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A NOVEL

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(A Novel)

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FOR

LORD VENKATESWARA

THE FAREWELL PARTY

PROFESSOR PRAKASAM looked at his watch. It was half past three. At five he had to attend the Farewell Party on the eve of his retirement. He was relaxing on his sofa, looking at the afternoon sky. Yes, an hour and a half more and after that he would be a free man. He had been a teacher for more than thirty years. He worked in three universities. His students loved and respected him.

He came to the present University five years ago. Within these five years he had established himself as a good teacher and a sympathetic guide. Students respected him for his scholarship and loved him for his unpretentious nature. The university itself was new. It was a rural university situated on the banks of the river Krishna. The village, Srikakulam, named after one of the Andhra kings had grown into a university town, bustling with activity. The gentle breeze from the river, the green vegetation all around, the silent temple — all these indicated the idyllic atmosphere about the place. It was said that Krishna Deva Raya paid a visit to the temple and this event was inscribed on its walls. So it captured the imagination of every visitor and reminded him of the glory and splendour of the Vijayanagar empire. It also filled him with hope for a resurgent Andhra. The university was

residential. It encouraged inevitably the pursuit of subjects useful for a living. But the cultural aspect of education was not neglected. Nor did it ignore the modern sciences. But much was left to the student to think out for himself. He could commune with Nature in all its glory, he could see the majestic river rolling by. Lectures did not occupy much of his time. He was not oppressed by the nightmare of the examinations and the unpredictable moods of the examiners. Living in the university campus for three years was an education by itself. It prepared him for a vocation in life and also equipped him with a general cultural background. So by the time he left the university he was a full man in a real sense — useful to himself and to others in society.

The Professors were old and most of them had already retired from one institution or the other. They had come there for a spell of peaceful life, free from the usual din and bustle of the cities. The university town offered them peace and content — to some even spiritual thoughts. Superannuation was no problem to them. It looked as though only such tried souls were preferred there. Prakasam was comparatively young for he joined the older group in his fifty-fifth year. He could go on till his sixtieth year or even later, but he chose to retire at the normal period, the sixtieth year.

He had seen much of life — he tried to understand the problems of life. He often asked

himself why there should be ugliness, hatred and injustice in this world, for his own concept of God was based on the three great qualities of Beauty, Love and Justice. If there was such a God and if man had been created in His image there was no reason why he should be bestial. Such problems worried him. He felt that no man could be bad by birth. Man had within him the potentialities for doing good or bad deeds. He was given the free will to choose for himself the nobler path or the ignominious one. But Prakasam felt that on the whole the nobler element in man triumphed over the brute force in him. It was a question of time. Man would ultimately go back to his innate good nature after having experienced several pitfalls and failures in life.

Prakasam very often pitied the narrow minded men and women carried away by considerations of caste and creed. Even educated persons could not get rid of these prejudices. Education had not taught them anything. Some of them were pretty old — physically though not mentally — and a change of heart was almost impossible at that stage. Even then he hoped against hope that in their next life they would be born better. To Prakasam of the early days, 'rebirth' was almost a ridiculous notion. Once a man was dead, he was dead. There was no question of another life. The physical frame was reduced to dust. The immortal part of man, the soul, joined the Infinite. There was an end of it.

It was illogical and unscientific to think of a continuation of life after death. But some of the irreconcilable facts of life had enlarged his vision. In the same family he could find a genius as well as a dunce, born of the same parents and having the same environment. If heredity and environment were the chief forces in shaping man's life — as psychology would put it — how could anyone explain this glaring anomaly? No scientific analysis could possibly explain why some should get all the opportunities of life and go up, and why some others should simply vegetate — of course the academic distinctions and the intense effort put in by the two being the same. Evidently there must be something wrong with nature; often a pessimist would put the blame on Fate, Destiny or some other unforeseen Force. Prakasam gradually came to believe in the Hindu theory of 'Karma'. It alone gave him satisfaction. He understood that man was not entirely responsible for his deeds in this life, his past also played a vital part in shaping his present life. Not merely his deeds, even his parents' deeds would influence him. He might do no wrong in this life, so he might expect a suitable reward. Often the reward would be delayed or sometimes it might not come at all. On all such occasions Prakasam was ready with his answer that something else besides our present life should be taken into consideration. This attitude towards life saved him from bitterness and unhappiness on

many occasions. Now that his active life was over he wanted to devote his well earned rest to seek an interpretation of life. . . . .

It did not mean that Prakasam was always happy during the five years he had been there. There were occasions when he felt gloomy. Despite his proved merit, he was often elbowed out. His simplicity, his forthright speech, his lack of diplomacy, his scholarly pride — all these left him with too few friends. Often he used to retreat into his shell. In moods of depression he could talk to the woods or to the river. He loved his profession. The happiness and the satisfaction he had in teaching made him forget the rebuffs of life. And now on the last day of his service he could look back and feel satisfied. Satisfied for the reason that his own students were flourishing. They were always full of praise for him. Who else could have that legitimate pride for having produced great intellectuals and useful citizens ? Only a teacher like him could have that. He was elated. He was grateful to God for having given him this rare opportunity for serving humanity, faithfully and fearlessly. As compared with some other professions there was not much chance for a man to go wrong in this profession. He pitied the youngsters entering the profession with mercenary thoughts. They were already dissatisfied. They would be, for they did not possess the spirit of service demanded by this profession. Perhaps it enriched the soul and kept

the body near starvation, as they often put it. But Prakasam had the right frame of mind even from the beginning. So he was a success at teaching.

* * *

His stream of thought was interrupted by the entrance of his wife. She liked him particularly in his meditative pose. He was often given to such moods of contemplation. She left him free and never grudged him his freedom. She was prepared to have his company only when it suited him. In his family life Prakasam was exceptionally lucky. His wife was his own student. She understood him thoroughly and respected him for his superior intellect. She tolerated his little angularities. He fussed a lot over trifling things. Sometimes even the arrangement of flowers in the room would be criticised by him, if he were to be in a bad mood. He was dogmatic and assertive; she was meek and submissive. But she could manage him well with her gentle manners and rich common sense. He was a dreamer, she was a realist. He was an utopian, she was practical minded. This difference in nature did not produce any conflicting results; on the other hand the one supplemented the other. She was amused by his philosophic speculations. She mothered him to perfection, whenever he came home disgruntled or disappointed. Their love for one another increased with their years as they faced the storm and stress of life together.

This afternoon in particular, Prakasam was lost in his world of meditation. He seemed to be far, far away from her. She watched him for a minute and sat opposite to him. She looked at him lovingly. She saw him as a young man of Twenty-four, the year he started his career. She belonged to the first batch of students taught by him. Her mind went back to the first day she saw him. She could see him entering the class. It was a big class. Lean, bespectacled Prakasam entered it. There was a lull. The students somehow did not greet him with catcalls, the customary, ceremonial welcome to the new lecturers in that college. They allowed him to speak, half amused and half curious to see how he would manage. He started off like an orator. In his student days he was a good debater; he was used to large audiences. But lecturing, that too for one hour, was different. He was young, he had a sweet, mellifluous voice, almost that of a girl. The front benchers were cheerful and appreciative. Their heads punctuated the rhythm of his speech. But a small group on the last row of benches was listless. Their faces were blank, evidently they were not following him. A senior teacher would have ignored it. But Prakasam wanted to be a good teacher or nothing. The whole class should listen to him, he felt it his duty to get them interested in what he was saying. After a few minutes someone in that group started hitting the bench with the scale producing a

rattling sound. The little fellow next to him was laughing. Prakasam noticed it : he was irritated. He even wanted to punish them. Normally that was expected and that was the beginning of the trouble in almost all the classes. He was himself an old sudent of that college ; therefore he knew its traditions. It was not by accident that he had gone in for teaching. He wanted to be successful or else he was prepared to leave it. If the students did not respect him he did not like to hang on as some others did.

So he looked angrily at the students ; they realised he was annoyed and they kept quiet for a few minutes. Luckily for him the bell came to his rescue. He left the class almost triumphant. That night he thought of those mischievous boys. His first reaction was to punish all those sitting on the last benches. But it was absurd. The same group might not be sitting there every day. It even dawned on him that perhaps there was something wrong in his teaching. He decided to talk to the students the next day.

That same small group was again seated on the last bench. It looked as though they wanted to have some fun at his expense. They were giggling like monkeys. Not that they had any ill will against him, but they just wanted to have some fun. Some of them came from wealthy families and they were not much interested in studies. Education for them was only a means to an end — to get dowries. They

could afford expensive tuitions and even corrupt the examiners as a last resort. Prakasam looked at them and instead of proceeding with the lecture he started talking to them.

'I am afraid you are not able to hear me. Shall I talk a little louder ? I don't want to address the walls. I know I am dealing with live, human beings. I am therefore interested in getting your reactions. It is not enough if a few students listen to me attentively. All of you should be equally interested. Tell me why some of you feel uninterested ?'

They were surprised. Such an approach was novel. They were usually rebuked and punished. It aggravated the malady and they became more and more mischievous. The teachers often lost patience and abused them heartily. But Prakasam was different. The students did not know what to say and he waited for a reply. There was silence, dead silence for a minute or two. He looked at them fixedly and they were looking at each other, surprised and non-plussed. Then one of them stood up and hesitantly muttered,

'Sir we are able to hear you, but we are not able to follow you, as you speak fast'.

Prakasam smiled for it was a simple affair.

'If that is your difficulty I shall go slowly or perhaps you will get used to my way of speaking in course of time. Anyway I shall make an effort,

and you, on your part, should be extremely attentive'.

There was a general assent. A peculiar happiness, born out of understanding, spread over the whole class. They became his willing admirers and faithful disciples. Prakasam established himself as a good teacher.

Mrs. Prakasam thought of his debut. Curiously enough Prakasam also was thinking of that pleasant experience, for his mind was in retrospect. Even at sixty with his silvery, grey hair he could not forget that memorable day. It was green in his memory. For a moment the freshness and the intoxication of that successful day came back to him. Then he looked at his wife. Naturally his thoughts led him on to her. Fair complexioned Sarala was one of the half a dozen girls in the class he took on the first day of his career. She was thin and tallish. She was twenty when she first met him. It was an exciting love affair. Right from the first day he entered the class, she had taken a fancy to him. There was something sweet in her face; her playful smile and her clever, penetrating looks always intrigued him. Even in the autumn of her life she still retained that hold on him. On the whole, it was a successful love marriage.

But in the initial stages it produced a great stir. She did not belong to his caste. It was unthinkable, especially in those days, to marry someone not belonging to one's own caste. But the

Prakasams did it, and they always felt proud and happy about it. Looking back at that happy moment Prakasam was once again moved. He looked lovingly at his wife ; but she felt that she should not disturb him. He noticed her all the same. She was his good student, his loyal wife. The hair was turning grey and she was slightly fat now. But he saw only the sweet girl Sarala entering his room, nearly forty years ago.

Prakasam was sitting in his departmental room in the college. There was a gentle knock at the door.

'Come in please'.

Sarala came in. She met Prakasam several times before. He encouraged her to come to him pretty often. He liked her. But that day somehow she was slightly nervous and she seemed to be intent on doing something.

'Yes Sarala what brings you here ? What can I do for you ? Do you need any help ?'

'No, nothing. I have just come to see you'.

'Yes you have seen me' laughed Prakasam.

She paused for a minute. There was an envelope in her hands ; she holding it near her bosom. He looked at it. She blushed and as she blushed she looked doubly beautiful. She drew the 'sari' tightly over her blouse and her lips artistically twitched. He was no doubt drawn towards her but he could not guess the purpose of her visit. Finally she spoke, though falteringly.

'I have come to give you the greeting card for the New Year'.

'O that's very nice of you. Thank you very much'.

Prakasam stood up and extended his hand to take that card. She extended hers. She was anxious to give the envelope and go away. He was equally desirous of sending her away from his room, lest somebody should notice and talk unsympathetically. The two were novices, as yet, in the art of love making. So in their confusion they gently touched each other's hand and the envelope dropped on the table. Prakasam blushed, Sarala beamed forth a radiant smile. He wanted to say that he was sorry, but she ran away from the room.

He sat for a minute to be composed. It was a novel experience for him. The gentle touch itself was exciting enough. He carefully opened the envelope. There was no greeting card; instead it was a love-letter, a passionate one. For a moment he could not believe himself. He wondered whether he was dreaming. He re-read the letter. Unmistakably it was a love-letter. Sarala's handwriting was fairly good; it was her own writing, no mistake about it. Of course he himself encouraged her on prior occasions to come to him and talk to him, but he never suspected that she was in love with him. That was in the second year of his teaching; 'pretty good beginning' he mused.

The next day when he entered the class he took an added interest in it. Yet it was slightly embarrassing for him to lecture for he thought of Sarala all the time. That feeling lasted only for a day or two and gradually he became his old self again. The novelty wore off, though of course he was still fond of Sarala.

She expected a reply from him, but peculiarly enough he did not respond. It was a trying period for her. She wondered whether she had offended him by writing that letter. She loved him but she did not know whether he had the same feeling for her. Nearly a month passed in that manner. One Sunday she felt restless. It was clear for her that she should get an answer from Prakasam. So she went to his house. He was reading a novel and he was completely absorbed in the study. He was by himself in his room; he was enveloped in the undisturbed silence prevailing there. The books on the shelf, the photographs on the walls, the landscape paintings in the corner — all these indicated simplicity and austerity. Yet there was something artistic about the whole arrangement. It was not the bachelor's den; it was neat, faultlessly neat. Everything in the room including the flower vase on the round table showed to any visitor the artist in Prakasam.

Sarala entered the room gently, stood for a minute and lovingly looked at him. He was startled; he never expected her to be with him in

that room. It was inexplicable. Something totally unexpected had happened. Of course, it was pleasant to see her. The same bewitching smile and the expressive looks were directed at him. He wanted to be nice to her.

'Sit down Sarala'

She was seated. 'Yes what is it now ? Any more letters for me ?' Prakasam smiled mischievously. She responded.

'I hope you are not offended'.

'Offended ! what for ?'

'For that letter . . . .'

'That letter is an excellent one. I love it.'

'And not its writer perhaps !'

'O no, I don't mean that. I only say that it is a pretty good letter with sentiments well expressed.' She was silent. He continued, 'Don't you think it is possible for me to love you ? You are good looking and any young man is bound to love you. He can't help it, you see.'

He was laughing and he was in a jovial mood. She did not know whether he really meant what he said, or was merely kidding her. In him she now saw a new person. He was no longer the serious teacher she had known before. Instead she saw him as a young man with broad shoulders, lustrous eyes and sensual lips.

She wanted to possess him.

'Sarala, I wonder why you are after me. You seem to be rather strange.'

She kept quiet and looked at him steadily and silently. He added, 'Perhaps this is a fleeting fancy. I think very soon you will forget me.'

The callous tone hurt her feelings. She became serious and she even showed slight irritation.

'You take me to be a pigtailed school girl playing hide and seek with boys and girls. No, I am not that sort. You are unfair to me in treating me in that manner. I am sufficiently grown up to understand the significance of marriage and that too with a man like you.'

Prakasam realised her sincerity; he no longer felt like trifling with her emotions. He rose from his chair and went near Sarala. She stood up facing him, expressing her inmost desires. He kissed her; he could no longer deny her that pleasure. They planned their marriage for the summer.

That was Mrs. Prakasam who was sitting before him. There was something magnetic about her. She was the source of comfort for him in all his varied experiences. She was the woman who kept up his ambition throughout. But she too had to face fiery ordeals before she could be his successful partner. Her step-mother goaded her father not to accept this match. In fact it was this step-motherly affection, that drove her towards Prakasam. She wanted to depend on someone and be loved by him. She desperately longed for human affection and warmth. That Prakasam gave in abundance. But some of the youngsters of her own caste looked at her

with contempt. They felt that she had slighted them. They could neither understand nor appreciate her madness for Prakasam. On his side too there were many difficulties. Though his parents were not living at that time he had to face social opprobrium. In desperation Sarala and Prakasam went to some other place and through the help of some friends got married. The news spread to the small town where he was working. The persons in authority in the college were scandalised. They felt that Prakasam had subjected their college to ignominy. He had set a bad example. How could girls from decent families come to their institution any longer? Who would send his children to such a place where the guardians of morality practised immorality? The prospect of losing a large number of students worried them. Not that they were in any way moralists or puritans, yet they had to take a stiff attitude towards Prakasam in the interests of the institution. So they asked him to quit. A notice of dismissal was served on him.

This trouble was a blessing in disguise for the pair, Prakasam and Sarala. It brought them nearer. They had to fight a common foe — social tyranny. She felt sorry for him for she feared that she had ruined his career. Some condemned her, especially his friends. They thought that he was seduced by her. But his courage was unshaken. He knew what he was doing and he was prepared to pay the price for his action. For a month or two his future

seemed to be dark and dreary, yet Sarala was a source of solace for him. Besides he believed more in God than in human beings ; so he could afford to be indifferent to the temporary set-back that had come in his life. No doubt he realised that injustice was done to him by the authorities of the college, but he did not feel like explaining to them his own position. His simple and almost naive faith in himself, that he was destined for an eventful life, also stood him in good stead. He waited patiently for something to happen.

There was an opening in Hyderabad. He moved to that place with Sarala. They started afresh and life went on peacefully for some years. Prakasam's chain of thoughts was disturbed again.

* * *

The postman came and delivered a few letters. Prakasam opened one. Mrs. Prakasam asked.

'Is that from Manohar ? What does he say ?'

Manohar, their only son, was selected in the Indian Foreign Service and he was then in London in the diplomatic service.

'He is getting on well and he finds the work quite interesting. He says, he may come back to India for a short while and after that he may be posted to Washington.'

It should be real good fun to visit one country after another.'

'Yes . . . but . . . '

'He seems to be rather fond of a British girl. He says she is devoted to him.'

Mrs. Prakasam looked archly at her husband.

'Is he serious about her?'

'I don't suppose so. At least I hope not . . .'

Prakasam was reminded of his own experiences in London, while he was a student at Oxford. He went to London for a holiday; he entered a cafe for lunch. A waitress accosted him with a bewitching smile, came to his table and started talking.

'Don't you find it cold over here?'

'Yes, I do.'

'I would love to be in a sunny country like yours. It should be quite thrilling to be in India.'

Prakasam was flattered especially to hear such an account of his country.

'I am glad you like our country.'

'I love it; I love its people too.' She looked at him coquettishly.

Prakasam was for two or three days in London and he went to the same cafe more out of habit than out of any love for the waitress. But she thought differently. She had a suspicion that he was coming there for her; so she made a bold suggestion on the third day of his visit.

'When are you going back to Oxford?'

'Tomorrow'.

'Then let us have good time tonight; it is half

day for me. How about going to a picture and then to a dance?'

'I am not keen on dancing.'

'Then we can go somewhere . . .' she stopped abruptly, winked at him and added, 'we can spend a couple of minutes in my room and celebrate the event.'

'O, I see.'

Now he understood the subtle undertones in her talk, but he wanted to be polite.

'All right, I shall see you at 6 p.m.'

He dashed out of the cafe. He did not relish the talk at all; he was disgusted. He did not want to be unfaithful to his wife, Sarala, in India. He left London for Oxford immediately.

In a similar manner, Prakasam thought, his own son might have been tempted by some woman in London. But he did not approve of such marriages; so he commented.

'I am not particularly happy about this affair of Manohar. I hope it will all be over soon.'

Mrs. Prakasam could not appreciate the views of her husband. She smiled.

'I think you are getting old and orthodox.'

'Of course I am getting old, but I am not orthodox. I have always upheld rationality. I wonder why you say this.'

'Ours was a love marriage, then where is the harm if Manohar loves a girl and marries her?'

'But there are racial differences in the present

case and then there is the problem of the children coming into the world as a result of such a marriage. It will be very unfair to them. They are neither here, nor there. They will become a problem, so such marriages are best avoided.'

'Prakasam, you are forgetting that you are now in the year 1960'.

'What if?'

'We believe in internationalism, and perhaps the first step towards that end is marriage.'

Prakasam with his characteristic, broad smile looked at his wife lovingly and tolerantly.

'Yes, yes. We should have international marriages. I think the world ought to listen to you, but unfortunately they seem to be minding their own business — of hating each other, let alone loving each other. You can very well understand how difficult it is for one nation to love another.'

'This is purely a personal matter; you are cleverly dragging in politics. Professors are clever.'

'That's how I got you.'

Mrs. Prakasam blushed and even in her late fifties she looked beautiful. The old romance, her college days, her romantic infatuation for him, her successful marriage — all these came back to her. He was smiling and she always liked him in that pose.

'Well, anyway Manohar is bound to be clever;

he won't make any mistake. I am sure he won't make any mistake.'

Mrs. Prakasam agreed that it was impossible for their son to make a wrong choice.

The other letter was from their daughter Lalita. As the only daughter of the Prakasams she enjoyed all the privileges of an affluent home. She was particularly liked by her father. He petted her and she grew up to be a smart, witty and intelligent girl. She had his brains; he was proud of her. She was coming that night. She wanted to be with her father on the eve of his retirement. Only the year before, her marriage was celebrated with great pomp. She was exceptionally lucky in getting a good match, her husband was an I.A.S. officer. But she literally ruled over him with her good looks and sharp intellect.

'I don't very much like the way Lalita treats her husband; she bosses over him.' Mrs. Prakasam commented.

'But she is very fond of him. She doesn't efface herself because she has her own personality. I hope you are not jealous of her.'

'Don't be silly. I only fear that her husband may not like to be bossed over all the time and she may get into trouble.'

'Don't you worry about it. Lalita can take care of herself. She can manage him all right.'

'I know you have spoiled her.'

'You see, certain people are destined to be

happy. Some are born to be lucky. Lalita is one such girl. You'd better go in and see whether her favourite dishes are ready.'

'Is it not time for you to go for the party ?'

'Not quite. An hour more.'

Mrs. Prakasam left him.

He opened another letter. It was from his old rival. Five years ago he left Hyderabad or rather he was obliged to leave that college in which he worked for nearly thirty years . . . . Bitter thoughts came to him. It was only because of Principal Gupta that he had to come away. He tore the letter to pieces ; he couldn't stand his handwriting. He swore he would never go there. Moreover why should he go ? His commitments were all over. The daughter was happily married ; the son would go up in the diplomatic service. He was not rich, but he was not in need of money. Even if there were to be need, why should he go to that college of all colleges in the world ? Never, never, he repeated to himself.

* * * *

He thought of his life in Hyderabad. It was inevitable for the letter took him back to that long stretch of life for thirty years with its summer sunshine and winter shadows. He slowly rose in his position, but then the Machiavellian Gupta came on the scene. The bald-headed Gupta was highly connected. Naturally he succeeded in superseding Prakasm.

Immediately after his romantic marriage with Sarala, Prakasam came to Hyderabad. In the first few years itself he earned a name for himself as a good teacher, a great scholar and a perfect gentleman. He was understanding and friendly; so naturally he got on well. It was difficult for him to believe that human nature could be so degraded as to come down to the level of bestiality. He believed in the essential dignity of man, and he also saw the possibility of man becoming divine through his individual efforts. In Rama and Krishna, the mythical Hindu gods, he found a superior race of men inhabiting the earth at one time. The race should have been a godly one and nearer to God in perfection. His own rationality convinced him that there could have been such divine beings who did not suffer from any of the lapses of the modern man. There was degeneracy, but Prakasam felt that man could be revitalised. With such strong convictions Prakasam could easily respect others and be respected by them in return. But he did not condemn vice outright, for he realised that it was a part of man. It was the negative force in him — it was up to him to become divine or beastly. He pitied the unthinking man going down the path from one passionate desire to another. He opted for himself the upward path.

Teaching was to him a noble profession, but he was not blind to the besetting sins creeping even into its fold. Unfortunately the misfits got into it as

a last resort. Some of them stepped in accidentally ; such teachers had neither love for learning, nor love for students. They did not care whether the students listened to them attentively or just tolerated them for an hour. The pay was their main consideration but it was unfortunately not very lucrative. There was his friend Sastry who was of the same age as Prakasam, but even at that fairly impressionable part of life he was always thinking in terms of money. To Sastry money was the only known god and he almost ran a school in his house. The institution of private tuitions was a sacred one for him, and he often argued that but for that, the poor lecturer would have been nowhere. His primary object was to find the tolerably rich boys in the class — that occupied his mind for the first few days. And having spotted out the prey he proceeded methodically. He endeared himself to them by tolerating all lapses on their part. He cajoled and even flattered them, then slyly hinted that they should get help from some good teacher. It was often thought that he could get his private students pass. He approached the other examiners with a list of numbers and obliged them in return.

Sastry was a good friend of Prakasam, but it was strange that they should be friendly. Prakasam had strong views on class-room teaching. He hated giving tuitions for the simple reason that it encouraged idlers to be more idle, and stupid

boys to be stupider. It killed initiative. There was a curious feeling in the minds of the rich students that they could afford to be idle in the class, physically as well as mentally, and then buy a teacher for a small sum of money. They expected such teachers to write notes for them and they would then gulp them. The man who gave tuitions sold his individuality for a cheap price, and the one who received, lost his originality. So there was deterioration on both sides. Prakasam vehemently attacked all such mercenary practices. But Sastry had his own views.

'Prakasam, I wonder how you can be so unreal' icily commented Sastry one evening.

'Unreal! What do you mean?'

'Somehow I have a feeling that you are not doing the right thing in throwing away the chances for getting richer. You can earn only now. You wont have the same energy all the time.'

Prakasam smiled indulgently. He liked Sastry for he was lovable, obliging and friendly. He was ready to do a good turn for all his friends. If there was a marriage in any of his friend's houses, Sastry was bound to be there organising the whole show. He left the place only after all the guests had gone. If a party were to be arranged in the college he would invariably be there. And he did all this out of love for being useful even though his detractors put it down to a craving for popularity. Prakasam

was his neighbour; he could therefore see the brighter side of Sastry's nature.

If Prakasam could get on well with Sastry he could do so with every other member of the college. There was the lecturer in Philosophy, Sekhar, whom it was difficult to like. With his protruding belly, stubby nose and semi-circular patch he always gave one the feeling of laziness and inactivity. It looked as though he had stopped thinking quite a long time ago. He could not help it. With such corpulence he had developed a taste for ease, comfort and luxury. Even in his small lecture room he placed an easy chair so that his fat body could lean on it and relax. He asked his three disciples to come to him and he never committed the sin of teaching Philosophy. He was more interested in Politics and Sociology; he could give the whole history of the institution of marriage from the pre-historic times to the present day. Philosophy was dry; what did it matter if the universe was ruled by God or the devil? Philosophy declaimed that life was transitory, joys were transient, men and women were bubbles in the vast, illimitable ocean of life. Nothing would go with them at the time of death, therefore it would be foolish to be ambitious for name, fame and riches. 'Blessed nonsense' he commented. Sekhar hated to teach Philosophy, but he had a philosophy of his own, modelled after Machiavelli's. Self-good was the only good for him and for its realisa-

tion he did not shrink from doing anything. He would betray his friends, his own kith and kin, if thereby he was sure of getting something for himself. He liked Psychology, but unfortunately he never understood the complicated nervous system. Students endearingly called him Falstaff and he did not very much mind it. In a way it enhanced his prestige to be compared with a comic villain or perhaps a prince of wit. He promised his students 'classes' as he expected to be the Chairman some day. But very often the prophecy proved to be wrong, and the students were the losers thereby.

But he did not lay much store by the examinations. He was thoroughly convinced that the examiners were quixotic, they often did not bother to read the answers. Some, he thought, would go by quantity and not by quality ; some were so lazy that they might get the papers valued by their sons or daughters. There were others who were allergic to Arithmetic and who could never add up 2 and 2. It was always 3 or 5, never 4 by any chance. And there was a personal reason for his non-belief in the examinations — that was a secret and that was known only to him. He passed his Hons. examination only because of his Professor's adding machine and not because of his wonderful knowledge. He sat before his Professor and threatened to commit suicide. The result was a Third class. That very minute he swore he would never put his faith in the examinations. He

never forswore; he was consistently true to his ideal and he hated the bookworms, the spineless fellows, as he called them, who were getting gold medals and distinctions. He looked with contempt at those thin, emaciated creatures — he refused to recognise them as human beings — who could never put on flesh. Philosophy, Literature, Art — what was the earthly use of all these wonderful subjects if they could not give the proper appetite and proper rotundity to their devotees? He did not believe in the dissipation of energies. Conservation was his motto. Speech making was a terrible waste of energy; therefore he spoke slowly, almost inaudibly. Prakasam sympathised with him for his views on examinations. He too pleaded for a reform even though he had a brilliant academic career. But he could see the faults of a system that did not take into consideration the work done by the examinee throughout the year. In the absence of any such record, the examination was likely to be a matter of chance. There was need for giving credit to the steady work; it was cruel to expect the student to cram everything for two or three years and then reproduce it mechanically. The examination system encouraged bare repetition of partly understood and ill digested stuff. Viewed from this angle the whole system would appear to be farcical and ridiculous. But even this faulty system had produced intellectual giants, but that was not realised by Sekhar. And Prakasam

in his enthusiasm for reform supported Sekhar to a certain extent.

But there was Ramesam whose scholarship was meant for the chosen few, not for the mediocrity. It should be for the elite. But somehow he never found out the geniuses and his wisdom luckily remained with him. Or perhaps it was the other way — the students had the good fortune to miss his erudition. It never occurred to him that they were getting stiff bored with him, for he never looked at them. But he liked to boss over, to show off and to get the emoluments without deserving them. In the academic field it was difficult to shine, but he was an expert in the art of undermining others. He did not have the gift of the gab, but he always maintained that speech making was for the politician, not for the teacher. And one who was good at it was only buying cheap popularity. He would never descend to the level of addressing gatherings. Shadwell never deviated into sense ; Ramesam never committed the folly of delivering public speeches.

He had no time for thinking, no time absolutely for writing. But he covered his laziness or perhaps his incapacity by the art of sophistry. He was not going to put himself to the trouble of writing a second or third rate article or book. He should write the best or else not at all. The best never came out and so nothing came from his pen. He sneered at the efforts of others at writing

because he himself could not do it. The aesthetic pleasure, the inner satisfaction of having done something creative and the stimulating effect it had on the brain — all these simply did not exist for him. He hated everyone, very few liked him. For that very reason — that he was disliked by many — Prakasam befriended him.

To a lover of human nature like Prakasam these little angularities meant nothing. He could therefore be friendly even with Ramesam. He sincerely believed that it was too much to expect men and women to be faultlessly pure and divinely good. It would be preposterous to do so. One had to live in an imperfect world, with human beings not in any way perfect. It would be sheer folly, if not hypocrisy, if one were to assume for oneself the godhead and condemn others as being beastly and inhuman. Tolerance was needed; Prakasam realised that. Naturally the others looked to him for company and three years he spent rather happily.

Prakasam was curious. He started thinking of Principal Gupta on seeing his letter, but his thoughts went back to his first few years at Hyderabad. Of late he was living in the past and he was often talking about his earlier experiences. They were the best loved and the most vivid ones for him. The present had nothing more to offer. He had been a Professor for nearly two decades and he had been quite happy in his domestic life.

What else did he want ? Was there anything more for him to aspire ? Was it not on the whole a well spent life, a usefully lived life ? What else was there ? Nothing. So he had developed a tendency to live once again the life of his youth, through his mental pictures. Moreover he was getting older and less clear in thinking. On that account also his mind ran fast backwards and the recent happenings were not as vividly recorded on it as the past ones. It refused to submit itself to the tyranny of the present. The past was lovable for it was hectic, romantic and eventful. The present was the autumn with its dim light ; the past was the spring, summer and winter. Even that winter, however unpleasant it might have been at that time, was far better than the present autumn. So Prakasam thought of the past, particularly the summer in his life.

Then after three years of happy stay at Hyderabad Prakasam was lucky in getting a state scholarship to go abroad and to prosecute his studies at Oxford. It was unexpected even though he well deserved it. Some no doubt envied him and they wished that something should happen to prevent his going. Unfortunately he was friendly even with those poor specimens of humanity, who could not tolerate a fellow mortal going up. On the strength of astrology one predicted that he would never go abroad. He was not born in a watery sign, so how could he go ? Prakasam did

not know much of astrology, and whether he was born in a watery sign or not he knew he was going. Rather he was determined to go. Only a year ago his son was born, he was very fond of him. He loved his wife Sarala for whom he staked everything. Even then he was bent upon going and nothing could change his mind, not even his affection for his wife and son. Some of his colleagues dissuaded him from an ostensibly humanitarian point of view. He might get into bad ways as many others had done before and they wanted to save him from such a catastrophe. Once or twice he was really irritated and he felt like telling them 'mind your own business.' With sheer willpower he controlled himself, and when the time came, he sailed for the U.K.

* * *

Prakasam thought of his life at Oxford. Two years at Oxford made Prakasam a better man. Even before he went abroad he was good, but life at Oxford gave him that polish and culture that would go a long way in life. That was exactly the time when he matured into a man, with his views well defined and shaped. It gave him time for thinking about himself and human nature in general. If he had gone as a boy perhaps he might have come back as a prig or a snob. But he had seen life, taught for a few years and therefore could accept the best at Oxford. He was not there

simply for the sake of keeping terms and entertaining friends in the rooms or for leading a Bohemian life. He wanted to make his stay a fruitful one. So he attended the lectures regularly, worked hard for the tutorials and came back with a Second Class Hons. That was good enough and especially in those days of British patronage it was considered to be a splendid degree. On the whole it was a pleasant life for him and his teachers were kind to him.

Those were the days of agitation against the Britishers. Gandhiji had launched his Salt Satyagraha Movement. Prakasam was divided in his loyalties. He was a staunch nationalist, but he developed a great admiration for the British culture. At home the Britisher was altogether a different person. He was helpful, kind and polite. Prakasam had several British friends who liked him. It was difficult for him to tear himself away from those friends simply because of political differences. In fact, human relationships seemed to be more vital for him than political ties. There was Margaret, deeply attached to him and greatly interested in India. She kept up the friendship even after his departure and she used to write to him frequently. He met her by accident in a club and she started talking to him as though she had known him for years. It amazed him, but her friendliness captured him. He was often in her

company and she was quite a stimulating influence on him.

'Prakasam, I wonder why there should be bitterness between our two countries. Don't you think it is silly to go about like this hating each other?'

'Yes, there is no point in spreading ill-will, but yet we want to be independent. That's our legitimate right.'

'Of course, you ought to be independent. But do you really think you can manage it by yourself now? Don't you think that your country will have to wait for some time more before it can be independent?'

'That's what your politicians tell us. But some beginning has to be made, the sooner the better.'

'I think so.'

That was how they started talking the first night they met. Prakasam took upon himself the role of a missionary as long as he was in England. He supported anything, even early marriages. He honestly felt that he should give a good account of his country. If he were to criticise his own country, he could do it after his return. He was amused by the pitiful ignorance of some of the English about India. Old women often pitied him for he did not have a true religion. Some were pleasantly surprised to find him to be intelligent. Once a girl asked him quite casually,

'Do you believe in religion?'

'No' commented Prakasam.

'Do you believe in God?'

'Yes'

The girl immediately said, 'Then you are a Christian, because God means only Christ.' Margaret was more understanding. She too put questions, but they were more in the shape of doubts to be cleared by him

'Prakasam, what do you think of your gods and goddesses? Is it not unreasonable to talk of gods?'

'In a way it is unscientific. But I suppose no religion is based on scientific principles. Religion is entirely a matter of faith. The Hindus believe in the freedom of worship. That shows the catholicity of Hinduism. It is immaterial whether you worship this god or that god. To worship some god is better than not to worship any god'

'Then how about idolatry?'

'Well, that is meant for the ordinary man who cannot concentrate otherwise. If you are an intellectual you can attain salvation through spiritual enlightenment. You need not bother yourself about all these ceremonies.'

'It looks as though you have several methods for attaining salvation.'

'Of course we have. But all paths lead to the same goal.'

'Prakasam, I hear a lot about the caste system in India. Is it a part of your religion?'

'O no, definitely not. That is a misconception

prevalent even among the people in our country. Caste system is a purely social institution. It is like your class system. It has nothing to do with religion. But practices coming from ages past get absorbed into religion; that's how the essence of religion is lost. We have the ritual and the ceremony. The ordinary man equates ritual with religion and ignores its essential significance.'

'I understand what you mean. But I do believe that we should do away with these ridiculous distinctions of caste and class. God's purpose is defeated by these man-made narrow distinctions.'

'Yes, that's true. But it takes a long time before these ugly sores disappear.'

* * *

Then Prakasam thought of his life after his return. He came back to Hyderabad after two years of stay at Oxford. He joined the New College. With his good degree from Oxford he commanded respect from his colleagues and his students. The first five years he spent at the New College were hectic ones for him. The Principal was noted for his pro-British sympathies. He was a great admirer of British diplomacy and he in his modest manner adopted it in the administration of the college. Divide and rule was his basic ideology. He created rifts among the members of the staff. His likes and dislikes varied like the winds. Nothing was certain; he could suddenly leave his own loyal supporters in the lurch. His ways were mysterious and

inscrutable. Prakasam did not like him very much. There was a world of difference between the two. Prakasam was forthright in his speech and he did not mince matters. He was prepared to call a spade a spade. The Principal was circuitous. His thinking was never straight, much less his action.

Like the Battle of the Books a futile battle was going on by the time Prakasam joined that college. Those who had First class degrees looked down upon their less fortunate brethren with Second classes. Suri was a gold medalist with a first class to his credit. He could never forget it. He bragged about it. He collected a few others of that type. The Principal encouraged Suri. He put him on every committee. He always consulted him. Nothing could happen without Suri — he was the right hand man. Students often referred him as Vice-Principal. In fact there was no such post. But Suri took it literally and he often dreamt he was the Principal. One step more and he would be the Principal one day. He was in his thirties, but he was very ambitious. Power was his creed and in its pursuit he was ruthless and unscrupulous.

Prakasam was reminded of his first meeting with Suri.

'Hallo Prakasam, we are very happy to have you with us. We have been looking forward to your return. We want people like you, or else this college will go to dogs. I tell you, it will go to pieces.....That's true, by and by, you'll know all

about this college. There are some undesirables. Of course I don't want to prejudice you against anybody. But I think I ought to tell you about some of our colleagues.'

'Do by all means. Of course, I shall judge for myself as time goes on, but no harm in hearing your views.'

'Yes, this will be a background for you. You see, there is that devil of a fellow, that Sundaram.'

'Yes, what's wrong with him?'

'You ought to avoid him. He is as bad as a pestilence. It is caught easily but takes a long time to get rid of it. You see, he is a bad fellow. He is good for nothing as a teacher. Of course he got a Second class, but he is the poorest teacher we have. His knowledge is old fashioned. He doesn't know anything about the recent trends.'

'At the undergraduate level what else is wanted? Is it not enough if he gives them the essentials?'

'O no, not that way. To tell you the truth he has forgotten his subject. Look at his face, it will tell you how deplorable his mind is. If I were the Principal I would sack him immediately.'

'Then, why don't you tell the Principal about him?'

'I told him a hundred times, but the Principal is a coward. Sundaram is highly connected. So he is afraid to touch him. Anyway be careful with him. Don't you become too friendly with him.'

Prakasam learnt his first lesson in human nature. He never thought that educated persons could be so depraved as that. He talked to Sundaram a few days later. He was friendly, sociable and obliging. He wanted to please Prakasam. It looked as though he was anxious to be friendly with Prakasam. He wanted to tell him how Suri was ruining the institution. He saw Suri talking to Prakasam. Naturally he too was eager to present his own viewpoint.

'Prakasam, I don't pretend to be brilliant as Suri does. After all I am in my forties. I have seen a good bit of life. At my age I can't show off. I teach in my own way though Suri considers it old fashioned. I know I can deliver the goods.'

Prakasam felt that Sundaram was more of a gentleman than Suri. He had a sense of modesty, which the other absolutely lacked. He knew his limitations; so Prakasam liked him better.

'Sundaram, you need not be so modest as all that. I think you are doing your best. And one day you will get the reward.'

'If meanwhile I don't get sacked. Suri poisons the mind of the Principal and anything may happen to me any moment.'

'Don't you fear. Truth will prevail.'

'Prakasam, you sound strange. You have not yet seen life. You are fresh from an English University. Truth has no place here. It's flattery that counts. No one wants your teaching. It's a

disqualification to be a good teacher. Be a flatterer, then you'll go up.'

'I am afraid you are getting cynical. That's not the right approach to life. You can't possibly say that there is no justice at all. There is fair play. Wait patiently.'

'Prakasam, I have waited long enough. Suri and his group leave us in no peace. We fear our own shadows.'

'It's a sad state of affairs. If you are all the time on tenter-hooks how can you do justice to your work? You ought to be happy.'

'I am not the only one in this miserable state. There are others who are equally distressed. The Principal keeps us at a distance as though we are unwanted and dangerous. In fact he never calls us.'

Prakasam was initiated into the mysteries of the New College. He was not treading on safe ground. He must watch his steps. Both Sundaram and Suri confided in him. Each hated the other, yet he was liked by both of them. He was a common ground; he thought he could exploit this and bring about harmony. He also wanted to talk to the Principal. He entered his room. The Principal was all courtesy to him.

'Yes, Prakasam, what brings you here?'

'I thought I might talk to you about the college.'

The Principal's face changed colour. He

wondered how Prakasam had the courage to talk to him about the college. He checked himself and politely added,

'Yes, go on. What do you want to say?'

'You see some of our teachers don't seem to be happy.'

'O, don't bother. Some of them are regular grousers. They are grumbling all the time for some reason or other. They can never be happy.'

'But they are not just individuals. They are responsible for shaping young minds. If they themselves do not have the proper frame of mind, how can they give it to others?'

'I don't suppose it really matters. A teacher ought to be objective. He shouldn't bring his misery to the class.'

'True, but he does. He can't help it. He is a human being. So he carries his emotions with him.'

'O, well, it may be true. However I can't do anything about the misery of certain wretched souls.'

'No, they are not wretched. They are made wretched. For instance Sundaram feels quite isolated. He feels he is cold shouldered. You could make him feel better by talking to him now and then.'

'Yes, I do talk to him. But he gets so excited that I can't stand him. He is a sentimental fool. I have no patience for him.'

'I am sorry you feel that way about him. You

could encourage him by putting him on some of the Committees. He then gets confidence in himself. And he will be more useful to the institution.'

'Prakasam, I think you'd better mind your own business. You are young and inexperienced. Administration knows no human feelings. It's a machine.'

'I quite realise it. But perhaps administrative machinery becomes more effective with some human element added to it.'

'We disagree. I am sorry I can't possibly do anything for Sundaram.'

'Thank you for having listened to me.'

Prakasam left the Principal's room quite dissatisfied. He thought he could convince him, but he was adamant. He could also see that he had annoyed the Principal by taking up the cause of Sundaram. He was right in his guess, for the Principal never forgave him for his interference in administrative matters. The Principal called Suri immediately after Prakasam's departure. He was fretting and fuming. Suri entered the room.

'It seems you called for me' enquired Suri.

'Yes, I did. Prakasam was with me.'

'What for? Is there anything important?'

'He has come to champion the cause of Sundaram. He advises me to be more sympathetic towards him.'

'Fine! So he befriends Sundaram. I know Sundaram is melodramatic. Prakasam would have

pitied him. But he has no business to champion him, especially after I had warned him. I'll teach him a lesson.'

'I think you should.'

Suri promised to help the Principal in his endeavour to put down Prakasam.

Suri saw Prakasam a few days later.

'Prakasam, I am sorry for you. You are suspected of Congress leanings. So be careful.'

'Of course I am nationalistic. Who would like to be a slave? But anyway I am not even a member of the Congress. I don't suppose you are justified in talking like that.'

'Well, the Principal feels that way. Better humour him. After all he is your boss.'

'That's true, but I have my own individuality. I can't possibly say "yes" to everything he says.'

'You have to, if you wish to continue here. Next year there will be a Professorship in your department. And you can get it, if the Principal is on your side.'

'I don't want to get it that way. I would rather get it on the basis of merit. If injustice is done to me I would leave the institution. That's how I take things.'

'Anyway don't poke your nose unnecessarily into matters that do not concern you. You'll get into trouble, if you do.'

Prakasam understood the implied suggestion. He realised that Suri was referring to his interest

in Sundaram. He kept quiet. Suri left him with a malicious look.

The next year the Professorship was not created as the Principal did not like Prakasam's independent spirit. He called it insubordination, but Prakasam felt it to be belief in the essential dignity of human beings. Prakasam was not sorry for it. He thought he could afford to wait for some time more.

* * *

Prakasam was slightly disturbed. Mrs. Prakasam came back. He looked at her and smiled. She started talking.

'You seem to be in a reverie. I hope you won't be late for the function.'

'No, I won't be late. I was thinking of my life at the New College.'

'O, I see. Are you also thinking of that girl, what's her name? I forget now.'

'You mean Padma, the girl who was crazy about me. I wonder what she is doing now.'

'She would have been married by now. She may be having children too.'

'Yes, just possible.'

Prakasam had a broad smile when he thought of that episode. Padma did not know that Prakasam was married. On his return from Oxford he happened to teach her. She admired him; she became terribly fond of him. Prakasam

was amused. He knew her mind, but he wanted to give her a surprise.

'I would like to come to your house; I have some doubts to be cleared.' Padma put in one day.

Prakasam paused for a while and replied.

'Yes, you can come. You are welcome.'

He gave directions for reaching his house and she came on time the next day. It was evening. She was seated in the drawing room. She looked at every object tenderly, in fact she could not guess the exact age of Prakasam. He called his wife. He introduced her to Padma and went inside to ask the servant to prepare tea.

'I didn't know that Mr. Prakasam was married.'

'O, I see,' commented Mrs. Prakasam with a gentle smile.

Padma was disappointed, no doubt. But soon she got over her shock and became friendly with Mrs. Prakasam. She came very often to their house and the Prakasams always treated her with affection. Later she left that town and they lost touch with her.

That memorable evening on the eve of his retirement. Prakasam thought of Padma again. Mrs. Prakasam never exhibited any jealousy towards any woman who had taken a fancy for Prakasam. By nature she was not possessive. So she could sympathetically understand the infatuation of other women for Prakasam.

* * *

Mrs. Prakasam asked him about the third letter.

'Who has written that letter from Hyderabad?'

'Principal Gupta.'

'Why, what does he want?'

'Nothing, he simply sends his compliments to me on the eve of my retirement.'

'Then have you been thinking of him?'

'In a way I have been. But of course I have been thinking of our life at Hyderabad in general.'

'You mean your stay at the New College.'

'Yes, New College — those five years of active life; yes, I am reminded of Suri, Sundaram and a host of others. Sundaram must have retired by now. Suri was almost of my age. Those were the tumultuous days.'

'It's all over now. I wonder what they are doing now. I remember how the Principal stood in your way of being promoted to the Professorship. But God's ways are just.'

'Do you remember all the fuss he created simply because I didn't like to take into my department the man he recommended?'

'Yes, I do.'

Prakasam sat silent for a few minutes. That tempestuous scene was before him.

'Prakasam, you'd better take Mohan into your department' put in the Principal of the New College.

'But the other young man is better qualified. So I think in fairness to him we ought to take him.'

'No, I don't like him.'

'If merit is taken into consideration, Mohan doesn't stand any chance at all. That's my frank view. You can do as you like.'

Prakasam left the Principal's office in utter disgust.

* * *

After five years the Principal retired and Prakasam became a Professor in that College. For a little more than fifteen years he occupied that chair with distinction. Students loved him. Some of them rose to high positions. They always remembered Prakasam with love and admiration. His vast erudition made them respect him; his humane nature endeared him to them. They loved him, but they feared him too.

Prakasam at that moment remembered Murty, one of his students. One evening he came to him dejected and on the brink of a collapse.

'Sir, I think I may fail again. I have already failed twice. I don't think I'll ever pass. I am the only unfortunate person. All my friends have passed. Last night I felt like committing suicide.'

'What a silly thing to do. What will you do after taking the degree?'

'Nothing. I am not in need of a job. I have some property. There is no immediate need for me to go in for a job.'

'Then, why should you worry yourself about passing? If you pass, well and good. Even if you don't pass, you are not hard up for a job. So what does it matter?'

'All my friends may ridicule me if I fail this time also.'

'They are young and immature like you. They haven't seen the world as yet. It's too much to expect success all the time. And there is an element of chance in our examination system. Sometimes even a deserving candidate may go down. It's just possible. You have done your duty.'

'Yes, I can say that in all sincerity. I have done my best.'

'Then that's enough. The result is not in your hands. You can put in effort, but you can't be quite sure of the reward. You must develop a certain amount of detachment, or else you can't exist. In all likelihood you may pass this time. Even if it is otherwise you should not worry.'

'I see your point, Sir, I feel slightly better. I get cheered up.'

'Of course we all want our efforts to be crowned with success. But we are unfortunately not the complete masters of everything. So we have to accept things as they come. We can't hurry the pace, nor can we alter certain situations.'

'True, quite true.'

'I also advise you, Murty, to take up a job.

Not that you are in need of it, but it will offer some diversion to you. Now you are thinking too much about this examination. It has become an obsession with you. You are getting mentally unbalanced too.'

'Yes, I fear I may go mad.'

'O no, don't fear. You keep yourself busy by taking up a job. Forget all about examinations. Get into a different world altogether. Don't even look at the result. You refuse to see it in the papers. Your friends perhaps may write to you. Once you become indifferent, the result will be all right. The more you hanker after it, the more it troubles you.'

Murty was happy and he left Prakasam with a certain amount of mental satisfaction.

Mrs. Prakasam commented again.

'Anyway your life at the New College in the last few years was better.'

'Yes, it was definitely better, but for the last clumsy affair of Gupta superseding me.'

'O, don't bother about Gupta. On the whole you had a fine life. You can't deny that.'

'True, true' he yielded.

He enjoyed teaching at the postgraduate level and the students too could appreciate his scholarship better. His colleagues became friendly, there were no more cliques as in the past. He was proud of his students. The nationalist movement attracted some of them. Though he could not openly

participate in the struggle for freedom, he had at least his students in the thick of it. This gave him an additional satisfaction.

The Salt Satyagraha movement was called off by Gandhiji. But that did not mean there was peace in the country. The Congress was still working, though of course silently. It was stabilising its position. The cause of the Harijans was taken up by the Mahatma. Prakasam with his reformative zeal felt one with the Congress on this issue. He wrote a few articles justifying the lead given by Gandhiji towards the amelioration of this class. The caste system had outlived its usefulness. There was no point in keeping some human beings out of the normal, social fold. It was pitiful and harrowing for Prakasam to see human beings in abject misery. He had a curious explanation for the origin and growth of the Harijans. To him they were the people excommunicated by society. Primitive society was more rigid than the modern one in implementing its laws. Society was ruthless towards those who flouted its authority. So these unfortunate persons, cut off from normal life, developed peculiar habits, and from generation to generation there was greater degeneracy. Temples were closed to them; they lived outside the respectable social pale. The problem in all its entirety was taken up by Prakasam in those days of social reconstruction. He was quite vehement in his support of the Harijans.

The Congress decided to enter the legislatures. They felt that the constitutional machinery should be used for the fight for freedom. After heated discussions they took this bold step. This was something new and there was tremendous excitement. In most of the States the Congress successfully captured the majority of seats. It came into power. The man in the street was thrilled. The people who were beaten and ill-treated by the police had now become Ministers. What a change! The spotless white cap came to be honoured. These changes did not take place in Hyderabad as it was still a princely state. But Prakasam observed the changes round about him and was mightily pleased.

One of his own students had become a member of the Assembly in Madras. He came to Prakasam.

'I am very happy to tell you that I have been elected to the Assembly.'

'Congratulations, Rao. I am proud of you.'

'How is life with you, Sir?'

'It goes on. No changes. We do the same type of work year after year. We value papers, sit on committees — nothing exciting.'

'But you are doing a great service to the country in training the youth. I can never forget the stimulating lectures you used to give. We always talk of you. Whenever a few of us meet, we think of you. We wonder how you are getting on.'

'Thank you, Rao, for thinking of me and our work in the college. It always gives me great pleasure to see my old students. But tell me something about the Congress organization. As you are in the Assembly you ought to know more. I wish I could resign my post and join the struggle for freedom.'

'No, no please do not leave this noble profession. We want inspiring teachers like you to remain in the profession. Or else we don't get the right type of persons to participate in the national struggle.'

'I see your point. But sometimes I feel I am not doing my best for our country.'

'Of course we are now in a better position than what we were a few years ago. We are on our way to freedom. It's only a question of time. We are now planning for some constructive work. The age-long Zamindari system has made our poor farmers poorer. It has made the rich, richer. There does not seem to be any justice. The farmers groan under the heavy taxes. The Congress will now try to abolish these Zamindaries.'

'It's a good thing to do. It'll mean a lot of opposition, but I hope the Congress will fight this evil, tooth and nail. It'll be a godsend for the poor worker.'

'Besides it's silly to have this remnant of feudalism raising its ugly head even in the

twentieth century. The sooner it is done away with, the better.'

'Rao, I am happy to hear all this. I hope our leaders will stand for what is righteous and liberate the country.'

Prakasam's mind on the eve of his retirement was full of these faces. His old students, his colleagues, his close friends — all these came back to his memory. It had been a rich and varied life, with its ups and downs. He never lost faith in himself or in humanity. If some were unkind or hostile to him he always tried to be friendly with them. In fact he did not have any serious quarrel with anyone. Some felt jealous of him, but he tolerated them.

Mrs. Prakasam was still with Prakasam. She was reading a book. Now and then she was looking at him. She thought he might be late for the party. Once or twice she looked at her watch, thereby hoping to attract his attention. But he was in a different world altogether. Mrs. Prakasam remembered clearly the occasions when Prakasam came home slightly disturbed just because of some unpleasant scene in the department. Most of the junior members were his own students. They were trained by him.

'You don't seem to be quite happy today' commented Mrs. Prakasam.

'O, I am thinking of Bhushan'.

'Why, what has happened?'

'He thinks I have not supported him in getting his lectureship. Someone has told him so and he believes it.'

'He must be credulous to believe all such stories. He is your own student.'

'That makes the matter worse. If an outsider misunderstands me it's bearable. But it's hard if my own student disbelieves me. I have never come across such a person before. So I feel hurt.'

'Don't worry. You have done your duty. What does it matter even if he thinks ill of you? You don't generally expect gratitude.'

'Of course I don't expect him to be grateful to me; in fact I feel it is difficult to be grateful. It's easier to be ungrateful. I take a realistic view. So I was not worried about it. But the worst part of it is this. I explained to him the whole situation even though I was under no obligation to do so. I did it as he was my former student. Even then he doesn't say, he is sorry for his mistake. Nor does he indicate that he believes in what I have told him. He looks at me incredulously. This maddens me.'

'Prakasam, don't be silly, ignore him. Time will cure him of his madness. He'll come round. Even if he doesn't, why should it seriously upset you?'

'I don't think it should. I ought to be sorry for him.'

Mrs. Prakasam softened him and made him cheerful again.

Prakasam was a great optimist and by nature he was cheerful. So his summer clouds never stayed for a longer time than they should. He was his old self again. Besides, she was a good helpmate to him. She knew how to keep him in good humour.

On the whole Prakasam steered his ship well and by the time he resigned his Professorship at Hyderabad the prestige of his department was high. English teaching was not an ordinary job. It was a foreign language, though of course the language of the rulers at that time. Prakasam had his own views about teaching this language. He felt that a teacher should first create an interest in the student for English. Many teachers differed from him on this point. They insisted on making their lectures as scholarly as possible, and they expected the students to come up to their level. The question of creating interest in the student did not occur to them at all, for the teachers were there to contribute to knowledge, not to make their lectures spicy and attractive. They even felt that it would be buffoonery and not serious teaching, if they ever tried to make their lectures interesting. Prakasam was no doubt amused by their arguments. He could see their point of view. But a good teacher could well fulfil both the objectives. He could make his lectures interesting as well as

scholarly. At the undergraduate level, he wanted some such effort to be made. Once the student got interested in what the teacher was saying he would naturally develop a taste for that subject. At the postgraduate level a teacher could make his lectures learned and scholarly. So Prakasam strongly felt that at the undergraduate level a teacher's foremost duty was to get the student interested in his subject. This did not mean that the lecturer should be theatrical; far from it. The teacher could be as serious as possible, but through an emotional appeal he could make his lectures lively and human.

* * *

Prakasam travelled fast in his recollection of the past. His mental pictures were kaleidoscopic. They moved rapidly, persons and scenes, all in a jumbled fashion. The political scene was before him. The Second World War had started. India was dragged in. The Congress felt offended, because it was not consulted. They resolved to quit office. Some of them wanted to continue in the legislatures, but the majority did not feel like continuing. So they came out of the legislatures. It was a short lived glory, not much could be done by them within such a brief period. But they felt that it was an experiment worth trying. And they took it in that spirit.

The war clouds were threatening India also. Japan was proving to be a mighty foe in the East.

Prakasam, as a pacifist, could neither understand nor appreciate the philosophy of war. But it seemed to be a necessary evil. Wars were waged right from the dawn of civilization and even in the pre-historic times. Perhaps it was an outlet for the animal instincts still in man. Civilization did not reform him. It was a vicious circle. Sometimes someone might start war and for self defence others might have to fight. Whether a war was for a good cause or a wrong one did not matter to Prakasam. He was more concerned about its consequences. The ghastliness, the horror and the savagery of war appalled him. Often he dreamt of war and woke up shivering. Those were awful days for him. He prayed for peace. Civilians had to give up everything for the armed forces. Travelling became difficult, if not impossible. One had to put up with many privations. It irked Prakasam to see all this unnecessary trouble thrust on India. But there was at least one good thing. The educated unemployed at last got an opening owing to the war. Most of them were idle for years. They had no future. Some of them became cynical; others were frustrated and quite a few accepted their lot with philosophic resignation. All of a sudden there was something bright for them. To them war was a boon, for millions it was a curse. Prakasam was amused by the thought. Even in things rotten there was a core of goodness. That was in fact the beauty of life. It had its sunny

aspect as well as the dreary winter look. The low paid employees too got definitely better posts. They were all war time jobs, but even a short spell of fine weather was a welcome break after a long winter. So several of them got out of their rut and accepted the tempting offers. They suddenly found themselves holding big posts. They too considered war a blessing.

But these blessings were nothing compared with the ruin and devastation brought about by war. Prakasam's friends advised him to take up a temporary post, just for a change. And it would mean financial gain also. He summarily rejected all such advice. His humanitarian outlook condemned war. It was definitely an evil. He could never help in waging war.

Some interesting events were taking place in India. Gandhiji started the Individual Satyagraha in 1942. 'Quit India' was the slogan. The Britishers were asked to quit. Even before he could set this movement going he was put in prison. All the leading Congressmen in all the Provinces were arrested. The people got wild; anarchy prevailed. Violence was resorted to, whereas non-violence was the creed of the Congress. It looked as though the pent-up emotions were welling up. Gandhiji had to call off the movement; but the widespread demonstrations indicated to the British that the time was up. They knew that they had to leave India sooner or later. Students were the worst

sufferers in this movement. With their characteristic emotionalism they joined the movement. Most of them were imprisoned; some lost their lives also. To quell disturbances the police were obliged to shoot and sometimes indiscriminately too. Prakasam heard that one of his own students was killed in one such tragic episode. He was moved almost to tears. He wondered when and whether this struggle would come to a close. It was a huge price they were paying for freedom. A great sacrifice on the part of all these men and women, Prakasam thought. On all such occasions he felt ashamed of himself that he was not actively participating in the struggle. But his academic interests equally kept him away from politics. He watched the political situation, the unprecedented struggle, with fascination and admiration. This was a unique freedom struggle. It was bound to make history with its stress on non-violence.

* * *

He was also reminded of another event of the same year, equally harrowing and distressful. This was an emotional entanglement and the consequence had been disastrous. He met almost by accident a fairly elderly type of man near a shop. He accosted him, but the other simply gazed at him. It was rather funny, for the elderly man was known to him quite well. He came to him many a time while his son Seshu was studying under him. Prakasam felt that perhaps Seshu's father

had forgotten him. So he again spoke to him,

'Don't you recognise me, I am Prakasam'.

'I do, but I don't want to' was the acid reply.

This reply was impudent as well as intriguing. 'Why shouldn't he recognise me? How have I offended him?' Prakasam asked himself. However he was patient enough not to be irritated. He made a fresh approach.

'How is Seshu? What's he doing?'

Seshu's father looked grim, paused for a minute and blurted out, 'Dead.'

'Dead! You don't mean to say that Seshu is really dead. So young!'

'Yes, he committed suicide'.

'Suicide! What for?'

Seshu's father was making a desperate effort not to cry. It would be ridiculous to do that. Perhaps a crowd might gather. It would be embarrassing for Prakasam as well as Seshu's father to get a crowd round them. So, Prakasam requested him to follow him to his house. They were silent on the way, but the moment they were in, Seshu's father sobbed like a child. He was convulsed with grief. Meanwhile Mrs. Prakasam came in to see what was happening. Seshu was known to her also. He had a photograph taken with Prakasam; he literally worshipped him. Naturally Seshu was dear to the whole family itself. The Prakasams tried to console the old man. A few minutes later he was calm and he slowly murmured:

'Professor, I killed him, I killed my only son. I am a sinner.'

'Please do not talk in this strain. How can you kill your son? That is impossible.'

'In a way I was responsible for his death. So I am guilty.'

'Do give us some more details. You know we loved Seshu. So we are as much grieved as you are. Do tell us something about this tragic happening.'

'Seshu after getting his degree got a job in Madras.'

'Yes, we knew that.'

'There was a girl working with him in the same office.'

The Prakasams partly guessed the rest of the unfortunate story. They looked at each other knowingly. The old man was not looking at them, perhaps he was seeing his boy in his imagination. So without raising his head he continued the narration.

'Seshu often wrote to us about that girl. He said she was good looking and intelligent, but did not belong to our caste. He was all praise for her. We thought it was a fleeting fancy, an exuberance of youth. We felt time would cure him of his infatuation. We took it as a perversion. His mother and I, old fashioned as we are, could never understand the depth of his feelings or the sincerity of his emotions. The bride selected for him

was his niece, his widowed sister's daughter. From their childhood they were meant for each other. We naturally wanted Seshu to marry his niece. She was not highly educated, yet with her gentle manners and good nature, we thought she would be an ideal wife for Seshu.'

The Prakasams were moved terribly. Theirs was a love marriage; so they could understand Seshu's position better than his own parents. The father proceeded:

'We asked Seshu to come home and like a dutiful child he obeyed us. He was with us for a couple of days. His mother shed tears, his sister appealed to him. What the niece thought of him we never bothered to know. We took it for granted that she liked to marry him. When we protested and pleaded he became soft. He agreed to marry his niece. We were happy. We quickly fixed the auspicious day. Within a fortnight he was to be married. He left for Madras and promised to be back two days before marriage. We thanked God that all was well and that a great shame was averted. It was unthinkable for us to see our son married to someone not belonging to our own caste. We considered it a great evil, almost a sin. Besides there was our duty to his sister and her girl.'

The Prakasams sighed. They too had faced a similar storm. But luckily they were able to swim ashore safely. Poor Seshu did not have the luck. Besides in his case there was a complication. He

had to marry the niece, whereas Prakasam had no such trouble. And his parents were dead; if they were annoyed it was only in their graves. The old man continued:

'Preparations were made for Seshu's marriage. But he did not come on the promised day. We were sure of his coming; so we waited for him till the last minute. Relatives had come. We became anxious and finally panicky. Seshu did not turn up. Instead a wire came telling us that he committed suicide. You can imagine how wretched we were. There was mourning all around. His mother was inconsolable. Some of us went to Madras. There we found him lying on the floor with the woman he loved by his side. We found a bottle of poison and a letter on the table. Seshu therein related the events leading to the decision he had taken. He told the young woman about his helplessness and submission to our wishes. When she heard about his intention to get married to his niece, she was shocked. She could not reconcile herself to that position. Seshu was equally miserable. The woman he loved was expecting a child. He could not leave her in the lurch. He knew he would be happy only with her. At the same time he did not have the courage or the heart to go against our wishes. They wept and wept, but they could not find any solution. Out of desperation both of them committed suicide. They were linked together in their deaths. The sight

was terribly moving and the whole affair was tragic. If only we had been wiser we would have saved our son. I still live, I don't know why. If only I can die it will be a godsend for me. But sinners like me don't die so soon.'

He was again moved to tears. The Prakasams were moved too. They thanked God a hundred times all through the narrative, for the same tragic fate could have been theirs too. They tried to console the old man.

'Don't consider yourself to be a sinner. There is a higher force governing our actions. We are not completely responsible for our actions. And when Fate wills it, human effort is futile. It is destined that Seshu should meet his death that way. You are only an instrument. If he were destined to die, even if you had not done anything to him, he would have died. So don't blame yourself too much. You are older than I and I need not tell you anything. But grief is clouding your reasoning power. Or else you ought to realise that you are in no way responsible for your son's Karma.'

The word 'Karma', the magic word for a Hindu relieved Seshu's father to a certain extent.

'Yes, "Karma" — the things we do now, the actions we did in the past life, the inherited good or bad from our parents — the sum total of all this is capable of producing results that can never be anticipated by us. I agree with you, Professor,

what you say is right. Let me go now. I feel much better by talking to someone who sympathises with me. I have found in you and Mrs. Prakasam a haven of comfort. Everyone blames me; society calls me a sinner. The same society would have called me a sinner if I had allowed my son to marry that girl of a different caste from ours. How ridiculous the social laws are! How foolish is man's reasoning! You are the only ones who have not condemned me. I thank you. If I am depressed I would come to you again.'

'Do by all means. You are welcome.'

As the old man stood up he saw the photograph of his son with Prof. Prakasam on the wall. 'Yes, that's Seshu.' He again looked at the photograph and left the room quickly.

The Prakasams watched him go. They pitied him.

'What an unspeakable tragedy!' commented Mrs. Prakasam.

'Yes, but see what the caste system has done. It has no doubt outlived its usefulness, but we still cling to it. Even the racial purity — if that is an excuse for the rigidity of caste — is gone now. There has been so much of admixture that no caste is pure. It amazes me that even educated people should be slaves to this. It is more a custom than a religious injunction. Perhaps sanity would prevail only after many a Seshu is butchered by the cold hand of caste.'

'Seshu could have been braver. If he loved the girl and if they had been indiscreet he ought to have been faithful to her. He should have opposed his parents. Now what has he done? He has ruined himself and the girl too.'

'But he was the only son. So naturally he could not see his parents being miserable.'

* * *

The Prakasams never forgot that episode. Later Prakasam was often afraid to enquire about his old students. For he feared that any day he might have to hear something awfully shocking about them. His son and daughter were growing; he wondered what would happen to them when they too had to face emotional upheavals in life. Incidentally Mrs. Prakasam too was remembering some of those old occurrences as she sat opposite to him that day on the eve of his retirement. She understood Prakasam thoroughly. His mind was like a book that she read and reread. Every single page was familiar to her. She stood by him in all his variegated activities and she shared with him all his experiences, pleasant as well as unpleasant. Prakasam looked at her and said,

'Do you remember Seshu?'

'Yes, I do. Funny though. I have just been thinking of him. How is it, we think alike.'

She blushed like a tender girl. Prakasam laughed.

'Yes, I know we think alike. Great minds think alike. So we are great.'

'Of course we are great. As long as we don't compare ourselves with others who are greater, we are great.'

'Good logic. But you know, as I look at my watch and see the few minutes more left for me before my retirement, I feel that my active life has come to a close. A peculiar feeling comes to me now. Haven't I got anything more to do?'

'Of course you have plenty to do. You can understand the purpose of life better. Formerly you understood only the struggle, but now you can look a little deeper. With what purpose we have come into this world, how much of it is accomplished and how have we been useful to ourselves and to others — all these can be surveyed leisurely. We can do some service to humanity and this will be for the love of it, not for money. Our actions in the past have been motivated to a large extent by personal factors and selfish interests. I don't say we have been bad, but human nature being what it is, it can't help being selfish. But by God's grace we have passed through the storm and stress of life creditably. Now we can devote ourselves to the service of others.'

'Oh, Nishkama Karma!' Prakasam laughingly added.

'Yes,' she said with a certain amount of elation, pride and satisfaction. Within these few years of

our existence we have seen much that has happened to our country also. From slavery to freedom, from dependence to independence — all this is a tremendous change. But it was won after a silent struggle spread over years and years. Who is not proud of this great achievement and who can ever forget Gandhiji, the father of the nation ?'

'No one can forget him. He is enshrined in the hearts of millions of Indians.'

Prakasam was silent again. He was thinking of the jubilation of the people when India got independence. Justice was done at last. The silent suffering of the millions bore fruit; India became free. People danced with joy. There was hectic activity everywhere. The Indian flag was flying cheerfully and colourfully. All these happenings even to a casual onlooker were pleasant, more so to an Indian who had become a free citizen at last. After centuries of slavery of one type or the other he was again his original self. But Hyderabad was still a princely state. Much of this elation could not therefore be openly exhibited. They had to wait for a year or so before they could join the rest in India. He was reminded of the police action and the days of agony. But all was well and peace was established in Hyderabad also.

The average man in India naturally expected that miracles would happen the moment the country was free. He expected a fair deal and a greater sense of justice from his administrators. The Con-

gress was in power. The common man's heroes controlled the destinies of the country. What more did he want? He thought he would become richer or at least be free from want. He also felt that there might be less of taxation and more of prosperity. The Congress that stood for sacrifice, the Congress of Gandhiji and Nehru could never go wrong; that was his firm faith. But very soon he was disillusioned. As ministers the Congress leaders were taking high salaries and they had the same official paraphernalia as the Britishers. The minister felt that he ought to keep up a certain amount of reserve, dignity and even show. That was expected of him; he felt that way. Or else he was afraid that he might not be respected and feared as an administrator. The power of governing had come to him like intoxication. The commoner gaped at him in wonder. All this estrangement had come about, as Prakasam very often explained, because of a wrong notion on the part of the people. They were still thinking in terms of sacrifice and those utopian ideals for which the Congress stood in its pre-independence days. It was too much to expect a few to sacrifice everything for the sake of many. Those ideals were unsuited to the administrative machinery. The average Indian was not quite fair to his legislators in imagining them to be faultlessly Gandhian in their practices. But as long as the term 'Congress' was there, he looked forward naturally to Gandhian ideology however impracticable and

unrealistic it might be. A change of name for the party might have eliminated this false hope. If the Congressmen called themselves Republicans or Democrats then the masses would not have had their hopes raised unnecessarily, they would not also have been disappointed. Prakasam honestly felt that in fairness to the masses the Congress should have changed its name once it was in power. The Congress organisation, after Independence, embraced anyone and everyone. Even capitalists and former British loyalists came into its fold. Besetting sins had crept in. Only a Hercules could cleanse these Augean stables.

But Prakasam did not lose hope. He was a great dreamer all through his life. His faith in man's ultimate goodness was now and then shaken, but was never rooted out. So he waited patiently for the good to show up.

Meanwhile a popular ministry was formed in Hyderabad also. In the first few years of Independence, provincialism had become quite dominant. Even the Universities were affected. These seats of learning which ought to get the best scholars from any part of the country had become parochial. This was a new development that was extremely displeasing to the educated man. Prakasam was not in sympathy with this narrow provincialism that was more a hindrance than a help to national progress and prosperity.

Mrs. Prakasam arrested his stream of thought by asking him about Margaret.

'I wonder how your friend Margaret is getting on', put in Mrs. Prakasam.

'Perhaps by now she might have divorced her husband. When I visited her in '49 she was very unhappy. Already eleven years have elapsed since I saw her.'

'I don't think she has written to us for the last few years.'

'No' she hasn't. Perhaps she is miserable, or who knows she may have married again.'

'I don't think so. At her age she may not bother herself about marriage. Anyway we ought to write to her and find out her whereabouts.'

'Yes, we should.'

* * *

Prakasam thought of his visit to England in '49, two years after India's Independence. He went on a lecture tour. It was a good change for him. It was a holiday that he richly deserved. After many years of work in India this was a relief. The moment he touched the English soil he was happy. He visited the country in April and the visit was for a few weeks. Spring had come in. The invigorating Spring weather brought back happy memories to Prakasam. The crowded parks, the cheerful faces, the carefree couples — all these reminded him of his youthful student days in England. There was a world of difference between the England of his

student days and this England after war. People were more informal than they had been before. Austerity, economy drives and rationing took away much of the old splendour. The Britisher was fighting a grim battle to get back to the pre-war conditions. Prakasam admired the Britisher for his uncomplaining attitude towards the rigour imposed upon him. He visited many universities and was received well. He did not miss going to Westminster Abbey and the Parliament House. London fascinated him as it did in his student days. Almost every building had a history of its own, though dark and dingy in appearance at that time. There was still the Hyde Park tradition — orators getting up the rostrums and holiday crowds coming more to heckle them than to listen to them. Prakasam liked the way the speakers went on ignoring the booing and the shouting. Their pluck was marvellous.

Piccadilly Circus, deprived of its little god Eros, was still the centre of attraction for gay men and women. The dance halls were crowded. All in dance — a huge pandemonium — where you could mingle with the crowd and not be ashamed of your poor dancing skill was popular. Etiquette did not bother its patrons; you could go in whatever dress you like. If you had no partner, the women waiting in the corners would come to your rescue. Prakasam was thrilled in seeing all this informality and the mingling of races in the crowded hall. It was more fun than dancing. Perhaps it was an excuse

to catch hold of a girl's arm. It was not even elegant walking ; it was treading on the toes all the time.

Prakasam went to Stratford-on-Avon, Shakespeare's birth-place. It was a pleasant drive through the country. Everything was green — the green meadows and the fields, the trees and the shrubs by the roadside. The mild fragrance in the breeze intoxicated him. The hills and the valleys on the way provided a rich landscape. Stratford itself was quiet with cottages and gardens, far from the madding crowd. The theatre by the side of the gentle Avon seemed picturesque and beautiful. Nature's darling, Shakespeare was restored to nature and the church stood as a silent witness to this transformation. It was like a pilgrimage to a holy place and Prakasam was awed and thrilled by everything he saw at Stratford.

But the most memorable part of his sojourn was his visit to Margaret. She was then in London. When he left Oxford after his studies he never thought that he would come back to England or that he might see Margaret again. It was providential. Though they exchanged letters now and then, they never thought they would see each other again. So their joy was unbounded. She closely examined Prakasam. She felt that he was not much altered and age had not withered him. He in his turn felt that Margaret was not changed much. She was still the same woman enthusiastic and vigorous with an innate curiosity to know things and to understand

the complications of life. There was still that half mischievous and half serious look in her. She analysed him. He was still the same serious looking fellow, more an intellectual than an emotional creature. His smile amused her as in the past. When he smiled it looked as though he was sarcastic. It was never a simple, straightforward one exhibiting geniality. He had lunch with her and they started talking.

'How is life with you?' questioned Prakasam.

'Not bad' was the casual reply of Margaret.

Prakasam suspected that all was not well with her.

'What is happening to Williams now?'

'He is all right, but he is in Germany. He is not likely to come here. He may settle down there.'

'You mean to say that he will leave all of you and stay there. What's his attraction?'

'Woman. A German woman. He came into touch with her while he was stationed there during war. I am suing him for divorce. I am waiting for the decree.'

'This is bad. I am sorry for you. How about your two girls?'

'They will stay with me, of course. I never thought he would be disloyal to me. But human nature is weak and he yielded to the flesh. This is the price we pay for our wars. Separation, misunderstanding and breaking up of family life — this is the common story of many a married couple now.'

'Yes, war has upset human relations and marital life. And even the people who come back to their homes take time to get adjusted once again to their old life. Did you try to win him back or did you leave him free?'

'I wrote to him to come back at least for the sake of the girls, but he thinks he can't possibly be happy with us. The best thing is to leave him alone. I live for my girls, or else there is not much fun in living now.'

'I quite realise that you are disappointed and even frustrated. It's only natural. But try to keep up your spirits and take life more stoically.'

'Of course, I will. You remember our good old days. We used to discuss these problems endlessly. You sound the very same man, balanced and poised. Yes, I'll take life like a stoic. For no fault of mine I get this misery. I cannot explain why I should suffer. So I am led to believe in the theory of "Karma".'

Prakasam laughed. He was amused to see Margaret using that expression. It was funny that she should be so Indianised, but she was quite serious when she explained her misery in terms of 'Karma'.

'Perhaps he may change his mind and come back to you.'

'I don't think it's possible. I have asked for divorce; so reunion at this stage is only a remote possibility.'

'But, it is a possibility all the same. Why not hope for it ? The differences between you two cannot be so fundamental. You have lived together for quite a few years. You know each other. This temporary phase may pass away. In fact you could have waited for a short while instead of going to the court.'

'Here I disagree with you. I am not his servant to wait for his pleasure. Let him find his own source of comfort. And we are not worse off by his absence. Prakasam, I now confess to you, I was not quite happy with him. He was cold and self-possessed. My marriage was a failure. He had no magnetism in him. His conversation was dull. I could never respect him. He was not the man for me. Very often we did not speak for days and days. But we were keeping up a show for social prestige. It used to irritate me to see him sit almost apathetic before me. The wireless was his friend. He often used to sit for hours before the wireless and doze himself to sleep.'

'Then, why did you marry him ?'

'Of course I could not understand him at that time. He was good looking and though he was not highly educated, yet he looked intelligent. For two or three years he was kind to me, but gradually he withdrew into himself, talked less and behaved like a stranger.'

'Perhaps you offended him !'

'I too thought so in the beginning and I was even miserable in imagining that I had offended him. But soon I realised that he was self-centred and nothing mattered to him except his comfort and well being. He didn't care even for his children. On the other hand he grudged my attention towards them. With such a man nothing can be done. I have silently put up with all this boredom. In a way it is a relief for me now. I shall take care of my children and end my days in peace.'

'If you can really get peace that way, nothing like it. I hope and trust that you are not deceiving yourself in thinking of peace in that manner.'

'I shall try.'

'But you know I now feel that no marriage system is perfect. Look at your progressive system where partners have free choice; even here there is not much of happiness.'

'Perhaps marriage is a matter of chance. However careful we may be in our choice, there may be other elements over which we have no control. Or perhaps people are predestined to be happy or unhappy.'

Here again Prakasam was laughing. Margaret was re-echoing his sentiments. He liked her for her oriental mind. He stayed on till tea time. They talked of many things — light as well as serious — and it was time for him to go. She kissed him good bye and he left her with a heavy heart. Mrs. Prakasam's reference to Margaret made

him reminisce for a short while on his visit to England.

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His reminiscences about his lecture tour in the U.K. brought him back to the last phase of his stay in Hyderabad. Mrs. Prakasam too was thinking of the last two years — turbulent and disturbing ones.

'You must be thinking of the last two years at Hyderabad,' queried Mrs. Prakasam.

'Yes, I am. Those were indeed troublesome years. Our own friends turned against us for no fault of ours. You remember Srinivasan. He was my loyal colleague in the beginning. He too had gone against me.'

'O yes, that was the worst cut you had received. Rivalry with Principal Gupta was understandable. He aspired for the same post you ought to have got. Naturally there was unpleasantness and misunderstanding. But others had no excuse practically to go against you. But they did.'

'That is human nature. Srinivasan thought that he would get more by supporting Principal Gupta. We make friends, but they often turn out to be our foes. But we can't on that account lead an isolated life. We have to be friendly with someone or other, and perhaps be prepared for disloyalties also.'

'Surely, Srinivasan could have behaved better. In your absence he got into the clutches of Gupta. The latter promised many things for him. The two joined hands. And both of them were highly con-

nected and belonged to the same community. That was enough for them to come together.'

Prakasam thought of that interesting episode. With the lapse of years the bitterness he had first retained for Gupta was gone. He could now look back and be amused. He did not lose anything by moving away from Hyderabad to the rural university.

When Prakasam was in the U.K. the old Principal retired. He was a stern, puritanical man. Administrative machinery worked smoothly under him. Gupta got busy. In his fiftieth year he got a Ph.D. in History from his own University. That was a feather in his cap and he got himself appointed as the Principal in the interim period. By the time Prakasam came back from his tour, Gupta's position was strengthened. The Committee was in favour of Gupta. The Committee was tutored by him and their arguments were remembered by Prakasam even on the last day of his service.

'We have to give preference to a Ph.D. We have to encourage our own University degree holders, or else who would respect them? Let us make Gupta the Principal.'

The same Committee on a different occasion pleaded for a good basic degree.

'We have to go in for a person with a good basic degree. What is there in a Ph.D.? Old wine in new bottles. Narrow specialisation. And what does a Ph.D. know? Only his limited field. He is

an ignoramus in other fields. So we should prefer a person with a good first degree.'

Prakasam could never accept the logic of a basic degree being preferred to a Ph.D. These wise persons forgot that a Ph.D. was taken only after a first degree. From a general degree a candidate would go for specialisation. Specialisation did not mean the unlearning of the basic knowledge. Rather it was a process of systematising everything learnt before. The discipline of research was invaluable both for teaching and for improving one's own understanding. It gave maturity and originality. Prakasam never condemned research. He himself did original work, though he never bothered to take a Ph.D.

The Committee decided in favour of Gupta. They had to. He was highly connected. Luckily for him there was the Ph.D. The first thing he did on the assumption of the Principalship was to encourage Srinivasan to flout the authority of Prakasam. His cherished ambition was to slight him and to make his life miserable. He did not feel secure about his position as long as Prakasam was there. He wanted to be popular with the students and the underlings. The senior Professors naturally ignored him. Only the younger ones could be bought or tempted by Gupta.

Power was his creed. It was dear to him all the more as it came to him in the evening of his life. He was waiting for that day when he would be in a position to oblige some and ruin others. In fact

he was not so powerful as he thought himself to be. But he wanted to give that impression to others that he was all-in-all. And a few believed he was a demi-god. Among his 'idolatrous crew' there were a few women too. It was a mutual admiration society. Hyperbolical language was its social code. They believed themselves to be the votaries of beauty and connoisseurs of art. This dilettante spirit led Principal Gupta to bungling inefficiency.

Prakasam was prepared to reconcile himself with his position. He never was madly in love with power. By virtue of his seniority he thought he could get the Principalship in due course. But Gupta did not allow him to remain in peace. As men they were diametrically opposite to each other. Prakasam was a steady, solid type of person for whom discipline meant everything. Gupta believed in liberalism. He could not afford to be unpopular; he wanted to please everyone. Ultimately he pleased none. His tall talk and veneer of politeness attracted many the first time they saw him, but by-and-by they were invariably disillusioned. Gupta never bothered about consistency. Consistency was the bob-goblin of little minds; he knew it thoroughly. So he aspired to be great by being consistently inconsistent. Moreover it was inconvenient for him to be true to his own words.

Prakasam belonged to the older world. He did not have many friends, but he was loyal to the few he had. Naturally, he could not understand very

much the new world that was rapidly taking shape. The teacher-politician had entered the arena. Teaching was no longer a noble profession. It was getting commercialised. To Prakasam all these changes were repellant. But he always believed in God's grace and man's innate good nature. The new year brought him an escape from the impasse.

The rural university was started. An experienced Professor like Prakasam was wanted. He left Hyderabad in disgust. The five years in the new university were calm and uneventful. Nothing happened to disturb his mental peace. He developed a detached attitude towards life. He became more and more philosophical. Very often he was absent-minded. The river Krishna flowing by the university had been his unfailing source of comfort. The rich fields with luxuriant crops often produced melodious tunes. Evenings especially used to be lovely. The lonely temple with the setting sun looked picturesque. The tiny island near the other side of the bank always impressed him. In the haze of the setting sun very often he dreamt of that island as the abode of the immortals.

'We are indeed grateful to God for this peace and contentment.' Mrs. Prakasam often used to comment.

'Yes, we are.' Prakasam would re-echo her sentiments.

'Your great belief in justice has stood you in good stead.'

'Of course it has. I was superseded. An almost unbearable situation was created for me in Hyderabad. But how are we worse off? We are here far off from chicanery and sophistication. We need not keep up pretences. Losing Principalship in Hyderabad has been a blessing in disguise for us.'

'One never knows what is good for oneself. Very often we plan in one way and something else turns up. And that something is divine dispensation.'

'Well, we can't thereby resign ourselves to inactivity. We have to put in effort, but when that effort does not bear the exact fruit we want, we need not be unduly excited and morally depraved. It only means that we get something else. God's ways are just, though peculiar.'

'I wonder whether you really believe in a personal god', Mrs. Prakasam commented.

'I do, I don't. With my rich Hindu heritage I think of a personal god. But I also feel that it is wrong to attribute certain qualities to God as though He is a human being. I am more inclined to believe in an impersonal godhead and in the existence of an all-pervading Spirit in the universe. We serve humanity and thereby fulfil our mission. It is immaterial whether there is a god or not.'

'It is the rationalism in you that makes you think in this manner.'

'Yes, of course. In fact sometimes I feel I am a bundle of contradictions. I believe in a personal god, yet I have faith in an impersonal godhead. Religion with all its ceremonial and ritual has no meaning for me. Yet I am not irreligious, as I have implicit faith in God. I believe in the innate dignity of man and his capability to do or to undo anything. But I also know that nothing happens unless there is the grace of God. I love freedom, but I enforce discipline mercilessly on myself and others. I hate being western, but I love some aspects of its culture.'

Mrs. Prakasam smiled. It looked as though Prakasam was preparing his speech at the Farewell Party. He was summing up his life, a life well spent on the whole.

'One life is not enough to solve all these problems. For instance if God is all merciful why should there be anomalies of some being terribly rich and others being miserably poor ? If the great God has created only beauty, why should there be ugliness in this world ? If God stands for goodness how does evil come into this world ?'

Prakasam saw Mrs. Prakasam getting excited over these knotty problems. He indulgently smiled and added, 'I think good and evil are inseparable. In man himself one can find saintliness as well as bestiality. Perhaps the same God who had created beauty would have created ugliness also. His greater glory lies in creating good out of evil and beauty

out of ugliness. That's why we all have our bright souls and dark spots. Even to the criminal, God has given moments of sanity. Life is a puzzle, the more we try to solve its riddles, the greater will be our bafflement'.

'Of course, it's difficult to understand the complexities of life. But we have done enough in this life. You have taught your students understandingly. You haven't spared yourself in doing your duty.' Mrs. Prakasam commented.

'Yes, I have done my duty. I have that feeling of pride and satisfaction that comes to every successful teacher at the time of his retirement. Pride not because of myself, but because of my students. That is justifiable and legitimate.'

'It's a great opportunity given to a teacher to shape and mould the future generations. Your students are your wealth.'

'What you say is right. Now that I retire, I can happily look back and feel satisfied. Life with all its storm and stress, with all its hideousness is lovable. Human beings are essentially good. I can never imagine anything exclusively negative. I don't think I have understood life in its totality. But I shall try to get at the truth of it. That will be my major work for the rest of my life.'

Mrs. Prakasam looked at him. He was serene and saintly. His face reflected the mellow fruitfulness. The autumnal glow radiated from his face.

She saw his student, Mohan coming towards their house.

'Mohan is coming for you.'

While listening to him, she too lost the sense of time. They two had entered a timeless world. They forgot all about the Farewell Party. They were left in a world of their own. They were brought back to reality by the entrance of Mohan. A few hours later Prakasam would live the life of sweet abandon — abandoned to his meditation. He would belong to himself and not to the University. That feeling thrilled him for a minute. He looked at his watch, the last time, he said, he would need it.

'O, it's half-past five. Sorry Mohan, I have forgotten all about the Farewell Party. I hope all others have come. Let us go.'

Mrs. Prakasam looked at the teacher and the student leaving the house and slowly murmured, 'Professors are lovable.'
