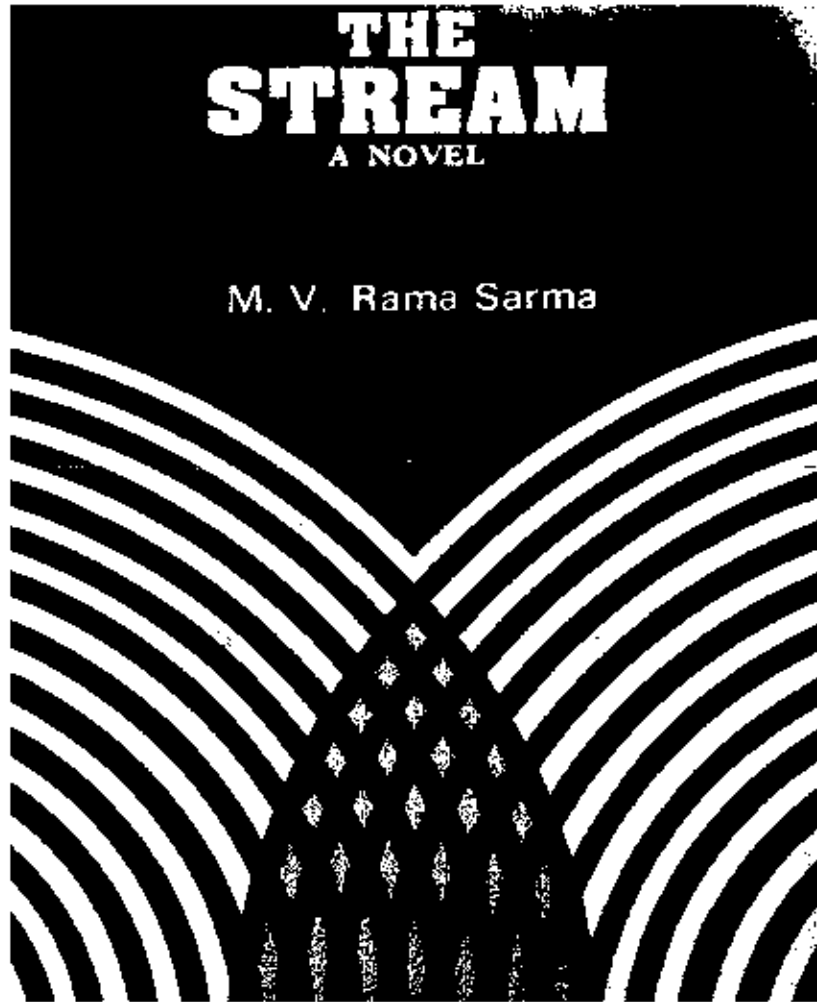


**THE
STREAM**
A NOVEL

M. V. Rama Sarma



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THE STREAM
(A NOVEL)

By

M. V. RAMA SARMA,

M.A., Ph.D. (Wales),

Vice-Chancellor, S. V. University,

TIRUPATI

1983

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ABOUT THE NOVEL

The title, *THE STREAM*, symbolises life. Its many currents and cross-currents stand for the various types of associations we have with men and women during our short, but fruitful, mundane existence. Peculiarly enough some currents come and get merged with the main stream; some come in, get separated and flow independently and some others definitely impede the march of the stream. These are the friendships, the separations and the rivalries we create for ourselves. But despite all this seemingly irregular and chaotic life, there is a strong under-current of justice controlling the universe. This is mentioned in the novel as the Triple Force, standing for Beauty, Love and Justice. These are the latent qualities of man and he grows purely from the sensuous stage to the highly intellectual one, through the medium of passionate longings and almost tempestuous desires. This is the great heritage of man whatever may be the position he occupies in life.

AUTHOR

CHAPTER I

'Suguna! Come quick.'

There was no response. Gopalam shouted again, 'Suguna, for goodness sake, come at once.'

It was a moonlit night. The stars were casting their radiance. Gopalam was sitting alone, watching the moon. A soft wind was blowing—the world seemed to be steeped in joy. He suddenly realised that he was alone. Loneliness oppressed him. He felt like having company, so he called his wife Suguna.

A few minutes later Suguna came wondering what Gopalam might have to say. Was it anything he wanted? She could not understand the urgency of the call. She looked enquiringly at Gopalam.

'Look, look Suguna, how lovely the night is! This is indeed grand. The atmosphere is serene and tranquil. If we have moonlit nights all through the year how happy we would be!'

Suguna was embarrassed. She did not know what to say. In fact she came expecting some errand from her husband. Instead she had the lecture. For nearly a year she was having those homilies on life. There was nothing new in what Gopalam said that night. It was a repetition of

the same old stuff. Yes, moonlit nights were grand. But how could one have only joys and not sorrows? Life would be a mixture, this was not known to her idealist husband.

Gopalam expected a fitting echo of sentiments from Suguna, but she preferred to be silent. He was a little annoyed. 'Why don't you feel thrilled by such wonderful sights?'

'One must be a poet or should at least have poetic imagination to admire such lovely sights. I am afraid I have none of these qualities.'

'You always talk like that.'

His tone indicated that he was sadly disappointed. When he called her he was so happy that he wanted to kiss her, but now it was different. A cold shiver ran through his body. He was silent, strangely silent, rather sullen. Suguna left him and went inside. Was it for this dull, dreary life that he married her? He had already spent a year with her, but it was a year of disillusionment. The fond hopes he originally lavished on Suguna proved to be abortive. He failed to make her respond to his flights of imagination. There was a barrier between them—it was clear, as clear as anything. He planned to lead an ideal life with Suguna, but that night he realised, painfully realised, it would never be possible. He was only twenty-four with all the freshness of youth, vivacity and vigour. How, how on earth could he continue to lead this sheepish life with Suguna? This, he repeated to himself a hundred times. No, he would end it, he said to himself.

He sat there alone. The cool moon was still in her

glory. His memory took him back to the past, when life was full of sunshine. In those days was he not called "The Shelley of India"? That was how he was known among his friends. Did he not feel proud on those occasions? Indeed he had the soul of a poet. His large beaming eyes, his lustrous hair, his broad forehead gave him the Shallean touch. Surely he was not a lady's man, but he had a certain magnetism in him. In those youthful days love was an all-absorbing passion for him. Love of the purest type, that was his goal. Platonic love with all the dream-like unreality appealed to him. He became an ardent advocate of it, little realising whether it was practicable. In his utopian world anything was possible.

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In that mood of retrospect Gopalram was sadly reminded of his lovely boyhood. He came from a very respectable middle class family. His upbringing was rather unpretentious but he had a rich cultural heritage. His father was a scholar and his good nature was exploited by the unscrupulous many. That did not worry that good soul for he had almost a naive faith in man. No wonder Gopalram had all that idealism. He did not have his father's implicit faith in ritual—as a rationalist he could not—but he believed in some Supreme Force controlling the universe. He thought he should, one day, evolve for himself a system of theology, based on his own individual belief. But at that age he could not be bothered more about religious tenets or theological concepts. In a judicious way he left

those complex problems for older heads and he was interested in an active, useful life. Even his poetic tastes, he believed, should not come in the way of his life's many-sided activities. Poetry was all right as a hobby, but not as a profession. He hated the very idea of seeing his wife and children starve to death, while he fiddled with his pen at versifying. No, that was not what he aspired for.

From his school days he dreamt of a glorious life. Year after year he stood first in the examinations and received several prizes. For some time the profession of a lawyer attracted him and he even argued within himself how fabulously rich he would become. He blurted it out to his mother that one day he would be rich. She just laughed, for she remembered full-well that only a few years ago he was pronounced to be a dunce. It took him a year to learn the alphabets. The poor father was shockingly ashamed of him and the mother championed him on the basis of their riches. They had property enough, so she argued why Gopalam should be tortured for the sake of learning. She would thus plead and comfort her son. Peculiarly enough one fine morning Gopalam got some inspiration. Maybe he was like Byron finding himself great. Soon he showed brilliance, extraordinary brilliance. To such a brilliant boy would law be a suitable profession? Perhaps not.

As he came to college he realised he was good at the appreciation of poetry. Beauty in its concrete form and abstract sense overpowered him. The quest for beauty, like the quest for the Holy Grail started. This Sir Galahad read

the romantics. Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth, these comprised his Trinity. Keats's devotion to Beauty, Shelley's ideal of Love, Wordsworth's worship of Nature—these were the three facets of the world he lived in. He was sensuous and highly emotional. But he never indulged in excesses. Nor did he have any temptations either.

Even in his 'teens' the prospect of marriage loomed large before him. His parents were pestered by all sorts of applicants. Some offered dowries, some others made promises of future legacies as they had no sons. Gopalam always insisted on a pretty girl, dowry or no dowry. He believed in having a fair-complexioned girl. He himself was not fair, but he hated black persons. Blackness shocked his aesthetic tastes. Ugliness too was detested by him. He could not look straight in the face of an ugly person. Beauty at that age meant for him only the external show. He did not probe into the metaphysics of beauty. So with such firm, unshakable views he could never possibly agree to marry any black girl. That was out of the question. It always happened that dark girls brought greater dowries than the fair ones. But money was no attraction for him.

At home the parents were becoming eager to see Gopalam married. They lived in a small village where it was outrageous to keep sons and daughters unmarried after a certain age. That age Gopalam attained. Soon circumstances were favourable. His father's friend proposed his daughter in marriage to Gopalam. The two old friends got busy, but there was a snag. The would-be father-in-law was not rich. Gopalam's mother got worried. How on earth

could she have a daughter-in-law coming to her house with no fortune? She talked it over to her neighbour and she said it was degrading. Yes, the situation was degrading, the mother thought. The father, noted for his generous impulses and broad outlook, could not possibly demand a dowry. He put it to his son. Gopalam thought it below his dignity to take money from others. Did not God give him a sound body and a poetic mind? He hated to be a parasite. Even the money he received from his father towards his education was really becoming irksome to him. It was incompatible with his spirit of self-reliance to accept money even from his father. Then how, how could he sell himself for the sake of money? No, it should never happen. That was definite. Negotiations were prolonged and Gopalam's father always put off his friend with evasive replies. Gopalam came for the vacation. He did not find any preparation for the marriage ceremony. He was fed up. He was impatient to have this affair settled one way or the other.

His father hit upon a plan. He knew his son's tastes thoroughly well. He thought that perhaps on the count of ugliness the match might be dropped. He desired his son to go and see the girl. Gopalam obeyed his father dutifully. Suguna was fair and good looking. He was not thrilled by her sight, but surely she did not repel him. He liked her immensely. Her innocence, her fresh, ruddy complexion, her fullness of form captivated him. There was no artificiality in her. The romantic in Gopalam was stimulated. The idealist in him, the poet, the champion of

women's cause, all these multiple personalities in him, goaded him to marry that girl. Or was destiny that prompted him? No, Gopalam could not accept destiny. For him character was destiny. So he dismissed the very thought of fate, though, of course, it dawned on him for a moment. Finally he concluded that it was he, Gopalam, the poet-idealist, who had come to the decision of marrying that girl and none else.

He went back to his father and reported faithfully that he liked the girl. He did not say he would marry Suguna, though in his heart of hearts he swore he would. The very thought of Suguna belonging to someone else oppressed him. She was not the first girl he had seen, but somehow Suguna was different. Even then he was cautious while talking to his father. He loved and respected him, so he waited to see his reaction. The father kept quiet. The mother offered to go and see the bride. Gopalam firmly and almost bluntly said it was absolutely unnecessary. After all it was he who would marry and he was satisfied. Why should others pass an opinion on his choice? The mother felt offended and she did not go.

At last the auspicious day was fixed. Suguna thanked her stars. She narrowly missed being married to some uncle or some near relative, whom she disliked heartily. Gopalam felt elated. It was a triumph for him. The vacation was over. He went back to the college. He looked at the college girls; inwardly he felt that his Suguna, with her rich complexion and unadorned natural beauty, was a hundred times better than those girls. His Suguna was chaste. She could

not be anything else. Her looks revealed maidenly modesty.

Days rolled by. The day of his marriage was drawing nearer and nearer. He visualised a world in which only two persons existed, Suguna and himself. No doubt she was not very highly educated. But he thought he could teach her, teach her according to his way of thinking. At home things were taking a different shape. Gopalam's father was to a large extent superstitious. The moment preparations were begun, bad omens appeared. Someone sneezed somewhere and it was inauspicious to do any thing after that. One day he thought of going to the bride's village to see her, just to satisfy himself that his son's choice was proper. There was a bad omen. He simply did not have the courage to go. These omens came not once, but almost every day and at every stage. He got perplexed. He consulted an old astrologer and he advised him strongly not to have his son's marriage celebrated at that time and with that girl. He even indicated that something bad would happen, if the event were to take place. Gopalam's father thought it his duty to cancel the match. He suggested to his friend that they might call off the agreement. Suguna's father was shocked. After all that period of hope and joy this negative proposal was so anti-climax. And then what about the ridicule of society? Who would marry his daughter when once she was rejected? So he went to Gopalam's father, but the latter was almost adamant.

Another vacation came. Gopalam returned to his village. With his rationalistic background he could not sympathise with his father's superstition. With him it was

all right, he could marry someone else. But with her, circumstances were pitiful, he argued. His father considered him rebellious, but a kind, indulgent father as he was, he did not like to ruin his son's happiness. So he yielded, though grudgingly. As a mark of protest against his son's action, the father forbade any undue expense at the time of the marriage.

Gopalani, with his genuine hatred for show, welcomed this move. But the mother's sense of vanity was horribly shaken. She somehow managed to get all the paraphernalia relating to Indian marriages. Musicians were there; parties were given. Gopalani's father went through all these formalities like a silent spectator of a show. He evinced no enthusiasm and he whispered in his son's ear that even at the crucial moment of marriage he heard someone sneezing. Gopalani's friends came and had a fine time. Suguna was voted beautiful by them also. Marriage was over.

Back he was at the college with his class-mates. He was not very keen on popularity, but he did command quite a unique position as the President of the Union. Several envied him for his prominence. He was a busybody with a group of Secretaries all around. It was the final year too, yet he showed no signs of settling down to serious study. He had such wonderful company that he could not possibly be serious. There was Suri, a married friend, who always amused him. Suri's wife stayed with her parents a few miles away and every week-end he would go there. He was bound to come back and give Gopalani spicy stories about his love feuds with his wife. Well, it was intoxicating

stuff. Suri was a bit of a comedian too. In the debates he was always saying the wrong thing. He had a knack of speaking without predicates. Grammar never bothered him. With his experience of marital life he brushed aside Gopalam as a bachelor and his one great mannerism was, "I had half an hour talk with Sarala", that was the name of the married girl in their class. Gopalam with curiosity would say, "What about?" Then Suri in a bombastic vein, arching his eyebrows, used to comment, "That's strictly confidential. Moreover you can't understand the talk of married people. You are a simple boy."

Suri lent books to Sarala and often she wrote back on small slips "Thank you very much for lending me the book." These sacred documents were stored by Suri and one day he took his friend to his room and showed him the holy slips. Yes, they were very dear to Suri. From all these evidences of Suri's intimacy with Sarala Gopalam concluded that they must be good friends. But he was shocked to hear Sarala saying that Suri was a fool. Anyway Suri was of an open and frank nature and Gopalam loved him with all his idiosyncrasies.

Suri's taunts stimulated Gopalam to write letters to his wife. His marriage was not yet consummated. In the village she lived, it was rather unusual for a wife to receive letters from her husband and that too before they started leading a married life. Suguna did not respond. Gopalam was shocked. Of course there were occasions when Suri also failed to get letters in time. But these occasions were rare. Gopalam wrote a stiff letter this time and soon came

the reply. But it was not the one he expected or wished to receive. It was a simple matter-of-fact letter. "What the deuce does she mean?" he remarked and tore the letter to pieces. But immediately he cooled off.

Moreover he could not fool himself any longer with his extra-curricular activities. He had to 'swot' his Shakespeare. One thing good about Gopalam was that he had a lot of self-confidence and determination. He worked hard and secured a brilliant result. Most of his professors who happened to be his well-wishers too, were pleasantly surprised to hear of his success. Congratulations poured in. Gopalam's father was the happiest man in that little village. The news was circulated from mouth to mouth and the whole village resounded with it. He had brought honour to the village itself. Gopalam was immensely pleased with himself and he wondered what Suguna thought of him. Suguna did admire him but it was not that thrilling compliment he generally received from his friends. "You are wonderful. Your speech today was marvellous." That was how his friends used to say whenever he did well in debates. That was the language he liked. In a way he was fond of flamboyant words. But Suguna's admiration was a silent one. It was no doubt sound and steady, but it did not have the din and bustle of formal adulation. She had to learn words like 'Fine, Lovely and Wonderful.' This jargon of pseudo-polite love-making was just Greek and Latin to her. Gopalam's triumph marked the first chapter of his life. The Stream of Life was before him. So far the stream was quite rapid and smooth. In every matter he had his own

way. His father considered him a genius and Gopalam's lofty idealism always kept him far above the humdrum life of ordinary men and women. He was a simple child, perhaps a spoilt child, made to face the bitter realities of life. No doubt he had the stamina and his attitude towards life was definitely a purposeful one. He always thought in terms of being great and his ambition was to go abroad and be a scholar. Yet he no longer liked to be dependent on his father. Patrimony he had, but he wanted to be independent. So he was bent upon getting a job.

Gopalam got a job in the nearest town. It was indeed a stroke of good fortune. His father embraced him, his mother prepared special dishes for him. His mother patronised his wife and did not allow her to do any work. Surely in those days of unemployment it was staggering good luck for Gopalam to get a job, that too a decent one, in a college. Once again Gopalam established a record in his village.

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It took quite a few days before he settled down with his wife Suguna in that small town. So far he was lucky. The stars were propitious and in his favour too. There was Suguna, whom he wanted to marry irrespective of his father's warnings and then there was the job which came to him almost immediately after his educational career. What else did he want? No, nothing. His complacency was unique. He treated his wife kindly.

But things did not go as he expected. On the home

front, he was feeling gradually, or perhaps he was realising slowly, that all was not well. In his profession he was all right. But somehow he was not able to understand Suguna. She was quite simple and harmless. Yet now and then she exhibited a wild temper. It was a great sacrifice on his part to have married her. She was in fact the only woman he cared for. With his romantic idealism he saw himself as Antony and his little Suguna as Cleopatra. Surely he was an Antony. He had all his recklessness and even his abandon to the woman he loved. But Suguna did not possess the majesty of Cleopatra, nor her infinite variety. Gopalam passionately longed for romantic love, thrilling and exciting. She wanted a steady, normal life. He wished, she should always speak of him, praise his intellect and worship his genius. But she was more or less matter-of-fact and prosaic. She took him for granted, a solid and faithful type of man. He often wondered whether she realised his genius, whether she had the slightest notion of the huge risk he had taken in marrying her. She no doubt considered him to be quite intelligent, but that intelligence she appreciated more as a source of their livelihood than as a creative instinct flowering in poems and plays. His literary world did not exist for her. This pained him much. As his wife she had to share with his emotions and thoughts. Suguna did not have the courage to talk to him on matters purely literary. That perhaps was one of the reasons for her silence on his creative work. As for the sacrifice he made in marrying her, she never understood. She thought that she was beautiful and therefore he married her. If he did

not marry her someone else would have married her. Surely she would not have remained unmarried. She suffered from a genuine home sickness like all newly-married women. She longed to go to her parents on the slightest pretext. On days her father came to see her, she was found in the best of her spirits. One could easily see the joy spread over her face. Simple as she was, she could not hide her feelings.

To Gopaliam all this was detestable. His one grand theory was that the moment she was married to him, she should think of him and none else in the world. If she was so fond of her father, why did she marry him? She could have as well remained unmarried serving her father loyally. Gopaliam argued thus within himself. He became unhappy about it. He little realised that the father did have a prior claim over her affections. He simply could not tolerate that situation. To humiliate her he started talking disparagingly of her family. Ucharitable remarks often came from him that her people were not really cultured and it was a pity he had married her. This only aggravated the malady. For a time Suguna put up with these insults. But gradually she mustered up courage and started attacking Gopaliam's family too. This exasperated him. He could take liberties with his wife and even insult her, but he could not tolerate such an affront from her. He married her out of sympathy and now she had the cheek to oppose him. Impossible. This was an impossible situation. Often scenes were created by Suguna. Life was not so rosy as he dreamt of before.

His conception of life as one of idyllic mirth was a little shaken. Here he was linked with a woman who had

not many things in life common with him. Intellectually she was miles away from him. The physical aspect of life was never a strong attraction for Gopalam. Not that he shunned it, but somehow he felt that life was complete and full only when the partners had common aspirations and ideals. His dream of life was completely shattered. Even if he were to wait for a hundred years she would never be able to understand him. That was flat. The more he grew busy with his meditations, the greater was the gulf he was creating for himself and Suguna. He stopped thinking in terms of her. There were the girls at the College, quite a good lot of them. Immediately after his marriage with Suguna he condemned them ruthlessly and even unjustly. But now the very same 'class' in society was attracting him. He no longer felt that they were artificial, rather they were a good jolly lot. In a way he hated chastity and condemned it outright. What was the use of being chaste, if one were to be as cold as ice? Suguna was pure, but she was a statue, a silent woman with a godlike virtue. But he did not want all that godliness. He wanted a woman in earthly mode, not in ethereal robes. A woman who had more of the human element, that was what he wanted. The college girls symbolised for him all that warmth and friendship which he badly needed. Suguna, was a dutiful wife, but not a helpful friend. Either she felt inferior to him or superior to him. She never was his equal. Gopalam wanted her on terms of equality. He neither wanted her to be supercilious, nor did he like to see her humble and obedient.

And then there was the zest for life, the fulfilment of

romantic love. He realised that marriage was incompatible with that type of love. Marriage brought him more inconveniences than comforts. It was more a hindrance than a help. It ended his days of freedom. He wondered why he should be faithful to one woman, one alone. He would have, he said to himself, if Suguna had come up to his expectations, or if she had only made an effort to understand him. But he was terribly afraid of leading a dull life with Suguna. He simply loathed it. But how could he get rid of her? Men and women were trying to be decent all the time, though they might be fighting every moment of their lives. He heard of divorces in America, France and England being given for the mere asking. What beautiful countries, he commented. These were countries where men and women could do as they pleased. He ought to have been born in one of those blessed countries. But India with its pre-historic customs had no attraction for him. Gopalam hated Indian society. Even in this apparently flawless society he found loopholes. In his own town, he heard with evident pleasure of respectable men and women having as many zig-zag relationships as possible. He was getting to know the world. He no longer thought of it as a paradise, for he looked at it with no coloured glasses. His life with Suguna to a large extent taught him to be realistic, but he did not, as yet, learn the lesson completely.

Anyway he confessed to himself that he had made a mistake, no doubt the first one he committed. But it was an irreparable one. He could have easily abandoned her. This thought also came to him. But the humanist in him

revolted against any such idea. So he reconciled himself to a life with Suguna. He no longer felt like depending on her or any other woman for inspiration or for the satisfaction of his inner yearnings. It was disgraceful for him to be dependent on others. He cut himself off from Suguna, talked less and almost observed a golden silence. At least it was a blessing in disguise for him. He could go on uninterrupted with his vast projects of writing. In all his writings invariably there was the heroine for whom his soul was silently longing. Whatever he missed in this dreary world he found it in his literary world. He could talk to his heroines, he could make love to them and they always admired him. He might lecture to them for hours but they would never frown as Suguna would. So he was perfectly content with his dream heroines. He was in fact leading a life of escapism. The world he lived in had nothing to offer him. But the world he was creating for himself, he thought, would offer him everything, peace, content and joy.

By the time Gopalam finished thinking of the past occurrences it was already midnight. He did not know for how long he lay there on that soft cushioned armchair. Time did not exist for him. His imagination flew in a timeless world. It was an open verandah on the first storey of the house. So he was undisturbed. Not a soul moved at that dead hour. He felt forlorn. In this vast world of men and women he was alone. It was a curious feeling. The only person on whom he depended for perfect companionship failed him. This very thought of desolation created in him self-pity. A silent tear was shed. He entered the room

2—T.S.

in which Suguna was sleeping. She was fast asleep, oblivious of her husband's lingering thought. As he looked at her he felt that she was far away from him. Did she belong to him? What right had he to possess her? Did marriage give him that hold on her? He could see that her tastes were different, there was no mutual understanding. She had nothing to offer him. Spiritually she did not belong to him. But did he make any effort to come down from his ethereal plane, his utopian world? Was he at any time interested in knowing her mental make-up? Unfortunately not. Gopalam took it for granted that his attitude towards life was the only perfect one. And in spite of his liberal views he believed that Suguna should follow him blindly or rather ape him completely. It never occurred to his busy, ponderous brain that she, despite her lack of university degree, could teach him something of life. No doubt she did not read any of the poets, but by no means was she unintelligent. She had common sense in abundance and she took life as it was. One thing lacking in her was the capacity for paying elegant compliments to her husband. Gopalam liked all such formalities. There must be something exciting, and domesticated life with all its sobriety repelled him. He drank deep at the fountain of romantic love and Suguna with her pure and simple tastes failed, tragically failed, to satisfy him. Gopalam cursed the day he had married her and gently reclined on his bed and was soon lost in deep slumber.

CHAPTER II.

Three months later Gopalam had a pleasant experience. A girl student followed him immediately after his lecture. 'Excuse me, will you please help me in my studies?'

This was her request. She was close on him and he did not notice her. Gopalam used to be very reserved, especially with girls. So he would naturally not notice her. He was about to go up and he was on the first step of the staircase and she was standing near him. This nearness was so compelling that he had to turn round and talk to her. The reply Gopalam gave was, of course, unfavourable.

'I am sorry I can't. I am very busy....'

That was all he could say and he moved forward. Somehow he felt like looking back at her. His reply was quite disappointing to her. She was puzzled and distressed. Perhaps she thought he would immediately accept, the moment she proposed. Gopalam had a lot of pride and it was below his dignity to indulge in such businesslike propositions as tuitions. But as he found her stunned and literally pale with disappointment he melted. He re-addressed her after a moment's pause.

'All right, you come to my flat. We can talk it over. I shall try to do my best....'

The girl's face suddenly changed. It regained its original brightness. She smiled and showed her immense happiness through her radiant looks. He too smiled, losing all his reserve. She whispered 'Thank you' and disappeared.

Gopalam's heart beat fast. This was an unusual experience for him. He had been there in that college for more than a year, but this was the first time when a girl student approached him for help. He wondered what was in store for him. This incident took place nearly three months after he had resolved that moonlit night not to be bothered about women. His dream heroines were all right, why should he worry himself about women in flesh and blood? They would not be in any way different from Suguna. He was not prepared to torture himself with unreliable women. It was indeed a mood of disgust which overwhelmed him at that stage. He never realised that his dream heroines might fail to give him complete satisfaction. It was a fictitious world he was creating for himself and that edifice might crumble any day, the moment he came into contact with real, live beings.

The very next day Swarna, the girl who requested him for help, came to his house. She was of a fair complexion with lovely locks of hair drooping on her forehead. She wore a blue georgette sari with a blouse matching it. There was a tiny gold chain adorning her neck. But her freshness and sweetness needed no ornaments. She was twentyone and for her age her form was full. Gopalam watched her with evident pleasure and satisfaction, being seated on one of the chairs. He sat opposite to her, blushing and feeling uncomfortable. She looked at him slyly and smiled. This encouraged him. He made bold to say :

'I am sorry I was rude to you yesterday.'

'O, it's all right. I was disappointed when you refus-

ed, but I was happy the moment you promised to help me !

Gopalam started teaching her. Every time he looked at her she was smiling. They were sweet, bewitching smiles. He could not understand what she meant. In a way the smiles made it impossible for him to be serious. She looked at him lovingly and as she did so, she seemed to be looking deep into his heart. Could she have any insight into his tortured soul? Perhaps not, but her looks were so searching that he was indeed puzzled. Was she listening to him? Yes, she was, but only mechanically. In fact she seemed to be recording within herself the picture of Gopalam. That was evident even on the first day of her visit. That day, as she left, Gopalam found a rose lying in the corner of the chair. It was the rose she had in her lovely hair. It dropped down. He felt like calling her and returning the rose to her. But he did not have the courage. He kept it. Perhaps it was left by her intentionally as a present to him. She was his student for the last one year in the college. So she might have thought of showing her admiration for him, he argued within himself. Anyway the rose was dear to him and he almost felt like taking it to his lips. It was indeed sweet of her to have left him that rose. In the romances he said, ladies gave such nice presents to their knights. Yes, he was the knight and she was the lady of his fairy castle. The very first day she came to him he was attracted to her. She was no doubt good-looking, but mere good looks would not be enough for him. She must be intelligent and sympathetic too. He could certainly wait and study her.

He had patience enough to wait, he was in no hurry.

Swarna's visits became more frequent as time advanced. The first day she came to him she did not show much of keenness in her dress or hair-do. But gradually she displayed all her beauty. From day to day she became more and more beautiful. Or perhaps Gopalam's eyes were getting used to her beauty. Months passed and the few hours he spent with her were usually analysed and scrutinised by him later. Whatever she said or did was closely examined by him. He was not going to make a fool of himself. He wanted to be sure of her affection before he might propose to her.

To test her he one day said, 'I think you'd better go to someone else. I can't teach you any longer.'

She was crestfallen on listening to these words. These were mighty daggers and sharp arrows to her. She controlled herself and murmured,

'Why, have I offended you in any way? Have I displeased you? Please don't send me to someone else.'

She put it as earnestly as possible. He was convinced that she was fond of him.

'Why are you keen on studying under me? There are others who are equally good, if not better.'

He looked at her anxiously expecting a suitable reply. But she gave no answer. She smiled in her usual mysterious way. Always that smile, the smile that baffled and intrigued him. He could get no more words from her, for she always expressed her feeling in a silent, admiring manner. It was agreed that Gopalam should continue to teach her.

She felt happy, extremely happy after that. In her jubilant mood she cast more endearing looks at Gopalam. He was senior to her by about four years, yet she seemed to be all the time leading him in the art of love-making. His situation was rather ridiculous. He was a married man and on that account he was hesitant to take any bold step. He was not clear in his mind as regards his future relationship with Suguna. As for Swarna he was becoming more and more infatuated with her. He wished to possess her and in her absence time hanged heavily with him. He always looked forward to seeing her and he was invariably sad to part with her. He asked himself many a time whether he could be in love with Swarna. For all practical purposes he renounced the world after having had an unpleasant life with Suguna. For a few months he withdrew himself into his utopia. But here he was once again dragged from his seclusion by a magnetic spell.

The world was no longer a dreary place. It was on the other hand a thrilling and exciting spot where women like Swarna lived and loved. She satisfied him from every angle. He lent her his plays and poems, and she found them interesting, intoxicating and enlivening. These were exactly the words she used. When the world had such dynamic women for him why should he run away from it and renounce its riches? He took to life again with zest. His ambition to go abroad was revived. He was no longer that apathetic Gopalam. He was his former self, ambitious and enterprising. Swarna led him on to hopes and hopes. She one day asked him, after having read some of his works,

'There seems to be one type of woman in almost all your plays. She is educated, intelligent and enlightened. Who's this woman in real life?'

Gopalam was surprised and was taken aback by that disarming question.

'Why, where is the need for having a woman in real life? I could have imagined or perhaps that may be the concept of my ideal woman.'

'O, I see. I thought that perhaps you might have had some woman in view. You know, writers generally disguise their own emotions. They usually have basis for their characters, I suppose.'

'Not necessarily. Sometimes it may so happen that the writer is expressing his sincere longings without having realised them in real life.'

'You mean your heroine does not exist.'

'At least for me she does not. She is only what I should like to have. But as you know, now I have to be satisfied with dream heroines alone.'

The last words dropped from him in a slow, reluctant tone with a heaviness unbearable for him. Swarna understood him. She also realised that there was no particular woman he really loved. From his writings she suspected he might have. But now it was clear. This made her determined to possess him and win his love. First she admired him for his erudition. Now she sympathised with him for his unhappy domestic life. She could read his mind like a book. In it she found restlessness and frustration. He was not happy. She wanted to make him happy. That was her

resolution. At that stage of her life she was greatly under the influence of feminist movements. She had not much respect for blind beliefs and age-long conventions. So her love for Gopalam was justified by her craze for unconventionality.

The next day she came to him rather cheerless. He was moved by her sight. He always wished her to be cheerful, so he could not stand it.

'You seem to be a little depressed today. What's the matter?'

'I lost my pen.'

It was a lovely pen she had. As a matter of fact everything about her was lovely. Gopalam felt sorry for the loss. And then he saw the pencil of that set still lurking in her hand. The pencil looked desolate deprived of its mate, the pen.

'You may lose the pencil also if you have it with you. Why don't you give it to me, so that it may be safe with me?'

'By all means you can.'

She presented the pencil to him immediately. And the way she gave it indicated that she was prepared to give anything to him. She showed such a spirit of happiness that for a moment she forgot the loss sustained by her a few hours before. For she had done something wonderful, she thought. She gave a present to the man she liked.

This was only a prelude to the exchange of gifts. Gopalam always surprised her with presents. There was bound to be, on all such occasions, a little heated argu-

ment. Swarna would refuse and then he would plead and urge her to accept. Surely she too appreciated and welcomed all such moves or perhaps tokens of affection from Gopalam. But she hated the expense involved in all such purchases. She was not a golddigger and she did not like to be a burden on Gopalam. But he derived immense pleasure from all such acts. Suguna was by nature not jealous. And she had immense faith in Gopalam. So she left him free to indulge in his own pranks.

Then came the marriage of Gopalam's sister. Swarna was invited and she went to his village, where the marriage was celebrated. She stayed there for three days and on all those days she was treated regally. This was the first occasion for Suguna to have a friendly chat with Swarna. During these few days they became intimate and liked each other. On the fourth day they started for the town again. But Suguna had to stay back for a couple of days more on the personal request of her mother-in-law. Gopalam could not refuse his mother's wish. As they waited for the bus Swarna and Gopalam stood side by side. She was nearly of his height, shorter by only a few inches. She wore a simple, dark green cotton sari, but somehow she looked enchantingly beautiful in it. She was ravishing. To the onlookers these two gave the sight of a newly married couple and as they sat in the bus side by side every one envied them. Or Gopalam thought they did. There was a gentleman near Gopalam's seat whispering into his neighbour's ear, 'Are these husband and wife?'

'Well perhaps' was the comment from his neighbour.

On the way the nearness of Swarna feasted and fed the love-lorn heart of Gopalam. Her breath was sweet; her looks were inviting. By the time they reached the town it was dark. That was convenient for them. They got into a cart and sat almost huddled together, for a good portion of the cart was occupied by their trunks and beds. Swarna's body touched Gopalam's. They were sitting opposite to each other with legs stretched, but bent. There was not much of space. Gopalam's hand was near Swarna's hand. It was almost touching hers. He felt like clasping it firmly. The driver was not able to see them, the trunks obstructed his sight. Outside it was dark. In the day time it would have been a scandal to go like that. But now it was different. Gopalam wondered how Swarna might be feeling, being near him in that manner. He looked at her silently, admiringly. She responded. There was a terrible silence, unbearable silence. But Gopalam did not have the courage to confess his love for Swarna, or perhaps he thought that he must as yet wait for some other suitable opportunity. So he sat by her like a silent spectator. He got down at his house. She lived a little distance away from him. She left for her house and Gopalam instructed the driver to leave her safely at her residence.

The relationship between Gopalam and Swarna changed completely after this trip. He became more and more restless, for very soon she would take her examination and leave him. If he were to let slip the opportunity, then he might have to repent of it later. Conveniently Suguna was away from him in his village. So he decided to

make the best of the situation by writing a love letter to Swarna. Even though she was coming to him every day he felt embarrassed to put it to her orally. To say that he was in love, being a married man, looked somehow ridiculous for him. He gently pushed the letter into her hands and she took it home. Next day she came and returned the letter very calmly. He was amazed. There was no apparent expression on her face. She merely gave it back to him with no comments.

'Have you read the letter?'

'Yes.'

'What do you say?'

There was no reply. Instead there was a strange silence. 'If she did not like him why did she encourage him all these months? Why did she give all those taunting smiles?' Gopalam argued within himself. He was a little nervous. It was his first experience at love-making. He loved Swarna to madness. In a way his future happiness was dependent on her reply. Yet she did not condescend to answer. It was a moment, one and infinite. Her silence, her behaviour tortured him. The situation was tantalising. For a minute or so Gopalam got confused. But soon regaining his confidence he said,

'Swarna don't you love me?'

As he put this question he gently touched her hand and looked into her face anxiously.

'Please tell me, do you love me or not?'

He repeated these words earnestly and hopefully. At last she murmured,

'Yes, I love you.'

Earth and Heaven seemed to be mingled together in that minute of ecstasy. For Gopalam the word 'Yes' sounded like music. The gods above were kind to him. Months and months of anxious suspense were happily forgotten. He kissed her. It was the first kiss she received from a man. To him it was the summit of happiness. Her eyes were closed. Perhaps she was shy, or it might be that she was enjoying the first kiss she received in her life. A minute later they were normal again.

She went home and thought about it. In a way she felt sorry that she yielded to him without having a definite assurance of marriage from him. She loved him no doubt and she longed to have him, but then there was the question of security. She cried a lot and sleep comforted her. That night Gopalam slept soundly and felt elated in finding a woman after his heart. In her he found completion, perfection and marital peace. It was no longer necessary for him to create fictitious women for mental satisfaction. Life was going to be worth living, now that Swarna would be his wife. But on the other side Swarna was feeling differently. She even wanted not to see him again. For a moment she considered Gopalam to be one of those men who would take women casually and then drop them off, the moment they were wearied of them. She knew Gopalam well enough, but at that time she cursed him. Was it fate or was it her sincere love that goaded her to go? Surely she was extremely fond of him, but she only wanted to be sure of Gopalam. The moment Gopalam saw her

that day, he realised that she was unhappy. He was about to approach her to kiss her, but she forbade him. He kept quiet, all the time wondering within himself why she should behave like that. Her eyes were a little reddish and he got frightened. He never wanted to give pain to her. So he requested her to explain her behaviour. She did not say a word but she wrote on a piece of paper. 'I was foolish enough to have allowed you to kiss me the other day without any definite promise of marriage from you. The whole night I cried on that account. Isn't this sufficient torture for me?'

Gopalam almost collapsed in his chair. Yes, he ought to have promised her. But then he took it for granted that marriage was incumbent on his love for Swarna. He never could imagine any other relationship with her. He definitely wanted to marry her. He could never think of ruining her. She was the source of all his happiness. To him she symbolised innocence, purity and modesty. Before he touched her sacred lips, as he put it, he resolved within himself that he should marry her. That was understood. But what a shame! She misunderstood him. He apologised.

'Swarna, I am sorry for what has happened, It's my fault, I own. But I thought you understood me and my intentions.'

The sincerity of Gopalam's words made Swarna feel ashamed of herself. She was creating all that row for nothing. And he was so dependable that to suspect him of bad intentions would be a sin. So she cooled off.

'Yes, I understand you. But you see, a woman always

wants security. Her position in society is such that she needs it.'

This was a new light thrown on his ignorance. He did not understand women, even though he thought he did.

'I now promise you that I will marry you and I think of you, only in terms of marriage and nothing else.'

He took her hand and pressed it warmly. The promise was given, the maiden cheered up. Swarna was pleased with herself and the way she conducted herself. From that moment onwards she had no mental reservations. She was to be the wife of Gopalam and she felt proud of it.

A few days later Gopalam heard very casually from an elderly gentleman that Swarna was just dependent on the sweet wishes of her benefactors. She was supported by a wealthy family and naturally they would have their say even in the question of her marriage. Perhaps the gentleman suspected Gopalam to be in love with Swarna or he might have passed that remark casually. Gopalam could not understand what it was. But it made him a little unhappy to think of Swarna as a tool in the hands of certain persons. The moment she came to him he hurled at her the question,

'Swarna, I am told, you are not independent....'

Swarna was puzzled. 'In what way I am not? Who told you?'

He gave the name of the gentleman and immediately she added, 'No doubt the cost of my education is borne by a rich family. But my marriage is my own concern. Moreover who cares for society? Our love should silence every-

one. If we are sincere and loyal to each other then no one can stand in our way.'

It was a splendid speech. He admired her for her strong views. She reminded him of the emancipated modern woman trying to be rid of the shackles of society. That was the type of woman he wanted and there she was. They belonged to two different castes, but none of them believed in that decrepit system. To him it did not exist. But with society it was valid and society would never tolerate any violation of this age-long custom. Gopalam asked her rather mischievously,

'Swarna, why did you not go to any one else for help. Why did you come to me alone?'

Swarna laughed outright and replied, 'Because I wanted you. . . .' she paused and continued, 'Yes, the first day I saw you in my class I fell in love with you. Later I was told that you were married already. That discouraged me a little. I thought I was longing for fruits that didn't belong to me. But now it is providential that we are together.'

'Swarna, how clever of you! So you have caught me in the trap. Before you came to me I was almost doggedly content with my misery. I thought I might live by my literary creations. I now realise what I would have missed if I had neglected you. How true is it to say that to have loved and lost is better than having not loved at all.'

'Why do you say "lost" ?'

'O, that is only a part of the famous saying.'

'Please do not use that word again. I myself have

come seeking you. So I prize you as a gem and I shall not lose it. I know our marriage will create a sensation or perhaps a scandal. But we will never care. We shall not bow down before tradition and ruin our pure and divine love.'

Swarna became sentimental. She was highly emotional and as she talked Gopalam could see the determination underlying every word she uttered. With his rich, scholarly attainments his mind was steeped in classic lore.

'Swarna, we are married this very moment. Do you remember Kalidasa's description of Sakuntala as a flower, fully blown but not yet smelt? That was how Dushyanta found her. So you are, my dear, the sweet, smelling flower. Like the busy bee sucking honey, I have tasted the elixir of your lips.'

Swarna laughed boisterously. She could not control herself. She exclaimed,

'Grand...poetic... But see that you don't behave like Dushyanta or like the bee leaving old ones after a short spell of love-making.'

'No fears. I shall be always true to you.'

'Let us see.' Swarna commented rather gravely and added,

'I wonder what Suguna will say. Sometimes I feel I have ruined her happiness. What will you do with her?'

'I propose to leave her with some money to support her.'

'It's rather unkind of you to say that. Let her remain with us, I can certainly be friendly with her. I shall marry you only on condition that she will be with us and be

treated nicely by you."

'Swarna, you are awfully kind. If you feel that way, then I have no objection to her staying. Let me first talk to her.'

'Do by all means, but see that she is not put to trouble.'

'We will manage and everything will be all right' assured Gopalam.

He explained to Suguna all about his love for Swarna. He expected a great fight or at least a terrible row with Suguna. But there was no comment from her. She listened to him patiently and calmly. Gopalam waited for her wrathful abuse. Instead she only said,

'So this is what you have done. I suspected as much. But I don't stand in the way of your love. I want you to be happy. I am glad you have found a woman who satisfies you.'

(2)

Soon came the vacation and the romantic days of love-making were over. Swarna accompanied her rich friends to Madras. While at school she came into contact with her class-mate, Lalita, the daughter of a rich landlord. In that locality Lalita's people were venerated and held in great respect. Gradually Swarna became indispensable to Lalita. Their friendship increased from year to year and Swarna started living with Lalita, leaving her parents altogether. The cost of her education was entirely borne by Lalita and her sister, and when Swarna came for

studying in the college she was all by herself, but nearly every week-end she used to go to her friend. This was the wealthy family to which Swarna owed all her education and patronage. There were lots of other boys and girls who were maintained by those rich people, but Swarna's position among them was unique. Whereas the others only received money, she literally became one with them. Right from her school days there was Mr. Murthy known to her. He too received help from that rich family. She treated him as her brother and they moved together as near relatives.

At that time Murthy also was in Madras. Now that he was a youth his attitude towards Swarna was to a little extent changed. Moreover Swarna's father requested him many a time to marry Swarna. He was willing to do so, but he wondered what Swarna might say to that. For the last six months she never cared to respond to his letters, though formerly she used to be prompt in writing to him. On that account he was annoyed with her. To him Swarna's behaviour was rather enigmatic. Formerly she received advice and guidance from him. And now the very same woman pretended as though she had no obligation whatsoever to him. This hurt his pride and he wanted to chide her. So when he met Swarna he was reserved and serious.

'Hallo Murthy, how are you? I think we have met after a pretty long time.'

'Yes, we have.'

'You don't seem to be very happy about our meeting. What's the matter?'

'Nothing in particular. For the last few months you

have not bothered to write to me. Don't I deserve at least this much from you ?'

'Of course, you do. But you see, I was busy preparing for my exams. So I couldn't write to you.'

'Don't tell me that you had no time at all to write a letter. I don't think you could have been so busy. If you had a mind to write, surely you would have.'

'Murthy, listen to me. I was really worried about my studies. Please do not chide me.'

'It seems you got help from Gopalam.'

'Yes, I did.'

Murthy smiled and said, 'I hope he did not advise you not to write to me.'

Even though he smiled he exhibited a certain amount of jealousy. He knew Gopalam before. Swarna, Gopalam and Murthy, they all studied in the same school and college, though Gopalam was senior to them by a couple of years. In a way they were all contemporaries and Murthy even from his school days was a sectarian in outlook. He believed in the emancipation of his caste at the expense of other castes. Gopalam, coming from a different caste, was disliked by Murthy. Swarna was aware of all that background. So she replied immediately, rather provoked,

'Who is Gopalam to advise me ? And why should he advise me in my personal matters ?'

'O no, I just wondered from your silence that you might have been inspired by him. Honestly speaking you are at a marriageable age and you ought to get married, the sooner the better. Recently your father spoke to me of

a certain young man who is prepared to marry you.'

Murthy indirectly referred to himself, but he wished to know the reaction of Swarna before he could propose to her directly. Swarna slowly remarked,

'Murthy, don't bother me about my marriage. My father goes on talking about my marriage but I don't have much respect for his curious, orthodox ways.'

'Anyway you can't choose your partner. Don't think that you are free to go your own way. You have to abide by the laws of society.'

This was a warning to her, for he had already heard some rumours relating to Swarna's love-affair with Gopalam. He wanted to nip it in the bud. So he cautioned her of society and her obligation to its code. But Swarna put him off with her strong but evasive reply.

'I don't understand what you mean by all this. Let me tell you, I have no intention to marry at all. I wish to remain unmarried. And if I change my mind, then I know whom to choose.'

Murthy realised that Swarna was getting heated and he did not intend to proceed further. One thing was certain, he could never marry her. So his next aim was to make her infatuation for Gopalam wither away. This talk had its adverse effect on Swarna. Momentarily she was upset and she wondered whether she had done the right thing in loving Gopalam.

With that conflict in mind Swarna kept quiet. She did not write to Gopalam. He failed to understand how his chaste maiden could be so very indifferent. 'What's hap-

pening to her? Why does she not write?' he asked himself. Then he slowly explained to Suguna all about his love for Swarna. He expected a great fight or at least a terrible row with Suguna. But there was no comment from her. She listened to him patiently and calmly. Like a culprit Gopalam waited for her wrathful abuse. Instead she only said,

'So this is what you have done. I suspected as much. But I don't stand in the way of your love. I want you to be happy. I am glad you have found a woman who satisfies you. I shall go to my parents for some time.'

These words left him cold and shivering. If Suguna abused him it would have been all right. He too would have hurled abuses at her. But this silent acquiescence on her part was too much for him. She showed absolute serenity and even nobility. No doubt, she liked Swarna. Both of them became good friends. Even then it was natural on her part to fight for her possession. But she showed no anger and exhibited no signs of jealousy. This was a lesson to him. It taught him a woman's capacity for self-sacrifice. Coming as it did from the woman whom he considered to be not up to his expectations he was baffled and amazed. Suguna scored a point over him. At least in one respect she was superior to him. He was selfish, whereas she was unselfish. This was a novel situation which he never imagined to himself, nor felt was possible.

His respect for Suguna grew and he was prepared to treat her kindly. But his heart was given to Swarna, there was no doubt about that. Happiness for him meant only life with Swarna. Her silence and separation aggravated

his torture. Meanwhile she was making arrangements to leave that town and prosecute her studies elsewhere. Not that she wanted to desert Gopalam, but the wishes of her wealthy patrons demanded such a move. During all that period of absence Gopalam did fear as much and his fears were not unfounded. Now that he had done the most difficult part of the job, of informing Suguna, he was eager to communicate that to Swarna.

At last Swarna came. Those were summer days with terrible heat during day-time. In the night it would be pleasant, especially moonlit nights. The night she came was a memorable one. The moon was casting her white radiance. The sky was serene and tranquil. A soft wind was blowing. Jasmines were lying on Swarna's bed. There were jasmines in her hair. Jasmines everywhere. Sweet fragrance was coming. She took a heap of those flowers and threw them at Gopalam. He was bathed in them. And he did not like to lag behind. He responded heartily and cheerfully by pouring flowers on her. They laughed and played with all the intoxication of youth and love.

Swarna talked a lot. She was lying on the lap of Gopalam facing the sky upwards. Suddenly she took his hands into hers.

'Dear, we two should be faithful to each other all our lives.'

'Of course, we will be.'

'Promise. . . .'

'Yes, I solemnly promise.'

Still lying in that relaxed posture Swarna sweetly

slipped a ring on to the middle finger of Gopalam. It had a precious stone, with some yellowish tinge. It sparkled in that light. The ring was a promise of her love. Her life was dedicated to the worship of him. The moon above and the stars around were the silent witnesses of their love and marriage. Gopalam kissed her fondly and passionately, the moment she gave him the ring. She always showed an immense satisfaction in receiving the kisses. And she had a trick of her own; she always used to kiss back in a long-ing, lingering manner.

'I believe the moon must be envying us. How happy I am, Gopal !

'Swarna, I am lucky in having you. At last I have found my partner in life.'

'I am often worried that you may not love me the same way as you do now.'

'Don't be silly.'

'Who knows, men are unreliable.'

'Women are fickle.'

'O, no. You'll see how I shall behave. I can never live without you. Before I saw you I hated men. Now I realise you are so very different from every one of them.'

'Sweet Swarna, listen to me. You are the only source of happiness to me.'

'You know, the first day you refused to help me, I became terribly angry with you. I lost all hopes of getting you. But how kind is fate to me !'

'I hope it will be in future too. If you leave this place for studies elsewhere then I can't live. Even this month of

absence was too bad for me.'

'Don't lose heart. I don't think I shall go. I may not get admission there. In that case I can stay here.'

'Well, let us hope you won't get. Anyway don't disappoint me.'

'How can I? You are as indispensable to me as I am to you. Sometimes I feel that we were related to each other in our previous life too. Otherwise we could not have been so fond of each other.'

'Dear...dear...Swarna darling, you are sweet.'

He drew her nearer to him. Her eyes were moist. She was joyful and there were tears of joy. Gopalan's fingers lovingly touched the curly hair of Swarna. She was blissful, dreamily blissful. The world around might roar aloud. Society might call her love unconventional. But to her it was perfectly natural. She loved Gopalam and he responded. Their hearts beat in unison, what more was necessary? In how many married lives was there such an amount of harmony, contentment and understanding, she asked herself. Moreover her life was her own concern and she could see that her future was linked up with Gopalam. Nothing else mattered to her. Circumstances favoured her choice. She did not get admission at the other place and so she continued her studies in the same town.

She put up with Gopalam for a few days and later shifted to her usual residence. At that stage she was not going to get her secret known to others. She wanted to pursue her studies and take a degree before settling down to life with Gopalam. Her visits were repeated and all the

time she was with him, she was oblivious of the whole world. She admired him with a single devotion and in her he found beauty, love and divinity mingled together. He felt as if they were together and inseparable even in their past lives. Or he also imagined to himself that the heavenly beauty he had seen before his entrance into the world was in a way reflected in her face. Swarna was no doubt quite good-looking and attractive. But to him she was perfection itself.

(3)

Time passed rather smoothly but for one incident. Swarna came to Gopalam's flat direct from the college. He was casually looking at her books, but when he was examining a particular book Swarna became rather nervous. She tried to drag it from him. This roused his curiosity all the more. To his great surprise he found an envelope containing a letter.

'Swarna, to whom are you writing?'

'To you' murmured Swarna.

'Then let me read it.'

'No, not now I shall give you tomorrow. Please don't read it just now.'

Gopalam was puzzled.

'Swarna, this is rather strange. If it is a letter addressed to me, then where is the harm in reading it? What difference does it make if I read it now or tomorrow?'

'I don't give any reason but I request you not to read it now.'

This raised not merely his curiosity but suspicion also. He wondered whether Swarna was loving someone else and making a fool of him. So he persisted in going through the contents, whereas Swarna insisted on his returning the letter to her. He opened the envelope and it was a letter addressed to Murthy and not to him. A terrible sense of contempt for Swarna oppressed him.

'Swarna, why did you tell a lie? I never thought you were so clever as all that. You planned to take this letter away and bring a letter really addressed to me in instead. What a scheme!'

Swarna kept quiet and she felt ashamed of herself. She shed tears of remorse and begged him to forgive her. The letter, of course, was no love-letter. Still Swarna's behaviour and her intention to keep her correspondence with Murthy a secret, all these made Gopalam feel suspicious about the whole affair. So he forbade her from writing to Murthy in future and she promised to abide by his wishes. To convince him of her innocence she produced all the letters she had from Murthy the very next day and Gopalam for the time being forgot all about that incident.

Gopalam was by nature a very ambitious person. The moment he won the heart of Swarna he indulged in other dreams. He felt like giving her the best of life and he wished to be faraway from the town they lived, at that time. His great aspiration was to become a scholar. He cared more for name and fame than for riches. Wealth might come and go, but scholarship would never leave a man. So his original intention of going abroad was revived in

him.

But then there was his newly-found Swarna from whom even a moment's separation was death itself. He could never think in terms of leaving her. Yet his ambition could not be curbed. It began to oppress him. Moreover his love affair with Swarna could be made known only after she had finished her education. He argued within himself that he might as well return by that time. He also felt that true love must be tested. It should undergo a period of separation when the lovers would be put to a fiery test. Swarna came to him and stayed away that night on the pretext of going to a picture. They were talking in a jubilant tone and it was getting late in the night. Gopalam talked about his trip abroad. He said it very casually, though, of course, meaning it seriously.

'Swarna, darling, I am contemplating to go abroad.'

'Go abroad, what for?'

'To get more knowledge; to have a better understanding of life.'

'Don't be silly.' Swarna gave him a gentle slap on his cheek.

'No dear, please think about it seriously. After all what sort of life do we have in this old fashioned town? We should live in a big city where we float with the busy tides of men and women and at the same time keep busy private lives to ourselves. I hope you understand what I mean.'

'You mean we live in peace in an unknown place.'

'Yes, that's exactly what I mean. Besides, will you

not like to see me renowned? Are you not ambitious for me?’

‘Yes, of course’ Swarna mildly yielded. But she had a gentle fear too. The thought of separation was too much for her. It would break her heart to leave the man she loved so intensely and so passionately. Gopalam observed her fear and patted her fondly.

‘Swarna, no doubt I mean going. But when I think of you and the days we have spent together my heart breaks into pieces. How can I stand it! Yet I must go, I know I must.’

He was overpowered by emotion. Tears dropped and he sobbed like a child. Swarna played the part of a kind mother. She could not understand why her unruly child should dream of leaving her. She had given him peace and bliss. He longed for it and he got it. Now he was courting torture for himself and thereby making her also miserable.

‘Dear, why must you go? Why can’t we be together? Who knows what may happen to you when you go abroad? You may forget me for the beautiful women there. After all I am nothing when compared with those foreign beauties. You may feel attracted towards them and then what will happen to me? Can I live without you? No, never.’

She pleaded passionately, thereby she also showed the fears natural to women. Gopalam smiled.

‘Swarna, darling, how can I be drawn to any other woman? One can love only once in one’s life. Love is such an all-absorbing passion that it devours its objects completely. That opportunity of loving once is already given to

me through you. What more do I need in life? I can never think of any other woman. The very thought of it is repugnant to me.'

'The way you talk is quite assuring to me. But you know... ' Here she kept silent again and Gopalam urged her to go on.

'Yes, what's it Swarna?'

She struggled hard, amidst choking tears, to express to him all her fears.

'You know you are going to a foreign land. You may get addicted to drinking and other bad habits. You may forget your own country and the ideals for which it stands.'

'I promise you, Swarna, I shall not do any of these things. Somehow this madness has come on me. I can't have peace unless I fulfil my mission. I shall be true to you.'

'Dear, I am still worried. I wish you won't go.'

'No please, please do not talk like that. You ought to encourage me. Be bold, my Swarna, and all will be well.'

'I hope so.'

Swarna was busy thinking what would happen to her in his absence and how she should spend her days. Yet she realised that there was some justification in what Gopalam said. On his return he would be well placed in life and they could enjoy the rest of their lives. Slowly she saw the wisdom in his words and surely life in that town was already unbearable for them. Gopalam's mind was faraway. It was roaming about the streets of London. He wanted a kick in life. He did not like to have a calm and steady life, at least not at that age. That was a period of active fight

and his later life might depend on the amount of effort he would put in at that time. His scheme, as he saw it, was flawless. Swarna and Gopalam were silent for a few minutes. Then she resumed,

'Dear, remember one thing. Whenever you are tempted, during your stay abroad, you think of me. The moment you do that you will never yield to temptations. You may not care for yourself or what may happen to you. But you will certainly care for me. If you do anything bad, then you consider your Swarna also to be doing bad things here in this country. Your good is her good, your bad is hers. You will be guiding me and my life. You are the source of my moral strength and if you yourself go wrong, then your Swarna is bound to go wrong.'

These words she spoke slowly, deliberately and with a certain mystic grandeur. Gopalam was amazed. He was touched and moved by her advice. Every word of hers echoed in him. They were imprinted on his heart. It was a leaf taken out of the holy books, yes, Swarna's words were gospel to him. He knew for certain that he could never displease Swarna. She might be faraway from him, but her spirit would be watching him, guiding him and saving him from pitfalls. She was his guardian angel and day in and day out her words would brace him against all possible temptations. Gopalam looked at Swarna. Her face was serene and tranquil. He wondered what she might be thinking at that moment, that very moment.

'Swarna, please wait for me and be faithful to me. Do not marry anyone else in my absence.'

'Please don't talk in that vein. I have given to you all that I can call my own. I belong to you. I understand the depth of your love. I am not such a brute that I shall deceive you and marry someone else. I can't be happy with anyone else in my life. I shall not be unreasonable. I know that your life, your future, your happiness, everything is dependent on me. I also know that my future is with you. Hence we are forever linked together in an eternal bond. How can I, knowing all this desert you? No, it will never happen. I will be for ever faithful to you. I am yours, your own sweet Swarna.'

She gave her hand to Gopalam as a token of this solemn pledge. He drew her to his bosom. For a moment Swarna forgot the impending departure. The thought of it was so unpleasant that she did not like to remember it. But of course, she gave her assent for his trip. Gopalam's heart was full. He could speak no longer. Swarna was silent but she was responding to his caresses tenderly. She loved him all the more, now that he was leaving her shortly. That very hour she resolved, she should help him in his endeavour like a true, heroic mate and not intimidate him by her fears and tears. She believed a lot in fate and she accepted the separation as a measure of that Supreme Force. Swarna was a little tired. She leaned against Gopalam and within a few minutes she dropped into his lap quite asleep, like a soft, little child. He lifted her up lovingly and gently put her on her bed. He watched her from his bed and as she slept peacefully she gave him the impression of an innocent babe. He could sit like that and watch her for ages.

What if that very moment were to become eternity! He was prepared to do anything for his beloved, he mused. He sat like that for hours or perhaps till his eyes became very heavy and led him on to sleep.

The next morning Gopalam woke up with a light and cheerful heart. Swarna also seemed refreshed by the comfortable sleep she had the previous night. She started teasing him.

'Gopal, I think I ought to wear lip-stick and have my hair bobbed. Or else you may reject me on your return.' Don't be silly' commented Gopalam.

'O, no; you'll be changed. You may insist on my dancing too.'

'Swarna, stop being ridiculous. I want you to be as simple as you are now.'

'That's what you say, now. But on your return you will be different.'

'No fears, Swarna, Gopalam will never change.'

Swarna smiled heartily.

For Gopalam those were busy months indeed. He went and saw Suguna in her village. Her parents wanted her to create a scene, but she maintained a dignified aloofness, Gopalam's admiration for her as a woman of noble suffering increased. He even felt that he made a mistake in not realising the intensity of her affection. Anyway at that moment of his life he was not prepared to retrace his steps. He had to go abroad. Only on his return he was prepared to examine his relationship with Suguna.

At last came the day when he had to leave India.

For three days before that final day Swarna and Gopalam talked less and moved about all the time together. They were afraid to talk. The moment they attempted to say a word, they were bound to weep. There were many thoughts, but they could not be uttered. Of course their silent looks were understandable enough. So in a way there was no need for them to talk. One look from Swarna was enough for Gopalam to guess what she wanted or what she felt like saying. There was such an amount of mutual, heartfelt communication of ideas and thoughts. In the last minutes Gopalam took Swarna to his bosom and kissed her. She looked at him with eyes full of tears and there was in those eyes love and sympathy for Gopalam. He made an effort to move, but his legs tottered and he was like a drunken man reeling and unsteady. His heart was torn asunder, but then there was his ambition to be fulfilled. He became quiet and at last managed to say, "Good bye, Swarna darling." That was all he could say. He got into the taxi and did not feel like looking back. The taxi was off and at the station his friends were waiting for him. There was din and bustle and he went about the place like an absent-minded philosopher. His friends bade him farewell and the train moved on.



CHAPTER III

Gopalam found himself a stranger in Bombay. This anonymity pleased him as well as oppressed him. Was he so

insignificant that no one took any note of him? Anyway he swallowed his pride and got into 'Strathmore'. It was a luxury boat. He saw men and women moving about and there were painful scenes of farewell. Luckily for him none accompanied him to Bombay to see him off at the boat, or else the separation would have cost him lots of tears. The moment he boarded the ship his mind ran back to Swarna. Every scene of the past, every word of hers came back to him with lightning speed. He felt unhappy and miserable. He spent most of the time in his cabin itself, reviving the past with great detail. Swarna's sweet face was all the time before him. The words of caution she gave to him were still ringing in his ears.

He saw others moving about sociably. On the boat friendships were made very quickly. All sorts of amusements were thought of. Otherwise life would be surely boring. But to Gopalam all these did not exist. Even the food was not to his taste. Everything was repulsive. Coming as he did from a small provincial town he was not quite sure of himself as regards the civilities of the ultra-modern lot. The boat was in fact a miniature English home. He felt a little shy in finding himself in such a vast crowd of strangers. As a matter of fact there was no such necessity. There were good many Indian students going for higher studies. But most of them were noisy and talkative. Surely there were one or two modest persons like him, and whenever he felt like being in company he was found in their midst. Or sometimes he used to stand on the top deck and see the waves rolling and dashing against the boat. On days of rough

weather the boat creaked and rolled like a cradle. Gopalam was a good sailor; he did not have sea-sickness. The great muscular athletes who took pride on their martial frames as compared with the thin figure of Goplam started vomiting. Gopalam fared well and looked at those tortured fellows with contempt and even pride. He often loved to watch the sunset. It looked like a huge ball of fire falling into the sea. He was always amused by such a sight. And on moonlit nights the boat gave him the impression of a fairy castle, strutting majestically against a background of angelic whiteness. He was indeed lucky, but he pited that Swarna was not there to partake of his joy. He missed her terribly, but he consoled himself that after reaching London he might not be so lonely. After all there was the mission of studies and that would keep him busy, he argued within himself. At last the docks of Southampton were sighted. Even then there was some delay. The tedious job of going through the formalities of the customs was sickening enough for him. The boat-train was waiting for them and he along with others got into it and reached Paddington. He was in London, the city of his dreams, the goal of his ambition. Some of the India House Officers came and took all of them, the Indian students, to some guest house.

It was a big flat in Kensington and as he moved from one big room to another he felt as though he were in a hospital. Beds were lying side by side and even at that time of the day some were still in bed. It was lunch time and Gopalam felt that perhaps they were sick. Outside it was terribly cold, it was said the coldest day for the last ten

years. Gopalam had to get used to such expressions, but the first day it was pronounced he wondered why the people were so meticulously careful about the weather and its variations with reference to the past. In India he never bothered to know when it was the hottest day or the coldest day. Perhaps most days were alike or life dragged on in the same way, methodically and in a routine fashion. London did not impress him at that time. He read a lot about that historic city, its Parliament House, Westminster Abbey, Buckingham Palace and all such famous spots. But everywhere he found darkness. The soil was dark, not a leaf was found. All the trees were barren, completely nude. The earth was damp and musty. Parks were deserted. What had happened to this city, he mused. Gopalam found nature almost dead. He wondered how the poets could have sung of birds when there was no sign of birds at all. He thought that London would be always like that. He did not, at that time, realise that Spring would rejuvenate the whole atmosphere and people the universe with birds, leaves, flowers and lovers. He saw the bombed sights by the Thames. He felt sorry for all such ruin created by war, but he was not awed by the sights of London. He reached it in Winter and perhaps that season made him cold towards the great metropolis. In the nights it used to be awfully chilly and in those large rooms the situation was even worse.

After four weeks he managed to get 'digs' in a little suburban part of London. The land-lady showed all pretensions to affluence, though her drawing room, the most

heavily furnished one according to her, indicated her exact plight. Gopalam could see that she was far from being affluent. He enlisted himself as a student in London University. The moment he settled down to studies he realised he could not concentrate. Every morning he used to wake up with the hope of getting a letter from Swarna. But Swarna, his ideal woman, seemed to be failing in her duty. She was slack and her letters were irregular. On days he failed to get one he would go mad. All sorts of conjectures and visions of Swarna's infidelity oppressed him. At the end of a week's torture the letter might come with no excuse except of laziness. If this were to be the way in which Swarna were to treat him, then he could never go ahead. Separation itself was unbearable. This irregularity in correspondence was fuel to fire. He became confused. He even rebuked Swarna for her foolishness and also indicated to her of the dire consequences of her negligence. Swarna by nature was lazy as far as correspondence was concerned. She could not write pages and pages as Gopalam would. He was getting crazy; it was getting on his nerves. If he had friends perhaps life would have been more cheerful. No doubt there were the men and women students at the University, but he had an insurmountable shyness. He met one or two girls who seemed to be of a friendly nature. They talked to him once or twice, but he had mental reservations. He still remembered Swarna's advice that he should not be friendly with any woman in London. In her letters also she used to repeat that. So he was afraid to be friendly with any one. He was prepared to be lonely, it did not mat-

ter to him provided she wrote letters frequently. He took her letters as his best friends and comforters.

He heard of the Kew gardens and its grandeur in Spring. On a fine day he paid a visit to the memorable gardens. It was indeed an intoxicating sight. The roses were all in their glory. A sweet fragrance filled the whole place. There were roses and roses, of all types, of all shades and of all hues. With the onset of Spring nature looked fresh, virginal and alive. He moved about the whole area admiring every flower and tree, musing to himself that the poets could certainly have been thrilled by such glorious sights of nature. In India where he saw something green even in Winter he did not notice the vivid change in Spring. Here the transformation was complete and thorough. But even in that mood of poetic ecstasy there was a tinge of sadness. At every stage he repeated to himself that his Swarna should have been with him. His blind faith in Swarna bordered on superstition though he hated to be superstitious. He took it as a sin to be happy; he felt guilty in feeling happy without having Swarna by his side. Gopalam's affection for her was a romantic passion that made him live only for her and for none else in the world. In that big city of London he was alone.

Then as Spring advanced into Summer he found the Londoners gay and left to a mood of sweet abandon. On the sunny days he could see the orators getting heated at the Hyde Park. They talked on all subjects under heaven and busy strollers used to have good time in heckling them. One Sunday Gopalam joined those large groups feeling

that he might drown his sorrows or perhaps his loneliness in that busy crowd. Yet there also he was not listening to the speeches. He was thinking of Swarna. Every young woman he saw reminded him of his beloved. Then with the tide of the people he floated into the interior of the Park and sat on a desolate chair. All around him were couples, newly married or perhaps courting. And there were the licensed as well as the unlicensed relationships of men and women. All these sickened him. Not that he was a Puritan, but he did not have the freedom of enjoying life as the others did. He was bound by his earlier promise to Swarna. This inevitably led him on to the thoughts about Swarna and what she might be doing at that time.

Two terms were over with this frustration and madness for Swarna. Gopalam realised that he was wasting his time and making a fool of himself. He was not so rich that he could afford to be wasteful. At the end of the academic year he found he did not make satisfactory progress. Gopalam lost all confidence in himself. Finally he thought of returning to India and he even wanted to go back to Suguna who was patiently waiting for him. He wrote a letter to Swarna expressing all his anguish and even suggesting to her his intention to return. He waited for the reply, but there was only silence from the other end. This baffled him. Swarna was in fact facing a crisis in her life. She was closely watched by Murthy and she had no freedom to write to Gopalam.

(2)

Meanwhile Gopalam moved to some other place and found the land-lady to be sweet and kind to him. She took every care to make him feel quite at home. The changed atmosphere proved to be a little beneficial, but as yet he did not completely reconcile himself to his state of loneliness. Nor did he stop worrying himself about Swarna's letters.

Another academic year started and he, as usual, went to the library. The moment he entered it found a very smart girl looking at him and smiling. He sat opposite her and wondered within himself why she should smile when he was almost a stranger. Yet he appreciated her friendliness and smiled in return. In front of her some books on Theosophy were lying. They were in no way connected with her studies and Gopalam's curiosity was roused still when he found the author of those books to be quite a familiar Indian writer. He felt like borrowing that book and he looked at her once or twice so that he might make the request. She too watched him closely and the moment he felt like talking to her she herself addressed him,

'Would you like to borrow this book?'

'Yes, I would' replied Gopalam slowly and bashfully. She took a slip of paper and wrote her name quite legibly and distinctly. She put the slip in the book and said,

'After reading the book please give it to someone in the Girls' Common Room to be put in my pigeon hole. My name is given on the slip. I hope you can manage.'

'Yes, I can. Thank you very much for lending me the book.'

Soon she left the library. She was the prettiest girl he had ever seen after coming to London. Somehow most of the British girls did not attract him. So he was never attracted to their beauty even for the satisfaction of his aesthetic tastes. But here was a woman who had the touch of oriental beauty. He thought she might be an Italian. She seemed more like a continental with exotic beauty. Her complexion was rich, her nose was pointed, her eyes were large and her hair was light brown. There was a sort of lustre all around her face and looks. She was absolutely feminine. She walked with a majestic gait, but she suffered from no undue pride. It was the pride of beauty that made her look so cheerful and so happy. Gapalam who shunned every other girl was somehow drawn towards her. He connected her books on Theosophy with her good looks and perhaps wondered whether she had some spiritual force in her. Something in him told him that he ought to be friendly with her.

That day he left the library beaming with a new life and spirit. He read the book and returned it as was directed. For nearly a week he looked for her in vain. He nearly thought that he had lost her. But to his great surprise he found her again. He was not sure whether she was the same girl he saw in the library.

So with timidity he enquired, 'Did you get back your book on Theosophy?'

'Yes, I did. Thanks.'

He did not know what to say next and she paused without leaving him abruptly.

She looked at him sweetly and said,

'If you don't mind, will you please tell me something about your country?'

'Of course, I will. Are you interested in India?'

'Yes. You see, on Sunday an Indian Theosophist is speaking in the Theosophical Lodge. I wonder whether you can come.'

'I shall try to come.'

'Hope to see you on Sunday. Bye . . . Bye.'

She left him spell bound. Yes it was rather a dream for him. To meet someone quite accidentally and then to have an engagement with her, this was quite beyond his expectation. That was only Thursday. So two days had to pass before he could see her. But the very next day he saw her and she herself accosted him and talked to him for a minute. Gopalam liked her immensely. She seemed to be so very different from all other girls he had seen. Her voice was sweet and soft. She seemed to be an angel who had come to rescue him from ruin.

Sunday came. The whole day he spent in anxious suspense. Sometimes he wondered whether she would really come. And he even felt like not going, for he was afraid of being in the midst of strangers. The lecture was at 6 p.m. He reached the Lodge five minutes earlier and he cast an anxious glance at the occupied seats. He found Joan, his friend, seated all by herself. But he hesitated to go and sit by her side. So he sat in a row behind her. She looked back and saw him. Immediately she came and sat by him. Gopalam was wearing an ordinary grey flannel trousers with a sports jacket to match it.

'Is this a new suit? I like it very much. It suits you.'

Gopalam was embarrassed. In his country such compliments were as a rule not paid to men. On the other hand men had to pay such elegant compliments to women. So he was a little puzzled and added,

'I am glad you like it. This is not a new suit.'

'O, then you must be taking pretty care of your clothes; that's quite evident. Who selects your ties for you?'

'Why, I select my own ties.'

'Then you have a good taste for clothes.... This tie....' she caught hold of his tie, examined it and remarked, 'this tie matches with this suit. You know some men are pretty bad at this. They always wear the wrong type of ties. O, I can't stand them! How ugly it looks to see a man with such poor tastes!'

Gopalam was pleased with Joan's words of appreciation. The lecture started and it went on very well. Gopalam was rapt in attention, but Joan was closely examining him. The lecture was over. Joan and Gopalam came out.

'Which way are you going?' questioned Joan.

'I am afraid I don't go your way,' said Gopalam. In fact it was a suggestion that he should accompany her to the bus and see her off. This pleasant custom was not yet known to him; he learnt it only later.

'In that case we will meet tomorrow, Gopal. What do you think of the lecture?'

'It was quite all right.'

'I think it was pretty good.'

Gopalam was not really thrilled as some others were.

One woman was actually annoyed with him for having not praised the speech quite enthusiastically. He left Joan with a promise to see her the next day.

During lunch time Gopalam saw Joan and she suggested that they might as well go and sit in the park facing the college. They sat on a bench and Gopalam was feeling a little shy for the other students were observing him or he thought they were. Joan was quite inquisitive; she wanted to know a lot about his views. Her questions were indeed searching and made him pause and think.

'Do you believe in religion?'

'Not much bothered about religion. I believe it has outlived its usefulness. In the present day world it is more a hindrance than a help.'

'Then, you don't believe in God?'

'O, no. I do believe in some Supreme Force, but I don't have much patience for the blind tenets of religion.'

'If you don't have faith in religion, then how can you believe in God? Religion and the scriptures related to it are given by God.'

'Religion in its essence may have been of that nature. But the religions we have today have through centuries upon them traditions and conventions too. So religion is of a social order. People are afraid to defy it for fear of being isolated as rebels and atheists.'

'But don't you think that religious beliefs are essential for formulating an unquestioned faith in God. He cannot talk to us direct. His teaching is given through the medium of religion. So I feel you have to be religious before you

can accept and acknowledge the existence of the Supreme Lord.'

'I don't think in terms of a personal God. To me the concept of some unseen Force controlling the universe is quite satisfactory and satisfying.'

Gopalam was trying to argue out his case when a spider came on to him from the drooping branches over them. Both of them were caught in its web. He felt as if it were an indication of their bond of friendship. She looked at it smilingly and said,

'You know what this means? It brings you new clothes, money and luck.'

'Joan, I need all of them.'

'Why, you have a nice suit on? Why do you want a new one? As for money I suppose you are tolerably rich and luck is bound to come to you.'

'I wish it would.'

'Why do you talk in such a doubting tone? What's the matter?'

'Nothing.'

Joan suspected that he had some trouble, but at that stage of her acquaintance with him she did not like to press the matter further. Moreover it was time for her to go.

'I'd better go now. I am glad we met. There are lots of things I wish to ask you. I hope you won't get fed up with me.'

'No, never. Indeed it is a pleasure to talk to you. You may be rest assured about it.'

Gopalam felt like inviting her for lunch, but he hesi-

tared. He never invited any other English girl before. If she were to say 'no' then their friendship which was progressing steadily might be spoiled. Still he was strongly inclined to take a chance. So he made bold to say,

'Will you...please...come for lunch tomorrow?'

'O fine...that's lovely!'

Gopalam was surprised, but was definitely pleased with her reply. It was arranged that they should meet at the Capitol, quite a decent place to go.

'Gopal, do you always go to the Capitol?'

'Yes, I often go there for my lunch. Of course, I go to the Continental too now and then.'

'I like both the places. I too go there. I am glad our tastes are similar. See you tomorrow then.'

Joan hurried up and Gopalam sat for a few minutes more in the park. He wondered what was happening to him. He remembered the words of Swarna; he did not forget them. But he argued within himself that there was nothing wrong in being just friendly with a girl like Joan. Moreover Swarna was unfair to him, he thought, for he was still not hearing from her regularly and he had already wasted a lot of his precious time in worrying himself about her. He realised that a few minutes talk with Joan had given him a world of mental relief. At least at that time he was not thinking of Swarna. If he could become a normal man through his association with Joan he might as well finish his studies soon and go back to India. These thoughts filled his vacant mind and the October weather was chilly no doubt, but was quite refreshing to him. He gently, rather un-

willingly left that bench, the one on which he sat with his friend for the first time, and went to the library.

The next day Joan was on time at the Capitol. Gopalam saw her and felt quite happy. It was a proud moment for him. She was indeed pretty and anyone surely would like to be in her company. He helped her remove her coat and in her frock she looked lovingly beautiful. They chose a corner seat, so that they could talk freely and they sat facing each other. Gopalam watched her radiant face with a silent admiration. Her heaving bosom expressing the most artistic curves revealed the exuberance of her youth. She was a sweet, little darling, as Gopalam put it. She looked at the 'Menu' and indicated only vegetarian dishes.

'O, you are a vegetarian!' Gopalam inquired.

'Yes, I am. Somehow I hate to take meat, it is cruel to kill animals for food.'

'I quite agree with you.'

'I don't suppose you smoke or drink?'

'No, I don't.'

'How lucky we are! We both of us don't have any vices.'

'It is rather strange that you don't have any of the vices of the modern girls. Most girls now-a-days smoke.'

'Yes, they do. But it is quite revolting to me. I can never make myself do it.'

'Joan, do you know French?'

'Of course, I know. I am doing it for my degree. Why, do you like to learn French?'

'Yes, I wish to. Perhaps it may help me in the long

run.'

'Then, you want me to teach you?'

'Yes, if you can. But where can we meet?'

'We can meet in the common room.'

'How about your coming to my 'digs'—have you any objection?'

'No, none absolutely. But ascertain from your land-lady whether she has any objection to my coming.'

'Why, why should she? It is my sweet will and pleasure.'

'Ah yes, even then you ought to know from her.'

'I shall sound her and see how it goes.'

They had nearly finished their lunch by then and the bill was paid. They came out and they proceeded towards the college. As they neared the porch Gopalram slipped into her hand a manuscript. In fact he wanted to give that to her even at the time of lunch, but he hesitated. She took the manuscript and gently moved away. Gopalram stood a minute watching her recede farther and farther from him. He liked every movement of hers. She had dignity. Her graceful gait and her looks were simply bewitching. That very evening he talked to his land-lady and she said she had no objection whatsoever. 'Only let me know when she is coming so that I may stay in and offer her tea' his land-lady remarked.

'It's awfully nice of you to say this. Well, on every Friday evening Joan comes here.'

'It's quite all right. That suits me fine' observed his land-lady.

§—T.S.

The next morning Gopalam reached the college in high spirits and informed Joan that all was well. Friday came. Joan and Gopalam first had lunch in the town and then started to the 'digs'. On the way Joan said,

'Gopal, you have told me a lot about India, but you haven't said even a single word about yourself.'

'What's there to talk of me? There is nothing special about the events of my life.'

'I have read your play. And I suspect you have something to tell me' she smiled.

Gopalam also smiled.

'If you feel that way then let us first reach the 'digs'. Then we can talk leisurely.'

They were silent. Soon they reached their destination. Gopalam introduced Joan to his land-lady and after the formalities were over tea was served to them.

'Your land-lady seems to be a kind one. I think she likes you.'

'Perhaps she does. Anyway she is better than my previous one.'

'Now I say, Gopal, you tell me all about yourself.'

'Joan, this is rather embarrassing. There is nothing that I can tell you about me.'

'You mentioned the possibility of platonic love in your play. Do you think it is possible for men and women to be friends alone and not become lover?'

It was indeed difficult to answer. No one ever put that question to him before, even though several of his friends had read his play. To justify his own position he said,

'Of course, it is possible. Physical attraction is not the only link between men and women. There can be good companionship or sometimes the friendship may be based on mutual admiration.'

'That's true to a certain extent. But men and women in the prime of their youth can be simply friends, perhaps for a few months. I don't suppose they can pull on like that for a longer period. Anyway have you ever practised this sort of love?'

Gopalam blushed. He knew full well how he started courting Swarna with that very motive and how ultimately it ended. What Joan said seemed to be true, at least as far as his relationship with Swarna was concerned. Yet how could he confess that? If he himself failed in his ideal he had no business to preach it to others. So he feebly commented.

'I haven't had any experience of platonic love, but it is my ideal.'

'Of course, you can have it as a goal, but I have my own sincere doubts about the accomplishment of it.'

There was a gentle tap at the door and the land-lady came in to clear the table, for by then they had finished taking tea. The moment she left them, they started talking. Joan was curious to know all about Gopalam's past so that she could help him. He seemed to be silent; at times he even exhibited signs of sadness. She wondered whether he had any sweetheart in his country. But Gopalam did not like to tell her of Swarna. He thought he might be thereby doing injustice to Swarna's reputation. Yet Joan was quite insis-

teut on knowing all about him.

'You write some more plays now. You have within you the makings of a good writer.'

'Perhaps I have. But I can't write now.'

As he said this he unknowingly expressed a certain tinge of sadness as well as frustration. Joan noticed it and immediately commented.

'Why, why do you say you can't write? Surely you can. God has given you intellect and the capacity to write. Why do you want to waste your talents?'

'It is not a question of my not willing to write, I can't put myself to the task. Something has come over me. I am not my usual self.'

'I am sorry for you. But it is unmanly to wallow in distress and self-pity. You have to pull yourself up and fulfil God's mission. You are a genius. You are bound to be great.'

These words were encouraging enough. He felt he ought to work vigorously. But the darkness that had entered his soul did not leave him so suddenly and so abruptly.

'What you say is quite right, Joan. I think I ought to work, but I can't, you see.'

'Why do you repeat that? I wish I could help you. If there is any serious cause for your grief or suffering, kindly let me know.'

This was more or less a direct reference to the mysterious sadness from which he suffered. Should he confide

Joan and give out all his experience with Swarna? Joan seemed to be so sincere and earnest in making him happy

that he felt like telling her all about himself. There would always be consolation in talking to someone else. So he prepared himself to relate to her the real cause for his misfortune. Yet he hesitated and replied.

'No, nothing. There is no reason why I should be unhappy.'

'That's exactly what I say. Supposing you had been a lame man or a blind man, then what would have been your position? You know how God is kind to you. If it is a disappointment in love affair that troubles you, well, we all of us have it at our age. That should not make us despondents.'

'I wish I had all your detachment.'

'No, Gopal, it's not detachment, it is just a question of putting up with life's unpleasant experiences. I have just come out of one such experience. I loved John. He was quite handsome and was extremely kind to me. He loved me to madness and I too loved him. But then all of a sudden, without my noticing it, he grew up to manhood and he made such suggestions that simply staggered my faith in him. So I broke off with him, but you know it was as good as breaking my own heart.'

'I am indeed sorry for you. But why don't you marry him?' interrogated Gopalam.

'Marriage at my age, no not so soon. Moreover he can't get settled as yet. He may have to wait for nearly two years, for he has to finish his period of conscription.'

'What a shame! Military training even in times of peace! I think the world has gone mad.'

'Maybe, but you see what a shock I have had in my

life. I am trying to forget all that and start afresh.'

'How can you ? It's impossible. You can love only once in your life time.'

'True, but that does not mean we should die if by any chance we fail in our love affairs. Moreover the person, whom we consider to be our proper partner may not be the one chosen by God. We are after all controlled and looked after by that benevolent Lord. For instance our friendship, we come from two different countries and it is only by accident that we have become friendly. But surely we ought to have been related to each other in our past lives. Perhaps I was an Indian or you were a Britisher.'

'Joan, you are marvellous. Do you really believe in reincarnation ?'

'I can't say that I definitely believe in this doctrine. Yet I feel, I somehow feel, that we have been related to each other in our previous lives. What is your own view as regards this ?'

'Frankly speaking I have not bothered myself to think of what may happen to me after my death. I live for the present, it alone is true to me. The past is a myth, the future an illusion. As for the present I know I am lucky in getting you as my friend.'

Joan smiled. She only thought that Gopalam was curious. She suspected that he was almost becoming a cynic. And at this age, he was about twenty-five only, it was dangerous to be cynical. After all he had no business to be like that. She even felt that he was suffering from self-pity. Perhaps his parents were liberal and indulgent towards him.

He was a spoilt child, as she understood him. She was determined to get at his secret and she wanted to help him come out of that muddle. In a way she felt, by helping him she might be compensating for the unkindness she had shown to John in rejecting him. She was twenty-one but her upbringing evidently seemed to be in an atmosphere of religious faith. In fact her maternal grand-father was a clergyman and she came from a good middle class family. She was essentially good natured. So she again questioned Gopalam.

'Gopal, you are trying to evade me. I won't leave you. If you consider me your friend, then why don't you confide in me? Please let me know the cause of your trouble.'

There was no escape this time. She put it so pleadingly that he had to lay bare the inmost recesses of his heart. He also realised that if he did not confess he might lose her friendship. So in a faltering tone he explained to her all about his love for Swarna and how she was not writing to him regularly the moment he left her.

She listened to all his story silently and sympathetically. She was moved, it was bound to be, for she also had an unfortunate love affair. But her case was different. She was in the midst of her own kith and kin, whereas Gopalam was in a foreign land, where he had neither friends nor relatives. So her sympathy for Gopalam was all the more doubled. The motherly instinct of woman was roused in her. She was junior to Gopalam in age but in her essentially feminine kindness she was far superior to him. She cursed Swarna for having nearly ruined a genius like

Gopalam.

'Gopal, I understand how you feel about Swarna. But she does not deserve you. If she had stopped writing to you it only means that she does not love you. Otherwise why should she not write to you?'

'I don't think she can forget me. She is not quite free. She is dependent on certain rich friends and when she puts up with them, she is afraid of writing to me.'

'I think the best way for you will be to leave her alone. By thinking of her all the time you are ruining yourself.'

'Yes, that's true.'

'Gopal, you ought to be ashamed of yourself for doing so. Why should you ruin your career and life for the sake of a woman? There are others who are equally good or perhaps better than Swarna. Who knows, you may fall in love with someone else? When you will say that you had been a simple fool in having loved Swarna. It is no use being sentimental. I admire you for your sincerity and devotion to the woman you love. But if that fidelity brings you more harm than good, then it is not worthwhile having all that.'

'O Joan, you are indeed far too clever for your age. You are gifted.'

'Promise that you will be your original self and do something creative. I always admire a creative work, for it is something original.'

'I shall try to write. At least to please you I have to do that.'

'By all means do, it will please me immensely. It will convince me that the trust I am putting in you is not for

nothing. Next time you meet me you should surprise me with a play.'

'Writing a play in such a short time is not such an easy job, unless some goddess comes to my rescue. There is a familiar story in my vernacular literature....'

He wondered whether she would be interested at all in his literature. So he kept quiet, but she wanted to know what it was.

Joan smiled and Gopalam remarked rather cheerfully.

'Of course, you are a child. Do listen to me then. A court poet had to finish a huge poetical composition by a fixed date or else his head would be removed. Till the last day of that date the poet took it easy and overnight the whole book was written by the goddess herself. He often used to say that the goddess was his lady love.'

'How impudent of him!'

'No, it was not impudence. It only meant he was confident of his poetical powers. Rather he was a worshipper of the goddess and he knew she would never fail him in the hour of need.'

'I think this is your interpretation. I know your brain works in a singular way. Better use all your intellect for a good cause and not allow yourself to drift away into lethargy and frustration.'

'No, I won't. With your rich, intoxicating influence how can I ever afford to be idle?'

'That is encouraging enough. But you know I will be satisfied only when you prove your mettle. I am pretty late now. How about making a move?'

'Yes, let us go.'

He accompanied her to the bus stop and saw her off. That night he lay awake for a long time pondering over the advice given by Joan. He realised for the first time in his life that he had something in him that could attract women. When he fell in love with Swarna he considered it very generous of her to have responded favourably to him. But the way Joan was getting interested in him proved that there could be other women too, who could possibly feel drawn towards him. Of one thing he wanted to be pretty certain; that he should not allow himself to love Joan and forget Swarna. He knew there would come a time when all that innocent friendship between him and Joan might develop into a stronger force like love. He was aware of such a possibility, but he did not want to forsake Swarna.

(3)

At the other end Swarna was having tough time. She took her degree and was then putting up with her friend Lalita. She had to keep company with her the whole day and whenever a letter came to her from Gopalam all the way from London, Lalita generally used to tease her. Swarna was afraid that her secret might be known to Lalita. Then came Murthy too.

'Swarna, how are you getting on? Are you hearing from Gopalam?'

'No, I don't get letters from him. Moreover why should he write to me particularly?'

'I was told that you were having a regular correspondence with him.'

'Who told you?'

'Lalita told me. I wonder why you should still bother about him. On the other hand people are likely to talk about you in relationship with Gopalam. Very soon you will be a byword for everyone. I think you are indiscreet. I may tell you, Lalita does not approve of this, even though she may not talk to you about it.'

'You see, I just had one or two letters from Gopalam, that's all. You are exaggerating the whole affair.'

'Swarna, you think you are the cleverest woman and that you can cheat everyone. You are mistaken. There are others who are equally clever or perhaps cleverer than you. The postman delivering letters here knows me. He has told me that you get nearly two foreign letters a week.'

Swarna paused, Murthy seemed to be dangerous. So she changed her line of approach.

'Murthy, if you are my friend, don't make a fuss about it. Yes, I do get letters. Gopalam is kind-hearted and he likes me. Moreover he thinks I can be of some help to his wife, Suguna. Poor woman she is much upset by his departure and she is not even keeping good health. So sometimes I go to her and stay with her for a couple of days. She feels happy in my company. So he writes to me requesting me to see Suguna now and then.'

'Swarna, we too have been friends all along. We shared each other's secrets. But now in this affair I feel you are hiding something from me. I only wish you well. I am

sure, you will be committing the greatest blunder of your life if by any chance you love Gopalam.'

Swarna inwardly shook with fear and Murthy could not proceed further as he had no proof of what he suspected. So he left it at that stage.

'No, Murthy, I shalln't commit any such mistake.'

'Then if you don't love him, why don't you write to him instructing him not to bother you with his letters?'

'Well, I shall.'

Murthy was satisfied with that conciliatory word. Swarna felt weak and diffident. She no longer had that fighting spirit. She dreaded Murthy, because his word carried weight with the members of that rich family. So she did not have the courage to defy him. Her love for Gopalam was still unshaken, but her faith in herself was completely ruined. When she made approaches to Gopalam she had an unknown strength in her, it could defy society or anyone. Perhaps she received all that inspiration from Gopalam. Anyway it was a maddening passion to get him, that overpowered her at that time. She still had the same intensely felt desire to possess Gopalam, but deprived of his comforting presence, she doubted her own strength, she feared her own shadow. She even became suspicious. If she saw two members in that house whispering to each other she invariably thought that they must be talking about her and Gopalam. And then there were the conscientious scruples that she had ruined the happiness of one good natured and innocent woman like Suguna. In that mood of despair and helplessness she thought she should break off

with Gopalam and make an end of her life.

So Swarna wrote a letter to Gopalam telling him that she would no longer write to him and that their relationship was over. If it had come earlier he might have gone mad or he might have committed suicide. But coming as it did at a time when he was almost questioning his blind faith in Swarna, it left him cold and unmoved. He wondered why Swarna had taken that decision. He did not curse her, he only pitied her fickleness. He thought that perhaps she might be forced into an awkward marriage alliance. In India, he knew, such compulsions were often made and parents generally considered younger generations to be moon-struck and insane, the moment they talked of love. So his rage was directed more at society than at Swarna. He did not respond, there was no need to do so. He got busy with his studies.

(4)

A few days later Joan and Gopalam went to see *The Arms and the Man* being staged at the Piccadilly theatre. The lights were off and in the first scene there was the terrific sound produced by the Bulgarian army pursuing the chocolate cream soldier. Joan immediately nestled closer to Gopalam and took his hand into hers. That was the first time she did so. She gently whispered in his ear, 'O, I am afraid of these sounds', and like a child pressed his hand for warmth and protection. Gopalam did not withdraw for he saw no harm in such a child-like act of Joan. Like the chocolate cream soldier on the stage they too ate chocolates.

Joan was extremely fond of them. In between the acts when the lights were on, she used to sit apart. But the moment the lights were off she again came closer to him and held his hand right through the play. Of course, the explanation of fear she gave was only an excuse to hold his hand, for there had been no more awful sounds later. They enjoyed the play quite thoroughly and she seemed to be quite happy and pleased.

'Are you happy now, Gopal?'

'Yes, I am.'

'Try to be cheerful at least in my company. I can't stand misery and I don't want you to be unhappy.'

Gopalam promised to be happy and that satisfied her. They went to a restaurant nearby to have some thing to eat. She was fond of 'eclair' and he always used to get it for her. And that night even in the cafe she was gently pressing his hand. They were seated in a corner and there was not much of rush. So she managed to thrust her hand below the table and Gopalam responded affectionately. He knew she was getting more and more fond of him. Suddenly she said rather misgivingly,

'I wonder what Swarna would say if she were to see us here in this manner.'

'I don't think she is jealous.'

'Don't tell me that. All women are jealous and possessive. Surely she will fight with me.'

'Well, the question does not arise. She has almost broken off with me. So she has no right over me any longer.'

'Gopal, you are mistaken. You don't know what

women are. Swarna will surely write to you again. You keep quiet. She will come to her senses. She is just playing with you. That's all.'

'May be, I don't know.'

Gopalam added rather colourlessly. In fact the mention of Swarna made him a little unhappy. It was enough to take him back to those intoxicating days of love, when the world existed for only two of them. Gone were those happy days. He cursed himself for having left her. Joan realised he was unhappy.

'I am sorry I have mentioned Swarna. I shall not in future do so.'

'O, it's all right. I am a little soft and sentimental, that's all. Nothing more than that.'

After that he tried to be cheerful and she tried to bring in this topic or that, but the evening was definitely spoiled by the reference made to Swarna. Both of them felt that it was no use continuing like that. So Gopalam paid the bill and they parted. But before she left him she bade him a sweet, little good bye and added,

'Gopal, think of me tonight. Sweet dreams.'

'Bye, bye' Gopalam repeated, though of course mechanically.

Gopalam thought of Swarna. He wondered what might be happening to her. Was she getting married to Murthy? Was she loving him? To both the questions there was a negative reply. No, no; she could never do that, he pleaded within himself. He tore the letter she had given to him at the time of parting, the letter in which she promised to be

faithful to him all her life. He could not imagine to himself what was exactly at the back of that silence or perhaps terrible coldness that Swarna exhibited.

For one moment self-pity overpowered him. But Joan's words of admonition rang in his ears. He said to himself, 'No Swarna, you are cruel. I am a fool to love you still. You are wicked, absolutely wicked.' The silent walls perhaps re-echoed his sentiments and sleep came to him as a relief.

For men in distress there would always be some consolation if they believe in the worship of God. Gopalam was neither an atheist nor a thorough-going theist. With his intellectual background and original thinking he could not possibly reconcile himself to the state of a blind fundamentalist. He had to find a suitable faith for himself, a faith which might answer all his doubts and fears. The concept of a personal God was unacceptable to him. Right from the beginning he believed in some Supreme spirit. But whether that Spirit was remote from him or was a part of him he could not imagine. He sought Joan out purposely so as to communicate his spiritual thoughts to her. Joan was always a sympathetic listener.

'Joan, it may sound silly if I say that I have at last found an answer to the perplexing problems of life.'

'How, how is that?' queried Joan rather surprised.

I am of the opinion that the whole universe is controlled and motivated by the Triple Force.'

'Triple force! What do you mean?'

'This consists of Beauty, Love and Justice. This is the

noble heritage of man. He comes into this world with all these three latent attributes in him. You may call them divine, if you want. Man is first moved by Beauty. Things that are beautiful attract him. He, quite arbitrarily, but according to his tastes, calls certain objects beautiful and others ugly.'

'Of course, Beauty is such a vague, undefined term that what is beautiful to one person may not be beautiful to another.'

'I know, I am aware of that. Appreciation of beauty is common instinct with all types of men. Beauty may be found in a scene of nature, in a landscape, a waterfall or in a beautiful woman. Man gradually grows and comes to a stage when he develops a strong liking for certain objects. This is the period when he is governed by Love. Finally he surrenders himself to Justice. Man goes through all these three phases of life and these phases are in a way the three attributes of divinity.'

'So, you believe, man is divine?'

'Of course, he is and the Triple Force leads men gradually through these three stages to perfection.'

'There is a flaw in your argument. If men have all these three attributes, why should they hate each other and condemn others?'

'That is indeed a sensible question. What happens is this. Man comes into this world pure and unsullied with his rich heritage, but then he comes into contact with the worldly objects of life which stand for the environment. Thus there comes a conflict between his spiritual heritage

and environmental lures, and he may yield to the latter. But this is only a temporary phase. Man's original self is never lost. It may be clouded but not extinguished.'

'Then how can you explain the existence of criminals and thieves? Surely they cannot have any of these divine qualities as you suggest.'

'Of course, they have. Even the criminal has his own object of love. If he does not love other human beings, at least he loves his dog or cat. Surely love in him has to express itself in some shape or other. There is not even a single person who is not touched and moved by this lofty spirit.'

'I agree, but don't you think there is ugliness in this world? By laying so much emphasis on beauty you are precluding the possibility of ugliness.'

'Joan, I understand what you mean. But you see there is nothing like ugliness. Perversion of love or negation of love becomes ugliness. The moment it sets in, it is punished by justice.'

'I don't quite see your point.'

'What I mean is this. A criminal may escape detection and may go on from crime to crime. But there comes a time when the sense of justice in him dominates over his weaker self and makes him loathe himself. That's why a Hitler or a Napoleon is often found ending his own life. He may escape the law of justice, but the justice in him, he cannot escape. So you see, none can ignore this higher force of justice. Man has within himself the great Triple Force and it is the interaction of this force with the one

in others that brings about all these chain reactions—good, bad and indifferent.'

'Surely there are some people who are definitely bad. You can't say that we are fundamentally good.'

'Of course, we are. The view that some are bad is purely subjective. You are judging others from your angle and that impression naturally depends on your relationship with them. Your experience may not necessarily be mine and hence we use these terms 'good' and 'bad' quite casually and even unthinkingly.'

'So you believe that you are the embodiment of the Triple Force.'

'Why, we all of us are, not I alone.'

'I know, but you see your concept of Triple Force is once again purely subjective. What God is to me, the Force is to you.'

'But Joan, mine is based on reason.'

'Mine is based on belief.'

'Triple Force is a revelation to me. This is something stimulating, something concrete and vital. To doubting sceptics and atheists mine is an answer. In this world of unfaith mine will be a source of inspiration. If man believes in this glorious heritage of his, he is bound to go up from a state of passionate longings to the complete annihilation of animal instincts. The path from Beauty to Justice with the intervening dynamic force of Love is the path from sensuousness to spiritual enlightenment.'

'Gopal, you seem to be inspired today. I am afraid I can't argue with you. But what have you done about your play?'

'Well, I am on it now.'

'Is it a comedy or a tragedy?'

'A tragedy, of course.'

'No, it can't be that way. When I am with you how can you dream of writing a tragedy?'

'O, no, it has nothing to do with our friendship. I call it Swarna, by the name of my beloved. And the woman whom I loved is no longer alive. At least for me she is dead. So don't you think I am justified in giving a tragic note to the play?'

'Well, you may be right in thinking like that. Let us see how it goes. For the present, start on it and finish it soon.'

They parted for the evening. Joan had much to think about. Gopalam's concept of Triple Force seemed to be quite convincing to her, even though she did not like to say that openly before him. She applied it to her own life. No doubt, from her lover John's angle she was cruel. He might say that, he actually said that many a time. But here she was showing all her affection for Gopalam. So the love in her had to find an outlet. She felt that Gopalam was surprisingly original in all his views.

The very first day she talked to him, she considered him a provocative type of person, having very unorthodox and revolutionary views on certain fundamental problems of life. Yet he was no atheist. He had an infinite admiration for all the beautiful objects of life and he saw some divine shape in all of them. He was a puzzle to her. She thought he might be a mystic. She decided to watch and examine

him carefully before she could form an opinion about him. Of one thing she was certain, she knew she was terribly fond of him. Whether it was love, admiration, sympathy or pity, she herself did not know. Gopalam was definitely improving under her watchful care. He showed signs of tremendous activity and he became friendly with more and more boys and girls. He used to have discussions with them on religion and politics. And he had some jolly good friends. Some of them were interested in games and he too started playing games quite enthusiastically. Then there was the lover's world, boys and girls whispering to each other in the library, exchanging shy glance and having dates. He played the role of a sympathetic observer in all such busy, idle activities. He participated in debates and on the whole there was a changed outlook in him. Joan prided herself on her accomplishment, for she was responsible for reviving in him his former spirit.

(5)

Gopalam showed a little progress in French. Joan became very fond of him, even though there were many other boys who were glad to have her company. As a matter of fact they started, teasing her and her only reply to them was 'Mind your own business.' With Gopalam a definite improvement was seen. He made good progress in studies and the general circle of friends also widened. At the University he was quite a popular figure. Joan used to accompany him to pictures, plays and concerts. They were inseparable. The waitresses in the Cafe got used to the sight

of this pair and they took it for granted that Joan and Gopalam would get married. One day Joan could not accompany him. So he was by himself, when the waitress came and said,

'Hallo, where is your friend to-day?'

'She couldn't come.'

'I say, when are you getting married?'

Gopalam smiled and added, 'Don't know.'

On another occasion the fat blonde at the cash desk remarked, 'How is it you are alone today?'

But Gopalam knew full well that he could never love any other woman the way he loved Swarna. No doubt he was grateful to Joan for all that she did and he wanted to repay the debt by being nice to her. So he used to take her out very often and be quite liberal to her. She often used to get his signatures on the programme sheets to be kept by her as souvenirs.

On all such occasions there was real fun. Joan and Gopalam used to talk of love in a very general manner and in the library where Gopalam used to sit and work, she would drop in towards the evening and keep holding his hand. The librarian, a very serious looking Miss, used to come now and then and disturb them. She would cast one forbidding look at Joan and Gopalam and go away.

Three months were spent in this friendly way. Joan and Gopalam were all the time together and they were indeed quite friendly. But peculiarly enough there was no confession of love on either side. She became more and more intrigued with the behaviour of Gopalam. One day

she made bold to say, 'Gopal, how is it you never asked me for a kiss, though you have been friendly with me for nearly three months? You are rather strange.'

Gopalam smiled and kept quiet. But she went on, 'I shall do anything to make you happy. I want you to be happy.'

'My dear, I am happy.'

'You are so very different from our British boys. I like you very much. I can trust you, whereas with them one never knows what may happen.'

'I am indeed grateful to you for what you have done to me. I can never forget your help.'

Joan was burning with desire to know why Gopalam was not attracted towards her. She wanted to know whether he liked English girls.

'Gopal, do you think the English girls are beautiful?'

'Of course, they are. Some of them are really pretty. Why, what makes you put that question?'

'Just to please my idle curiosity. I thought that you could perhaps appreciate only the beauty found in Indian women.'

'O no, I can admire any beautiful woman.'

Then in that case Joan argued to herself he must have recognised her as a beautiful woman. Indeed she was beautiful and Gopalam was not unaware of that. Joan wanted some compliments from him, but somehow Gopalam did not proceed further. For that day the conversation stopped at that stage and they busied themselves for the rest of the evening with some other general talk. While leaving, Joan

said,

'Tomorrow I shall not see you in the college, but meet you at the Capitol for lunch. Then we will go to the 'digs.' In the night I have to go for a dinner, given by one of my father's friends. I shall go from your 'digs' straight to that place.'

'It's quite all right. See you lunch time then.'

Gopalam saw her off at the bus stop. That night Joan thought a lot about Gopalam. She wondered whether he had any spiritual power. Or else how could he remain so absolutely self-possessed in her bewitching company? In a way she took it as an honour to be loved by him. Not that she wanted to lead a physical life with him, but only to have the satisfaction of being loved by an intellectual like him. That was all her ambition. But Gopalam seemed to be not noticing any of the lovely looks she cast at him. At the same time he showed a great affection for her.

The next day she met him for lunch. She was dressed in a black frock and it heightened her beauty. She looked lovely and graceful. Gopalam did not say anything openly, but in his heart of hearts he felt that she looked imposingly attractive in that particular dress. After lunch they reached the 'digs.' Joan pleaded to be near the hearth and she sat on the hearthrug. Gopalam was seated on the sofa near her. She leaned on his lap and talked to him in that slightly alluring pose. It was much, far too much, even for a recluse like Gopalam. His body was aglow with passion. Joan realised it, looked at him coquettishly and said,

'I hope you are not feeling uncomfortable.'

Gopalam could not say anything. He only added, 'I am all right.'

He took her hand and lovingly went over that soft, white arm. She enjoyed the tender touch and she felt like being kissed. Leaning over her slightly, Gopalam could see the white radiance of her bosom. It was a low necked frock and the typically feminine bust of Joan was quite bare to the looks of Gopalam. He was thrilled and intoxicated. Yet he tried to keep his senses about. But Joan that day was determined to get a kiss from him. When she had taken so much care and trouble in dressing herself up in such an elegant and attractive manner, she thought Gopalam should take due note of it. She pressed her back against Gopalam's lap and as he was looking at her amused, she gave him a mischievous kiss on his lips. He responded and gave her a passionate kiss. She was pleased, mightily pleased. She felt honoured, that was the reward she wanted and expected from Gopalam. But he was not quite sure whether he was right in kissing her.

'I am sorry I have taken liberties with you.'

'Don't be silly' retorted Joan and looking at him with a bewitching smile said, 'Gopal, you did not give me a formal kiss, say, a friendly kiss.'

Gopalam was perplexed, 'Then what was that?'

'It was a lover's kiss.'

'O, was it? I did not know that.'

'You are clever, Gopal, you are clever!'

So saying she literally dragged him on towards her and kissed him fondly. He felt awfully dazed and stupefied.

He did not know what he was doing.

'Joan, you are grand today. You look wonderful in this particular frock. You are lovely, sweet.'

Joan and Gopalam passed a few happy minutes that way and then it was time for her to go. On the way Gopalam asked her about the dinner.

'O, I just wanted to come to you in this frock on that pretext. I am not going for any dinner.'

'How clever of ybu!' remarked Gopalam.

That night Joan indicated to Gopalam to kiss her good night. He simply satisfied every wish of hers. No doubt he too was getting more and more attracted towards her, but he was still keeping some thought of Swarna. She had left him but he wanted to be faithful to her. So he tried his best not to be completely led away by the ravishing beauty of Joan. Swarna was homely and her affection was based on a genuine desire to be his wife. But Joan's beauty was almost seductive. And she was best suited to him as a companion and he intended to be her friend, not her lover.

The relationship of Joan and Gopalam entered a new phase. He was not yet attracted to her physically, though he admired her a lot in an impersonal manner. In the college there was the going down dance, an occasion for great fun, almost boisterous fun. Joan wanted to go for it. Gopalam was not much of an enthusiast of dancing. The rhythmic way of going round and round to the tune of the band somehow used to appear dull and mechanical to him. He never could make himself go according to a system. He respected order in life, but it was one created by himself

and not imposed upon him. The ball room dancing bored him. A game of tennis gave him more thrill than Waltz or Quick Step. Still he could not displease Joan, so he accepted her proposal. She lived rather far off from the college and the dance would invariably go into the early hours of the morning. So she thought of taking a room in some hotel near the college so that she might stay for the night. Gopalam was not quite satisfied with her move.

'Joan, you can stay up to 10 or 11 in the night and then go home. Why do you take a room unnecessarily?'

'O, no, actually the dance starts from 10 p.m. even though it is put up for 8 p.m. The hall will be crowded late in the night. So, I think I ought to take a room in a hotel.'

'If you are keen on it, then let us go and try some of the hotels.'

She was pleased and both of them went to the Park Hotel, quite a respectable place. Gopalam reserved a room for her and then they strolled about for some time. Joan requested him to come and see her at the hotel for dinner. Meanwhile Gopalam went to his 'digs' to have a wash and change of clothes. He informed his land-lady that he might come late. He rushed back to the hotel and went direct to Joan's room. He gently tapped at the door and Joan opened it stealthily wondering who it might be. To her great relief it was none else except Gopalam. She shut the door behind him and he stood facing Joan. She had just then taken her bath and she was not yet dressed up. She put on only a dressing gown and even her wavy hair was all undone. Gopalam saw her never before in this manner. They

were all by themselves in the room, but so were they several times in his room too. In his drawing room there was a different atmosphere, but here in this room things were different. The loose dressing gown exhibited her lovely curves to perfection. In her tight fitting frocks and skirts she always gave him the impression of a girl. But for the first time during his period of association with Joan he felt that she was a woman. He wondered how she could have metamorphosed into a woman so suddenly and so mysteriously. As he faced her that night in such an enchantingly beautiful pose he could not resist the temptation of embracing her. He drew her to his bosom and kissed her passionately. Joan led him to the dressing table. But there was only one chair near it. Both of them sat on it, Joan facing the mirror and Gopalam with his back turned to it. As she sat like that in such an awkward manner a greater portion of her dressing gown slipped off. Gopalam could see her lovely, shapely legs, slim and smooth. Her slender waist and the curly hair reminded him, strongly reminded him, of his Swarna. Joan enjoyed every moment of it. Gopalam kissed her on the neck.

'O, I like it immensely' Joan whispered. To Gopalam she was ethereal; her sweet breath was intoxicating. It was more like a dream for him. He passed his fingers lovingly through her unkempt hair. After a few minutes of this idyllic love Joan said,

'This chair is rather inconvenient for two of us to sit. Let us sit on the bed.' But she added, 'Gopal, I trust you as a gentleman. So I have allowed you to come in.' He under-

stood the implication involved in it and he did not betray her trust in him. They were discreet enough; perhaps they might have lingered on in that sweet forgetfulness for hours and hours. But reality dawned upon them when the chamber-maid knocked at the door to do the bed. Joan bade her come later and the moment she was away Gopalam came out and waited in the Foyer for Joan. She dressed herself up for the dinner and after that they proceeded to the dance. To Gopalam that was a night of romance and happiness. He was so immensely pleased with the events of the night that he was like a man drunk. But his intoxication came not from the heady liquors but from the Stream of Life. One of its mighty waves fondled him. He was tossed before on the high waves of life and he had seen and faced their tempestuous motion. After that storm and stress there was a change. He was to be hurled again on the stormy waves, but that night he was on the Olympian heights tasting the elixir of life.

The next morning he was normal again. Joan was sweet to him and they had lunch in the town.

'You see what you have done to me. Look at my lips, I can't wear lip-stick today.'

'Why, what has happened?'

'My lips are bruised. O, you are a brute' smiled Joan.

'I am sorry.'

Gopalam expressed real embarrassment, but Joan added, 'Don't you worry, I am just teasing you.'

Gopalam sat looking at her admiringly. He realised he was getting attracted towards her even physically. But the

moment they knew each other's physical longings, they were in a way disillusioned. It was not a physical life they wanted; it was companionship and intellectual communion. They could not dream of marriage. Joan thought that the moment Gopalam would return to his country Swarna might join him. Moreover there was the hideous aspect of the 'half castes' coming into an unsympathetic world. As for Gopalam he was terribly afraid of losing Swarna for ever. Somehow he felt that everything would be all right with Swarna. She was still his ideal woman. With such mental reservations it was not possible for Gopalam to love Joan, the way he did Swarna. A few days after that night of mad joy Gopalam was with Joan in a park. She too seemed to be a little pensive.

'Joan, you don't seem to be cheerful today. What's the matter? I hope you are not trying to get rid of me.'

'Why, why do you say that?'

'Well, were you really thinking in that manner?'

'Not exactly, but in a way something relating to that.'

'You mean to leave me?' Gopalam said rather tremulously.

'Perhaps, I may have to' added Joan dryly.

'Listen Joan, you came to me at a time when I was about to be drowned. You saved me, I am indeed grateful to you. Please don't break my heart by leaving me.'

'Gopal, how can I leave you? Yet as I think of our present relationship I am afraid it may lead us to trouble. And mind you, we can't get married. As we are in the prime of our youth we may yield to the physical urge in us.

I am only afraid of this possibility.'

'Joan, I am much pained to see you troubled. But surely we can go on as we were before, as friends. We can laugh and play as children and forget that we are men and women.'

'Do you think it is possible?'

'I believe so.'

'Then let us try. Gopal, I am terribly fond of you, and sometimes I even feel like possessing you. But I also know I can't get you. You love Swarna rather too much.'

'Perhaps you are right Joan. I think I can never love any woman except Swarna. There is nothing more in me that I can give to others.'

As days passed by, it became increasingly difficult for him to resist Joan. Her artistic lips always used to tease him and it became a torture for him to be with her and not to kiss her. It was hard on her too. She knew the full blooded passion lying behind his kisses. And she also knew, she could no longer resist him. However, for the remaining months Joan and Gopalam kept on friendly terms with no marked tendencies towards flirtation.

Gopalam received letters from Suguna from time to time but as yet he did not make up his mind to take her back. He was still struggling to overcome his ego. By now he knew he was in the wrong in leaving Suguna for Swarna. Yet he was not prepared to accept defeat. One fine morning Gopalam was pleasantly surprised by a letter from Swarna. She was then at Madras and not with her friend Lalita. She therefore enjoyed some freedom. So she wrote

in the same old way, exhibiting all her warmth for him. He could not understand what made her write to him again of her own accord and that too in that sweet manner. But at that time he was busy with his studies and he had no time to speculate on her varied moods. He wrote to her in a friendly manner. She responded immediately. Then there was a lull again. Meanwhile Gopalam received his degree and he was making arrangements to return. A week before his departure he received another letter from Swarna, requesting him to come and see her. She said she was working at Madras and that she was all by herself. She referred to the romantic past and indicated a desire to be with him the very first night on his return. He wondered what all that meant. She was the very woman who finished everything with him and who was again tempting him to come. He thought of Samson and Dalila and he even felt that it was a test for him. A couple of years spent in studies made him more of an intellectual with a slight aversion for the physical aspect of life. No doubt he was fed up with Swarna, yet he had a longing to see her. So he decided to go to Madras. In that mood of almost penitence he thought of Suguna, his wife who was putting up with her parents. He took Swarna as the source of all his happiness, as the ideal woman, but she ruined him and nearly killed him. So the thought of Swarna created in him a certain revolt and bitterness, but Suguna could not instill in him any positive love for life. He was lost to these conflicting thoughts when another letter followed from Swarna urging him to see her first on his return. In a way it pleased him to be still loved

by her. He thought he had lost her, but she offered him some more hope.

The day of his departure soon came. He felt extremely unhappy in leaving all his friends. Joan was upset, but she took it philosophically. They met once again in the Park Hotel for lunch. And at the time of lunch she remarked,

'Gopal, I know we will meet again. Friendship true is friendship ever. I am grateful to you for all that you have done to me.'

'Joan, I wonder whether we meet again. You have been a great influence upon me. I shall never forget you.'

'Gopal, don't go back to Swarna. On your return you are bound to be well placed in life and she will try to come to you. But she won't make you happy. She does not deserve you. Remember these words.'

'Thank you for your advice.'

The next morning Gopalam was seen off by all his friends. He left London with mixed feelings of grief and joy. When he saw all his good friends at Paddington he was overwhelmed by grief. The possibility was that he might never come back and see them again. This vague uncertainty made him miserable. But the thought of seeing Swarna comforted him to a certain extent. He wondered how she might look like. Would she be the same woman who loved him almost to madness? The boat train left the precincts of London; it gathered speed. Mentally Gopalam was rushing to the familiar scenes of India with Swarna in the background. He could see her slightly tallish figure, looking at him with a look of innocence and bashfulness.

Swarna always roused in him passionate longings. There was something bewitching in her that made Gopalam a slave to his passion, the moment he thought of her, or saw her. Now that he was in a mood to think of her without the bother of studies Swarna presented herself before him. Especially the moonlit nights when they used to be in each other's arms, those nights flashed before his vision. In England he missed the moonlit nights very much. From a cold, foggy country he was again going back to the land of sunshine and moonlight. And against that background of loveliness and profusion there was Swarna, his beloved. With the celerity of wind his thoughts flew forward to India and even before realised where he was, the boat train screeched and stopped at Liverpool.

He was returning by 'Jal Azad' an Indian boat. It was a small, tiny one, not having the luxurious look of the other liners. Gopalam did not mind, for he was anxious to reach India soon. The very next day, as they entered the Atlantic, they were caught in a storm. There was a terrific gale and the waves rose and fell in a mighty, grand manner. The boat creaked and rolled and the waves dashed against it with cruel ferocity. Gopalam, accompanied by one of his cabin mates, went and sat on the top deck. Chairs and tables were hurled right and left according to the tremendous movement created by the rocking of the boat. Only these two stayed on the top deck and watched the huge waves in commotion. The ocean had a sinister look; it was like a seething monster uttering imprecations against a helpless crew. But as the blue waves rose up and

burst into whitish foam they presented a grand spectacle, lovely though in fury. Gopalam and his friend had nothing to eat that day, but they had enough thrill in watching nature in its pitiless garb.

The storm raged for twenty-four hours and the next morning the weather improved. Gopalam, with his poetic mind, wondered whether that storm was a symbol of his future stormy life in India. But this was soon forgotten, for there was lot of fun on the boat from the next day onwards. In his own cabin there was the fat bellied Falstaffian gentleman. His brain was a store-house of obscene words and stories, and every night he used to narrate spicy anecdotes, mostly sexual, to his cabin mates. The first night Gopalam heard them, he was rudely shocked and he even felt like rebuking him. But he saw others in the cabin encouraging this comedian and appreciating him for all his pornographic stories. It was a novel experience for Gopalam to be in this non-literary world. He argued to himself that he might as well join the gang of sympathetic admirers and not quarrel with them for nothing. As a matter of fact one or two imprudent travellers who protested against the midnight revelry of Gopalam's cabin mates were jeered at and ridiculed. So Gopalam saw no useful purpose in attacking that fat youth. In the evenings there were discussions and talks arranged by the Peace Conference people. They were coming from all parts of the world to attend the World Conference of Pacifists in India. Somehow Gopalam considered them to be a group of eccentrics; so he never felt inclined to attend those lectures. His brain

refused to be stuffed in, any further, with discussions of a serious nature. It was taxed to the full. So he kept himself busy with some games and the meaningless nonsense of his Falstaffian companion. On the whole the journey was pleasant and enjoyable and he disembarked at Bombay. He was in India again, his own motherland, now a free country too. He wondered what his motherland had in store for him, but he believed in his Triple Force. So nothing could go wrong. Justice would be meted out to him and all the hardship he encountered, he thought, would finally be crowned with success.



CHAPTER IV

To comply with Swarna's request Gopalam went to Madras straight from Bombay. Before leaving Bombay he sent a telegram to the school where she was working informing her of his arrival. He expected her to be at the station to receive him. She did not give him her house address. So he wondered where she was putting up. He reached Madras by about 7 p.m. There was no sign of Swarna. The platform was rather dark. It was a couple of years ago that he left her. She might have changed and it was quite likely that he might not have recognised her. So from one end of the platform to the other he moved briskly. No, Swarna was not there. He was shocked and confused.

How could she disappoint him like that? Instead of going to his home town he came to Madras only to see her and fulfil her request. And this was the reward he was getting. A hotel agent was watching him all the while and he suggested to take him to his place. Gopalam agreed rather grudgingly. On the way he inquired at that school whether they knew Swarna's residential address. Only the night watcher was there and he directed him to the headmistress's house, which fortunately was nearby in a lane. The hotel agent was patient enough to accompany Gopalam to her house. Her husband came out to talk to Gopalam.

'I am sorry to bother you. You see, I sent a wire to my friend Swarna to come and see me at the station. But she hasn't come. I wonder whether you know her residential address.'

The gentleman calmly looked at Gopalam and went inside. This time he came out with the envelope bearing Gopalam's telegram to Swarna. So it was not delivered to Swarna.

'Was this wire sent by you?'

'Yes,' added Gopalam.

'This came to the school on Friday evening after Swarna had left. I can give you the phone number of Swarna's residence.'

'Thank you.'

Gopalam took the number and left that place. It was the first shock for him. While in London he was used to a different life and social manners. The telegram was opened and read and they knew Swarna's phone number too. They

could have contacted her and informed her on the phone. He reached Madras on Saturday night. There was time enough for them to inform Swarna. He condemned them as unsociable creatures and he was fed up with Swarna too. In his letter from Port Said he indicated roughly the date of his arrival and she herself should have been on the look out for a telegram. Or she should have requested her headmistress to give her a message in case there was any necessity. He was westernised and from that angle he failed to sympathise with the headmistress or Swarna.

He reached the hotel quite tired and bored to distraction. The hotel manager was all attention to him as he was returning from London, but he was in no mood to notice it. He had a hurried bath and he could not eat anything. He lost his appetite. Swarna in a way deceived him. She said she was alone; in fact she was not. She was with some of her rich friends and in that case he knew it would be difficult for him to talk to her freely. He cursed her for all the unnecessary trouble she had given to him. Fortunately there was a gentleman who was known to him at Swarna's residence. He contacted him by phone and the news of Swarna's stay at that place was confirmed by him.

In the night he lay awake. He could not sleep. For nearly three weeks or so, ever since he left Liverpool he was looking forward to his night, the first night, as Swarna put it. Instead of enjoying it in the company of his beloved, he was there all alone in that dark, dismal place. He hated Madras for the poor reception it gave to him. There was moreover the sense of disappointment in not seeing Swarna

that very night itself. In such a restless manner Gopalam lay on the bed and he woke up very early too. He rushed to Swarna's place, but by the time he reached it, she had gone out to see someone else. She did not know that he was coming. It was a curious feeling that oppressed Gopalam. He was there in the same city where Swarna was, yet he could not see her so far. This helplessness maddened him. He waited patiently for her and at last she made her appearance. He was sitting on a sofa and she got out of the car the moment she saw him. She was struck with wonder. She never expected he would be there. Somehow she grew pale and tremulous and as she entered the house her friend teased her about Gopalam. Swarna exhibited certain signs of confusion. On one hand she was happy, mightily happy, to see Gopalam, but on the other hand she was afraid she might not be free with him. On every side of the room there were people listening to their conversation. So it was rather embarrassing for both of them. They had to be general and vague. What an irony of fate! To be separated for two years and then to meet under abnormal conditions this was not what they had bargained for. But Gopalam considered that it was all the fault of Swarna for she did not make proper arrangements for seeing him at the station itself.

'When did you reach Bombay?'

'I came two days ago and I sent a wire to you from Bombay. I wonder why you didn't come to receive me at the station?'

'I did not get the wire. Moreover, why did you come

to this place?’

‘Well, where else could I see you? I think you have become darker in complexion.’

‘Perhaps. And you have become fairer,’ complimented Swarna.

‘I think you are appearing darker because I have been used to seeing white women these two years.’

‘Only seeing, nothing more than that’, smiled Swarna with an implied suggestion that he might have loved some English woman.

‘Well, does that matter to you in any way?’ questioned Gopalam indicating that once she had given him up it was for him to love or not to love someone else.

The conversation dragged on like this. Gopalam was rather unmoved. He was scrutinising her carefully, wondering whether she loved him still. Apparently he was trying to be reserved, but inwardly he was yearning for a fond, dear embrace. Swarna asked him casually,

‘When are you going?’

This question was rather unwise. He came all the way only at her request and she was asking him when he would leave Madras. Was he in any way a hindrance to her activities? If she loved someone else, by all means she could. He was not going to stand in the way of her happiness. No, never. With his liberal views he could not dream of such a possibility. So he was a little taken aback by her question, but he calmly answered,

‘I am leaving tonight itself.’

She kept quiet. Evidently she was planning a rendez-

vous. But she could not give it out orally. So she went in to put down on paper details relating to their meeting place and she thought of giving that to him. But Gopalam, with the bitter experience he had about her letters, felt that she was no longer bothered about him. Added to that the unfortunate miscarriage of the wire and the consequent meeting in that room, all these only made the situation worse. His love for Swarna was coupled with hatred. And as she went in, he slipped out without saying 'good bye' to her.

Later Swarna learnt that he had gone. She felt wretched and miserable. She could not understand why Gopalam behaved like that. He was always kind to her, but this unkindness she never anticipated. His stay abroad might have ruined all his love for her, she thought. 'O yes, I deserve it. I have not written to him regularly and I have made him miserable. Now this is a punishment for me. Perhaps he does not love me any longer. He may be hating me for all the suffering I have inflicted on him. I am undone. He has come and gone, slipped out of my hand. What dreams I have had of spending the first night with him happily, now what do I have, my solitary life again.'

Swarna burst into tears. Gopalam went back to the hotel. His head reeled. His legs tottered. He was like a mad man. He felt defeated. He thought Swarna had insulted him. His original intention was to spend at least a week with Swarna. Now he did not intend to stay even for an hour more. He immediately bought a ticket for his home town. Swarna thought of ringing him up, but she did not know the exact name of the hotel he stayed in. That night

she spent in crying, cursing herself and her fate, whereas Gopalam spent it in the train, sincerely repenting of his foolish trip to Madras. He promised to inform his friends and relatives of his arrival beforehand. They intended to give him a hearty welcome, but in that mood he did not inform them. He was smarting under a sense of defeat and the joy of having returned to his country with a degree was lost in the first disappointment he had in Madras. So he considered himself to be a defeated warrior and not a hero. So he argued to himself that he deserved no rousing reception. He entered his home town as stealthily as possible. Everyone was surprised, if not bewildered, the way he had come. They even felt hurt for he had ruined all their cherished plans of welcoming him. So his beloved did not give him much of a kind response. But he was not worried. In a way he accepted that much from a dependent woman like her.

But Swarna was making no pretence at affection. She loved him sincerely. There was no doubt about that. So she wrote to him pleading for his love. She even called him cruel in having left so abruptly. Gopalam felt sorry for what had happened, but he repeated to himself that if only she had been a little more careful all that misunderstanding and misery could have been avoided. He also thought that Swarna should once again get him back or woo him back through her sincere love. At that time he could not bother much about her. He was trying for a good job. That was his primary object. Luckily for him a few months later he got a job in the Ministry of Education. That

part of the struggle was over. One battle was fought successfully and he settled down in Delhi. Even then it did not occur to him that he should do justice to Suguna by accepting her. To him love for Swarna seemed to be a religious faith which transcended all conventions and norms of social behaviour.

The moment Swarna heard of this she started pouring letters. She even lost her patience. She put forward an emphatic plea for reunion. Her letters were passionate and even ungovernable. For nearly two or three months Gopalam offered evasive replies like finding accommodation. He also suggested that she was under no obligation to come to him and if she loved anyone else she could marry him. All this he did only to test her. But this exasperated her. She gave a spirited reply.

'If you are fed up with me, you have every reason to be, for all the nasty treatment I have given to you, kindly say that at once, so that I may end my wretched life. O Gopal, why do you torture me? I want your loving kisses. They alone can make me live. I have waited for you for years. How long can I wait? This is impossible. Anyway if you don't want me, there is no compulsion. I can put an end to my life. Let me know your decision quickly. Swarna'.

Gopalam shook with fear as he read this impassioned appeal of Swarna. He was no brute. He immediately wrote to her showing all his tenderness and love for her. She could come to him any time, that was how he concluded his letter. It was enough for Swarna. She was pacified when she knew

that Gopalam still loved her and wanted her. She gave a prompt reply apologising for her previous harsh letter and intimating to him that she would start in a few days time. The day of her arrival, according to that plan, coincided with his birthday too. 'How grand, how terrific', Gopalam said to himself, 'to meet Swarna on my birthday!' He wrote to her, Gopalam's joy knew no bounds, that she was welcome, most welcome, and he was looking forward to that date with unbounded joy. Yet there was a gloomy thought too for the day on which Swarna promised to start, he did not receive any wire or confirmatory letter. It would take two days for her to reach Delhi, but the letter would take only one day. Even if she were to post it on the day of her departure he should get it a day prior to her arrival. The next day he looked for the post. No, there was no letter. He cursed the whole tribe of the post office people. They had no sense; they would always delay or sometimes even misplace the letters. In India, he concluded there was not much of civic responsibility. But it never occurred to him that his goddess at the other end could have changed her mind.

The day of her supposed arrival came. He had his own misgivings and doubts. The night before he did not have even a wink of sleep. He was tortured, he was enraged. In the morning as he got up he thought of punishing her by not going to the station. But this was only a momentary phase. 'No, no. I ought to be kind to her irrespective of her behaviour,' Gopalam said rather sentimentally. He became soft, if not weak. So he had a hurried breakfast and almost

ran to the station. The Grand Trunk Express came on time but Swarna did not come. He was flabbergasted. He searched every compartment. He was a grown up man but he was almost on the point of weeping. With a wry, disappointed face he slowly dragged his feet from the station. His feet refused to move. He even wished to be converted into a statue on the spot, so that he might typify constant devotion, perhaps foolish devotion, to the woman he loved. And that was his birthday too. In a way it indicated what luck the new year had for him in store.

This was the second shock he received, the first was when he went to Madras. Men in similar situations might have condemned fate or God. For them it would be a consolation too. But Gopalam with his infinite faith in the Force could not blame any of these. He still waited for justice. He had no comments on that particular occasion. He was stunned and stupefied by the second defeat enforced on him. So he had no words. He was dumbfounded. But even then he still had a ray of hope. There might be a letter waiting for him at his residence. She might have started a day later. If he were sure of her coming it was immaterial whether she came the next day or the next month or perhaps the next year. He could wait for her for hundred years as long as he had a hope of getting her. With such philosophical reflections he consoled himself and came home. There was no letter. He was shaken, but gradually he began to sympathise with her. She might have been prevented from coming. The previous night he actually dreamt like that. After he had spent two days of intense mental strife,

he received a card with a few lines scribbled on it. Swarna wrote that she could not manage to come and apologised, but the details, she said she would give in a letter later. Evidently there was no hope of her coming in the near future. Once again their love had gone to the correspondence level. They had to communicate with each other through letters, even though a few days before they were dreaming of reunion and no more bother of letters. And Swarna, quite peculiarly, no longer pestered Gopalam with requests to join him. She started expressing fear of society. She wondered whether she could ever come to him. This was preposterous. When Gopalam was rather indifferent she took life out of him with her letters of distress. Now that he was once again loving her in the same old way, the bitterness having disappeared completely, she was offering lame excuses for not joining him. He wondered if she derived any sadistic pleasure in harrasing him like that.

It was his turn to write to Swarna and even beg her to come to his rescue immediately. Or else he might do something awful. Swarna still wrote letters full of affection but on the point of joining him she was evasive. What was exactly happening to her, she never wrote. Even though he insisted on knowing the details, she never gave. She only said that there was a lot to be narrated to him, but she could not give it through letters. But one thing she always repeated, that she did not love anyone else, nor was she going to marry any other person except Gopalam. If she could, she would come to him one day, when that day might come she herself did not know, or else she was destined to die.

Gopalam's mental state was far from steady. But he had enormous will power. Otherwise he might have gone mad. He controlled the terrible anguish and went through all the day-to-day activities with a smile on his lips. No one could suspect that underneath that smile there was agony, frustration and even disillusionment. To his friends he always gave the impression of a happy person with no worry to face. No doubt he was a thorough going optimist with an implicit faith in a bright future. That dogged creed perhaps saved him from turning into a cynic or a pessimist.

Swarna too was going through a period of mental strife and conflict. She was far from being happy. When she loved Gopalam she was younger and even stronger in her faith to fight the ills of society. Now she was gradually changing and that change was almost thrust on her. She never anticipated all that trouble. She became a fatalist. She accepted everything, even misery, as a measure of fate. So instead of giving a full picture of her misfortune to Gopalam, she bore it patiently. Like a pessimist she looked forward to a bleak future and this policy of passive suffering proved to be ruinous to her as well as Gopalam. Incidentally Suguna too suffered violently caught in the midst of this tempestuous relationship between Swarna and Gopalam. She felt she was abandoned, but she had a firm faith in herself that God would be kind to her and all would be well. She hoped that one day justice would be done to her.

(2)

When Swarna was in Madras Murthy also was staying

there. With the familiarity of his past acquaintance he used to move about with her quite freely. When once he realised that he could not make Swarna his wife, he married some other woman on the basis of a huge dowry. With that money he was doing business in Madras, as such he was constantly in touch with Swarna. Lalita had a beautiful mansion in Madras and Swarna was putting up there with one of the members of that family. Swarna never told Murthy or any of her rich friends, anything about her love for Gopalam. Her plan was to come away to Delhi on some pretext and then stay away with Gopalam. It was with that motive that she wrote to him of her visit to Delhi on his birth-day.

But things took a different shape. Two days before her intended departure she was to go out with Murthy to see a common friend of theirs. But by the time Murthy came she was reading a book in which there was a letter from Gopalam. He took the book from her and the moment he saw a letter, he became curious to read its contents. And even before she could snatch the letter away from him he was half way through it. Murthy read it and was annoyed with her. The letter was full of references to the romantic past. It was spicy. Swarna always demanded such intoxicating letters from Gopalam. She too used to write to Gopalam wonderfully exciting letters. Murthy's suspicion that she was in love with Gopalam was at last confirmed. It was none of his business to interfere with Swarna's love affairs. But coming as he did, from a narrow circle of life, Swarna's infatuation, he refused to call it love, for Gopalam, he con-

ried soon so that Gopalam may not bother you. If you remain unmarried he will hope for you.'

Murthy seemed to be winning her over to him. She was half in a mood to say he was right, but she refrained from saying that. She promised to consider his advice and for that day they departed. It was in the light of this unfortunate incident that Swarna cancelled her trip to Delhi. And in that mood of indecision she did not even feel like writing an elaborate letter to Gopalam.

Swarna was helpless. There was a conflict in her between what she thought to be her own good and what the others considered to be good for her. Deprived of the comforting guidance of Gopalam she had to fight an uneven battle. Society, as Murthy repeated, consisted of Swarna's friends alone, nothing more than that. And the question was of pleasing them and ruining herself or displeasing them and carrying out her own wishes. Swarna was terribly afraid of bringing disgrace to her friends. The more she thought of it from that angle, the greater was her fear. But she also felt that she should go to Gopalam and not accept another man to please society. Slowly she came to the conclusion that she should not deceive Gopalam.

Gopalam did not know anything of the peculiar happenings taking place in Madras, nor did Swarna write to him about them. But from her letters he suspected that all was not well. He had a vague fear that Murthy might be influencing her adversely. So he suggested that he would go over to Madras to talk to her, but she requested him not to come. He too was distraught. He made it quite clear to

her that if she were to be in love with someone else, she could go ahead and leave him alone. It might mean ruin for him, but he was prepared for it. Every time he expressed this fear, Swarna wrote to him quite assuringly that she loved none else except him. But she only hinted that there were other factors like social fear troubling her. Gopalam wrote to her repeatedly that society was not interested in them alone. They might be talked of for a day or two, and then no one would think of them. That was true, Swarna agreed. But somehow she said she had lost all her courage and determination. And Swarna did not have any of the nonchalant attitude of the modern woman. She cried a lot and she despised herself for the degradation that had set in her. But she did not leave Madras all the same. Inaction, an utter futility of earthly longings, a helpless desperation and an ultimate abandon to cruel fate, this was the perplexed state in which she lived. She was half mad. She wrote to Gopalam meaningless letters disparaging herself, calling herself a loose woman, so that he might forget her, or even suspect her and leave her. But Gopalam had immense faith in her and he even went to the extent of saying that he was prepared to accept her, even if she were to be a depraved and demoralised woman. What could Swarna say? It made her weep all the more lest she should ruin such a perfect man. She realised her helplessness, her want of courage. After all she was not the only woman who trespassed conventions for the sake of love. There were several others before. But she did not have their zest for life or their moral indifference to blindly accepted social laws. The will

to live, the determination to fight, the urge to make life a success, all these gradually ceased to exist in her. She was disgusted with life, and death was her only solution.

Murthy never bothered to understand what love meant. He never had that experience in life and his marriage was based upon a huge dowry, plus the guarantee of physical needs. To a man of that nature Swarna's love for Gopalam was silly and meaningless. He never sympathised with her, nor could he imagine that there could be men and women of a different type, for whom love, however unconventional it might be, would mean life and death. He thought he was a superman and he was obsessed by a sense of social justice. He was determined to see Swarna married to someone of their caste.

Suddenly he was reminded of his classmate Siva Rao. He came from a very poor family and somehow he struggled through his period of education. He was then employed in some modest job in a town near Madras. His salary hardly kept his body and soul together. Such a man would jump at the idea of marrying a woman, connected with the richest family in those parts. Murthy satisfied himself with the thought of getting Rao as the husband for Swarna. But before he could contact Rao, he thought he should make Swarna accept the idea of getting married. So he went to her one morning a few days after his first meeting. Swarna was reserved. Inwardly she hated him for his undue interference in her private life. Yet she dared not say even a word against him for she was terribly afraid that he might disclose her love affair with Gopalam to all her friends. She

might be able to convince her friend Lalita but if she were to be confronted by all her friends she would never succeed. Moreover she did not like to face that scene when all of them might consider her treacherous and sly. With such mortal fears she behaved like a lamb before Murthy.

'Swarna, what do you say to your getting married?'

'Well, where is the hurry? Let me think about it for sometime.'

'Don't be silly. You are quite a grown up woman and at your age it is not good to have a bad reputation. Think of that. . . .'

'I do not care for others' views.'

'Of course you do. You know full well that you cannot displease Lalita or anyone of that family. I know you from your tender age. So be sensible or else you will get into trouble.'

'What do you mean by *trouble*?' anxiously questioned Swarna.

'Nothing. I only say that things have come to such a pass that either you get married or else all your past will be known.'

Swarna realised the gravity of the situation. She should marry someone suggested and recommended by Murthy or else. . . . or else she thought he would tell Lalita and others about her past life with Gopalam. If she were to marry, she would be considered respectable and all of them would continue to give her as much good treatment as before. She did care a lot for the opinion of her friends, though she sincerely loved Gopalam. The scales were evenly balanced.

sidered, was foolish and unwise. He too nourished the idea of marrying her at one time, but Swarna, with her pre-occupied mental state for Gopalam, always treated him as a brother. After perusing the letter to his satisfaction he observed,

'So this is why you are all the time saying that you will never marry. Now I understand. It is quite clear. You want to run away to Gopalam and make us all a pack of fools. No, this can never happen. I shall see to it that you are married to someone else.' Murthy raged and Swarna trembled. But she was offended too. She could no longer offer false explanations. She was determined to speak.

'I do not understand what you mean. Don't you think I am free to love someone of my choice? I am old enough to decide for myself.'

'Old enough! You have no sense of shame. What will the society say? Gopalam is not of your caste; why should you marry him? Are there no eligible bachelors for you in your community?'

'Murthy, you don't realise one thing. Love knows no distinctions of caste or creed.'

'Love, why don't you call it lust. Your attraction for Gopalam is purely based on lust. It is the fulfilment of animal instincts, nothing more than that. There is nothing like love; it is a perversion of human intellect to glorify sinful acts by lofty words.'

'I don't agree with you. Moreover I am already married to Gopalam.'

Now that Murthy had seen Gopalam's letter she

thought she should justify her own position.

'Married to Gopalam! How can it be approved when you two belong to two different castes? Society will look down upon you.'

'I don't care for society. In fact I know I can never live with anyone else except Gopalam. I was wedded to him the day I gave the ring to him in all sincerity of faith. I can't go back on my promises; if I commit any untoward act I will be ruining myself as well as Gopalam.'

'Don't be silly. Try to be realistic. If you go to Gopalam you will be treated as his mistress by society. No one will accept you as his wife, as he is a married man. Do you like to be his mistress? Moreover what will Lalita say? Surely it will be a shame for her to see you running away for the sake of Gopalam. What will be the reactions of her family if they come to know that the woman they have brought up all these years is now to be the mistress of someone belonging to a different caste? You will bring disgrace to all of us. This then is the reward we get for having treated you kindly and affectionately. Swarna, you are ungrateful.'

Swarna was a little moved by these touching references. The word "ungrateful" was unbearable to her. She was never ungrateful, nor could she ever dream to be, to her patrons and well wishers. A curious dilemma set in. Yet she tried to argue out her case.

'Murthy, why do you talk of Gopalam in such a manner? He is highly educated and well placed in life. He has gone abroad and he is quite refined. Moreover he loves me

sincerely, he will surely die of a broken heart if I desert him.'

Murthy gave a malicious smile.

'Swarna, I pity your ignorance. Do you mean to say that Gopalam had been faithful to you, while he was abroad? No, it cannot be. He must have had a good time, and who knows he may leave you when once he is fed up with you.'

Swarna was definitely annoyed this time.

'Murthy, you have no business to abuse Gopalam. You may insult me or chide me, but please do not talk ill of him.'

'Why not? He has done enough harm to you by making love to you.'

'No, certainly not. It was I that went to him. In a way I ruined all his principles and made him yield to me. You do not know him, he is a man of exemplary character. He is a genius. I will be a fool if I lose him.'

'O, I see!' Murthy remarked rather sarcastically and added,

'Any way it is your duty to think of Lalita and her attitude in this matter.'

'I can manage. She loves me and she will never stand in the way of my happiness. She is pretty broad-minded too.'

'Let us see what she will say.'

'Leave that to me, but do not poison her mind.'

'I do not promise you anything. You betrayed my trust in you. So I have every right to be disloyal to you.'

'No, please do not tell her. I shall communicate to her when I think it necessary.'

Murthy changed his line of approach. He thought it was no use talking ill of Gopalam, on the other hand he felt he ought to play on her sentiments.

'Swarna, please do not misunderstand me. We all love you and we want you to be happy. Remember on how many occasions I have come to your rescue and saved you from pitfalls. So you cannot possibly think of me as your foe.'

'No, I never said that. I value your friendship.'

'That's good. Then think calmly what you are contemplating to do. When there are good many young men of our caste, prepared to marry you, you are refusing all of them and going in for someone of a different caste. There are real practical difficulties in this. It means dishonour for your own family and obloquy for all your friends. It is all right, you did something in the past in an emotional way. Perhaps you thought Gopalam was a wonderful man and you got involved in an unfortunate passion for him. That is all over now. The past is past; I no longer refer to that. Nor do I condemn you for what you have done. Treat it as a closed chapter. To tell you quite frankly several men and women have these romantic experiences before they get married and settle down. There is surely a magnetic period when one is bound to be swept off one's feet, but to ruminate over that and to think in terms of the past is indeed foolish. You need not be ashamed of what you have done; I promise not to disclose it to anyone. But get mar-

and years and marry someone who was absolutely poor. But he had nothing more to add. Murthy left him with instructions to consult a pundit for an auspicious day. He returned to Madras and wrote to Rao to come and see him immediately. He did not mention the need for such a visit, but only indicated it was an urgent piece of work that required his immediate presence in Madras. Rao had a good opinion of Murthy; so he came the moment he heard from Murthy.

Murthy was very hopeful. He took him to a good cafe, entertained him to a rich repast and then took him to his house. Rao followed him wondering within himself what could be the motive of Murthy in inviting him to Madras. Gradually the conversation veered to the moot point.

'Rao, when are you getting married?' questioned Murthy.

It was indeed an embarrassing question. How did it matter to Murthy, if Rao were to marry in the near future or not to marry at all? In fact Murthy was playing the part of Pandarus in getting a suitor for his Cressida. So he had neither scruples nor shame in introducing this topic. Moreover, Rao was his friend and as such, he felt, he could take that much liberty with him.

'I don't know' Rao answered evasively.

'Don't tell me that. At your age you can't say you don't know. Tell me if you have any woman in view', coaxingly pleaded Murthy.

'To tell you quite frankly I have to marry my niece.'

'Have to, what does that mean?'

'You see, right from our childhood we were supposed to marry each other. In a way I am committed to marrying her.'

Murthy laughed derisively.

'O, don't talk to me of all these old fashioned promises. Now you are a grown up man; you have to decide for yourself whether she suits you, let alone the wishes of the old parents.'

'Of course, she isn't very highly educated, but I think she will be all right for me.'

'But will she bring you any dowry?'

'No, she won't.'

'Supposing I suggest to you an educated woman, who can also bring to you a good dowry, what will you say to that?'

'Well, let me first know who she is.'

'She is Swarna. She is a graduate and she is connected with a rich family. She will be of great help to you and her father is prepared to offer you a dowry of twenty thousand rupees.'

'It's quite all right. But I wonder whether she will be modest enough to be my wife. She may have richer people in view.'

'Don't you worry. She is unsophisticated and even though she is in the company of the rich she is quite simple. You are forgetting one simple factor, imagine to yourself what luck will come to you. Through her you can get wealth and promotions in life. Being her husband, you are automatically in the good books of the rich family. And if

they wish to help you, well, nothing can beat your good luck.'

Rao saw the wisdom of Murthy's words. Yes, he could shoot up in the social sphere and even in his job he could go up through the patronage of that family. Who would forego such an opportunity? He yielded, but there was the niece to be married. If he were not to marry her, then he should at least see her happily married in life.

'Murthy, I am only worried about one thing, that is about my niece's marriage.'

'O, that's quite an easy matter. You are now getting dowry, you can give a part of that to someone and get her married.'

Yes, it was a wonderful suggestion, Rao thought. He could convince his sister and get rid of his niece on that plea. Peculiarly enough all these people had a purely mercenary attitude towards marriage. It was a question of bargain. Offer a few thousands as dowry and then all the sins could be washed off. In all such cases no one would bother to think of the woman's emotions and feelings, likes and dislikes. Invariably it was the woman hard hit in all these business-like propositions. The decisions of men would be arbitrarily imposed upon women. The woman might be educated, even then she should go by the dictates of masculine tyranny. There was no escape from this cursed evil. Or perhaps women did not have the courage of conviction and therefore they were exploited. Anyway Rao agreed to marry Swarna, but to satisfy himself of her simplicity he wanted to see her. Murthy advised him to go and see her

on the pretext of having come from her village with news from her father. Rao followed his advice and the very next evening he saw Swarna at her residence. Rao's sister lived in the same village where Swarna's parents lived. That was how he was a little known to her.

'I have been to your village. I saw your father. He asked me to see you and enquire about your welfare?'

'It is nice of you to come and see me. I am quite all right' replied Swarna.

Then Rao related to her some gossip of that village, how some girl ran away with her lover and that a Hindu girl married a Christian youth. He hinted that all these were the current scandals of the village. Swarna inwardly felt that people might have talked of her also in the same unsympathetic tone if she had gone to Gopalam. All her former idealistic love, that she existed only for Gopalam, and for none else, had gone, to the winds. The moment she accepted to marry someone of Murthy's choice, she realised it was meaningless to dream of Gopalam or anything relating to her past with him. She tried her best to forget him and prepare herself to accept someone, suggested by Murthy. That was inevitable, she knew.

Rao left Swarna fully impressed with her for she had pleasing manners and friendly disposition. She was no doubt changed physically and mentally from the first days of her romantic love for Gopalam. She no longer had that freshness. Even her rich complexion was lost. Instead a dull, sallow shade came over her skin. Years of separation from her beloved and the raging conflicts that faced her recently

But then there was the threat of Murthy. With such mental conflicts, even if she were to go to Gopalam, would she be happy, she wondered. She was prepared for death, but if she married according to the wishes of Murthy that would be a living death for her. But that might satisfy all her friends to whom she owed a debt of gratitude. In that mood she was absolutely indifferent to the thought of happiness. Even her love for Gopalam seemed to have ebbed in her. In fact she had no emotions. She realised she had become a tool in the hands of Murthy. He received an immense satisfaction in controlling her destinies in such a masterly manner. So he proposed.

'Swarna, listen to me. There is a friend of mine, Mr. Siva Rao, who is interested in you. He wishes to marry you. If you say 'Yes' everything will be all right.'

Here he told a lie. So far he did not contact Rao but he knew he would only jump at the idea. So he ventured to speak on his behalf. Swarna kept quiet. She did not have the courage to abuse him, even though she did feel that way.

'What's your opinion? Of course, I shall talk to your parents as regards dowry. I shall arrange everything. You only accept this proposal. . . .', pleaded Murthy.

'You do whatever you want I have already indicated my view. Please yourself. . . .' replied Swarna.

That was a rebuke enough for any decent man, but to Murthy it was an acceptance of his proposal. He purposely understood it that way and he ignored the tempest lying behind that helpless acquiescence. He left her, immensely pleased with himself, and Swarna sat there motionless and

gloomy. Gopalam's figure flashed before her mental vision. She saw him pale and thin, earnestly appealing to her not to ruin him. That mood passed. She saw Gopalam hurling abuses at her for betraying him. She trembled and shook with fear. Then she saw Gopalam in the act of committing suicide. She ran to him and saved him in the nick of time. He embraced her fondly and held her like a frightened man. Her whole body tinged and pulsated with that warm embrace. All her suffering was over. She was content and peaceful. This panorama of anguish and peace engaged her for nearly an hour and all the while she lay on a chair, as though in a trance, stunned by the events of the morning. By the time she came to her senses she felt weak, timid and desperate.

(3)

The moment Swarna agreed to marry, Murthy went to her friend Lalita to inform her of the new developments. Lalita at that time was staying in her home town, a few hundred miles away from Madras. The celebration of the marriage and the cost involved in it was her concern. So it was imperative on the part of Murthy to keep her duly informed. Lalita was surprised to hear of Swarna's conversion.

'How, how did Swarna accept the proposal of marriage? In the past she always refused to marry. This is indeed a miracle! Are you sure she is sincere?' questioned Lalita.

'Of course, she is. I introduced my friend Siva Rao to

her and he is in love with her. Perhaps she too loves him.'

This was a deliberate lie given by Murthy. But he did not hesitate to give any number of lies, provided he could see Swarna married to someone. If Rao were not to agree to his proposal he thought he might bring someone else on the scene. The most essential point was to convince Swarna or rather force her into acceptance and that part of it was already done by him.

'So you mean to say that Swarna loves Rao. But I have my own serious doubts about that' Lalita said, for she suspected Swarna to be in love with Gopalam.

'O yes, she is anxious to get married!' Murthy said emphatically.

'Anyway Swarna is old enough to know her own mind. If she is willing to marry Rao, it's all right with us. We don't want to interfere in her purely private affairs', commented Lalita.

Lalita thought that perhaps Swarna might have changed her mind. So she agreed to Murthy's proposal and promised to make all the necessary arrangements for the marriage.

Then Murthy went to Swarna's village and gave a terrible surprise to her father. With all the simplicity of the rustic folk Swarna's father believed every word of Murthy, though he too was rather bewildered.

'Did she really say she would marry Rao?' Swarna's father asked Murthy.

'Yes, of course' said Murthy, and added 'you have to offer a dowry of twenty thousand rupees.'

'Twenty thousand . . . how, how can we offer all this amount? We are not so rich as to afford all that sum.'

'Well, it can't be helped. Otherwise how long will you keep your daughter unmarried?'

'That's true, she is pretty old, I agree. But . . .'

'No, nothing doing, you have to give twenty thousand.'

Swarna's father was almost fed up in persuading her to get married. He brought several matches before and all of them she rejected. Her younger sister was already married and she was a mother of two children. Swarna was out of his hands, out of his control as she was all the time away from him with her rich friends. In his little village he was feeling a sense of shame also for having kept his daughter unmarried for such a long time. He was helpless, therefore he put up with all the ridicule or scorn heaped on him. Murthy brought him the most welcome news. If he were to sacrifice a few thousands, then all his worry would be over. But he had his own doubts.

'Rao is very poor. We all know him. How could Swarna accept him? What did Mrs. Lalita say? Do you think Swarna's friends will accept this match?' Swarna's father expressed all his fears in a naive fashion. But Murthy was far too clever for him. 'What are you talking? Do you mean to say I could have come to you without first ascertaining from Mrs. Lalita? Everyone has agreed.'

Swarna's father had to keep his mouth shut. If Swarna agreed to it and if Mrs. Lalita approved of it, then what business had he to disapprove it? None, practically none. He considered it Swarna's fate that she should wait for years

had their complete effect on her. She knew she was courting disaster by ruining the life of Gopalam. Morally she was wedded to him, though at that time she could not help falling a victim to Murthy's strategy.

That night the friends of Swarna teased her. Lakshmi, said, 'Swarna, why has this man come? Perhaps he wants to marry you!'

Swarna expressed nothing but contempt for him.

'I marry that mad fellow! Never, never. Who will marry that eccentric? He has very curious habits. He doesn't believe in using even a soap, let alone powders and perfumes. The woman who marries him will have the worst of life. Moreover he is poor and he isn't very highly educated either. He is just a graduate like me. How can I respect him as my husband?'

Formerly if anybody mentioned the word "marriage" she used to say vehemently 'No, I will never marry.'

But on this occasion she did not dispute the idea of getting married. She only showed her aversion for Rao. Her friends thought that she was slowly falling into the groove or perhaps accepting the primeval curse of marriage and perdition. For none of them, even though married for years, really had the bliss of marriage. Hitherto they considered Swarna lucky, now they had to change their opinion.

Meanwhile Swarna's marriage with Rao was fixed. This was communicated to her by Murthy. She was shocked. She only agreed to marry some day. She did not accept Rao by any chance. So her first impulse was to write to Gopalam and get his reaction. He was expecting this blow

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for a long time, yet he never thought that Swarna was indeed capable of doing him any harm. He was unnerved. So this was the reward for all his sincere love, he said to himself. He wondered whether she would be happy through such a marriage. He wrote to her requesting her to come away to him immediately. He knew nothing about the various happenings taking place in Madras. Swarna kept him in the dark. She did not tell him to whom she was getting married or why she was made to come to that decision. Gopalam was tortured. When he received that cold and cruel news from Swarna as regards her marriage with the other person he grew wild. For a moment his faith in himself, in the Triple Force, in the ultimate sense of justice was uprooted. He cursed the day he had seen Swarna and wrote to her a desperate letter. His last request to her was that she should cancel the present match, come to him according to her original promise and then discuss all her problems with him. Even if she were to disappoint him, he did not mind, provided she explained to him all her troubles and difficulties.

Her next letter was written all in a mood of penitence. Her first letter was rather matter-of-fact and dry. It only communicated the date of her marriage with no feeling betrayed. Gopalam could not understand what all it means. Had she been in love with that man for a long time? If that were to be a love marriage, then he had nothing to say. But if it had been an arranged one, then he knew what Swarna's state would be.

Swarna's brother, who never came to Madras before, now rushed to that place to advise his sister not to accept

that match. It was a Herculean task for him to find her out and he suggested to her that she ought to give up Rao. He knew him well enough and he considered it below his dignity to have him as his brother-in-law. Swarna consulted Lakshmi, her friend, and she advised her quite sincerely to run away to some place. She gave her a hundred rupee note and asked her to get out of Madras.

'What happiness are we receiving, we married women? Why do you wish to repeat the same mistake we have committed? Moreover do you like Rao?' questioned Lakshmi.

'No, I don't like him. But he hasn't asked me, I would certainly have advised him not to bother me', Swarna replied.

'But Rao is coming today. You'd better inform him of your decision. If you fail in that effort, you run away from this place, for a week and come after the marriage date is over.'

Swarna thanked her for her advice and took the money from her. Her brother also advised her to be not on the scene by that day. She could have gone to Gopalam even at that time. But she feared to take that bold step. Social fear was incurably strong in her. She first wanted to settle the matter with Rao. He came wondering what she might say.

'Please get this date changed. Postpone the marriage to a later date.'

'Why, why do you say that?' anxiously put in Rao.

'You see, somehow I am not quite happy about this marriage. I am afraid of your niece. By marrying you I

shall be ruining all her hopes and happiness. I think you ought to marry her.'

This was an indirect hint to him that she did not care to marry him. But Rao wanted to get her by all means. He came under the direct influence of Murthy's Machiavellian philosophy and he considered Swarna to be a prize figure. It was a boon to him to be her husband, whereas it was a curse for her to be his wife. He anxiously pleaded, 'Swarna, don't worry about my niece. I shall make satisfactory arrangements for her marriage. It will be a great disappointment for me and to my friends if this marriage day is postponed. The sooner it is celebrated, the better.'

Rao waxed eloquent and he approached nearly everyone who had some influence over her, all the time requesting them to interfere on his behalf and see that the marriage would take place on the appointed day. Having failed to convince Rao she started towards the home town of Lalita. Her brother accompanied her. Surely she could have gone to Delhi, but she wanted to fight it out. She even thought that she could manage with her friend Lalita and get the marriage postponed in the first instance. But her calculations were wrong. By the time Swarna reached Lalita's bungalow she could see that the preparations were in progress. Murthy was in charge of all those operations and he was to a certain extent, taken aback in seeing Swarna and her brother. Her brother hurled abuses at Murthy.

'Murthy, you have ruined my sister. You had no business to interfere with her marriage. What sort of man have you brought for her? A poor fellow, who has no home, nor

even a single acre of land. You are a villain. You have played a dirty game with us. With all her education and refinement I can't see her married to that pauper.'

Murthy grew taller with rage and advanced menacingly towards Swarna's brother. He neared him and roared, 'Don't be a fool. Be careful or else I will knock your brains out. Ask your sister, she agreed to marry him. Is this the reward I get for arranging this match? What a dunce you are!'

Swarna's brother caught hold of Murthy's neck and shouted, 'Don't tell lies. She never agreed. You thrust it on her. You did all the mischief. I know you are a rogue.'

Murthy pushed his opponent's arm a little and freeing himself from his grip retorted, 'Yes, yes I am a rogue. I know why you are so much upset. You have to give a huge dowry, so you are afraid that you may have to part with a few thousands for her sake. I know people like you, you live for money and die for money.'

Then Swarna intervened, 'No, Murthy, don't say that. My brother doesn't grudge giving the money. He only feels that I am disposed of like chattel to some undeserving person. So he is annoyed. Otherwise he is prepared to give any amount and he wishes me nothing but happiness.'

Murthy cooled off and talked rather sarcastically 'O, I see, you are now trying to justify your brother. I am after all not related to you, so you don't mind hurting my feelings.'

This was too much for Swarna. She was the last person to hurt anyone's feelings, more so of a man who had been good to her on many occasions before. Moreover she also feared Murthy's wrath, the consequences of which she

knew only too well. So she did not have the courage to take the risk of attacking him openly. Murthy was liked by all her rich friends. So it was useless to complain against him. So she requested Murthy not to be angry with her. Then she suggested to him that she might as well go to Delhi to collect her letters from Gopalam and obliterate her past with him. She promised to come on time for the marriage. Murthy conceded though of course he was not happy about her going to Delhi.



CHAPTER V

The Grand Trunk Express at last brought Swarna to Delhi. Gopalam expected her to peep through the windows as the train came to New Delhi station. But Swarna, consumed by a sense of shame for all her misdeeds, did not have all that enthusiasm. Gopalam stood watching every compartment as the train was slowly moving to its stop. As soon as it halted he briskly walked and he was nearly feeling that Swarna had deceived him again, when from one compartment she was slowly alighting. Gopalam looked at her with a gentle curiosity. He found her weak, she was bound to be. The journey itself was tiring enough. And she even might have been weeping all the time in the train. Gopalam brought her to his flat exhibiting warmth and affection for her, whereas she was silent and meditative.

Perhaps she was wondering what should be her attitude towards Gopalam. The moment she saw him, the past came back to her. She bore no love for the man she should marry and the concept of duty as binding her towards him was only of a flimsy nature to her. It was more or less an eye wash. Her strong affection was for Gopalam. He too observed her lovingly. He sat on a sofa and was talking to her in a quite impersonal manner. He carefully omitted the topic of her proposed marriage, or anything relating to her unfaithful act. She was rather surprised. She expected a world of abuse from him immediately on reaching Delhi. But to her great surprise he had nothing but affection showered on her. Gopalam was decent. Her respect for him was all the more heightened. She thought, she was selfish and even her visit to Delhi was prompted more by personal ends than by the desire for gratifying the last wish of Gopalam. But her dear man was all kindness and forgiveness.

The first few hours were over. They were reading each other's thoughts carefully. Gopalam did not like to make any approaches of love for he was not sure of her affection. Her proposed marriage with Rao might not be binding on him, but if she loved Rao, then he had no business to touch her. He had greater respect for love than for the commercial marriages. They had their lunch. Then she lay on her bed pretending to be sleeping. Gopalam sat on a chair near her hesitating to disturb her. She tossed this side and that side, slowly raising her head and looking lovingly at Gopalam. That was encouraging enough for him, yet he waited.

Swarna, you don't seem to be sleeping. Isn't the bed comfortable?'

'It's quite all right. But...'

She paused. The ceiling fan was revolving at great speed. It was July. Summer was nearly over. But those were days of sultry weather when one liked to recline at mid-day with a fan nearby. So Swarna had no reason to be uncomfortable, still she was restless. She felt like calling Gopalam to her side, but she was hesitant. Swarna again looked at Gopalam with a pleasing smile. This time Gopalam too moved uncomfortably in the chair. Swarna again looked at him, but this time she beckoned him to her bedside. Gopalam came and sat by her with the flood gates of his heart almost bursting.

'Swarna, darling, do you love me?'

This time Swarna murmured,

'Perhaps you may not believe me after what I have done to you. But Gopal, I love you, I can never forget you.'

This cheered Gopalam, and that day before going to the office he returned Swarna's letters to her. It was a huge bundle. The whole day she spent in reading them. What sincere affection she had expressed, what promises she made, what hopes she entertained and what had she done ultimately! She felt that she behaved in the most inhuman manner, solely guided by her dictator, Murthy. And then did she gain anything by ruining Gopalam? She was tortured with such piercing thoughts of remorse. So when she talked to him in the night, she was self-critical.

'Gopal, I wonder why you don't hate me. I have done

the greatest harm to you, yet you seem to be loving me all the more. This is rather strange.'

'No, not strange at all. Love is such a strong, dynamic force that it cannot be extinguished. In fact it is one of the three main forces influencing man, the other two being Beauty and Justice. Human life goes according to this pattern of Beauty, Love and Justice. This is what is known as the Triple Force. We cannot help falling in love, as we can't help appreciating beauty. Life begun with such an elementary appreciation of beauty gradually tends towards the nobler sense of justice, but the path is not so direct and straightforward. In between comes the most trying part of life, when one is swayed by love. At this stage life becomes complicated and we are moved by deep passions.'

'Do you think that these forces go by gradation, quite systematically, one coming after the other?'

'O, no, I don't mean that. Man has all these attributes in him even from his birth. But it so happens that at a particular period of life, one of these will be dominating over the others. This doesn't necessarily mean that the others are extinct. It is the harmonious interaction of these essential attributes of man that guides and inspires his life. Most mistakes are committed when man is pulled by the stronger element of love.'

'Do you suggest that love is more of the animal nature in man?'

'No, not exactly that. Love is by itself pure, but there is a possibility of its being polluted and debased to the level of animalism. You see, you can roughly put man's nature,

according to this system, under three categories, the sensuous, the physical and the intellectual. No serious mistakes can be committed from the sensuous or intellectual plane, but from the physical level, when strong passions control and dominate man, he is likely to err. But he corrects himself or is corrected by the intellectual approach or the sense of justice in him.'

'Gopal, I wish I had come to you a few months earlier. Then life would have been all right, now I see before me nothing but ruin. How can I ever make myself live with Rao when all the time I know he doesn't deserve me?'

'Dear, dear, in your desperation you don't know what you are talking. But even now you can make the best of life.'

'What life! I shall be very happy if something happens to me now and I die in your arms. This is my sincere wish.'

She leaned on him and looked at him sweetly.

'Swarna, darling, it's silly to give up fight. Life can't be a perpetual holiday, a fiesta or a carnival. It means struggle; it is a glorious battle. The great ones are those who succeed in this terrific fight.'

'I don't intend to be great, so I need not fight.' Swarna readily commented. Gopalam smiled.

'How clever! But you haven't understood my point of view. I feel that the moment we long for a passive life we are dead. The spark of ambition, the will to accomplish our goals, the determination to pursue our objects, these determine the existence of a life, not the type of vegetative living.'

'But what can I do now? I have neither hope nor

ambition. To tell you quite frankly I don't like to go to Rao.'

'Then why did you agree to marry him?'

'You know how Murthy almost threatened me with the disclosure of our affair.'

'Well, supposing you had come away to me much earlier, then things would have been different. You didn't have the courage to defy him.'

'I agree. I know I am at fault. But at the same time I had peculiar notions, I thought I should suffer. I despised happiness, in fact I forgot what happiness was. I was helpless and I despaired of my ever coming to you. So I resigned myself to misery. I was pathetically content with my ruin. But now in your company I feel the need for living. I now understand what it is to live. I feel I am gradually coming out of a deep slumber. Now I curse myself, and death is my only solution for I can't get you.'

'Death is no doubt the end of life, but there is no need for you to come to such a conclusion. Swarna, we love each other, fundamentally you are still unchanged, and I am prepared to take you back.'

'But how can I get rid of Rao? What a bother?'

'You can write to him explaining all your innermost feelings. You tell him plainly that you don't love him and that the marriage is literally thrust on you. As he is an educated man he may appreciate your viewpoint.'

'I wonder! You think every one will be as enlightened as you are. Anyway I shall try to get rid of him. But I don't intend to communicate it through a letter. I shall talk to him after my return.'

'Supposing you fail to convince him, then what will you do?'

Swarna kept quiet, she had no answer. But inwardly she was thinking, "I shall try, if I fail I shall die." She dared not say that openly. Gopalam again suggested,

'I think you'd better express your views through a letter. It is rather difficult and awkward to tell a man to his face that you don't love him.'

'I know, but somehow I feel, I ought to talk it over with him, whatever be the consequences.'

'O.K. You do as you wish. But you can be sure of me any day under any circumstances. You are forever welcome.'

Gopalam left it at that stage, for he never believed in forcing his views on others. His policy was one of expressing his views fearlessly and frankly and he stood for individual freedom, freedom in thought, word and deed. But he was no anarchist on that account.

From that day onwards Swarna accepted life with relish. Swarna and Gopalam used to go for walks. The moment they sprawled on the grass for rest, Swarna would move towards him and lean towards him as though she had a right over him. Swarna's original intention was to stay for a couple of days and then go back, but now she could not bear even an hour of separation from Gopalam.

One morning as they got up they found the weather quite mild. Gopalam said it was ideal for picnics. Soon they left for the Humayun tombs. They climbed to the top of the tombs and there they sat for some time. The river Jamuna was flowing calmly. The sky was overcast with

clouds. There was peace, supreme silence, reigning over the whole area. Swarna as usual leaned on him. A gentle wind was blowing. It was as intoxicating as the Spring weather. Visualising the whole scene from the top Gopalam and Swarna felt extremely happy.

'Why not we sit here for ages and ages like this?' Then she suddenly changed her tone.

'Gopal, now I wish to die like this! That will be a calm and peaceful death for me. The last few months I spent under great stress. I was bewildered by the tragic circumstances confronting me. But now I have peace, content and satisfaction. The moment I leave you I shall once again plunge into darkness. I love to be with you.'

'Let us see' said Gopalam rather cautiously, for he knew Swarna wanted to go.

Then they moved from that place to Okhla. It was crowded that day. There was much of rush as it was Sunday and as the weather was unusually fine for July. They moved about and found a corner for themselves. They lay on the grass and their minds raced past to the bygone days. Swarna heaved a sigh of regret that those days would never come again. When she first met Gopalam she was younger, fresher and freer. Now her life had become complicated. She was not sure of her own success with Rao in convincing him of the need for the cancellation of their marriage. The present was all right, but the future was uncertain. With a misgiving she said,

'Gopal, I wonder what my friends think of me. They may be spreading all sorts of rumours by now.'

Gopalam was a little irritated this time.

'Don't you worry. Enjoy yourself for the present. Take this stay in Delhi as a holiday. You surely deserve a nice, good rest.'

Swarna was cheerful again.

'Gopal, do you really think I am justified in loving you?'

'Swarna, it is difficult to give a decision in these matters. The only real justification is love, if you feel sure of your emotions you should not bother about others. Social laws are elastic. They are created by the members of a community in its own interests. In all such cases the general good of the community is taken. There are bound to be certain anomalies, for what is good for the community may not necessarily be good for its members. So we have to justify our actions to ourselves and not to others.'

'But as members of a society we have to go by its dictates, how can we otherwise manage?'

'Yes, we have to be normal and decent, but when it is a direct conflict between what you sincerely consider your good and what is decided by others as good for you, I think, you should choose the former and not the latter. When you tell me that you have to marry Rao simply to please others, I honestly consider you to be silly and stupid. You are quite mature and you ought to know your mind. What's the use of being fickle? Mind you, you can't please everyone. I know you like to do that, but that very effort is leading you to trouble. You want to please Murthy by marrying Rao, now you want to please me, tomorrow you

may try to humour Rao. But someday you are bound to end up in trouble. It is humanly impossible to satisfy everyone.'

'What you say is true. I am weak, I can't offend the feelings of others.'

'But when they come into conflict with your own happiness, your own future, you have to be stiff and firm. Your vacillation has involved you in trouble, I tell you, even now be frank. If you love me and if you feel you will be happy with me, then by all means you fight, and even in the teeth of opposition come to me. But if you think you won't be happy with me, then you'd better go back. Please don't try to dilly-dally. And if you have a strong desire to break off with Rao, do it soon. It is unfair to keep him in hope, and disappoint him ultimately. Take a decision and stick to it.'

'Gopal, I don't have your clearness of vision, nor do I have your strength of character. But one thing I know, I can be happy only with you. I shall try my best to come back to you. If I fail, I shall see you in the next world.'

'You are incorrigible, Swarna.'

The conversion always came to that stage and dropped abruptly, for with Swarna there could be no final decision. She openly showed aversion for Rao, at the same time she had neither courage, nor honesty to break off. The moment she thought of such a proposition she thought of society. Then she would go back to her original idea that she was destined to suffer. In Gopalam's company the *joie de vivre* was revived in her.

Another Sunday soon followed. This time they planned to go to the Qutub. It rained heavily that day, still they took a chance. By the time they moved about for an hour and climbed nearly half of the pillar, torrential rain came. Their programme was upset and they got into a taxi, bound homeward. They could have enjoyed it better if the rain had not come. But the ride of the taxi was quite pleasant. Swarna nestled closer and closer to Gopalam. He suddenly remarked,

'Perhaps this is the last ride with you.'

Swarna groaned,

'O, no, this cannot be the last ride. Please do not make it the last one. Gopal, do not give me away to that cold society? Please do not leave me.'

Gopalam hugged her and said reassuringly,

'No fears. I won't leave you, unless you yourself choose to do so.'

'No. I shall never. I now understand you better than I did a few years ago. So I shall not leave you.'

Swarna stealthily kissed him on his cheek and Gopalam was delighted with that show of endearment. Two days more were spent in that sweet, oblivious mood. She improved her health also. Then came a telegram, followed by a letter from Murthy, informing Swarna about the serious illness of Rao's father and the consequent postponement of her marriage to a later date. She felt sorry for Rao but she was more worried about what others might talk of her. Gopalam realised that she was anxious to go.

The last minutes were spent in the exchange of gifts

between Swarna and Gopalam. She took a nice photograph of his for memory sake. Then as a matter of duty Gopalam reminded her of her letters.

'Swarna, wouldn't you like to take back the letters with you?'

'What should I do with all those letters? You'd better destroy them.'

'No, how can I? They are too dear for me. If I burn them I feel myself burnt. You have created them; so you might as well destroy them.'

Swarna was silent. She herself could not do that, it was too much even for her. Those letters reflected her purer self, her better part. Now she was debased and demoralised. All the lofty sentiments she expressed formerly through her letters were flagrantly violated by her. So she considered that she should not impugn her idealistic past. She could not carry her letters with her, for if any of her friends read them, her position would really be embarrassing. In view of the letters no one might justify her marriage with Rao. She knew that therefore she left the letters with Gopalam as the custodian of her original, pristine self.

Gopalam watched every movement of her with curious interest for within a few minutes she was leaving him.

'Swarna, hope you will remember your promise and come back soon.'

'Yes, I will.'

'I hope you will have the necessary courage to fight the battle.'

Soon they reached the station. Gopalam stood near

the window, Swarna came and stood opposite to him. Perhaps she wanted to speak, but tears choked her words. Her kerchief was soaked in tears. Gopalam was about to cry the moment he tried to say something. So they stood, looking at each other silently. It was a typical dumb show. Swarna was registering within her mind the picture of Gopalam. Half a minute more with his beloved, the Grand Trunk Express would start. At last Gopalam made a desperate effort to say "Good Bye Swarna!" The train started, they were separated. It was like the breaking of the hearts. It was painful and distressful. Swarna waved her kerchief with a lonely, forlorn look. Gopalam waved back, but as the train was pushing further he felt that the gulf between him and Swarna was becoming wider and wider. He knew she would yield to the circumstances. With a heavy heart Gopalam entered his flat, for there seemed to be a bitter emptiness without Swarna's presence. He looked at the plants she had planted. Yes, they were there. But the person had gone, perhaps never to return. It was pitiful and harrowing. To Gopalam life seemed to be suddenly deprived of its lustre. He missed Swarna terribly.

The train was racing fast, but Swarna's mind was moving back. She lay on her berth, dreaming of the happy days she spent with Gopalam. As the train gathered speed, her thoughts reached momentum. She felt the strong hand of Gopalam, she was wrapped in a warm embrace, her body thrilled with excitement. She saw Rao. He was hurling her down from the summit of a staircase; every time she fell she was caught by Gopalam. He gently lifted her and car-

ried her to the top. Rao pushed her ruthlessly many a time and Gopalam protected and supported her from falling. She was frightened. She sobbed. She woke up in a great fright. Everyone in the compartment was sleeping soundly. With a palpitating heart she lay again. She told herself that she should return to Delhi. The air of freedom, the spirit of joy, the refreshing memory of her days with Gopalam, all these left her with a new intoxication for life. In a way she felt it was her right to be happy and therefore she pleaded she ought to go back to her lover. This time, she said, she was not prepared to accept misery as her destiny. She even framed speeches, fiery speeches, to be delivered before Rao. With such flaming thoughts she reached Madras, determined to fight for her right of happiness.

(2)

Murthy was anxiously waiting for Swarna. The moment Swarna reached Madras he went to see her.

'I am glad you have come at last. I couldn't go on inventing lies on your behalf. What a woman you are!'

'Murthy, you always chastise me. O, I enjoyed my stay in Delhi. I didn't like to come back.'

'Swarna, be sensible. You ought to be true to Rao. It is your duty to marry him. I thought you became sensible after my advice, but you are as bad as you were before. You do not know in what light you are spoken of.'

Swarna became a little nervous.

'Yes, what does everyone say?'

'They all talk ill of you, naturally. They consider you

immoral and shameless. Moreover, Gopalam is not of our caste, if he were, I would not have minded. But now this is a degrading situation. You are bringing disgrace to our whole caste. You run to that man as though he alone can give you happiness.'

'That's true. I can never be happy with Rao.'

Murthy gnashed his teeth.

'You are mad, Swarna, you are completely mad. Rao is in no way inferior to Gopalam.'

'Murthy, it's not a question of superiority or inferiority; it is just a matter of taste. You can't offer explanations for your particular likes. I love Gopalam.'

Her recent experiences with him were still fresh, so she did not hesitate to say that openly.

'But you have to marry Rao.'

'I shall break off with Rao.'

'Break off. . . . What are you talking! You have to live with him; there is no escape. I shall see that you are immediately packed off to Rao. I think you are perverted. Your love affair with Gopalam is based on your foolish imagination, it is a disease of the mind. But your marriage with Rao is a social event. It is real, whereas the other is merely fictitious.'

'O, I don't know. I am tossed this side and that. I spent my time in Delhi quite peacefully. Now I am again faced with misery.'

'This misery is self-courted and created. The moment you marry Rao everything will be normal. Even your recent frivolity will be condoned by us. Or else I shall disclose

your shameful past with Gopalam.'

'You may do so, I don't mind. I can go to Gopalam any day. He has promised to receive me. So you need not threaten me.'

This was rather surprising to Murthy. He found some change in Swarna and he never expected her to react in that manner. It was partly due to desperation that Swarna spoke like that. Inwardly even then she feared such a prospect of being talked of. Her social fear was not eradicated, though it was to some extent mitigated by the exciting life she had with Gopalam. If she were to get all that bliss of heaven through him, then why should she bother about others? It was with this determination that she reached Madras, but when she talked to Murthy half of that pious intention and grim resolve was already lost. It was only a semblance of fight, she was putting up. Murthy however was taken aback by her reckless reply. So he used a different technique, that was to play upon her emotions.

'Look here Swarna, I think I have offended you. I am sorry if I have done so. In my own anxiety to do good to you I sometimes go beyond the limits of civility. I treat you as my sister and at times I take liberties with you. It's all for your own sake that I am worrying myself. What does it matter to me if you marry Rao or Gopalam? In fact I have no personal grudge against Gopalam. I like him and I consider him brilliant. But you see, I can't really appreciate his flirtation with you. He will leave you when once he is fed up with you. Then what will be your position. Men often exploit unsuspecting women like you. So I shrink

with horror the moment you talk of your fascination for Gopalam. I am only afraid he will ruin you. With my sincere affection for you how can I allow you to court ridicule and ignominy? . . . I think I have made my position clear. Perhaps you may also curse me for coming in between you and Gopalam. But you will appreciate my help only at a later stage when you are comfortably settled with Rao and have forgotten all your madness for Gopalam.'

Swarna listened to him in silence and this speech of Murthy was convincing enough for her. She said to herself "Poor man, he is killing himself for my sake. Why don't I follow his advice? By doing so I shall be esteemed and respected in society." So in a half-subdued manner she pleaded,

'Murthy, what you say is true. But how can I convince Gopalam? I don't want him to be unhappy. Is it his fault if he loves me sincerely? We, women, admire such steadfast lovers but in his case his very sincerity seems to be a disqualification. If he had been one of the wayward type he could have by now forgotten all about me. He loves me with a singular devotion. How can I deceive him?'

'But what about Rao? Is it his fault if he marries you, expecting you to be a chaste woman? What a shock it will be for him if he knows that you had a past, a shameful past! Can he live after that? Can I live and see you in disgrace? No, never. You write to Gopalam and tell him that all is over.'

'I don't know what he will say to that. It will be cruel of me to leave him.'

'But you have to, if you want peace and content for your life. Don't think we will leave you alone with Gopalam. Rao and I will go to any limit in getting you from him. In other words, do as I tell you, of course, I mean it for your good, or else you may count me as your deadliest foe.'

Swarna indeed feared his enmity. She saw no way out. She had to satisfy Murthy or else he was not in a mood to leave her in peace.

'All right Murthy, I shall write to Gopalam and explain to him my viewpoint.'

'That's fine. Now you are in your element; a moment ago you weren't. See you later.'

Swarna heaved a sigh of relief. Murthy bored her to distraction, but he won his point all the same. He left her in a triumphant tone and sent a wire to Rao. The very day Rao came. Swarna was perplexed and confused on seeing him. Only a few days ago she was with Gopalam. Here she was confronted by a man, supposed to possess her. There was a conflict of emotions, especially because of the suddenness of the whole transformation. When she was with Gopalam she gave herself up entirely to him. There was no place for Rao. Now at least physically she was expected to surrender herself to Rao; that was what the marriage with him meant for her. It was a curious feeling of disgust that crept over her. In one minute, she hated herself for having made her life extremely complicated. Rao was definitely annoyed with her and he even suspected her of having some secret love affair with someone in Delhi. Murthy reassuringly told him that she had gone to Delhi to see some of

her close friends. So he addressed her rather pleadingly, 'Swarna, why did you stay for such a long time? I thought you would return within a couple of days.'

'Of course, I wanted to return, but I was ill and couldn't take this long journey. My friends took care of me and I am indeed thankful to them for serving me during my illness.'

Swarna was no doubt slightly indisposed for a day but it was not of a very serious nature. The way she talked of it indicated almost a crisis.

'I wonder why you didn't write to me of your illness. I was mentally tortured. You can't understand how I suffered all those days.'

'I am sorry.'

'You know I was very much perturbed when I heard the scandalous talk about you, I couldn't stomach it.'

'But did you take that gossip seriously?'

'No, I didn't. But I wonder why you did not come back immediately. I know you love me. I am indeed lucky in having you.'

Swarna was pained to hear him speak in that innocent manner. But how could she tell him all about her relationship with Gopalam? So she kept quiet.

'Should I go to your village now to see your father?'

'No, let us go to your village. But will you be able to get some money from your friend, Lalita?'

'I will.'

Swarna managed to get money for him and then they went to her village. Her parents, no doubt, disliked Rao in

the beginning, but now they too were reconciled to him as a measure of fate. So they received him cordially. Swarna promised Gopalam that she would come back. But she could not tell her parents that she was not willing to marry Rao. That was bound to create fuss for nothing. She was not clear, as yet, in her mind whether she should go back to Gopalam. She loathed herself for her indecision. She could tell Rao all about her love for Gopalam, but she did not. Rao was full of expectations. He first attempted to kiss her, she tried to put him off.

'Swarna, you are sweet.'

So saying he kissed her. Her whole body shivered and she rubbed her lips with her hand, as though she was removing something unwanted. She was going through a world of agony. She hated herself for the kiss she received from Rao. She felt impure and treacherous towards Gopalam. Rao was baffled,

'Swarna, what's the matter?'

'Rao, please don't bother me for some time more. I know it is hard on you to wait for me.'

'No, not at all. I shall definitely wait.'

Rao was by no means a simpleton. He became suspicious of Swarna, but he controlled himself and accepted her decision. The very next morning he left her and went to the town where he worked.

Two weeks later Swarna was married to Rao. She was terribly unhappy but all the same she had gone through the celebrations like a mute and dumb creature. She communicated the shocking news to Gopalam and told him

that it was her last letter to him.

Gopalam became mad, mad with fury. The letter was icy cold. Right to that day he treated her indulgently and gave her nothing but kindness. But in that mood he felt that his kindness was exploited by her. All along he was manly and human, but to what end? To be deceived and jilted by a woman, in that mood he hated women in general. Beastliness overpowered him and thoughts of revenge flitted over his mind. Thinking that she might have gone to Rao, Gopalam wrote a stiff letter to her and posted it to the care of Rao address. Rao read it and became terribly angry, but he did not understand the whole background to that letter. Unfortunately, Swarna had not yet joined Rao. The house he was promised was given to someone else; so he wired to Swarna not to start. She was still in Madras, even though she did not bother to inform Gopalam about it. She wanted to sever all her connections with him, as though it were such an easy affair. Rao in his wild temper called Gopalam an intriguing, corrupting villain. His letter to Gopalam was thoroughly abusive, vindictive and onesided.

For a moment Gopalam lost his balance of mind. His original good nature, his refinement, his generous disposition were lost. He was desperate, Swarna deceived him a second time. She was a party to that letter of Rao. He thought that Swarna had already joined Rao and that she might have even inspired him to write that awful letter. Swarna might have pretended to be innocent as regards her relationship with Gopalam, and Rao would have believed every word of hers. Gopalam argued thus and he was mad-

dened by rage for Rao. Never in his life did he receive such a letter. Was he a villain? He answered back referring to his romantic past with Swarna.

Rao was dumbfounded. He was speechless. So this was the woman he had married! This was perhaps the punishment for him for not marrying his niece, he thought. Immediately he sent the letter of Gopalam to Swarna demanding an explanation from her.

Gopalam wrote that letter in an angry mood, but gradually he came to his normal senses. He realised that in his supreme rage for Rao he had unwittingly betrayed Swarna. On second thoughts he even feared that Swarna might commit some awful deed. So he wrote to her Madras address in great haste and said that owing to some provocation from Rao he was forced to give out the truth. Strangely enough on the same day she received the letter from Rao also. In a way she felt bitter towards Gopalam. He was loyal to her all these years and despite her strange behaviour he tolerated her. But now he could not swallow the pungent and nasty remarks of Rao. So he hit him back, but Swarna in one moment flared up at him. All her respect for Gopalam was gone. If she loved him the way he loved her, she could have gone to him at least at that time. Rao wanted details. That was an opportunity for her to confess and make an end of the whole show. No, she did not possess that courage. The artificial social set up in which she spent the best part of her life taught her to be respectable, and that she should be, even at the cost of truth. Moreover she thought Gopalam was unkind to her. She might

deceive him, give him a hell of life, but he ought to be faithful to her and talk of her as chaste Diana. He had no business to expose her. That was how she argued to herself. In that awful mood she turned to Murthy for advice and guidance. He was all sweetness to her. Now he had a real good opportunity to abuse Gopalam in her presence.

'Swarna, now you understand Gopalam? I know he is selfish.'

'I never expected this of him. He is a perfect gentleman, I wonder what has come over him.'

'Don't tell me he is good. He is wicked. He ruined you and he isn't satisfied with that. Now he wants to ruin your happiness with Rao.'

Swarna did not comment. She was busy inventing a scheme so as to come out of that awkward situation.

'Murthy, tell me what I should do now?'

'You leave it to me. I shall manage. I shall write to Rao to come immediately.'

'But what will be your line of approach?'

'There is only one way to come out of this muddle. We have to give a lie.'

'Will he believe?'

'That's my concern. I think I can influence him. Don't you worry. But promise one thing, that you will never write to Gopalam in future.'

'I promise. I shall never think of him. You may be sure of my conversion.'

Murthy was mightily pleased. All his efforts had borne fruit. He was successful and he had given a crushing blow

to Gopalam. Swarna seemed to be fed up with him. That was all he wanted from her. What more was needed? No, nothing at all. His mission was over. He not merely separated her from Gopalam, but also instilled in her a thorough-going contempt for him.

Within two days Rao came to Madras. He went straight to Murthy's place. Murthy received him in a pompous style. Rao was inwardly smarting under a sense of defeat, whereas Murthy was itching to give him a pleasant surprise with Swarna's transformation.

'Hallo Rao, what's the news?'

'You should tell me, because you called me.'

'Well, you seem to be worried.'

'Don't I have every reason for that? If you were to be in my position, surely, you too would feel the same way.'

'I know, I understand. But what I mean is that your worry is for nothing.'

'For nothing! How can you say that? Have you seen Gopalam's letter?'

'Of course, I have. Swarna showed it to me. But tell me one thing—do you have faith in me or not? Do you think I could have cheated you with a "stale" woman?'

'No, I don't say you did it purposely. Perhaps you too were ignorant of the facts.'

'Rao, credit me with some intelligence. Swarna and I moved together as kith and kin from our earliest school days. So there is nothing that I do not know of her.'

'Then, how do you explain this letter of Gopalam?'

'Now you are sensible. I can give you all the details.'

You see, Swarna was Gopalam's student and at that time he fell in love with her. She could not possibly agree to his importunities as he was already married and was of a different caste. But her maidenly modesty prevented her from being rude to him. Meanwhile he went abroad and even then he pestered her with letters. Of course, she never bothered to reply, but he used to molest her with letters. Tell me frankly, is it her fault if someone loves her and writes to her like a mad man?

'If she really did not care for him, why did she go to Delhi? I think there is something. Please don't make me a fool.'

'Listen, this is not what I expected of you to say. What happened was this. Gopalam threatened her saying that he would spread rumours about her. Moreover he said he was determined to die, if she didn't come. So she had to go to please him and thereby get free of him.'

'You mean she doesn't love him, though he is terribly fond of her.'

'Yes, that's what I mean. There is one simple test. If she loved him, do you think she could have married you? She is not a child to be forced into a marriage. Surely, she knew what she was doing, when she accepted you.'

'Murthy, there is only one more doubt. Gopalam quoted a few lines from her letter, relating to her pledge to be faithful to him. What do you think of it?'

'Rao, don't make me laugh. Can't Gopalam manage to write those lines himself? Please be reasonable. You see, Gopalam is jealous of you. So he wants to ruin your happi-

ness by such fictitious tales.'

'I thought so in the beginning, but his letter upset me. I wondered whether there was any truth in it.'

'Nothing, absolutely nothing. My dear Rao, be practical-minded. Just for the sake of argument, even if she had some fascination for Gopalam, what does that matter to you? You are not concerned with her past. If she is true to you now, then it is all right. Why do you take undue interest in things that don't relate to you? After all what is virtue? A meaningless word. Is there any woman who hasn't had a past? Why, we men, we too have our weak spots. It is unwise to concentrate on these little, little follies when you are getting a huge dowry along with the woman.'

'That's true. To err is human. In my present circumstances that sum is godsend. I should be unwise if I were to give her up on the basis of some unfounded story. I shall see her to-day then.'

'Yes, by all means. I shall accompany you.'

'Let us go then.'

Rao and Murthy reached Swarna's residence. She was frightfully upset; she was worried that Rao might leave her. In that case all her past with Gopalam was likely to be known. She might have to face a scandal. That was the very thing she wanted to suppress at all cost, but now due to the indiscretion of Gopalam it was about to flare up. She saw Rao and Murthy, and stood up to receive them. To her great surprise and relief Rao apologised to her.

'Swarna, I am sorry for what I have written to you on the receipt of Gopalam's letter. I hope you will forgive

me.'

'It is my fault. I ought not to have gone to Delhi.'

'In fact I should not have maintained correspondence with Gopalam, almost a stranger. I admit it is my mistake.'

Murthy was watching the whole affair with an air of supererogation. He was the director; they were his puppets. The whole trouble was created by him and at last it was having a successful close. Swarna was cowed down in spirits. Rao was full of physical longings. Murthy enjoyed the whole situation. The human drama of strife and reconciliation was all engineered and manipulated by him. He was the destroyer, the creator, the all-knowing tactician. In a grandiloquent manner Murthy said,

'Well, the past is past. From now on, Swarna, you are the loyal wife of Rao and you have no business to write to Gopalam. Promise this to Rao and he will be happy.'

'Rao, I shall be always faithful to you. My primary object is to keep you contented and satisfied.'

Murthy's game was over. He thought he could retire and retreat honourably and triumphantly. He crushed his foe and kept his original oath that Swarna should never go to Gopalam. That was accomplished. So he could go.

'Rao, I take leave of you now.'

'Thanks a lot.'

Murthy cast one understanding look at Swarna and departed. That night Swarna surrendered herself to Rao. He was the happiest man alive.

(3)

In her bitterness Swarna yielded that night to Rao. The very next day he left her instructing her to follow soon. A week later she started thinking calmly about herself and what she had done. In a mood of revenge she went to Murthy for counsel and later accepted Rao. But now the whole problem looked different. Gopalam wrote to Rao only because he insulted him. He had no ill will against her, for he requested her to come to him. So his letter was an attack against Rao. She felt she was unfair to Gopalam. It was only natural that he should have reacted in such a manner. After all he too was a man and not a saint. He was already bitter because she did not keep her promises. In addition to that there was the insulting letter from Rao. That was fuel to fire. Swarna argued to herself quite dispassionately. She felt, Gopalam was justified in his actions and she ought to have gone to him, instead of accepting this sly life with Rao. Any way, she feared, her past with Gopalam might come out. What a shameful life! Did not Gopalam put up with all her tantrums? For once in his life he hit back, that too not at her, but at someone who was practically his rival. So he was within his limits.

She was penitent. She ought to have gone back to Gopalam, she said to herself. Now she could not go. She was polluted; she looked at her body. Yes, it was defiled, defiled by the touch of Rao. She asked herself why she had allowed Rao to possess her. She concluded she was not in her senses when she committed that shameful act that night. It was all over, she was impure. She had no right over

Gopalam. The woman he loved in her was dead. She was only the ghost of that woman. Tears of remorse trickled by. She thought of writing to Gopalam. On a second thought she paused. She remembered the promise she had given to Rao. Moreover why should she take her corrupt frame to Gopalam? It would be better to die or lead a life of misery. No more Gopalam. On the appointed day she went to the small town where Rao was working. He took it for granted that Swarna was his, he did not have even a single doubt about her. He was simply satisfied with the physical aspect of life. But to Swarna those were days of torture and agony. Every time Rao made an approach, she was pitifully reminded of Gopalam. She often dreamt of him. Rao congratulated himself on his good luck and he took a certain pride in being brutally passionate. He felt he was giving her complete satisfaction, whereas she was gradually tending to be frigid. His physical approaches were always viewed with great fear by her, for she saw Gopalam, not Rao. She loathed herself, but never said 'no' to Rao. She took it as a matter of duty and he never suspected that Swarna was cold. Her apathy was mistaken by him as ecstasy. Rao did not have much of imagination or refinement. Added to this, there were temperamental differences too. She realised that there was something missing in her life with Rao. That was happiness. She tried her best to forget Gopalam, in fact she thought she did. In reality she did not. His idealistic views, his inspiring talk, his soul-stirring looks, his sense of humour, his romantic love-making, all these she missed, seriously missed in her sordid and too earthly life with Rao. Her love for

Gopalam might be unconventional, but that was compensated by the world of thrill, romance and excitement she had in the company of Gopalam. He was brilliant, daringly original, whereas Rao was mediocre with a typical rusticity about him. These were the painful thoughts of Swarna and this was the world, the world of frustration and frigidity into which Rao never bothered to peep. He was blissfully ignorant of the huge strife, the volcanic fire that consumed and convulsed her.

The situation became worse when six months later an unfortunate incident took place in the domestic life of Rao and Swarna. She still had the photograph of Gopalam, given to her at the time of her departure from Delhi. All these months it was lying down below her trunk along with certain books of Gopalam. They were all preserved by her, though all his letters were destroyed. She saw no harm in keeping them. As life was becoming intolerable for her, she felt like looking at Gopalam's photograph. She stealthily removed all the 'saris' covering those articles. That day she was definitely sentimental. As she was looking at Gopalam's photo she was moved to tears.

It was four in the evening. Rao should not have come for an hour more. But as ill luck would have it, he came earlier that day. She listened to the footsteps, she knew it was Rao. So she hurriedly put off those relics of Gopalam, spread a few 'saris' over them. But in her haste she could not put everything in order and the trunk was left open. She went and opened the door. There were still some traces of tears in her eyes. She murmured,

'Rao, you have given me a surprise. How is it you are rather early home today?'

'O, I was not feeling quite well. So I came away.'

'That is fine. Shall I get you tea?'

On that pretext she went into the kitchen so that she might have a wash and look all right. Rao went into the bedroom. The trunk was open, things seemed to be confused and disorderly. He wondered what Swarna was doing. Out of curiosity he lifted the few 'saris' and found to his great surprise and dismay certain books. Swarna never told him of those books. What secret literature she could be reading, he mused. He opened one of the books. It was written by Gopalam with an inscription to his beloved Swarna. He threw it away. Swarna came into the room anxiously.

'Rao what are you doing? what a fancy is this to search my clothes? I suppose you are becoming inquisitive.'

She tried to smile, and pushing him a little away she started rearranging her clothes. But Rao came forward and said,

'Swarna, please wait. Let me see that photograph. whose is that?'

She ignored the question. This time Rao was determined to know the truth. So he got hold of it, even though Swarna tried to retain it with her. Rao repeated the question,

'Who is this fellow? Is he Gopalam?'

Swarna was silent, pathetically silent.

'Tell me whose photograph is this?'

He was getting infuriated. So Swarna slowly admitted.
'It is Gopalam's.'

'So you live with me and worship him, awful woman!'

'Honestly, I never looked at it. I did not even know it was lying down below. Gopalam thrust it on me when I went to Delhi.'

'Don't tell me lies. You must be secretly kissing and making love to it. You have no sense of shame.'

He tore the photograph to pieces. He threw them on the floor and trampled over them. Swarna was helpless, but felt offended. Inwardly she hated Rao. A mighty tempest rose and fell in her bosom. She shed tears, Rao perceived them. He then took up the books and threw them out into a corner.

'They are only books meant as literature. I suppose I can keep them.' Swarna said humbly.

'Keep them! I shall destroy them.'

'Do as you like. I only suggested that they might be kept. It is immaterial to me whether they are with me or converted to ashes. I never looked at them.'

'Enough, enough of your explanation.'

Rao dashed out of the house. He wanted to have a solitary walk and cool his heated brain. He went to a park nearby. It was peopled with beautiful flowers and creepers. Men and women were coming for a stroll. Children were busy playing. Everyone seemed to be happy. There was contentment on the faces of the strollers. A nice wind was blowing. He saw two persons on a bench. They seemed to be husband and wife or perhaps lovers. The wind blew over

the woman's lovely curls. They were dangling gracefully on her face. The youth beside her was looking at her lovingly and was whispering something. Rao looked at them. He felt jealous. He envied them for their happiness. Suddenly it dawned upon him that Swarna never gave him such an affectionate glance. There was always something secretive and suspicious about her. She was only acting a part, too painful for her. Rao's mind was steeped with such melancholy thoughts. Not one in the park appeared to be sympathising with him. They were cheerful and to them life was a glorious holiday, at least Rao thought it was a holiday for them. He cursed his luck and hated the silly men and women who were moving about as though they never knew any sorrow in their lives. They were only putting up a show, surely they too should be having their own domestic troubles. They were cheating themselves or perhaps they had resigned themselves to misery. So he was not going to be in their midst. He left the park, he roamed about aimlessly. Peace did not come to him. He even thought of leaving Swarna to her fate. But then he was afraid of a scandal. His friends might ridicule him for having married an undeserving woman. All his foolishness might be exposed and scandalised. It was better for him to tolerate her.

It was pretty late by the time he reached his house. Swarna was terribly worried. She was sorry, sincerely sorry for what had happened. But was it not a conspiracy of circumstances that Rao should have come an hour earlier that evening? Why did she have that unfortunate desire of looking at Gopalam's picture? It was all her fault, she admitted

to herself. When once she came to Rao, she really had no reason to think of Gopalam. She was destined to be miserable. That evening she was rather unwise. Something came over her and she could not resist the temptation of looking at Gopalam's photo. She apologised to Rao as soon as he returned.

'Rao, please do not attribute any motive to me. It was just by accident that the photo was there. You asked me not to write to Gopalam and I never wrote. You know full well how fond I have been of you, all these months. You cannot really say that I have been unfaithful to you. Please forget all about this.'

She earnestly pleaded for forgiveness. Rao melted. After all she did not commit any horrible deed. She was with him for nearly six months and all that time she was faithful to him and abided by his wishes. There were lots of other women who were worse off. He knew of women who were adulterous and their husbands tolerated them for fear they might be courting slander and gossip from society. Yes, respectability was what was absolutely necessary. Swarna never flirted with any one within those months, nor showed any tendency towards unlicensed relationships. She abhorred them and was horrified too, whenever such instances were casually mentioned by Rao. So she was better than most other women he had heard of. If these men, that too coming from the upper strata of life, kept quiet and moved about as though nothing had happened to them, why should he, like an imprudent fool, advertise his wife's harmless fascination for someone else? Wisdom dawned on him and

he forgave her for the time being.

'Swarna, see that you are discreet, otherwise we will be laughed at. We have to keep up our prestige in society, or else we will be humiliated.'

'I understand what you mean. I shall be careful.'

The quarrel was over. That night Swarna was in a mood to please Rao without any mental reservation. Perhaps that might serve as a balm for the suffering she had inflicted on him. But somehow Rao could not enjoy her company wholeheartedly. Even though he struck a note of compromise with Swarna, yet in his heart of hearts he felt she might have been really in love with Gopalam. Prior to that unfortunate incident he was living in ignorance and it gave him bliss. But now when he saw her with Gopalam's photograph, his original fears were confirmed. He imagined her to have been Gopalam's lady love before she became his wife. Then the letter of Gopalam, forgotten all these months, came back to him with cruel ferocity. So he was overcome by a sense of aversion for Swarna. Anyway he was not going to live in a fool's paradise any longer. He would suffer himself to lead that life with Swarna for the sake of society.

A few months rolled on in this strange manner. None of them was happy. Yet like all other decent men and women they too were pulling on with the stress of life. Rather they were floating on it with grim determination.

(4)

The first time he was deceived by Swarna, Gopalam

was awfully upset, but he considered her helpless. But the second time when Swarna left him for Rao, Gopalam was really annoyed with her. He had no more faith in her, yet he did not go down to the depths of despondency. Through the repeated shocks Swarna gave him, he became shock-proof. He developed a certain unruffled mental state. It was one of detachment to the worldly entanglements. He accepted his defeat with no regrets.

But peculiarly enough this disappointment in love did not produce in him any of the unhealthy tendencies that were generally found in rejected lovers. He took to life with greater vigour and he argued to himself that he was not born merely for the sake of falling in or falling out of love. There were mighty projects before him, Love was only a subsidiary object. He might do something constructive to himself, to society or to the country in general. Social service, creative writing, political work—any of these he could take up and anyone of them should surely absorb him completely. He was determined to rule out passion for women from his pageant of life. Instead he strove for the sublimation of all desires for the achievement of one single goal. In his college days he dabbled in writing verses, later he wrote plays. But the moment he came into contact with Swarna he was totally engulfed, if not eclipsed by his feverish love for her. It was a mighty stream, he was often drowned and he came up. His love for Swarna became an obsession with him and in those hectic days it was impossible for him to think of any other object except Swarna. His nature was such, that he would go the whole hog and never do things

by halves. He even thought he might die, if Swarna failed him in her promises. Now life taught him a lesson not to bother about women. After all there were other activities which were enticing and equally romantic.

And there was his belief in the Triple Force which gave him immense strength. It always assured him that there was justice in the seemingly unjust universe. If men failed to distinguish between their inherited and acquired personalities, it was their own fault. He was thoroughly convinced of the prevalence of reason over bestiality, of judgment over ignorance in man. At last he admitted to himself that he was unfair to Suguna in his madness for Swarna. He asked Suguna to join him. She patiently waited for that word and she came and joined him the moment she was asked to do so. His life with Suguna was no longer unbearable. She understood him better and the suffering she was put to, made her submissive. But the real reason for success lay with Gopalam. Formerly he used to be quite taxing, all the time bossing over her. Even over insignificant matters he used to lose temper. His life in London and the rebuffs he received from Swarna—all these created in him a spirit of tolerance and understanding for others. And with that marked change in him it was not difficult for him to adjust himself to the new trends in life.

Moreover there was a marked change in Suguna too. She knew how to please Gopalam. And it was not difficult to do so, for he was no longer the romantic idealist, beholding things unapparent. In his romantic intoxication for Swarna he neglected Suguna. But now he was quite tamed. The

relationship between Gopalam and Swarna had at last come to a satisfactory close. No more Swarna for him, he had enough of that life.

Suguna thought a lot of Swarna. The latter left a deep impression on her. She wondered how she might be getting on. But she was afraid of mentioning her name before Gopalam. Suguna was by nature sentimental and she was always reminded of Swarna in some connection or the other. Gardening was her hobby. One evening as she was looking at the plants, she was moved. All of them were planted by Swarna. Swarna left Gopalam on the Independence Day a year ago. She never wrote to him during that period. Gopalam was reconciled to his lot. As Suguna was working in the garden Gopalam was watching her with interest.

'You talk a lot about justice, but you see with your eyes nothing but injustice in this world. The poor man is exploited by the rich, the mightier man crushes the weaker one. Honesty doesn't pay. How, how can you ignore all these glaring ills of life?' questioned Suguna.

'No, I don't ignore. In fact my faith in Triple Force becomes stronger and stronger as I go on seeing more and more of the ills of life. Superficially speaking there isn't much of an explanation for the contradictions and puzzles we face. But some close observation yields good results. For instance an innocent man can easily be duped by his clever friend. But unfortunately it doesn't stop there. The friend in turn will be deceived by someone else, or he repents of his crookedness. This may not happen immediately. With some it may take a year, with others it may take

even one whole life to be reformed. You see, what has happened to Murthy?’

‘Of course, he is punished. Poor fellow he is maimed for life.’

‘He was no doubt involved in an accident, but that accident is nothing but the sense of justice, prevalent everywhere. Man may correct himself or be corrected by others. But one thing is certain, we are not governed by blind chance. We often talk of fate only to excuse ourselves. In fact, we create and destroy, we love and hate, we sin and repent, we are responsible for all our actions.’

In the early days of her life with Gopalam, Suguna dreaded these speeches. She used to be awfully bored with his pompous oratory. But now she too came under his spell. She saw Swarna’s infatuation for him, for his intellect. Moreover she was mentally more advanced and was at that time capable of enjoying his talks.

‘Gopalam, I don’t think you are right. Was it Murthy’s fault if he had an accident while going in a car? How many times did he not go by car, why should it happen at that time? Did your friend give some more details relating to that accident?’

‘No he didn’t give; it is unnecessary also. Involving himself in an accident was not his fault, but that was only the penalty he was paying for his wickedness to others. By being physically, incapacitated he will have the worst of time for the rest of his life.’

‘Anyway I really want Swarna to be happy.’

‘I too wish it, but what about the law of nature? It is

what is known as harmony in the universe. This harmony is based only on justice. So I don't wish her to be unhappy, but that is a strong probability. I only say that. In fact I am no longer interested in her. I now live for nobler ends: not for me the maddening days of love. I want to be a man, a complete man, a perfect one. Passionate longings no longer move me. The nobler element in me moves me to the more balanced and intellectual understanding of life. I have come out of the storm and stress of the stream. Now I look back and heave a sigh of relief. I am not sorry for my experiences, for they have chastened and sublimated me. The stream of life now goes on calmly towards the annihilation of animal instincts. So what does it matter to me if Swarna is happy or unhappy?"

'I know you are quite different now from what you used to be. I am glad you have at last found peace through your own individual efforts. You thought you would get that from a woman, so you ran after Swarna madly. But now you have attained peace through your own enlightenment. I am indeed grateful to God for this happy change in you.'

Gopalam was silent. He offered no comments. Gopalam did not forget Swarna, yet he never longed for her. Mentally, he was far advanced of his age and he was bent upon exploring the riddle of life. Suguna left him free, completely free, in all his busy, ponderous thoughts. She was often a sympathetic listener. He grew serene and austere and was always poised. Spiritual thoughts kept him fascinated. Yet on the question of a personal God he was

still unreconciled. To him the Triple Force was quite explanatory. It strengthened his belief in the goodness and justness of life.



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