be—whether by stringing him up or by his car pushed



into a ditch."

"And if he doesn't die?"

"If he doesn't—If he doesn't—well, somebody should go to the gallows. That is all."

Sparks flew out of his eyes. Chellappan said in a calm tone: "Be calm and have patience."

Hamza went on in a passion: "This Hamza is ready for it—if the country be rid of the killer and thug."

"Hmm."

Chellappan's eyes flashed. Hamza did not notice it. Both fell silent for a while. Their nerves were getting taut with an emotional pressure. It took some moments for those nerves to relax into place. They helped themselves to another cup of tea. As they sipped tea, Hamza said:

"I saw Gopi just two days back. Talked to him about the Union. He said he would take steps to call up a meeting of all workers, after Chellappan's return, so that they could all see you."

Chellappan mumbled absently: "Oh, ah."

Hamza had not finished. He went on: "But, then, it is all for higher wages, dismissals and the like, isn't it?"

"Which?"

"This Union."

Chellappan laughed and said: "No."

Hamza was not convinced. Chellappan moved closer to Hamza and said in a stifled voice: "Hamza, why do you think I came down here after my release?"

Hamza did not understand the question and he said nothing.

"Don't you think," Chellappan went on, "I could

have gone to my own village as well ?”

“You could have.”

“Then, why here of all places ? Because it has a purpose, a definite purpose. Get it ?”

Hamza couldn't guess what that purpose was. Chellappan said : “I have always been a bird of passage. I have no home, no village. But I mean staying here. You like it ?”

Hamza's face brightened. He said : “Do I like it ! How do you think I would live without you ?”

“Well, we will find ways for all our problems. It wasn't for nothing that I went to jail. I have often been a jail bird. But this time it did me real good.”

Hamza zestfully asked : “So, you are not leaving me ?”

“No, I do mean staying here.”

Hamza leapt for joy : “Ah, I have no worries now. Nothing to fear !”

He went on : “Do you know anything about me ?”

In fact Chellappan knew nothing of Hamza. He, a total stranger, was just standing before his shop for two days. And to the very first question from Hamza, Chellappan laid bare his history in a few words. Hamza had at first felt only contempt for him. Their antecedents were almost alike, yet he never showed resentment. For, he had the consciousness of superiority in that he was a flourishing shop-owner, while the other was a tramp. It was the incidents that followed the struggle at the factory gate that made Chellappan hero in Hamza's eyes. After that it was with reverence that Hamza met him in the prison. Praising, and praising him, Hamza hypnotised himself into a worshipper. And Chellap-

pan unconsciously imbibed a deep affection for Hamza. Chellappan had till then a barren, vacant heart with nobody to be enshrined in it. And in a soft corner, Hamza was immovably installed. Chellappan's choice of returning to Mattanchery after his release was chiefly due to that solid bond of affection.

Hamza said passionately : "We will live together till death."

"Yes." Chellappan couldn't choose a better rejoinder.

That fraternity came to stay. They were drawn to each other not because they learnt that their life-patterns were similar. In fact their friendship preceded that learning. When Chellappan unfolded the truth that he was no trained wrestler, nor knew any secret techniques of combat, Hamza refused to believe it.

"You lie !"

"No, Hamza, I have told you all my history, haven't I ?"

Hamza wanted to get the secret : "Well, in that case, how did you do it, throwing Pappu and Mohamed yards off like chicks ?"

"O that ? I don't know. Don't even remember what happened there. I was myself only when a policeman dug his gun into my ribs."

"What about John's knock-out ?"

"Who knows ?"

Hamza asked, surprised : "Indeed ? Then don't ever say this to another soul. Right now they are at heart scared of you. They twirl their moustache all right, but shiver in their boots."

Chellappan said : "I do not think one needs to be a trained fighter. It is the will. Technique does

you no good."

"I see, it was all then an itching, eh?"

"When they were trampling over the bodies of the boys, I couldn't contain myself. My blood boiled. And I sprang."

Hamza was reliving those exciting moments: "You just scooped up the fellows and hurled them with ease."

"If I did, it wasn't because I had the muscles or knew techniques."

Hamza again appealed to him not to let the fact circulate.

Chellappan had a counter appeal to make too—that his release from prison be kept a dead secret. The episode at the factory gate had been forgotten by all. No one would recognise him too. Let it remain so, or else it would throw a spanner into their works.

Hamza agreed, though reluctantly. He had a big idea in his own mind. Chellappan obviously had another, hadn't he? Both withheld from each other their respective secret ideas for fear of the other dissuading execution. But for this trifle, there was no rift between those fast friends.

Chellappan got down to earn his living on daily labour. Hamza went on with his beedi work.

A suggestion came up at the Union meeting that Chellappan, being a class conscious and brave worker, be co-opted to be a member of the Working Committee. The workers were, in general, happy about it. Gopi, introducing him as the hero of the monumental struggle at the company gate, described the incident as an epic saga of valour and praised sky-high his unparalleled fearlessness and zeal. The statement to the press was of course false, but Gopi justified it as a struggle stratagem, though he pointed out, it proved a flop. But then, it used to happen often in struggles.

The workers, on their part, had a feeling that a Samson had come into their midst and Pappu and other professional hooligans would cease to be a pest. The suggestion to admit Chellappan into the committee was doubly acceptable to the workers. But Chellappan had other views.

"I do not want it," he said stoutly. The general body and the office bearers tried their best to prevail upon him, but Chellappan stuck to his guns. He told them indulgently : "But I will always be here at the disposal of the Union."

"And I assure you," he promised, "I wouldn't act

on my own in public. I shall abide by the decision of the Union."

There were sporadic murmurs among the audience attributing this resiling stance of Chellappan to the Secretary's unwise reference to the hero's inopportune and hasty show of valour and passion. A hackneyed excuse for the debacle, another reference to it in the presence of the hero himself was out of place. But Chellappan modestly said he was only proud to admit his errors.

Hamza also didn't understand the decision of his hero to stand down.

"I tell you," he warned him, "they are all timid rats. You should have been on the committee."

"I cannot do much on the committee," Chellappan said, "as I know nothing of the work inside the factory."

He continued : "I wouldn't be anything more than an idler and time-killer."

Chellappan seemed braced up for speaking out his heart. Hamza stood a patient listener. Chellappan continued : "A Union office-bearer should be one who knows a thing or two. But I am illiterate,"

"So am I too. No one put me to school."

"I had none even to think of it," Chellappan said. "I don't know how to conduct a Union though I know when it goes wrong."

After a moment, he continued : "Moreover, after what happened on that day, I am nervous I should be causing another embarrassment to the Union."

"You mean, such things will happen again ?"

"They might."

"What, for instance ?"

"I don't know. It is possible. Who knows ?"

Anxious to know more, Hamza asked with a smile:  
"Tell me frankly, what is on your mind ?"

"Why do you ask ?"

"There is something, I feel so." And a moment later, Hamza continued : "Whatever it is, won't you tell me ? You came here with some definite purpose. And I have been eager to know what it is, ever since you came here."

Chellappan said nothing for a while. He kept back something and that was obvious. He said : "To me Union is a passion. I came here with that passion. I cannot allow the workers being toyed with or tortured. But I have done nothing for the working class. Nor for any Union."

"But you said you had been to the prison several times ?"

"That is true. I didn't mean that. I have done nothing to wield them into a force. I was just living an empty life. This is my regret."

"And you gave up an excellent chance to serve the Union, didn't you ?"

"I would have served it ill. I do not know how to teach a worker much less to conduct a Union. I might bungle."

Hamza asked if he wasn't stretching it too far ? But Chellappan replied : "You are wrong. A unionist ought to know things. Or else Unions won't exist. Those who know, unfortunately, are usually boys of rich homes. And they fail to feel the heart-throbs of the workers. They may be honest."

Hamza was getting uneasy that he still did not get the bee in his friend's bonnet.

“But tell me, what exactly is on your mind?”

Chellappan gave a reply, full of sincerity and honesty : “Inside the jail, I thought hard on this. On this problem alone. And came to a decision—to live and die for the worker.”

It got past Hamza. Chellappan explained : “I don’t mean just putting myself to death. I don’t like a death like that. My life is dedicated to the cause of the worker and I will give it up when he wants it. I have nothing else to give him.”

“So, this is what is on your mind?” Hamza asked.

“Quite so.”

A seat in the Municipal Council of Mattanchery fell vacant. The last date for the filing of nomination by the contesting candidates was drawing near. One of them was Ouroz. The workers’ organisation and leftist parties decided to set up a candidate. The choice was Gopi, the leader of the workers of Ouroz’s factory.

Ouroz was stung. Any other candidate wouldn’t have so much infuriated him. He was determined to employ all his resources.

Nominations were filed. Only two were left on the field after the last date—Ouroz and Gopi. Ouroz tried to influence the scrutinising authorities for rejecting the papers of his opponent.

Gopi’s supporters minutely scrutinised the voters’ list. They counted on a run-over victory as the ward in question consisted chiefly of workers. A fund collection programme was also drawn up, each worker to contribute a day’s wages. The Union in the other wards also rendered monetary assistance. The supporters and election volunteers felt an abo-



unding zeal. Sub-committees were formed and duties assigned. All arrangements were set afoot.

The upper class people were quick to sense the seriousness of the situation. Even those among the employers of the town, who were not on good terms with Ouroz, rallied round him, shedding their petty quarrels with him. On the whole, the election promised to be a battle of strength between the employers and the workers, between the rich and the poor, between luxury and toil.

Ouroz's party launched its election propaganda with a tremendous, colourful procession and public meeting. Noted political figures spoke.

Gopi's too did not lag behind. Another massive procession and public meeting. The streets were drowned in the strident slogan-shouting. Though the election was for only one ward of the Municipality, the leftist luminaries of the neighbouring towns heightened its importance by lending their physical participation in the campaign. House to house propaganda was initiated. Chellappan, the idol of the workers was paraded through the streets. In the meantime Ouroz's men had already gone round every house.

Chellappan was in a company of four volunteers, including Hamza. They first went to the house of an employee of a shop, a voter named Elias. The propaganda party had scarcely reached the yard, when the voter cried out:

"You won't leave this poor man alone, will you?"

Chellappan and his party were perplexed. They had done no harm to this man.

Elias went on: "I know who to vote for. You have

been going too far. Get out."

They tarried for a while. And Elias was on the verge of using force to turn them out when his wife came out and said to her husband.

"No manners?"

"Manners! You care for manners and not for our life! Didn't hear what the landlord was saying?"

Chellappan and his men turned back, when the woman went up to them and whispered.

"Our vote is for you. But keep it to yourself."

The party believed her vote was for their candidate—but not Chellappan.

At the next house, they were not turned out but the reception was frosty.

The day was not altogether quite encouraging. The workers' colony was too harsh on them. Two of them said without any hesitation that they would vote only for Ouroz. Even Poulouse and Ayyappan and others who had suffered at the hands of Ouroz gave no hope. They spoke as though they were under the affliction of being spied upon by Ouroz's men.

As the party walked along, Chellappan was amused to watch them counting the prospective votes, banking on the promises. Why, they were all workers, weren't they? But Chellappan was sceptic.

In the evening all volunteers of different batches assembled at the Union office. They discussed about the prospects based on their day's experiences. And the experience of all was identical. When they all finished, the candidate asked: "And so, what do you make of it?"

Viswan a volunteer answered: "Everybody is

scared. The *muthalalee* has already seen to it."

"Quite so," said Ibrahim, "one or two frankly told me so."

Another said that still the votes were theirs. The voters were only feigning hostility. After all, the voting was a secret affair.

With all these, gloom prevailed. And Gopi, the candidate asked: "What next?" One opined that each worker should be got round through his Union and confidence instilled in him. Another suggested a mass rally to demonstrate their might, which would help galvanise the electioneering.

There was yet a relieving factor. Few grumbled about making contributions. Couldn't it be taken as index of the voters' mind?

A demonstration was decided upon. Undeterred by the day's bad luck, they decided to go the whole hog to win over every voter. More volunteers came forward.

As far as Ouroz was concerned, it was a life and death struggle.

He could not afford to lose the battle. The Union could not lose either, for it had to retrieve its ground lost on account of the fizzled out struggle.

Ouroz had not imagined that the opposition would be so strong. In the meantime, one of Gopi's party had won over two volunteers of the opposite camp and through him, filched some secrets of the latter—that Ouroz was buying votes, every volunteer was being paid handsomely, that the voters vowed to vote for the *muthalalee*. In the evenings, Ouroz would be leaping for joy on hearing of the rosy reports of his men, but in the mornings he would flare up at

them, losing faith.

In the meantime, defection infected Gopi's camp too. But the *mutthalalee's* party kept them at an arm's length, though paying them as they paid the others.

The day of election dawned. The polling began peacefully. As usual, a long queue had gathered at the gate early in the morning. The polling agents of both parties were very busy. Chellappan, seated on a bench, his head bowed, was watching the irritable sight of even workers going straight to the polling office of the other camp for receiving their identity slips.

Chellappan felt his blood boiling. He shifted his position clenching his teeth, muttering under breath.

By nine o'clock, the briskness of polling had subsided. Half the electorate was yet to come to the poll. Gopi's volunteers raced to the ward to marshal the voters who were expected to vote for them but who had not yet come. But the volunteers saw to their terrible dismay that the voters had left their homes. No one knew where they had gone.

Gloom spread over Gopi's camp.

At noon, a few of his volunteers came up running with the information that there were three houses with a total of fifteen votes. The houses were locked from outside but the voters were in. Pappu and others were keeping a secret watch over the houses.

Gopi made a complaint to the police suspecting that the voters were forcibly interned, and prevented from exercising their franchise and the police at once acted for getting the doors opened. The inmates came out and vouchsafed that they were not illegally interned. They just didn't want to vote.

What could the police do?

Polling over, both the camps hopefully counted the number of votes that might have been cast in their favour, judged from the trend. Both claimed victory, but Gopi's camp was visibly enveloped in gloom.

Chellappan sat hunched up alone in a corner, lost in thoughts. He was not aware of the surroundings. Hamza kept a vigil on him and his face changing colours. He felt that Chellappan's poise betrayed the fact that he was deeply pondering over something, some decision in the process of fermentation. He must know what it was.

A valcano was smouldering.

Ouroz won the election by a respectable margin. He celebrated the victory with a noisy festivity that shook the whole city. Fireworks, drums and tins, all combined, made a thunderous blare that echoed in the sky. There was a particularly tumultuous show, dancing, hooting and drumming, in front of Gopi's election office\* under the leadership of Pappu and his team. Chellappan and Hamza stood on the verandah witnessing the uproarious demonstration, but the others slid away inside, crestfallen.

While Pappu was fitfully capering about, he happened to lift his head. He abruptly stopped. There stood Chellappan, arms tied across his chest. Pappu could not believe his eyes. He stood benumbed for a moment. Both stared at each other. An explosive moment. Hamza watched breathlessly. He felt Pappu was losing his verve. Chellappan waved him off. Pappu twirled his moustache and bellowed to his clamorous retinue: "Come along, boys!" The rabble moved on.

Hamza threw his hands round his friend and exclaimed: "He is scared! Saw him trembling?"

\*Typical of Kerala elections.

Chellappan said nothing.

The election and Gopi's defeat created new problems before the Unions in the Mattanchery city. The *muthalalee* sacked six workers. Another four were reduced to part-timers. Pappu and others had trespassed into the houses of some and assaulted them. A volunteer of Gopi's camp had disappeared. His old mother complained to the Union that the boy was kidnapped. Might have been murdered for all she knew. She was crying her heart out.

Chellappan sprang from his seat but at once calmed down. The internal turbulence was visibly registered on his face. He was crushing his own fingers. Clenching his teeth he was desperately trying to quieten himself. He had now learnt to tame himself. Those present in the office room saw his inner struggle and said nothing.

They were all on tenterhooks. The boy in question had worked hard during the election. He had tremendous canvassing skill and proved a bug-bear to the opponents. Perhaps the *muthalalee* was exacting the retribution and Hamza openly said so: "It is Pappu again!"

No one would deny. Gopi consoled the hag that her son was not in any danger and that the Union would do its best to trace him. But she must first report it to the police though it would be followed up by the Union by telegraphic appeal to the higher authorities and holding a protest public meeting. What more could be done?

"And I will get back my son?"

"You will."

Gopi could not say anything more reassuring.

Kuttappan explained : "She had jaundice. While dying she had cried: 'Father.'"

Chellappan said nothing. The boy went on.

"She too was going to school."

In the meantime, Bhavani had appeared at the yard. She saw Chellappan. A sudden shudder shot through her. But the mother in her, afflicted by the death of the daughter, soon got the better of her. She swiftly walked up to the mango-tree whimpering.

"She is gone—Kumari—asking for her father."

Some dark wrinkles appeared on Chellappan's face only to fade away the next moment. It reassumed its granite rigidity.

That mother of the dead girl was wailing her heart out. She had not anticipated the child's end would be so quick. Gopal had wanted to go and inform Chellappan personally of her illness, but before he set out, the child died. A lapse on their part that Chellappan could not be informed in time, grave indeed, but not deliberate. Bhavani begged pardon of both the child and the father so wronged.

Chellappan walked away without uttering a syllable.

Bhavani had an appeal to make :

"O stay ! please, just give him a look before you go !" Kuttappan was standing there, his face sullen and miserable and about to unleash a torrent of tears.

Chellappan ignored it.

She said again : "He is your child, your own ! Believe me !"

Chellappan looked back. Then walked on. The boy's lachrymose eyes followed him.



Bhavani had no moral right to say anything more.

Chellappan got on to the road and walked on to the north. His mind was not blank nor his heart hollow. He was both thinking and feeling. What nettled his mind was the regret of having come here. What was it that impelled him to return to what he had already renounced? And he trudged along buffeted by the self-reproach.

Yet deep within his heart, that little girl was gambling merrily. He heard her fond twitter: "Father!" Those little footprints would indelibly lie green, those soft sweet sounds would ever ring, in his memory.

Kumari's death was a deliverance. He was now free. There was nothing now that could fetter his limbs. The only little piece of string that bound him to life was now snapped.

She cried to see him in her last moments, did she? But he wondered what he had done for her that his name should be on her lips before the end came. On the day of his leaving his home, he had taken her to a tea-shop and bought some eatables for her. And nothing else since. Yet she cherished him in her mind till the last flicker of her life.

He had at first wanted to go to Manakunnam also, another place where his heart had been caged for a while. But he changed his mind. He had already cut off those moorings. Why go there and resuscitate a dead relationship?

Chellappan returned to Mattanchery. Hamza had feared Chellappan wouldn't be back for a few days and was extremely glad to find him the very next day.

Chellappan took Hamza out for a walk. And they were walking along, Chellappan in front, Hamza following. "Where to brother?" Hamza asked.

"Just come along."

Hamza said humorously :

"I am prepared to follow you to hell."

Chellappan said nothing.

They reached the sea shore and walked towards a desolate place. Chellappan sat down and motioned to Hamza to sit by his side.

Chellappan's face was a cold and forbidding mask. Hamza dreaded facing it.

"What has happened to you, brother?" Hamza asked.

"Nothing. I am alone in this world—but for you."

Hamza did not understand it. He was completely bewildered. Till that moment, Chellappan had not called him "you" in the singular number. That inscrutable shadow of fierceness on his face coupled with the arrogant tone caused a creepy sensation crawl up his spine.

Hamza asked : "What is all this, brother?"

Chellappan stared hard at him. Hamza had a sick feeling of terror building up within. Had the man gone mad? Chellappan was quick to surmise what was crossing the friend's mind.

"Think I am gone off the rocker? Not at all."

Hamza kept mum but after a while asked : "Then this change on your face?"

"O that? Tell me first, why did you love me?"

Hamza was lost for an answer. Yet he managed to mumble : "May be because you loved me,

brother."

The darkness on Chellappan's face deepened. He growled : "Don't call me brother'."

Hamza winced, said nothing.

"Don't ever call me so in future !"

Hamza's head made a slow nod : "See, I never loved you !" Chellappan said more severely. "Did I ?"

Hamza, frightened to the marrow, could not recollect a single instance to say 'yes' to that question.

He said mechanically in a bleat : "No. You did not love me."

"Then why did you love me ?"

Hamza had told him a thousand times why he did. He told him again : "Because you knocked out Pappu and others."

Chellappan moved forward. Hamza too shifted a little away from him. He was gazing at Chellappan. Those frightful shadows were receding. The monster showed signs of returning to human form. Hamza did not feel hatred. He felt pity for him, loved him all the more. Yet he was afraid to talk.

After a while, marshalling all his dismembered spirits, Hamza made bold to ask : "What is wrong, Chellappan ?"

No answer.

Hamza was formulating words to say what he had been yearning to say.

"I had a particular reason for being good with you. I haven't said it so far. Would you like to hear ?"

Chellappan lifted his eyes inquiringly, but still was not his old self.

"I have often thought of saying that," Hamza said, "I didn't know how to put it before you."

Chellappan did not relax the vicious harshness of his looks. Hamza went on : "I wanted to kill Pappu. He ruined me."

Hamza saw Chellappan's eyes sparkle for a moment. And he continued : "I thought you had the same idea too."

Chellappan's lips curled in derision. He muttered : "A mercenary hangman. A tool. Why kill him ?"

"But countless are the crimes of the hellhound !"

Chellappan dismissed it with a shrug. He rose. Hamza also got up. They walked, saying nothing. When they came to a crowded place, Chellappan turned round and blurted out :

"Hamza ! I took you there, to that desolate place—to kill you !"

"I feared as much," Hamza squeaked.

"You are the only living being who stands in my way. If you are also removed, then there will be nobody to claim my body."

"What are you raving about ?"

"This is serious talk. Very very serious."

They walked on and reached the place where Hamza's shop had been once situated. The remains of that shed still lay there. Chellappan stopped. Hamza stopped too.

"It was here that I first saw you. At that time you were yourself a *muthalalee* in the making."

Hamza said absently : "Yes."

Wearily, Chellappan sat down and said : "Sit down. We will talk here. I have a lot to say."

For some moments they spoke nothing. The passers-by eyed them curiously, perhaps recognising Hamza. Chellappan said nothing though he said

he had a lot to say. Eagerly looking forward to what he was going to say, Hamza was also keeping silent.

"Come on, speak out, please," Hamza said at last. He had now overcome his fears.

"This Chellappan first met this Hamza here. And right here we part. This is all I wanted to say."

"Part ? Where are you going ?"

A long silence. Hamza repeated the question four times. After the fifth, Chellappan asked him :

"Have the guts to do it ?"

"To do what ?"

"Has it ever occurred to you that you should do something for the workers, for the poor ? Anytime in the past ?"

An unambiguous straight question. Truthfully Hamza said : "No."

"You are then useless to me. You needn't come with me. You are an ass that spites a tool."

A delirious prattle, Hamza thought. Chellappan was going mad. Hamza said desperately : "My dear Chellappan, I have brought ruin on myself for your sake. I have now no one but you. You will not speak so cruelly. Kill me if you want. How am I to live without you ?"

Chellappan gave a swift answer : "You will live by your trade, making beedis."

"Chellappan !"

Hamza was on the verge of sobbing. He was not equal to the situation.

Chellappan rose. Standing for a moment, he issued a command ! "You ! Stay where you are ! Not a step forward !"

Hamza stood 'as if frozen on the spot. Chellappan strode away and turned into a by-lane. Hamza endeavoured to shout : "Chellappan !" but his vocal cords failed.

Ouroz was found dead. Murdered in cold blood at his own private rest-house built in the midst of his extensive coconut-plantations a little away from Mattanchery. Somebody had run some sharp weapon into his stomach through the window when he was asleep. No one knew who the murderer was. A political assassination, it was thought, following a conspiracy. The *muthalalees* and the bigwigs all over the district rushed to the place of the incident. The news had hit the newspaper headlines. Inquest and postmortem were all over. The dead body was taken to Mattanchery. Thousands thronged to pay their last homage.

Who was the assassin ? As yet there was no clue. Police were conducting a vigorous investigation. It was undoubtedly a political murder, the papers even wrote editorials on the tragedy. They commented that to let the assassin drop through the fingers would be a challenge to the democratic traditions of this land ! Gopi and the other main Union leaders were summoned to the police station and questioned, but released before long.

Ouroz the altruist. Ouroz the bastion of democracy. Ouroz the munificent contributor to nation

building, Ouroz the devoted servant of the people ! Several condolence meetings were held. The workers in his own firm passed a condolence resolution. Another resolution demanded that the murderer should be tracked down at once and punished.

Chellappan presented himself at the Kodungaloor police station. He had in his hand a long pointed iron rod. There were blood stains on it. He said he was the murderer of Ouroz. That he had waited for a good opportunity for committing the murder. And that one day he fulfilled his life's greatest mission, by thrusting the iron rod into the man's stomach.

At the time of his entering the police station, there was a head constable and two constables. They lost no time informing the District Superintendent of Police and other higher authorities who rushed in at once. Chellappan was immediately handcuffed and locked up, but the police authorities made some deep deliberations. How should it be recorded, the murderer voluntarily surrendered or was caught and the weapon discovered ? The Inspector, a young promising official found that it would be a brilliant opportunity to rise if it was twisted as a case of his detective skill. But another officer who apparently grudged the young officer attempting to rise without wings pointed out that a fabrication like that was bound to render the confession to be of no value. Finally, they decided upon sticking to the true facts. The young officer resented the decision, while the latter scoring off him sat pretty.

The police officers began questioning Chellappan. The D.S.P. made the first : "You murdered Ouroz ?"



"Yes," an intrepid answer.

"Your motive?"

"I thought he shouldn't live."

"Why?"

"He was harmful to mankind."

"Did he do anything to you?"

"No, he didn't."

"What was the reason for your spite?"

"He was a bad man."

The officer's next question was whether Chellappan was a worker of the firm owned by the deceased. No, he was not. Personally he had not suffered anything at the hands of Ouroz. He had, as a matter of fact, never seen him before.

The officers found these inadequate for their purpose. The accused must have a motive of his own. Otherwise the case would be weak. A fabrication was the only way out.

"Who else was with you?" Another officer asked.

"None. No one had known."

"Wasn't it at the instance of Gopi, the Union Secretary?"

"No."

The D. S. P. went red: "You would do well to speak the truth. Or, we know how to make you."

Chellappan's lips curled in scorn.

"You'd better spill the facts. Or else you won't have a bone left."

Chellappan replied undaunted: "I am speaking the truth."

"Whom did you consult in this matter?"

"No one."

“Are you a Communist ?”

He paused for a moment before saying : “No.”

The police officers were getting angry. They felt that the man was not speaking the whole truth.

They put questions about the satyagraha at the company gate. Chellappan gave straight answers. The officers were not satisfied. The D. S. P. left, instructing the subordinates to question him in the proper way.

The proper way was adopted. A whole night of blows and kicks. Chellappan didn't produce a sound. At one stage, he fainted. He had nothing more to say than what he had already said.

The next day Chellappan was taken to a magistrate for recording his confession. A police officer dictated the sentences. The story was slightly altered. Chellappan bore a grudge against the late Ouroz for having been incriminated in the events at the company gate. He was intent on killing him from the moment of his release from the jail. He got an opportunity and made use of it. The police compelled him to add : on the way to the scene of the crime, he met two persons. And after the crime was committed a crowd had collected at the spot. He got into their midst and escaped. Chellappan confessed all.

The news of the murder had reached the simple folks at Manakunnam. And later they learnt who the murderer was. Everyone of them was stunned.

Kotha recovering from the shock said : “God blessed us !”

“That is right,” Kochitti said. He continued after a moment. “How stupid of you to have suggested his marriage into our family ! I had never liked it

in fact."

Kotha was stung to the quick: "I like that! Trying to appear wise? I know you did like it and would have jumped for it."

"I just said yes when you seemed to be insistent."

"But why do you quarrel over it now? After all it did not happen," Kumaran said.

Parvathi was standing in silence in the doorway.

"But I am still of the view," Kumaran continued, "Prabha—I mean Chellappan, wouldn't have done it without reasons."

Kotha went a step further.

"He was a man of some stuff. No doubt."

"May be a Union affair or something?" Kochitti asked.

At this stage, Parvathi opened her mouth: "Had he remained here, all this wouldn't have happened."

That view received general approval but Kochitti said: "That is fate. No escape from it wherever you are, here, there or anywhere."

Kotha, musing, repeated: "God saved us!"

Parvathi remained silent. She was probably thinking that if she had left the back door open as desired by him, perhaps, he wouldn't have left the house, and all this wouldn't have happened. Oh, that a trifle like that should make so terrible a change in the course of a life!

"The penalty is death, isn't it?" she asked.

"It is for the court to decide. May be he gets a life term."

Kotha, still thoughtful, said: "Ways of God! Or why should he have come here and got mixed up with us? And that is what pains me!"

"That is right," Parvathi said, choked with emotion. "Oh that he had not come here !"

At this stage, Kochukuttan, who had recently married Parvathi, came up. Parvathi rose with a smile.

"News for you ! It was the man staying here with us who killed Ouroz !" He was abreast of the latest news.

The sad news was being discussed at another place too. It was between Gopal and Bhavani. They sat absorbed in thoughts. The boy Kuttappan had fallen asleep.

"So he knew he was paying his last visit when he came here that day ?"

Gopal said, without lifting his head : "Perhaps."

For some moments they spoke nothing. Bhavani dwelt upon the life of Chellappan seeing it in her own light :

"What a life it was ! He had not known the pleasures of life. As a child, later as a husband. Nor had I. I had always thought he would get into some trouble one day."

Gopal said : "I couldn't see him that day when he came here. And I would like to see him now. May be difficult to get permission."

"I too would like to."

"No. You'd better not see him. It will be most embarrassing."

"But I have a lot to say to him."

"You don't see how it is. Listen, is it fair we should both go together ?"

She put it in a way, as if all her accounts with Chellappan had already been clean settled : "Why not ?"

All is over and he should be only glad that I am safe in the hands of another man."

Gopal turned it over in his mind and agreed that she could go with him."

At Mattanchery, there was a soul, desolate and forsaken, gadding about like a stray dog.

The case against Chellappan had been committed to the Sessions. A large gathering had collected at the court. The Judge had taken his seat. The accused was brought to the dock. A defence advocate had been arranged by the court itself for the accused.

The charge sheet was read out to him. Heard and understood? The accused did. Committed the crime described in it? A firm "yes."

All the people were shocked to hear the answer. His defence advocate was sitting, his head sunk down.

The witnesses were called in one after another and examined. The accused's animus towards the deceased began from the day of the satyagraha at his factory. There were two witnesses to testify to having seen the accused going to the deceased's house with the iron rod in hand! The people who had gathered immediately after the crime testified to having seen the murderer running off with the weapon in hand! They couldn't have apprehended him, as they were panicky. All the witnesses having been examined, Chellappan's statement was recorded. Chellappan admitted to the crime, but refuted the testimony of a few. He had voluntarily made the statement before the magistrate. He had no quarrels about it.

After hearing the arguments, judgment was reser-

ved for two days.

That day, the court hall was full to suffocation. The crowd included Gopal, Bhavani and Kuttappan. Kumaran from Manakunnam too. The weary Hamza was already loitering around. These acquaintances of Chellappan did not know one another.

Bhavani was keen on getting a chance to speak to Chellappan. She had a lot to speak to him. She had brought with her a little money to bribe her way in. Gopal was trying in vain for it on her behalf, since the morning. For hours, he ran frantically about. Bhavani was deeply sore over the disappointment. Weeping, she accused Gopal for his incompetence.

Kumaran too wanted to meet and talk to Chellappan. But he did not know how to work it out and so he made no effort.

At eleven o'clock, Chellappan was brought to the Court, handcuffed. Bhavani was standing on the way, Gopal beside her with the baby on his arms and Kuttappan leaning against his mother.

There came two policemen, Chellappan in between. Chellappan seemed to be walking with measured steps, his eyes fixed into the distant void.

Bhavani suddenly flung herself forward and fell prostrate before him. Kuttappan followed suit. He did it of his own accord.

The accused and the policemen stopped. All the people were stunned. Chellappan looked down. The prostrate woman's luxuriant tresses were lying sprawled on the floor.

One of the policemen snarled : "Get out of the way."

Another lifted up the prostrating two and dragged

them to a side.

A third policeman said : "Don't ! May be his wife."

Chellappan walked along as if oblivious, with no flush, no feelings on his face, the policemen on either side. The onlookers were surprised at the cold and stodgy face. They all thought the woman was his wife. Offering her last greetings.

The Judge arrived in time and took his seat. Pin-drop silence. People holding their breath. The accused got on to the dock. The Judge did not even look at him. Merciless unconcern.

He read out the judgment. A lengthy one. Gopal and Bhavani couldn't make out anything. The accused also didn't seem to understand. Hamza with the look of one in a trance was standing at a far end within Chellappan's sight. The Judge concluded :

"..... And, under Section 302 of the I. P. C., I find the accused guilty, and deserving the highest penalty—to be hanged to death, subject to confirmation."

The handcuffs clamped down round Chellappan's wrists. In a moment he was shoved into a police van. The van rattled away.

Bhavani had laid claim on the dead body. She earned the money for it by mortgaging the five cent plot she and Gopal lived on as, she said, it rightfully belonged to Chellappan.

The doomsday was announced through the newspapers. Bhavani was given notice of it. She and

her husband came in time.

The hanging would take place early in the morning.

There was a weary man who had been squatting all night at the gate of the Central Jail in Trivandrum.

It was Hamza.



# STERLING PAPERBACKS

## CHECK LIST 1974

<b>S34</b>	<b>SELL BETTER LIVE BETTER</b>	
	Alfred Tack	<b>Rs. 5.50</b>
<b>S33</b>	<b>THE CASE OF THE POISONED CAT</b>	
	K. P. Bahadur	<b>Rs. 4.50</b>
<b>S32</b>	<b>TEACH YOURSELF CONTRACT BRIDGE</b>	
	K. L. Hira	<b>Rs. 6.50</b>
<b>S31</b>	<b>THE RAPE</b>	
	Raj Gill	<b>Rs. 6.00</b>
<b>S30</b>	<b>VENUS IN INDIA</b>	
	Charles Devereaux	<b>Rs. 6.50</b>
<b>S29</b>	<b>100 MOST IMPORTANT INDIANS TODAY</b>	
	A Sterling Special	<b>Rs. 6.00</b>
<b>S28</b>	<b>THE HOROSCOPE CANNOT LIE</b>	
	G. D. Khosla	<b>Rs. 4.50</b>
<b>S27</b>	<b>THE IRON ROD</b>	
	Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai	<b>Rs. 5.00</b>
<b>S26</b>	<b>THE INSIDE-OUT OF WATERGATE</b>	
	Vipin Tripathi	<b>Rs. 6.00</b>
<b>S25</b>	<b>PRIVATE LIFE OF YAHYA KHAN</b>	
	Dewan Berindranath	<b>Rs. 5.00</b>
<b>S24</b>	<b>THE ART OF BEING HAPPILY MARRIED</b>	
	Andre Maurois	<b>Rs. 4.00</b>
<b>S23</b>	<b>THE MAN EATER OF MANJARI</b>	
	Ruskin Bond	<b>Rs. 3.50</b>
<b>S22</b>	<b>THE DIAMOND HANDCUFF</b>	
	Krishan Chander	<b>Rs. 4.50</b>
<b>S21</b>	<b>BOBBY</b>	
	Khwaja Ahmad Abbas	<b>Rs. 4.50</b>
<b>S20</b>	<b>PRIVATE VIEW—100 CARTOONS</b>	
	Abu	<b>Rs. 4.00</b>
<b>S19</b>	<b>THE ROAD</b>	
	Mulk Raj Anand	<b>Rs. 4.00</b>
<b>S18</b>	<b>INDIAN POETRY IN ENGLISH TODAY</b>	
	Pritish Nandy (Ed.)	<b>Rs. 3.50</b>
<b>S17</b>	<b>THE ART OF CONVERSATION</b>	
	D. Erskine Muir	<b>Rs. 3.50</b>

<b>S16</b>	<b>CONFESSIONS OF AN INDIAN LOVER</b> Sasthi Brata	<b>Rs. 5.50</b>
<b>S15</b>	<b>BOY MEETS GIRL</b> Khwaja Ahmad Abbas	<b>Rs. 4.50</b>
<b>S14</b>	<b>WORLD FAMOUS LOVERS</b> Melvyn Brown	<b>Rs. 4.00</b>
<b>S13</b>	<b>TWILIGHT IN DELHI</b> Ahmed Ali	<b>Rs. 5.50</b>
<b>S12</b>	<b>MIND YOUR MIND</b> William Welby	<b>Rs. 4.00</b>
<b>S11</b>	<b>IMMORTAL LOVERS</b> Gurbakhsh Singh	<b>Rs. 4.00</b>
<b>S10</b>	<b>THE FUTURE THAT WAS</b> Urmila Haksar	<b>Rs. 5.50</b>
<b>S9</b>	<b>1000 WAYS TO INCREASE YOUR SALES</b> Alfred Tack	<b>Rs. 5.00</b>
<b>S8</b>	<b>LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP</b> Khushwant Singh (Ed.)	<b>Rs. 3.50</b>
<b>S7</b>	<b>BETWEEN TEARS AND LAUGHTER</b> Mulk Raj Anand	<b>Rs. 4.00</b>
<b>S6</b>	<b>PERSONAL ACHIEVEMENT</b> Martin Rhodes	<b>Rs. 4.00</b>
<b>S5</b>	<b>PORTRAITS OF GREATNESS</b> T.V. Parvate	<b>Rs. 5.00</b>
<b>S4</b>	<b>LIFE THE GREAT ADVENTURE</b> Prem Nath (Ed.)	<b>Rs. 5.50</b>
<b>S3</b>	<b>SEX AND VIOLENCE IN LITERATURE AND ARTS</b> Suresh Kohli (Ed.)	<b>Rs. 3.50</b>
<b>S2</b>	<b>LOVE SCENES FROM WORLD FAMOUS NOVELS</b> Ursula Lewis	<b>Rs. 4.50</b>
<b>S1</b>	<b>FLIRTING WITH YOUTH</b> Amrita Pritam	<b>Rs. 3.50</b>



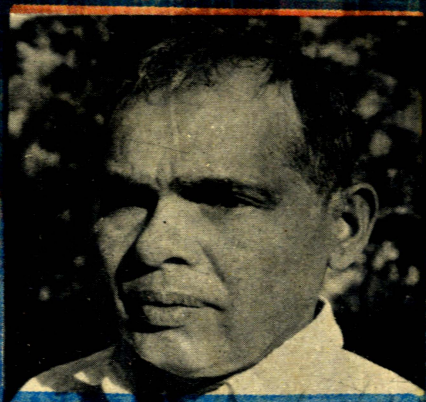
## **Sterling Paperbacks**

**A Division of Sterling Publishers Pvt Ltd**  
**AB/9 Safdarjang Enclave,**  
**New Delhi 110016**



The moving story of a man committed to certain values and ideals by the renowned author of internationally acclaimed Chemmeen. A superb novel, easily the author's best, *The Iron Rod* portrays the violent and sexual episodes with remarkable passion and insight and they are beautifully woven in the main theme. The novel also depicts the loneliness, the suffering, the unfulfilled life, the disturbing situations which drive him to commit a cold-blooded murder of a rich man with an iron rod.

A novel with epic dimensions, enthralling, splendidly narrated, *The Iron Rod* also depicts the life of a man who is a victim of his own lust and passions.



**STERLING PAPERBACKS**

**A DIVISION OF**

**STERLING PUBLISHERS PRIVATE LTD.**