

POETRY OF THE DAY AND POETRY OF THE NIGHT

Manik Bandyopadhyay

Translated by
Dipendu Chakrabarti

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Sahitya Akademi

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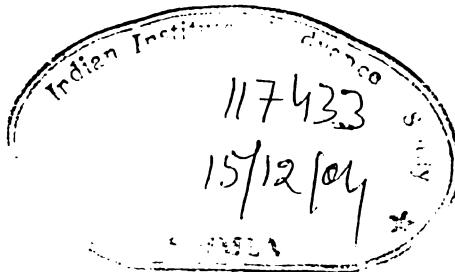
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In memory of my Sejda
Kamalendu Chakrabarti

Translator's note

A translator's job is as hazardous as the tight rope walking of an acrobat. The shuttling between the source and the target language is fraught with graver risks when the translator confronts a text as difficult as *Divaratrir Kavya* by Manik Bandyopadhyay, one of the major novelists in the post-Tagorean phase of Bengali literature and the author of two famous novels—*Padma Nadir Maghi* (*The Boatman on the Padma*) and *Putul Nacher Itikatha* (*The Story of the Puppets*). This novel (*Poetry of the Day and Poetry of the Night* in my English translation) which was written by Manik Bandyopadhyay at twenty-one and went into several revisions later has long been treated either as a self-indulgent romantic fancifulness of a budding writer or as a mystifying allegorical tale of an all-too-familiar triangular love affair. Part of such a misconception of the novel was encouraged by the author's own comment on it*. Rereading it today only confirms the fallibility of authorial intention and the inherent subversive tendencies of a text not intended by the author.

Divaratrir Kavya, despite its title, is not concerned with the poetry of love; rather it interrogates Bengali reader's romantic preconceptions. Within its short span the novel seems to intertwine the psychological, the philosophical and the symbolist perspectives on a solid base of realism. It shows something of Tolstoy's concern in *Anna Karenina* for the question of family happiness (as in the case of Anath-Malati and Supriya-Ashok episodes) and

* The novel was serialized in the journal 'Bangasri' edited by Sajanikanta Das. 'Divaratrir Kavya' was then the title of one of the chapters of the novel. It was chosen as a title of the whole novel when it was published in book-form in 1935. The first edition had also the sub-title 'A fanciful allegorical tale of certain projections of reality'. It should also be noted that the novel was revised in more than one way when it was first published as a book.

something of the supreme unconcern of Camus' hero in *The Outsider* for traditional conception of human bondage (as in the case of the hero Heramba). In fact Heramba seems to be the first outsider in Bengali fiction, so far as his dispassionate, detached, and sometimes almost unfeeling acceptance of his wife's suicide, his mother's death, his daughter's fate and even the death of the only woman who nearly cured him of his cynical aloofness, is concerned. No other novel in Bengali of its time raises so many questions about love and marriage, intellect and passion, life and death, sex and religious ritual. Ananda's suicidal dance at the end has both a Freudian implication and a symbolic function like that of Anna's dance in Lawrence's *The Rainbow*.

The three poems Manik Bandyopadhyay added in the final version of the novel which are supposed to differentiate its three separate sections certainly suggest a poetic vision, but the narrative modes he adopts do not always seem to bear them out. I had to resist a strong temptation to leave them out while translating the novel, but later preferred to leave the text as it is in view of the increasing freedom of reader response these days.

I have felt compelled to take certain liberties a translator is grudgingly permitted, but I have tried my best to remain as faithful as possible to the original.

I convey my heart-felt thanks to Sahitya-Akademi for giving me this opportunity of making available to the readers who have no English translation of a novel that has a great fascination for me and an importance in Bengali literature that has not been sufficiently recognised. Thanks are also due to Ramkumar Mukhopadhyay, Regional Secretary, Sahitya Akademi, Kolkata, to Sutanu Mahapatra, Suman Banerjee, and to my wife Nilanjana.

Dipendu Chakrabarti

Author's note*

I wrote *Poetry of the Day and Poetry of the Night* when I was just twenty one. You can write about love only at that age. I left it on my shelf for several years. Last year after so many revisions, I published it in *Bangasri*.

If you feel that *Poetry of the Day and Poetry of the Night* is rather incoherent and unrealistic, let me tell you that it is neither a story nor a novel— only an allegorical tale. I have attempted a new version of allegory. It is not difficult to see that here is an attempt to give human shapes to certain feelings operating within the limits of the real world. The characters should not be seen as human beings, they are just projections of Man— so many pieces of the human psyche.

* From the first edition of the novel, 1935, D. M. Library, Kolkata.

Part I

Poetry of the Day

Look, dear, here is a traveller
at the break of dawn
Holding a handful of dry, withered grass
From the orange-coloured sands of Sahara,
His heart aching with a raging thirst,
His wistful eyes craving the
dark passion of the night,
His lips sheltering a dead bee.
He is standing there, his shadow so soothing.
Yet a warm breath burns me,
And creates a mirage in the courtyard.
His heart is drained dry of feeling
And there is no sign of life
In the dry, discoloured grass of the desert.

The bullock-cart pulled up at seven in the morning in front of the police station at Rupaikura. The car ride to Bisra did not give much trouble to Heramba. But his whole body was aching from the long bumpy ride in the bullock cart since midnight. He got out of the cart, stretched and felt relaxed. Then he took a pinch of snuff and looked around.

Vast fields stretched as far as the horizon in the east and the west. The only variations were a few green patches of rural habitation here and there. In the north there was a whole range of hills standing cheek by jowl like so many cones of smoke. They merged so completely with the sky that it was impossible to see anything beyond. About half a mile towards the south one could spot the dense clumps of trees and a few mud-built huts of a village. That was most probably Rupaikura village. Just above the village the sky was strewn with nuggets of silver, justifying the name of the village 'Rupaikura.' As a matter of fact, the

illusion was created by white clouds shining in the sunlight. Matilal, the *jamadar* of the police station, came out as he saw the cart. It was he who greeted Heramba warmly. With an uncalled-for timid smile, he said, 'Sir, Darogababu is not at home. He went out riding his horse at day break. It is a case of murder at Barkapashi. He has gone for investigation. He would be back to-night. Come in and make yourself comfortable. Let me carry your luggage. Kishan, are you there? Come here.'

There was a plain unattractive garden between the office and the small barrack of the sepoys. At the other end of the garden was the quarters of the Darogababu. The walls of unbaked bricks had a new coat of whitewash with their base painted with tar as high as three feet. The roof seemed to have been newly thatched before the rains started and the morning light gave the whole building a bright look. The veranda in front of the building was quite wide.

Heramba caught a glimpse of a beautiful face peeping through the curtain at the front door. As he walked towards the veranda it disappeared for a moment probably to adjust the *ghomta* that came off the head. Then the whole figure emerged on the veranda. Controlling her curiosity and excitement she said rather casually, 'Come in, you must have had a very tiring journey.'

'Yes, but the moment I saw you Supriya, I forgot it.'

'Really? Just by looking at me?', a tender smile spread across her face, 'It is hard to believe. Just think of the roads and the transport. I was almost in tears when I first came here. How can you forget the hassle of such a tiring journey simply by looking at me? You haven't cared to see me for the last five years.'

'Yes, I can do it. I can bear any kind of pain. That is why I haven't thought of you for five years.'

'What a brief reply for such an excuse! But don't think I've accepted it. I've still a score or two to settle with you. Don't let us stand here. Please come in. Now, take off your shirt, will you? Let me fan you with my *pakha* as long as I can. I won't mind if my hand aches. You would like a bath, wouldn't you? I've got a tub filled with water

for you. You know, it is very cool, just drawn from the well. You'll surely feel refreshed after your bath.'

Supriya's way of speaking was quite charming. Even in the morning the temperature here had already risen to 104° Fahrenheit. But the way Supriya carried herself reminded Heramba of the cool of Darjeeling. Even this extremely hot weather had no withering effect on the refreshing quality of her speech. There was no sign of fatigue in her voice either. She was as cool as the water of her own well.

Heramba followed her through the drawing room and came along the veranda that led to her bedroom. On the way he observed that there was an air of extreme cleanliness about every thing. The floor of the room and the veranda were freshly scrubbed. Not a single stain on the white walls with black borders. The pails, the utensils, the cotton seats—everything was meticulously put in its place. Even a spoon had no chance to be misplaced.

Supriya came into the bedroom and said, 'The easy chair over there is most comfortable. Why don't you put off your shirt, and sit there and relax? There are no bugs in that chair, let me tell you.'

Heramba took off his shirt, and sat on the chair, but not in a relaxed manner as Supriya expected.

'Now tell me about other arrangements you've made for my comfort.'

Supriya started fanning him with a *pakha* and said, 'Don't speak of comfort here, Herambababu. It is such a wild place, you wouldn't get your tea within twenty miles. You must be ready to put up with such inconveniences.'

She gave a laugh, 'But I know you just don't care for comforts. And that saves me a lot of trouble.'

Supriya's room looked picturesque with everything neatly arranged. There was not a wrinkle in the white bedcover, and the pillows were neatly plumped up. Even the tiny holes left by the discarded pegs on the walls were now hidden beneath the new coat of white paint. The cosmetics of Supriya and her husband were so meticulously arranged on the table that the sets would never have a

chance to come into contact with each other. The cotton cover on the sewing machine would always remain clean. Heramba just could not imagine how much time Supriya spent everyday cleaning and tidying up her room.

Heramba was rather ill at ease, though he was enjoying the cool air produced by the movement of Supriya's *pakha*. Then suddenly he quipped, 'Why do you want your room look like a showroom?'

'Showroom?'

'Well, not really, but it smacks of exhibitionism. Do you really enjoy it?'

'I'm not sure.'

'Not sure? you mean to say you really don't know whether you like it or not.'

'I just don't care to know. It has been a habit with me. One has to do something to pass the time. You know God gave me a son and then snatched him from me. I don't enjoy reading books, so what else can I do?'

But Supriya again spoke charmingly.

'Well, don't bother about me. Tell me, how is your mother?'

'Mother died in September.'

She was shocked. 'Oh, God!', her eyes were moist with tears.

Heramba said, 'She had spoken of you just before she passed away.'

The *pakha* in Supriya's hand stopped for a while, then it again started moving. She said, 'She loved me so much. Everybody scolded me for calling you Herambababu, only she used to say with an affectionate smile, "crazy girl."'

Heramba said, 'you're really crazy, Supriya.'

She was lost in thought, so she did not react.

Supriya was a devoted housewife. The milkman had not come, so she herself milked the cow to make tea for Heramba. One corner of the courtyard was curtained by bamboo sheets which served as a bathroom. Heramba took his bath there. As he came out he was surprised to see Supriya milking the cow.

Sypriya said, 'Care for a little frothy milk? Good for

health, you know? My husband takes it everyday. Would you like me to milk the cow again?"

Heramba retorted, 'Only babies take frothy milk. Give Ashok when he is back home. When did you learn it, Supriya?"

'You needn't learn it.'

'Of course, you've to learn it. I haven't, so I won't be able to do it.'

Supriya said with a smile, 'Yes, you can do it. My cow has been dying since morning to milk. Just touch the tits and you'll have milk. But I'm afraid she may not allow you to go near her. She will charge at you?"

'I am rather scared. I don't like the look of your cow.'

'Very naughty, indeed. She breaks loose everyday and charges at you lowering her horns. Can't you see how I have to tie her with a thick iron chain? But she is friendly with me because she knows how I feed her.'

Supriya stroked the cow's neck and said, 'Please find the mirror and the comb in the room.'

She gave the cow a few bundles of straw and went into the kitchen. Last night she made *chhana* from milk, now she started making *sandeshes* with it. But she could not forgive herself when she found that the *sandeshes* she made were not up to her expectation.

Serving them to Heramba she said ruefully, 'What a pity! I made it specially for you, but something went wrong.'

Heramba tried to cheer her up, 'Never mind, this is good enough for me.'

'Well, I know that. But you can't offer such rotten stuff to a guest. *Sandesh* can't be *sandesh* if it is not very smooth and soft. I had a fit last night, otherwise I could have made it then. You can't make *sandesh* if you leave the *chhana* untouched throughout the night.'

Heramba stopped eating and said, 'But I heard you were not having fainting fits.'

'Yes, but I'm getting it now. In fact, I've had it twice recently, if you count the one I had last night. I was kneading the *chhana*, suddenly my head began to swim. Then I had a blackout. As I came round I found Pare and the maid pouring buckets of water over my body. The

kitchen was full of water like a tank.'

'Excuse me, I forgot your tea', Supriya said and went into the kitchen without giving Heramba a chance to ask anything. When she came back with tea she changed the subject, 'How long did you stay at Ranchi?'

'Four days!'

'How long would you like to stay here?'

'Just one day.'

'Thank you. That's good for me,' said Supriya with a frown.

Heramba sipped his tea and said, rubbing his chin with his left hand, 'How many days would you like me to stay here?'

'Why days? Say years!'

It was not possible for Heramba to take it as a joke. Supriya did not like discontinuities. Her calendar had neither days nor months. She could see life only in terms of years. And Heramba was quite aware of Supriya's incredible stamina.

Nevertheless, he had to say, 'Neither years, nor months, nor weeks, only one day, only today.'

Supriya could not believe her ears.

'Are you going back tonight?'

'No, tomorrow morning,'

After a long silence Supriya said, 'Why did you take the trouble to come here if you intend to stay here just for one day? You haven't cared for me five years, you might just as well spend another five years without seeing me.'

Putting down the cup and wiping his mouth with his *dhoti*, Heramba said, 'you'd be none the better for it.'

Supriya gave him a long stare and said, 'If I had known it before all I would have liked to do was to send a dish of *suji* and a cup of tea to you in the drawing room, and said to myself, "He is a pain in the neck. The sooner he leaves the better for me."

'Well', said Heramba with a smile, 'next time I'd come after ten years. I hope you'd be glad of it.'

'Yes, of course', said Supriya softly, 'you are quite capable of that. I was so immature when you tricked me into my marriage. It made me realize then that nothing

is impossible for you.'

Heramba protested.

'I didn't force you to marry, Supriya. It was your father who did it. Well, now you can remember, can't you, that I didn't give you even a wedding gift?'

Supriya did not catch Heramba's last comment.

She said, 'Father arranged my wedding all right. But you talked me into giving my consent. It was your high-sounding words that swept me off my feet. I didn't know their meaning. I was just thrilled to hear them. Well, do you find all these words in the dictionary?'

It was rather difficult for Heramba to answer promptly. He realized that though Supriya had no intention to pick a quarrel with him, she had been nursing her old grievances for such a long time. Even if she was not vindictive she would not miss this opportunity to let him know that she had good reason to be critical about him. She was really helpless. Nobody can be sane for long by suppressing so many grievances. But Supriya just could not bear the thought of suppressing her feelings. Heramba would leave tomorrow. Supriya could not believe that they would meet within a few years' time, so she could not resist a compulsion for telling him everything just now. Only then could she be able to spend the rest of the day with an unruffled mind for the entertainment of her guest. Only a bold decision like this would prevent her from being unmindful during Heramba's short stay here.

Heramba wondered rather nervously whether Supriya would conclude her speech with tears.

'Supriya, I said only what was good for you.'

'You sound as if things would have been worse for me without your advice. I was a school girl. After finishing school I could have got a job and an independent life. You didn't allow me to do that.'

Heramba shook his head.

'It wasn't possible for you, I'm sure.'

Pat came Supriya's retort, 'Why not? If it suits me living for five years in such a god-damned place where I'm slaving to earn my keep, if I spend all my time

looking after the cattle and tidying up the rooms—which makes me so tired—if all this suits me what was wrong with my decision to live independently?’

Heramba asked, ‘Whose slave do you think you are?’

Supriya did not lose her patience.

‘Well, you may well guess it?’

Heramba shook his head again, ‘No, I don’t agree. Even if it were true you have no right to question the work which women all over the world have been so happily doing. You probably think that living an independent life on a job is great fun, but it is not really like that. No man loves a woman who lacks the courage to accept economic dependence.’ At this point Heramba put his elbows on the arms of the easy chair and leaned forward a little, ‘Besides, independence couldn’t suit you, Supriya. You were sure to mess up your life.’

Supriya’s answer was brief : ‘Nonsense.’

‘Don’t say that. That is really your nature. You were quite mature at fifteen. Women acquire the single-mindedness of a lifetime at twenty-two or so, you got it at fifteen. At that time you decided for two courses of action: one was to live independently after finishing your education, and another was,’ Heramba paused, ‘oh, that was simply impossible.’

Supriya gave him a hard look and asked, ‘Why impossible?’

Heramba sank into his chair, ‘That’s all for now. Why don’t you go to the kitchen for a while?’

Supriya went into the kitchen not to obey him but for the sake of hospitality. She was deeply hurt. She knew that one had to observe certain rules in domestic life and she was also ready to honour them. She never regretted her marriage to a petty *daroga* instead of a judge with a large income or a professor or an affluent doctor. Certain calculations are unavoidable in marriage and from this view-point few people feel let down. Once a Head Daroga came to see her about matrimonial negotiation. Of course he could not be blamed for not liking her snub nose. It was not at all unfair on his part to reject her in favour of

a woman with a sharp nose, since he had to work his way up to be a Head Daroga. Yet she could not make out why her adolescent dream should be treated as absurd.

Her agony, her despair welled up in her heart. Heramba was the man she knew so well—one of her own people. She did not know the junior Daroga, yet he became her husband. How could Heramba be expected to conform to this absurd convention of match-making? 'What an unfair custom! It is as if there was nothing called love. Isn't there any room in our society for love?' Supriya thought to herself.

She was in the habit of thinking so much about the whole matter that she had fainting fits two or three times a year.

Supriya had a sepoy to cook rice and *dal*, she liked to cook fish curry, vegetable dishes, *chhana* with gravy. She loved household work so much that as soon as she sat down to slice potatoes for fish curry she overcame her depression. She also planned to get two chickens in the evening from the village.

In the middle of her cooking she suddenly went to Heramba and said in a tone of reproach, 'Anyone would love to come and have a chat with me in the kitchen—oh dear, you're falling asleep.'

'Yes, I'm feeling awfully sleepy, Supriya. I didn't have a wink of sleep last night.'

Supriya said, 'But I won't allow you to sleep at this time of morning. I'm sending another cup of tea for you, that will refresh you, I'm sure; you'll have the whole afternoon to get enough sleep.'

Supriya could not decide whether she would like to have a chat with Heramba in the afternoon or cook a special dish or two for him. Heramba's need for sleep, however, resolved her dilemma.

She thought to herself, 'It is not possible to do the cooking without attending to him. He is such a good eater. Perhaps it is better that I will be able to finish the cooking hurriedly while he sleeps. After that I'll have a wash. And then we'll have so much to talk about.'

But she was not sure what kind of talk she would have with Heramba who was so serious by nature. She went to make tea for Heramba and then changed her mind.

'Would you care for a little brandy? It will raise your spirits.'

Heramba thought that she was joking, so he said irritably, 'Brandy? How can you get it?'

'I've got it, you know. My husband takes it?'

Heramba was surprised.

'Does Ashok drink?'

Supriya gave a laugh.

'Do you think he drinks to get intoxicated? He takes it as a medicine, because he is not in good health. I've also taken a few sips from time to time. It feels so good! Makes my body so light. One day—please don't be cross with me—I had a drop too much, I felt so intoxicated that I had almost a black-out.'

'You're exaggerating as usual.'

'Don't you believe it? If you were in my place you would have realized.'

Supriya looked at the bunch of keys in her hand and then picked the right one.

'Please tell me, shall I bring tea or brandy for you? There are two bottles of brandy in the almirah. What colour! you'll smack your lips at the sight of it.'

Supriya could talk lightly about her husband's drinking habits, since she knew he never drank to be intoxicated. But she felt nervous looking at Heramba.

'Are you angry with me?'

Heramba's eyes, red after a sleepless night, did not send a favourable signal. With the gravity of a stern school master he said harshly, 'No.'

Supriya felt so helpless, so vulnerable at this.

'What is the matter with you? You must tell me. Is it because I drank brandy? Believe me, I took just a little for the fun of it.'

Heramba said, 'Don't talk like a child at your age.'

Supriya took a step towards Heramba and then gripped his hand firmly.

'No, I didn't talk like a child. It was you who didn't allow me to grow up. I've had enough of it. Look at me. I've been married six years. I'm not a small girl, so I've every right to know why you're angry with me.'

Heramba did not look into her eyes. Sitting in the same way he said acidly, 'Why do you want to hear it? You wouldn't understand. You're just crazy. I don't understand why you're so determined to ruin yourself little by little? You might just as well give Ashok sleeping pills at night and set fire to your house.'

Supriya seemed to be standing there for what looked like a long time, silent and puzzled. As words failed her, she burst into tears, and went back to the kitchen. She had a suspicion that Heramba had come here after so many years only to torture her mentally. His arrival at such a short notice looked like an intrigue. He would first try to know her present mental condition, then he would slowly make an assault on her long cherished dreams and hopes. That was certainly his intention of coming here. He would always keep her under his control. He wanted her roots to be enclosed in a narrow space and all her unnecessary branches to be pruned off. Not a single branch would be left intact, not even two unwanted flowers on it.

Once he succeeded in talking her into marrying a junior Daroga. He had come now to make her feel that she was nothing but the typical wife of a junior Daroga. Supriya could no longer concentrate on her work. She threw large peices of potatoes meant for *alurdoma* into the fish curry and then stirred it with a *khunti*. She could not remember whether she had added salt to it, so she tried to taste a drop of curry falling from the *Khunti* she held over her tongue. But she could feel only the heat, not the saltiness of the curry. She called out, 'Pare, come and see if I have mixed salt,' and instantly got angry with herself when she remembered that the bloke would not eat anything cooked by her, let alone fish curry.

He said in Hindi, 'Please go and leave it to me.'

She was afraid she would not be able to finish her cooking in time.

She turned over all the comments made by Heramba. She just could not make out why she should be held responsible for Ashok's use of alcohol as a medicine. How could she help it if Ashok's medicinal dose would become

an addiction? She could of course raise hell about it. She could even beg him on her knees to stop drinking. But the man whose sole qualification for being her husband was a prestigious job would not give a damn what she said. What right did she have to make people listen to her? Ashok would just shrug off any warning made by her that he might become an addict.

‘Are you off your head? Do you think I’m so feeble-minded? May be I won’t need it at all after I’ve finished these two bottles.’

Ashok would also add, ‘You must be thinking of the money spent on it. It is certainly better to go for postal savings, I admit. But you surely know why I buy such an expensive thing.’

It would be pointless to protest after this. How could she question her husband’s mental strength? Or would it be better to pester him not to bother about his health? Heramba had no idea how horrible he looked when he gave one a tongue-lashing.

Supriya felt awfully hot and sweaty from the heat of the earthen oven. The sun was beating down mercilessly on the courtyard. As she came near the door for a breath of cool air she noticed that Heramba was standing on the veranda opposite her. The fierce sun on the courtyard separating them suddenly seemed very meaningful to Supriya.

Heramba shouted from the veranda, ‘You can do without cooking today, can’t you? It is beastly hot today. Why not ask Pare to do the cooking? Let him do whatever he can. Don’t bother.’

Supriya kept silent. She was standing still, wiping her face with her *anchal*.

Heramba said, ‘But you haven’t given me tea.’

‘You shouldn’t have so many cups of tea in this heat.’

‘Then give me a glass of water, please.’

Supriya’s instinct for hospitality was suddenly roused by Heramba’s thirsty look.

‘Would you like to have lemon sherbet?’

Heramba showed his eagerness, ‘Of course, I’d love to.’

As Heramba took the glass of sherbet from Supriya's hand he noticed that she was dripping with sweat and looking flustered and depressed.

Heramba thought to himself, 'Men have really made a blunder by looking after the welfare of women. That is the reason why women remain so immature. Of course some of them become quite precocious at an early age, but most of them never outgrow their childhood. They will be quite happy digging a pond on the sandy shore of the sea of life, but they will never care for the sea. They are inclined to think that the water inside a green coconut is enough to quench the thirst for life of all men. They will never know the true nature of this thirst.'

After drinking sherbet Heramba said, 'You had a fit yesterday, so why did you bother to do the cooking today?'

'Don't forget I've a guest. I must give him something to eat.'

'Curd and *chira* would be all right for him, let me tell you.'

'It would be better if the guest in this case shows less consideration for the hostess.'

Supriya's face began to brighten. She tried to persuade herself that even if Heramba, who was so whimsical by nature, wanted to do something odd, she would not be upset. She was now ready to accept him as he was, whatever his motive for coming here. She would not give a thought to her own feelings if he bullied her as an elder brother. She would accept it all rather calmly. If he hurt her like a misguided well-wisher, she would accept her suffering in silence. If he wanted her to be tearful she would at once fulfil his expectation with a flood of tears. If he wanted her to be totally immersed in an ugly, uninspiring soul-destroying world of dull domesticity, he would be taken aback to see her brilliant performance as a seasoned housewife.

A pleasant feeling of drowsiness that enveloped Heramba in the morning gradually gave way to an oppressive sulkiness because of Supriya's secret row. Suddenly Supriya had hidden herself behind a veil of mystery. Her sudden change of manners—her strangely cheerful mood appeared to Heramba like Debjani's curse on

Kach when he came to take leave. Which was as ignoble as the revenge of a very weak personality. It seemed that the woman who was as cool as the water of a well had suddenly frozen. The icy solidity within her increased at a gesture of tenderness; at the same time it would dissolve instantly in the heat of a few harsh words.

It was twelve when Supriya finished her cooking. There were dark shadows under her eyes caused by the convulsions she had suffered. Her eyes looked brighter now within these black circles. Her face had lost its glow after she had done the cooking for such a long time on burning firewood. He felt sorry for her as she came to ask him whether he would like to have a bath again. Heramba knew quite well why women were so mad about cooking endlessly. He had seen so many women who really derived great pleasure from cooking night and day till they were ready to drop dead.

But Supriya was basically different from these women who lacked the power of thinking. That was why he had no patience with Supriya's obsession with cooking.

From the veranda could be seen the fields stretching far away beyond the walls of the courtyard. The terrible heat of the fields had a burning effect on one's eyes.

Heramba said, 'You want me to refresh myself with frequent baths, but look, you're going to dissolve in the heat.'

Supriya laughed as usual, 'Really? Do you think I'm made of butter?'

Heramba said in a grave tone of voice, 'Don't laugh. I know what you mean. Yet let me tell you nothing is more important than health. Ill health makes one introspective, encourages all sorts of morbid thoughts. It even makes you feel that life is meaningless. You don't probably know that love and indigestion have the same symptoms.'

Supriya stood there hearing abstractedly Heramba's lecture on health but did not show any sign of approval. Heramba woke up from his long afternoon sleep and saw Supriya going through the last stage of plaiting her hair in front of a mirror. She must have wished that Heramba would wake up and watch her at her toilet. He was

surprised to think of it.

'Herambababu. I was almost in tears combing my tangled hair. I'm lucky you didn't see it. If you had seen me grimacing the way I did you'd have felt awfully disgusted.'

Joining his hands behind his head, Heramba said, wryly, 'You could wake me up earlier, Supriya, I quite enjoy the sight of you women grimacing while struggling to smooth your tangled hair.'

'I know, you've always such strange ideas.'

Completing the plaiting, Supriya examined herself in the mirror like an inspector, indicating that her toilet was over.

She said, 'Let's go and have our tea out there. It's rather cool now. There's a gentle breeze blowing.'

'It is rather cold at night here, isn't it?'

Supriya shook her head, laughing. 'It is less hot at night, but it is not really cold. But there's always a strong wind blowing. Look at those casuarina trees over there. They make hissing sounds all night.'

Looking at the trees, Heramba was enthralled.

'Supriya, let's go and take a stroll near those trees.'

'Are you serious?' Supriya was thrilled, 'Get ready, quick, I'll make tea. Hurry up.'

Heramba was still lying down quietly. Enjoying this pleasant indolence he said with half-open eyes, 'But I can't feel like going out.'

Supriya was offended.

'But you said you'd like to go!'

'Yes, I said that. But then I thought it would be better to spend the time looking at the casuarina trees from a distance.'

'Let's go somewhere else, then. Let's have a walk across the field. You must go, I say. Keep your word. I'll count up to ten. If you don't get up I'll drag you out of the bed.'

It was not on the spur of the moment that Supriya threatened to do so, she secretly wished that Heramba would give her a chance, too—just a pretext for a little attention from Heramba. But Heramba was not attentive enough to grasp what Supriya really meant. Before Supriya could finish her speech, he sat up on the bed.

Supriya had to hold back her tears with a great effort. She was aware that in her present condition her feelings would be hurt at every step. She was deeply hurt to think that Heramba had his doubts about the propriety of walking with her in the lonely undulating field in this twilight. Maybe he did not care for propriety, he really wanted to go out with her, but then thought better of it. Nevertheless, the very thought that Heramba had feelings to conceal was a comfort to her. But when she again recalled how Heramba showed indifference to her threat to pull him out of the bed she felt insulted and neglected. She seemed to feel that Heramba no longer cared for her. Whatever Heramba did for her now was only due to a sense of duty, an urge for practical help.

At last Heramba took her for a stroll, but she could not enjoy it. She dreamt of so many things while she was in the kitchen braving the heat of summer and the smoke of the earthen oven. She expected that he would not help laying bare his heart, overcoming his inner resistance and the fatigue of his journey. He would certainly say so many things unwittingly, he would be inconsistent in his speech and conduct, and then he would stare absent-mindedly at her. It would be great fun for manipulating his own words, pointing out his errors and reading his mind through his glances.

Supriya again thought to herself, 'I'm quite grown up now. I've come round to the view after thinking deeply last five years that only one thing mattered for me in this world—to declare my love openly—'

Supriya thought about it throughout the afternoon, 'I don't think I've such physical beauty that one would adore me only for my looks, I must feel less shy in order to make him less whimsical. What does he care, really? He would go away with the proud feeling that he had made a great sacrifice for me. And then I'm done for. What use is poetic fancy for me? I haven't known what happiness is even for a single day. Nothing attracts me, nothing! What shall I do with my life when he would leave me tomorrow for ever? How can he understand the agony of my waiting for

him. Oh, I'm so sick of family life. I don't care for good or evil. I don't care what is good for me. If somebody's absence means so much agony for me what in the world is good for me? Five years is enough to show that this life of mine doesn't suit me. I've moved my limbs to do this or that like a doll, but I know what I've gone through. I know how many times I've just wanted to throw myself on the ground and cry my heart out. That's enough, I can't bear it any longer.'

Supriya stared at the *rasagullas* almost hidden beneath the foaming syrup of sugar in the cooking pots and thought again, 'I must go with him. I won't let him go without me. I'll say, take me not for your sake, but for my sake. If he says 'no' I'll take poison and I'll make it very clear for the first time in my life.'

Supriya was speechless as she remembered her vow and walked with Heramba on the dry grass of the field as the evening fell silently.

'Why should I elope with this man who is now so lifeless, so absent-minded? He has forgotten everything. He doesn't care for my body or my heart. Sheer domesticity has snatched me from him. He wouldn't like me to return. Oh God! How baffling all these things are!' Supriya reflected as she walked on with Heramba. As she reached a mound looking like an immobile wave of earth, she said, 'Let's sit down here for a bit.' They sat facing the blinking lights of the Police Station.

Supriya asked, 'Will it hurt you if I ask something about your wife?'

'No', he said in a tone of savage cruelty.

'Why did your wife hang herself?'

'I don't know!'

Darkness deepened all around. Only a few dots of light were seen moving in the direction of the Rupaikura village. Twice in the year one could see here shooting stars,—in winter and now in summer. Most of the stars had not come out yet. Supriya suddenly caught sight of a star falling behind the Police Station.

Turning over the brief comment of Heramba in her

mind, Supriya said, 'When I first came to know from my elder brother's letter that your wife had killed herself by hanging, I just couldn't believe it. It is just impossible to think that your wife, of all persons, would do this.'

'That is a natural thing to do for the wife of a man like me. I know I'm the most heartless person in the world. You're still so immature—'

'You're at it again!'

Heramba gave a chuckle.

'You women feel offended when we call you immature. But you always pretend to be young. you women—'

'Herambababu, none of your old stale jokes.'

'I'm not surprised, Supriya.'

Heramba remained dumb. Supriya waited a few minutes, and then said, 'Come on, tell me please.'

Heramba said, 'I'm the most heartless man in the world. What more can I say? Uma would have gone out of her mind if she could not hang herself. As a matter of fact, she was a bit psychic, that is why she did it.'

Holding her breath Supriya asked, 'Why? Did she hear about me?'

'No, I haven't told her anything about you, you see.'

'Why, then, did she do it? I have heard about her, Herambababu. My elder brother wrote to me that she was a very quiet sort of woman. Why should she kill herself like that?'

'Your brother seems to know everything.'

'You're a strange man, indeed.' Supriya groped for words. She always felt like this in the presence of Heramba. His presence made her feel that she had no use for words to convey her feelings. It was as if Heramba could hear her thoughts. Supriya had not yet been able to get over this illusion experienced by girls falling in love for the first time. She remained silent, her mind tormented by thousand and one questions. She had all along believed that Uma killed herself because of her, as she just could not bear the painful thought that her husband loved somebody else so passionately. She chose to disappear from her husband's life because her husband had

chosen to disappear from her life by loving another woman. Supriya was highly perturbed when Heramba implied that her assumptions were all wrong. Uma's suicide was a proof of Heramba's love for Supriya. Death—an indisputable, unchangeable evidence! As soon as this evidence was shattered, Supriya was overwhelmed with suspicion and self-pity. It seemed that after the long day's unsuccessful effort Heramba at last had succeeded in destroying her last refuge and throwing her into the deepest pit of despair. Her life seemed empty. The story of her life had only two chapters—one day's blunder and its painful recognition for the rest of her life. She foolishly thought that her life would be as grand as an epic, now it was clear that her life was not even an ordinary poem.

Coming back to the Police Station they saw that Ashok was taking rest after his bath.

Heramba asked, 'When did you come back, Ashok?'

'Just after you had both gone out.'

Supriya said reproachfully, 'Why didn't you send for us? We were walking in the field over there. You can see it from here.'

Ashok laughed and said, 'Why should I disturb you? Just to tell you I'm back home? I thought it would be better to have a bath and then take rest. My limbs, you know, are aching.'

'Oh, dear. That is quite natural. You spent the whole day riding. You haven't eaten anything, I'm sure. You wouldn't have a bite until I serve for you.'

Ashok replied apologetically, 'I've had my meal. I was awfully hungry.'

Heramba observed that Supriya's face darkened and then regained its natural brightness. It was quite clear to him that Supriya had been quite successful in making her husband dependent on her in everything except his job. If it was a crime for a man to have his meal without waiting for his wife, it could be safely assumed that the husband enjoyed the privilege of a child. Heramba wondered how Ashok managed to spend his day always trying to humour his wife.

Supriya asked, 'What did you eat?'

'I took a little bit of everything you had cooked for me.'

'I know quite well how much you've eaten,' said Supriya.

Then she began to cross-examine him. 'Did you take sandesh? Oh, you did! Don't you know sandesh gives you acidity? Have you taken *rosogullas*? Why one? you could have taken a few more. Today its preparation is not good. Have you taken *malpo*? Why? It doesn't agree with you. That is the reason why I always serve for you. you just can't resist eating all the rotten stuff, and then you ask for soda water. Haven't you eaten *sarbhaja*?'

Heramba asked Ashok, 'Ashok, is it true that you are not well? Do you drink brandy to improve your health?'

Ashok says with a start, 'Oh, no, I don't drink. Who said that?'

Heramba said, 'No one. I just wanted to know.'

Supriya said, 'You ought to know better than to ask this question.' But Heramba evaded this question by changing the subject.

'I have heard that you went out to arrest a murderer. Where did the murder take place?'

Ashok's answer was brief, 'At Barkapashi.'

'Have you arrested him?'

'Yes, the bugger has given us no end of trouble. We had such a trying time chasing him from one village to another. At last he was cornered in a bush, and then he surrendered.' Ashok related it with great enthusiasm. After all everyone would be quite enthusiastic talking about his professional experience.

'He raised his chopper to kill me. It would have been quite a bloody affair if the *jamadar* had not grabbed him from behind. The bugger had such physical strength.'

Heramba looked straight into Supriya's eyes and then asked, 'Whom did he kill?'

'His wife, as happens in such cases. The husband comes at an expected moment, the lover takes to his heels, and the wife gets killed. That bugger was not really satisfied slitting open the throat of his wife. He hacked her whole body.'

Supriya shuddered, 'Oh, God!'

Heramba felt uneasy to notice that Supriya did not react like this when she heard about the murderer's attempt to kill her husband with a chopper.

'Is he going to be hanged?'

'No', said Ashok, 'There was enough provocation.'

Supriya said with irritation in her voice, 'Stop it, please. I don't like it—murder, injury, hanging—can't you talk about something else?'

Heramba laughed, 'You are the wife of a Daroga, Supriya. You can't say you have no stomach for murder and all that.'

'You sound as if I have committed a crime by marrying a Daroga. But, look, I am not a Daroga myself.'

'Who knows what crime you've committed! I can't tell you. Ask Ashok. I thought you'd find it rather hard to love Ashok if you have no stomach for murders and such like crimes. I just asked you to develop an interest in certain violent things. Supriya, why are you standing? Do you always keep standing like that before Ashok? This is not fair. After such a long walk your legs must be aching. Ashok, please give her permission to sit down. Come on, Supriya make yourself comfortable. I'll tell you a story.'

'No', thank you!'

'Please, Supriya. Ashok, why don't you tell Supriya to hear my story?'

'No, no, I won't. Do you think I'm a little girl?'

Heramba took out a cigar and said, 'Give me a match, Supriya.'

Ashok was visibly puzzled, 'God!

'I see you're really quarrelling' said he, as if he had just woken up from sleep. Heramba said with a smile, 'I was pulling her leg. When she was a little girl she used to pester me to tell her a story. Where are you off to, Supriya?'

'To prepare the dinner.'

Heramba said, 'She is offended!'

Ashok said, 'Yes, She can't take a joke' and then added hesitantly, 'She lacks a sense of humour.'

'Does she?' asked Heramba.

'You would't believe how much I'm scared of her.'

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'Who is not scared of her, Ashok? You won't find another woman who is more headstrong. What she starts doing she must finish at any cost. It would be easier to kill her than to break her will.'

'Right. I thought as much.'

Heramba was rather nervous, 'What do you mean?'

'I should tell you. I couldn't bring her here even after one year of our marrige. Last time I went to bring her, her uncle said bitterly, 'If you don't go with him, I won't allow you to stay in my house any longer.'

Of course, it was also very bad of me to lose my temper. However, since she came here she hasn't visited her uncle for last five years. She used to say, 'I told my uncle I wouldn't see them again, so don't ask me to go.'

I knew that she was not willing to come here. So 'I persuaded her. But I did not know that she came here with the determination not to visit her uncle.'

'She is a baby, you know. Nobody took seriously what she said in the heat of the moment. But she never let anyone know her secret vow that she would never go to visit her uncle. He still writes to me remorseful letters. She weeps over them but has not changed her mind.'

Heramba keeps silent for a while. He remarked, 'I thought it was you who didn't like her to visit her uncle.'

Ashok gave a sad smile. 'Not only you, everybody thought like that reading all the letters she made me write to her uncle. Keep it to yourself. Uncle would be shocked to hear it, and she would give me hell if she knows I've told you about it. She can easily threaten me saying, 'I'm going to my uncle's and I'm not coming back.'

Heramba was deeply worried, but he tried to hide it from Ashok. Considering everything he began to realize that it would have been better for him not to come here. He thought to himself, 'Supriya is too experienced to learn anything new. She has developed herself on her own, without caring to consult anyone. Who can change her at this stage?'

Supriya came back after sometime, holding a bottle of brandy in one hand and a glass in another.

'It is time for you to take your medicine. You forgot to take it in the morning, so let me give you a larger dose now.'

Ashok could not answer. Glancing at the bottle of brandy and then at Heramba's face, he wondered what Supriya was up to.

Heramba gave a faint smile. He was not in the least surprised. He would have been surprised if Supriya did not show her womanhood with such a trick. This subversive gesture only showed that she was still alive.

'Supriya, please give me a little brandy.'

'Oh, really? Don't forget that you may feel tipsy after taking it. Are you sure you won't be addicted to it after this?'

Heramba was still smiling.

'What does it matter, Supriya? I haven't a wife like you to get brandy for me.'

Supriya could not help hating Heramba for the moment. Her face was flushed with anger.

'I know you have no wife. She has hanged herself.'

Heramba remembered that Supriya lost her self control in this manner only once in the past. He would not mind if she behaved like this again and again in the future. But now he could only suppress a wish to give her a slap on the cheek.

Ashok was shocked, 'Why are you saying all this?'

But Supriya remained silent. She silently poured brandy into a glass for Ashok and then walked out of the room.

When they sat down for dinner at night, sepoys came back with the murderer. Heramba showed restraint in his conduct. Supriya looked pale. The sky was overcast; the world seemed gasping for air. Heramba said, 'May I talk to the murderer, Ashok? I feel tempted.'

Ashok said, 'Why not?'

Supriya said with an effort, 'There is no hurry for that. The murderer won't escape.'

Heramba laughed, 'I know he won't. He is tied with a rope, isn't he, Ashok?'

'Oh, sure.'

Supriya was surprised. She tried hard to grasp what Heramba suggested, and then she suddenly felt that

Heramba was merely trying to conceal his nervousness with smart talk. What he said did not make any sense.

After dinner they went on to the outer veranda. There was a sooty lantern burning dimly. The killer was sitting, his dust-covered figure reclining against one of the columns. His body bore many marks of his determination not to surrender to the police without a fight. A constable was squatting holding the rope tied round the waist of the culprit. As he saw Ashok and Heramba coming, he sprang to his feet.

Heramba asked, 'What's your name, eh?'

'Birsha'

He used to roam the jungle like a wild animal. But he was not really a wild animal, he was only a human being. After his brief reply, he only relapsed into a stupor.

The constable said, 'He wants a wash, sir.'

'Give him just a bucket of water.'

Heramba had something on his mind.

'Why did you do this, Birsha? You might as well have kicked out your wife.'

Birsha did not speak. At the mention of his wife he merely looked with his bloodshot eyes at Heramba and then dozed off. Ashok said quietly, 'Why ask him all these things, Herambababu?'

Heramba gave a short nervous laugh.

'I just wanted to know if a man repents after killing an unfaithful wife.'

Ashok asked in a quieter tone of voice, 'And what do you think you've learnt?'

'Quite a lot, you see. I have always questioned the theory that when a husband kills his wife out of jealousy it only proves his boundless love for his wife. I'm convinced that my doubt about it is not baseless. Did you notice, Ashok, how the fellow was looking at me? He is almost frightened to death to think of the price he must pay for killing his wife. This is not a sign of real love. He is just a murderer. He is not a real lover. No, he didn't love his wife. The man who tortures, or neglects or kills his wife simply because she loves another man can't be said to love his wife. Don't you feel that there is no ebb and flow

of love? Love means patience and tolerance. It is a sustained flow of passion. You can't get rid of it, or control it. You can kill your wife if you like, but if one day you feel you shouldn't have done this, you must realize then that you didn't murder your wife for the sake of your love, you did it for a different reason. One who loves his wife knows how to wait. He thinks she is immature now, so she can dream of loving another man. Let her enjoy this dream. When she would grow up, I am sure to win her love. When she is in the prime of her youth, he thinks her youthfulness has made her blind, so she can see only the darkness of the past. Let her continue like this. When she will be past her youth, I shall show how much I love her. Well, Ashok, don't you think that it is a great folly to immortalize, by murdering your sweetheart, love for another man? It is nothing but idiotic to make permanent by torture this extra-marital love or infatuation? Doesn't it prove that you haven't loved your wife? To let the wife live and be happy—'

Standing in the doorway Supriya heard everything. Just at this point in Heramba's speech she fainted. They both rushed out at the sound of her fall and found her lying face down with her hands locked under her bosom.

Ashok roared, 'You idiot! Why on earth did you say all this when you knew she would be around?'

At dead of night Supriya came into Heramba's room.

'Are you awake?'

'Yes, Supriya.'

'I'm not going to sit on the bed. But I am feeling so weak I can't even stand.'

'Why did you get out of bed then?'

'You'll leave in the morning, so I thought I'd tell you something. I can't keep standing, Herambababu.'

Heramba remained silent.

'I've a feeling that I'm going to faint again. It will wake up the whole house. Please tell me something, anything you like.'

'You were always such a sweet girl, Supriya. Since when have you been behaving so defiantly?'

Heramba could see Supriya even in the darkness. For

her figure stood there like a thicker mass of darkness.

'I really can't stand like this.'

Heramba was still silent.

'Why don't you ask me to sit on the bed?'

Heramba did not break the silence.

Supriya waited for a few minutes, and then said, 'Now it is clear to me why your wife hanged herself. You enjoy ruining women, but when it comes to accepting responsibility you simply take to your heels. You are not inviting me to bed, because you don't want me to go with you in the morning.'

Heramba said, 'Look, Supriya, you aren't well. Besides, you're so tensed up for many reasons. You're after all a patient. Can I give you whatever you ask for? Is it fair to offer a patient anything he wants to eat? Do you remember you didn't give Ashok fish curry because it was too hot? Get some sleep. We'll meet within six months. Then we'll decide what to do.'

'Another six months?'

'Six months will pass very quickly.'

'Suppose we don't meet. Suppose I die?'

So Supriya would not like to die leaving behind a Heramba who would gradually lose his zest for life without her. The old apprehension that his life with Supriya would make him unhappy began to recede. Heramba began to feel that a new Supriya had emerged from behind a curtain of self-imposed restraint, reserve and alertness. Supriya possibly had enriched herself in a way that was incomparable. Yet Heramba's courage failed him in the end. What is more difficult in the world than to sacrifice one's true self? Heramba failed to summon up the courage he needed for such a great benevolence. He said, 'Supriya, why should you die? You must live like a good girl.'

After Supriya had left the room, Heramba got out of the bed, opened the front door and went out.

The sky was overcast. There were flashes of lightning. Heramba began to walk very slowly on the field filled with withered grass. If the rain fell to-night, the dry, and discoloured grass might have a chance to have a new life tomorrow.

Part II

Poetry of the Night

My love, dear friend, flutters in a cage,
There is a mud wall in between light and me,
My night is the shadow cast by an unreal world.
The vapour that longs for the sky,
The lifeless face that looks like the sands of Sahara
Speaks of the disgrace of a dead *Saki*.

Quiet is the night in the sphere of the galaxies,
But the night imprisoned within me is restive,
This sky, so cramped, has no space for me.
One who does not find liberation in death
Finds it in love. This new physical form
Is no liberation, probably its intimation.

Heramba said, 'I couldn't imagine that I should meet you here on the sea-beach after so many years. D'you remember I last met you twelve years ago at Madhupur?'

Anath replied, 'Yes.'

'If I hadn't met you then I couldn't have recognised you today. I was not more than twelve years old when you suddenly stopped giving tuition at Stayababu's house. Since then twenty years or so have passed. You had such good looks. Who can forget it? Yet I could have passed by without recognising you if I had not met you sometime ago.'

Anath smiled weakly.

'Heramba, I would not mind if you had cut me dead in the street.'

'I am not like others, sir. How is Satyababu's daughter?'

'Quite well.'

Heramba was rather curious and said, 'Let's go and see her.'

Anath said with a little hesitation, 'You won't be glad to see her.'

'Why?'

'Malati has rather changed, you know.'

Anath again smiled weakly.

Heramba said, 'Well, that's quite natural. She has a right to change after so many years. You probably don't know how much I speculated about you and Satyababu's daughter. I always thought you were both as mysterious as the characters of a fairy tale.'

Anath said, 'That is not unnatural. Young boys are as a rule very sensitive about such things. What they overhear elderly people say and what they cannot follow sets them imagining all sorts of things. But it has a certain impact on their life. By the way, didn't you ever hate us?'

'No. I couldn't judge you like others. I was excited like a boy when I met you both at Madhupur. Probably I was very eager to know you since my childhood. I can't say I've got over it. Of all the people who have influenced me you are still the most important.'

Anath said with a sigh, 'Oh God! If only we could keep in mind that man doesn't live alone. Heramba, must you see Malati?'

Heramba said in an offended tone, 'Why do you object?'

Anath put his hand on Heramba's shoulder and said, 'Just a kind of weakness, Heramba, mental weakness, you may say. Let's go.'

Going past the white building on the fringe of the town, Heramba felt that he had come to the end of the town. His nerves were numbed by the continuous meaningless roar of the sea. Heramba suddenly felt quite carefree. Anath was walking along absentmindedly, lost in thought. Heramba did not get any answer to the questions he put to him. The day was drawing to an end. On both sides of the road cowherds were herding the cows in the open fields for return journey. The road ran straight ahead.

Going further Heramba saw the garden encircled by a broken wall. Anath stopped in front of it and said, 'This is my house.'

Heramba could not see the house. He could see only a temple hidden behind trees towards the end of the garden.

It was not possible to guess from the outside whether roses and *gandharjas* bloomed in such a garden. It looked like a garden full of trees which had flowers without smell, and fruits which were eaten by people. The trees cast long shadows across the garden and an unnatural silence reigned in it. Anath entered the garden opening a broken wooden gate. As Heramba followed him into the garden he sensed that this might be a real change for him.

It was a wonder that an authentic peaceful atmosphere reigned undisturbed in this little space bound by a broken wall when the world outside was full of noises made by men.

They walked up the zigzag narrow path through the curtain of the trees and stopped.

There was an open space and from here one could see the temple. A little way in the south of the temple was an old brick-built house. Both the temple and the house had damp walls. The door of the temple was shut. A plump woman clad in *garod* sari was sitting on the cracked cemented floor in front of the door. She was nearly past her youth, but her complexion was exceedingly fair. Her appearance was splendid, though grave.

'Who have you brought along, eh? Is it a guest?'

She had a low husky voice. Heramba was rather moved.

Anath said, 'Do you recognise him, Malati? He lived next door to you in Calcutta. His name is Heramba. You also saw him once in Madhupur.'

Malati said, 'Yes, now I can place him. But what made you bring him in here? Never mind, sit down, my boy. Oh, you can sit down on the steps. You know the steps of a temple are always sacred. Don't think your clothes will be spoiled. They are scrubbed every morning and evening. You ... you must have been to the sea for a bathe? Can't you stop going there, just for one day? You should have at least told me about it.'

Anath said, 'I went right away after the puja. I just forgot to tell you.'

Malati said, 'Good. I've at last got a reply from you. But you haven't brought from the town what I told you repeatedly yesterday.'

Anath said, 'I have told you already I won't bring you that stuff.'

Malati said angrily, 'Why, may I know? As if you cared for me.'

'If you want to go to hell, that is your choice. I can't help you.'

'Thanks for all that. But may I know who tempted me to sink so low? And now you're insulting me in presence of an outsider.'

Malati suddenly gave a laugh, 'Let me tell you I've so many people to bring the thing for me. Well, where are you going?'

'To take a bath,' with this brief reply Anath went into his house.

Heramba asked, 'What do you want to bring from the town?'

'Oh, a medicine for me,' said Malati and then she became thoughtful. Her grave look did not surprise Heramba. He could see that neither Malati's loud laugh nor her sullenness was natural or perpetual. They could alternate any moment. Malati smiled as if to prove this. 'Did you notice it? He brought you here and then he left you for his bath. What a nuisance! Do you see? But you've grown much older.'

'Quite natural. I'm now thirty two.'

'I see. It seems ages since I left home. Oh, let me remember. Yes, twenty years. I was sixteen then, now I must be thirty six. This is my fate, I'm old now. Can you think of it?' She scanned Heramba from head to foot. 'But you look quite young and do not seem more than twenty seven or so. If only I could accept your offer of marriage without laughing it off, oh, I would have lived today with a young handsome husband.'

Heramba said laughing, 'Mastermoshai was so handsome then—'

'So you haven't forgotten.'

Malati was curious to know and asked, 'Are you sure he is the same man? I don't think I've lost my charm altogether. Aren't you impressed?'

'No. I remember how I suffered adoring your beauty in my boyhood days—'

'So you're now taking revenge telling this to my face? I see how dangerous you are. Have you married?'

'Yes, I married, but my wife is dead.'

'Any children?'

'I have a daughter, two years old. I say "I have a daughter" because I saw her fifteen days ago. If she is dead by now, I can't say I have a daughter.'

'Touchwood, why do you say so? What are you doing?'

'I teach at a college.'

'I hope you haven't left home and now are roaming about like a vagabond out of grief for your dead wife.'

'No, when I feel tired of teaching Shelley and Keats all the year, I go out during summer holidays for relief. I had been to Ranchi this year. I came here from Ranchi to accept my friend's invitation.'

'What's his name?'

'Shankar Sen, Deputy Inspector.'

'A good man. His wife is very religious minded. She has given out hundred rupees for the repair of the temple.'

Malati was saying all this in an abstracted manner. Suddenly she asked with great eagerness, 'How long will you be here?'

'Ten days or so. I'm not sure.'

'Oh, good.'

Heramba was inquisitive, 'What is good about it?' Malati laughed.

'Because I'm so glad to see you. What did you say you are teaching?'

Heramba said with a smile, 'I teach poetry. Some selected bad poems of very good English poets. Malati-baudi, life has no pleasures. Happiness.....'

Malati laughed at the sudden philosophical observation of Heramba. She cleared her throat and said, 'Happiness? Who cares? What would you do with it? Happiness is a dried fish. You can't enjoy it unless you have the taste of a poor ill-bred man. Happiness is not found all around. You must fill your space with love, with joy. How profitable it is! If you don't have wine you can have nectar.'

What do you want?"

Heramba stretched his hand towards Malati. 'Give me nectar then.'

'Why ask me?' Malati broke into a loud laughter. 'I'm no longer young, you see.'

'Then give me water. I feel thirsty.'

'All right, I can give you that,' Malati called out, 'Ananda, Ananda. Come out for a while.'

'Who is Ananda?' Heramba asked.

'She is my infinite joy! Don't you remember? You met her in Madhupur. You gave her so many kisses that she cried.'

'Oh, that little girl of yours. I forgot her completely.'

'Oh, how can you forget her? How strange you're, Heramba! Is it possible to forget my daughter?'

Heramba said, 'I can't remember little children. Malati-baudi, your daughter was then a little girl, to be sure.'

Malati admitted, 'Yes, she was a little girl. Otherwise you couldn't shower kisses on her till she cried. Besides if she wasn't a little girl then she would have become an old woman now.'

At that point Ananda came. Heramba became restless at the sight of Ananda. Ananda was not a heavenly beauty, nor an enchantress. It was a beauty to admire, not to excite a man.

Heramba's reaction now was different. He had not yet forgotten Malati, Satyababu's daughter—not this Malati. The memory of those days still carried with it the innocence and sentimentalism of a twelve year-old boy. Looking at Ananda, he felt that it was the same Malati who had been transformed and refined in the studio of the creator of the world and had acquired all her experience and quality from nature, from dumb animals, and birds, from the morning dew and the evening star. It was as if she had acquired all this only to present herself properly before Heramba. Just as the spring breeze gave the trees a new life driving away its leaves withered by winter, Ananda's appearance also stirred Heramba's spirits sagging under the weight of age and fatigue. He kept on

looking at Ananda and was overwhelmed. The twenty years that had passed seemed to have frozen in a few minutes now. Heramba abandoned himself to this upsurge of emotion and wished he had more of it. His imagination suppressed so far suddenly found a release. All his senses sprang to life with an intolerable excitement. All the plants around him suddenly came alive. The coloured rays of the setting sun struck him like a colourful life throbbing all around.

Ananda gazed intently at Heramba as she approached him from the door of the house. As she stood near him, Heramba looked up into her eyes. Curiosity turned to fear in Ananda's eyes. Heramba noticed it and realized that this fear was not a sign of nervousness, but a hint of passion. The question that Ananda's eyes were asking was silenced by Heramba's speechless passive gaze.

Heramba experienced something he had not known since he left Supriya. He began to think highly of himself. Not an ordinary conventional man, he had known all the complexities of life. Suffering all sorts of guilt feelings, he had to justify himself quite frequently. He had experienced so many twists and turns of fate that he had a feeling that his head was swimming. It was now a hard job for him to look for joy, ecstasy and exuberance. But the very fact that Ananda was charmed and visibly perturbed at the lingering gaze of Heramba sent him into a childlike fit of emotional effusion. He felt a lightness in his mind and body. His feelings amounted to a prayer that Ananda would cast a similar glance at his eyes before she would leave.

'Why did you call me, Ma?' asked Ananda very softly.

'Give him a glass of water.'

As Ananda went away to fetch water Heramba felt listless like a sick man. Many years ago he had a surgical operation and now the same feelings of being chloroformed came back to him.

Malati asked in a low voice, 'How did you like my Ananda?'

'Quite good, Malati-baudi.'

'She was born, eighteen years ago, Heramba. I had two unforgettable moments in my life. The first one was when

your tutor came to coach my elder brother and I kept looking at him through the window of the inner room standing alone in the darkness. The second one was when Ananda was born. Have you any idea of labour pain?’

Heramba answered confidently, ‘Yes, I know.’

‘Are you crazy? How should you know?’

‘I used to write poetry, Malati-baudi.’

‘Do you think writing poetry and having labour-pain are the same thing? Only a crazy man can say that. If that was the case, then there wouldn’t have been any difference between God and you. We give birth to God’s poetry, and your poetry compared with it is nothing but trivial fun. Never mind, I forgot all my pains at the sight of my baby.’

‘All mothers have a similar reaction, Malati-baudi.’

As Ananda came back, Heramba took the glass of water and said, ‘Sit down, Ananda.’

Ananda looked at Malati for permission.

Malati said, ‘Don’t hesitate, darling. I have known him for a long time. Do you know which family he comes from? When he was twelve years old he was mad about me and wanted to marry me. Oh, how much pain I had to take to divert his attention with all sorts of sweets and candies. Why are you laughing? It’s no laughing matter. Do you know, he has now come to kill your father after twenty years’ search for him.’

Ananda replied, ‘Don’t talk nonsense. you have already...’

‘What do you mean? Please explain.’

‘Nothing Mother, stop it.’

Malati would not be stopped.

‘You want to know, don’t you, whether I’m on the booze? No, I’m not. I need it for my meditation. I don’t care for it at other times.’

Heramba was inquisitive. ‘Are you talking of alcohol. Malati-baudi?’

‘It is not called alcohol, it is *karan*. You drink only a little of it for religious ritual.’

Ananda quipped, ‘Oh, yes, drinking is certainly a religious rite.’

Malati frowned, 'Don't you think so? Ask your father when he comes.'

Malati looked at Heramba, 'My Baba gave me the permission to have a few drinks. First I became a *vaishnab*, but the path of Bhakti did not suit me, so I have now started something highly exciting. Baba says—'

'Who is this Baba?'

'My Gurudev! Srimat Swami Mashalbaba. Haven't you heard his name? He worships and meditates day and night with burning torches.' Malati put her folded arms on her forehead.

Ananda said, 'If drinking *karan* is a religious practice then why did you rush at me when I wanted to have a few sips? From tomorrow I'll also have a bellyful of your religion.'

Heramba wondered why Ananda had said this. Was it because she just wanted to let him know that she did not drink *karan*?

Malati said, 'Well, you might as well try it.'

'First tell me why you drink it.'

'Because I'm old enough to practice such a religious function. You're a little girl. You have other things to do. When you would be our age you might as well do that, why now? Every age has its own demands. For example, you dance, but I don't.'

Ananda said with a grin, 'Well, why don't you? You used to dance so well? Even now sometimes you have such a wild dance when you drink your fill.'

'I haven't seen such a naughty girl as you, Ananda.' Heramba just could not figure out how Malati had changed so much. She had put on, her voice had become so harsh, her manners showed a shameless brusqueness. If Ananda was not present, Heramba could not find in Malati any sign of Satyababu's daughter and Heramba would have gone back home feeling more aged and more depressed. He quite understood why Malati didn't hesitate to recount the tale of how she left home at twenty. If the timid bride could within a few years of marriage order her husband in presence of others to go for shopping, it was hardly surprising

that Malati's elopement twenty years ago was only a trivial matter. But it was also undeniable that even after meeting Heramba she did not hesitate to reprimand Anath for not bringing her *karan*. She did not even hesitate to call alcohol *karan* in the name of religion while arguing with Ananda. What made Malati change like this? The legendary Anath of his boyhood days was still the same person, but what was the matter with Malati?

Ananda did not give him a second look. But Heramba just could not help stealing a glance at her from time to time. He had a suspicion that if Malati had long changed, it must have affected Ananda too. But the way Ananda talked and laughed and sat hiding much of her body behind Malati seemed to suggest that she had imbibed only what was best in Satyababu's daughter, she did not allow herself to adopt her mother's acquired habit of brusqueness. But Heramba could not forget that the circumstances which made Malati what she was now were unknown to Ananda.

Heramba began to feel annoyed with Malati. It was not easy to forgive her for not being motherly enough, when she had got such a daughter. Heramba could easily forgive Malati for what she had done; he could even pardon her if she committed murder under the spell of alcohol. But he would not forgive her if she had ruined her daughter.

Anath came back after some time. He had taken his bath. 'Where is my *asan* for meditation.?' Malati answered, 'I don't know. Well, You have taken your bath, why don't you do *arati* today? I feel rather tired today.'

Anath said, 'I must take my meal now. I can't wait till the evening for *arati*.

'You have invited a guest today and now you're sitting down for your lunch? Who is going to attend your guest, please tell me? How selfish of you! Can't you see the evening is not very far?'

Anath did not pay any heed to what Malati said. Now he asked, 'Who has misplaced my *asan*?'

'I don't know, Father.'

Anath said to Malati quietly, 'Where have you kept my

asan? Please get it for me, will you? You should remember that you should not meddle with my *asan*.'

Malati said, 'Why do you always behave like this? Please sit down and have a chat. Heramba has come after such a long time. He may feel hurt if you don't talk to him for a while.'

Heramba tried to protest, 'Well, I—'

But Malati interrupted, 'Don't meddle in our private affairs, my dear Heramba.'

Visibly embarrassed, Heramba was silent. Anath said with a sad smile, 'The very assumption of yours that I can offend Heramba is enough to insult him. Don't mind it, Heramba. She always speaks like this these days.'

Heramba said, 'Well, I don't mind it.'

Looking at Malati's face Heramba felt Anath should not have hurt her feelings in order to honour his guest.

Anath asked, 'Where's my *chadar*, Ananda?'

'It is on the clothes-stand in mother's room. Shall I get it?'

'No, I'm going there to get it. Heramba, don't think I have not treated you properly because I could not sit down for a chat with you. I'm feeling rather restless today. I can't have any peace of mind if I don't sit on my meditation seat.'

Heramba said, 'Never mind Mastermoshay, we'll have a nice chat some other day.'

Malati was sitting.

Now she asked, 'What do you want with your *chadar*?

Anath said, 'I shall use it as an *asan* on the floor. You've done the right thing hiding the *asan* I've used so many years. Using it for ten years I have been so attached to it. Thanks to your kindness, I've now got over my weakness for such an inanimate object.'

Malati said with a sigh, 'Ananda, will you go and get the *asan* from under my bedsheets?'

Anath said, 'No, I don't need it. I am not going to sit on that.'

Red with anger Malati said, 'You're not a human being, do you know that? You're a thing. You're so mean.'

'Don't be angry, Malati. Don't.'

'Wonderful! You live off me and now you're sermonizing.'

Anath said in a low voice, 'To lose one's temper is a crime, dear,' and went into the house.

Malati remained lost in thought for a while and then laughed one of her famously loud laughs, 'Have you noticed Heramba how crazy he is?'

Feeling ill at ease Heramba said, 'Well, I have no comment to make.'

Ananda said, 'What a pity! You just could not help quarrelling with Father in presence of an outsider.'

Heramba protested, 'No, Ananda, I'm not an outsider.'

Ananda replied, 'Yes, I know it. Mother does not crack jokes with outsiders. I saw it from the beginning—the way mother was sharing jokes with you. It is now clear that you are more than an insider.'

Malati said, 'Ananda, do you think I say funny things to my old man, don't I? It is as if there were so many people in my house to share a joke with me. Is there anyone here I can talk to?'

Ananda rubbed her mother's back with her palm and said, 'Why bother about people at home? You have so many visitors. All morning you are so busy talking to them.'

Taking the daughter's hand from her back Malati said, 'They are all my *bhaktas*—those uncouth folks. I'm really sick now of cheating them. You lead such a carefree life. What do you know about earning money by cheating people? I have to think all the morning how to earn a few more paise from my visitors. I am a woman, is it really my job? Does your Dad earn anything? Does he ever think where your damned meal comes from? Do you ever give a thought to it?'

Ananda said with annoyance, 'You're telling everything to this gentleman, ma?' Malati was not in the least perturbed. She said, 'What's wrong with that? I have done it deliberately. I know Heramba appreciates frankness.'

Heramba could not appreciate this frankness of Malati. He quite realized that she cared little for Heramba's opinion; she had to be frank about herself simply because

she knew everything would soon be known to him. She was shrewd enough to let him know beforehand the present state of affairs in her family. There was something else that pleased Heramba. Malati wished Heramba to come here frequently. Betraying all her weakness today, she would only spare him the pain of discovering the truth about her. Heramba felt that it was what he had been waiting for. He was rather glad to think that Malati would wish him to come here again and again and know all the inconsistencies and sordidness of Malati's abnormal life. He was happy and grateful at this unique invitation of Malati.

'It is true, Malati-baudi. You don't need to hide anything for me.'

'Oh, you see, I've really nothing to hide from you.'

'Yes, I think as much.'

It was like an agreement between them. Malati admitted that she drank *karan*, and earned her living by cheating people in the name of religion, and Heramba also declared that it did not matter to him.

Life had taught Malati so much. It might not have anything to do with her feelings. But nobody could underestimate her sharp mind.

But what about Ananda?

Didn't Ananda's mind get its required education and refinement? Heramba mused, did not her beauty conceal her heart? He had the impression that Malati and Ananda had two different kinds of life. Ananda could not possibly be exposed to those things that made Malati a wreck. Then there was her father Anath. Girls usually look after their father rather than their mother. It is the father's teaching that becomes more effective in the lives of women. Anath's influence on Ananda's life could not be dismissed. Anath had already admitted to Heramba at the sea-side that people did not like Malati as they used to these days. If Anath had this experience, he must have given Ananda the protection she needed.

Anath was like a master craftsman in the art of emotions. Ananda must have been moulded by him. Maybe,

Ananda, by overcoming Malati's influence with Anath's assistance, had developed her mind with an incomparable charm. Home is not really the place for the full development of the human mind, nor does it help the mind to preserve what it acquires. Nobody can become a good soul unless he comes into contact with the evil. Man is bound to be crippled if he does not face up to the harsh realities of life; he then becomes as shapeless as a liquid. Ananda possibly had come to know the world fully through Malati. Instead of a listless plant in a flower-pot she had struck roots in the earth with the help of Malati. She had at last got a freshness, a vitality that only the sun, the rains, the winds, and the moisture of the earth could give.

They were silent for a few minutes. Ananda went inside to see if Anath wanted something and now came back with her face properly washed. She had done this because probably she felt she had been blushing even without exchanging glances with Heramba.

But Heramba just couldn't be certain about anything that Ananda did. He could only feel that whatever Ananda did or said carried deeper meanings. Ananda said, 'Aren't we going to have *arati* now, Ma?'

'Yes.'

'But you haven't yet opened the door of the temple.'

'You must be hungry, darling. You needn't wait for *prasad*. Just have something to eat, Ananda.'

'No, I'm not hungry, Ma. Even if I'm hungry, I shall not have anything.'

'What's the matter? I see, you're going to dance today.'

Ananda gave a faint smile and said, 'Yes, but not now, I'm waiting for the moonlight.'

'Oh, you want the dance again. I don't think I have done a good thing by giving you dancing lessons. You go without your meals—'

Ananda beamed with joy as she said, 'I shall do the *chandrakala* dance late at night.'

'And then you'll go to bed without your dinner, I know.'

'So what? Going without a dinner is not always bad. Do you know it is the night of the full moon?'

Malati said, 'Really? Now I see why I feel rather heavy.'

in my limbs and having pains around my waist.'

Heramba asked with great curiosity, 'Do you really dance, Ananda?'

Malati answered, 'That is the only thing she has learnt from me. She has no other qualification. Ask her to cook something, her head will be swimming.'

Ananda said with a wry smile, 'Don't say such things about me, Ma. Who cooks for Dad everyday?'

'Yes, that is only fit for your father.'

'It may be so. But you can't deny that I do the cooking everyday. You can't say I only dance and do nothing else.'

Heramba asked, 'May I see your dance, Ananda?'

'Of course. why not. It is not a dance you see in the theatre. So you needn't buy a ticket. But I wonder if you can stay awake to watch it.'

'I can if I get your permission,' said Heramba.

Malati said, 'You're staying here for dinner, too.'

Ananda said, 'It is nice of you to invite him to dinner. What will you offer him to eat?'

'Well, he will take just pot-luck.'

'Which means fasting, doesn't it? This full-moon night you'll drink a little milk, I'll not eat anything, what a treat it is for our guest!'

Malati said, 'Ananda, you don't know how to talk. We may go without our meals, but surely we have something for our guest.'

Ananda smiled and said, 'That's all right. When you said he would have the same dinner as we have, I thought you really meant him to fast.'

Heramba wondered why Ananda wanted to talk to him with her mother as a mediator. So far Ananda had said everything for him to hear, yet she did not care to speak straight to him. She answered all his questions in a matter-of-fact manner, but she had nothing to ask him. Why was she trying so hard to suppress a very ordinary expression of curiosity about him? Why did she actually imply by ignoring him in this way? She could easily ask him a question—a small irrelevant question—

'What're you thinking?'

Ananda's question startled Heramba— how could she guess the prayer he had not uttered yet. Probably Ananda asked this question since she saw him so absent-minded and thoughtful, not by guessing what he was actually feeling. There must be more surprising coincidences than this in this world. But it seemed to Heramba that something unusual had happened, an extraordinary deviation from the laws that governed the world. He felt happy and said, 'I was thinking how you could read my thoughts.'

Ananda frowned and said, 'When do you think I read your thoughts?'

'Just now.'

'I can't follow you.'

Malati said, 'It is just his way of confusing us.'

'Really?

Ananda felt nervous, 'No, that's not the case.'

'Then why did you say I had read your thoughts?'

'I said it only for the fun of it.'

'It is so hard to know what you mean. I thought you just wanted to say something very very funny, and then of course you would end up explaining everything and we would have a good laugh.'

Heramba had meanwhile regained his control.

'I thought as much. At last I thought it would be better to make you laugh without trying to explain anything.'

'No, you don't mean it. You are inventing it.'

'Right you are. You should appreciate this quality of mine. A joke can be stale in five minutes.'

'And laughter? How much time does it take to go stale? Listening to you I'm beginning to think of all sorts of absurd things. Well, have you ever thought why man suddenly stops laughing? I'm not talking of those people who go on laughing after taking *siddhi*. I'm talking of those who laugh either with joy, or hearing funny comments or any laughing matter. But why does a man remember something while laughing and then his laughter slowly fades away? Besides, you must have noticed, it is only a madman who laughs alone, laughter really needs

two people. If any one laughs sitting alone in a corner of his house, he must have remembered something which is somewhat linked with another person. Nobody has a laugh over his own comment, does he?"

'No.'

'It is very strange, isn't it? You laugh only when you read or hear something that is funny. You can't be forced to laugh if there is nothing to cause a laugh. The reason for laughter will be always something out there—you must not be connected with it any way. I'm really amazed when I come to think of it. Laughter is such a good thing that you can't make it for yourself. That is why men are usually so sullen. I wonder why one laughs now and then and not all the time.'

Malati asked, 'What's the matter with you, Ananda? Why are you talking so much?'

Ananda said, 'Am I talking too much? I'm sorry. You're all so busy with one thing or another and I must keep mum, though I am bursting to tell you so much. I can't help talking too much if I have a chance.'

'You must have drunk *karan* on the sly.'

'Not at all, Ma, I'm not the one to drink that kind of rubbish secretly. I don't need *karan* to raise my spirits.'

After expressing her pride in such a way to Heramba, Ananda, for fear of having exposed herself too much, almost hid herself behind Malati. Malati could not understand why she behaved the way she did, and Heramba was rather afraid of guessing it.

Malati said, 'I didn't ask you to massage my waist simply because it is aching. If only such a massage could relieve my pain!'

Heramba could see only the feet of Ananda. As she was sitting on the steps, the nails of her twisted toes were stuck in the crack on the steps. Heramba had a feeling that Ananda's toes were hurting. He could not figure out why she had chosen to hurt herself like this. He felt a strong desire to pull out her toes from the crack in the cemented steps. A small black ant—one of the kind that was timid to bite and was easily crushed to death under a little pressure was crawling on Ananda's toes and made Heramba painfully aware of its sudden arrival. He killed

it as he tried to brush it aside.

Anand queried, 'What are you doing?'

'It is an ant.'

'What kind of ant?'

'Possibly a poisonous ant.'

Malati said, 'Why did you touch her feet to do that?'

'Oh God, what're you doing, Ananda? You should not give him any *pranam*. Don't you know a virgin can't do that?'

Ananda, after touching Heramba's feet, said, 'Ma, I don't care for your peculiar *tantric* rites.'

Heramba feared that Malati would flare up at the defiance of her daughter. Instead Malati suddenly broke into a tale of woe.

'I knew she would not care for me. Nobody in this house cares for me. I'm here treated worse than a domestic help. Had her father made the same comment you would have seen how eagerly she listened to him. A poor dispensable mother—that's me.'

Heramba did not feel any sympathy for her pitious complaints. He was rather happy to see that Ananda was not a mother's baby. He felt as if it was a stroke of good luck for him that Ananda was a papa's darling. Heramba could not quite realize whether his apprehension about Ananda or the expectation he had been nurturing about her carried more weight to him. He was ill at ease until he knew whether Ananda had been groomed by Malati or Anath. The faintest suspicion that Anand's inner self could have a dark side was unbearable to him. That was why he did not notice how much respect Ananda showed him by giving him a *pranam* against Malati's warning. He only appreciated Ananda's refusal to model herself on her mother. His apprehension disappeared at the child-like defiance of Ananda.

The passion and attachment Heramba felt at the first sight of Ananda now pervaded his whole being. He no longer felt amazed at his sudden submission to her charms. His mind soared to the level where the unspeakable charm of Ananda was like an eternal truth.

To see and hear Ananda was at first like an addiction

but his excitement in Ananda's presence was as normal as any habitual addiction. Now Ananda again cast a new spell on him. Ananda was the beloved daughter of Anath who was still an inhabitant of a wonderland to Heramba—this very suggestion coming from Ananda's conduct had sent Heramba into a state of an unforeseen emotional exuberance.

To the lover there is no history of the progress of love. You can go as far as you can, but that would be only a fresh beginning. It is as if there was nothing before that. It is only a nest in which your heart hidden within a hard shell is just waiting silently to be reborn. Heramba did not know that his restless heart became more restless—it was only an increase in intensity. Only now Ananda's existence revealed itself fully to Heramba.

A moment ago his heart was throbbing with the daily joyless flow of blood through his veins. Only now Ananda had made his heart beat wildly.

Malati got up after sometime. Ananda said, 'Where are you off to, Ma?'

'Don't you know that it is the time for a wash? It is the time for *arati*? Have you forgotten that it is getting dark?'

Malati went away leaving Ananda with Heramba in the twilight.

The evening is descending here in this place, not all over the world. The other side of the earth has only a busy daytime. The night that is about to fall seems to have been an embodiment of the earth's own desire. The darkness extends beyond the sun filling the cosmic space. There is no end to this darkness. Even human imagination would fail to find its limit. The light that brings day to one side of the earth is too scanty to illuminate the limitless cosmic darkness, Heramba thought to himself. This was only a brief verbal translation of what Heramba imagined looking up at the sky after Malati had left. It was only a momentary respite for him—not to think of Ananda. He did not fail to understand that Ananda was feeling rather helpless as her mother left her. Because there was a grey sky stretching before his eyes he could

start his conversation about it, hoping that Ananda would gradually remove his inhibitions and he would descend from the sky to the earth.

‘Ananda, can you tell me how many stars have come out?’

‘I can see one. Oh, no, two.’

‘Do you know what happens when you see two stars?’

‘I’m not sure. Do you think one’s eyes become bright like the stars?’

Ananda’s voice was changed and she kept looking down at her toe-nails. It was impossible to talk irrelevantly for long. It was Ananda who brought down this conversation to their own level.

‘Father says, you teach in a college. You must be a very well-read man.’

‘Oh, no, to read is to think the thoughts of the people. I like to think for myself. You have probably heard everything about me from your father.’

‘Yes, everything. And not only from my father, I heard whatever you said to mother, standing at the window until mother called me to bring water for you.’

Ananda raised her eyes, but she could not yet look straight into Heramba’s face.

‘What did you think of me after that?’

Ananda did not reply. Then with some hesitation she said, ‘I felt you talked about your wife without any feeling. How long has she been dead?’

‘She has been dead a long time—about a year and a half.’

Ananda looked at the button on the shirt of Heramba and asked, ‘Didn’t you say, long ago? A year and a half—is that a very long time?’

Heramba said, ‘Isn’t it a very long time? Do you know how many times the sun rises in a year and a half? Do you know how many babies are born and how many men die?’

Ananda made a mental calculation and then said, ‘The sun rises five hundred and fifty seven times in one year and a half. But how many men are born? How many die?’

Heramba said laughing, ‘May be about twenty lakhs.’

Ananda looked at him with a smile: ‘Only just that? I thought in one year crores of people are born in the world. You know the women devotees who come to mother every-

day have each a child in arms, a child around the waist, and holding the hand of another child—I see so many children that I am inclined to think that everyday innumerable babies are born. But how much can a man change in a year and a half?"

'Yes he can. He can change even in a minute,' Heramba insisted.

Ananda said with a blush, 'I didn't really think of your wife. I said only in general terms.'

Heramba did not believe that Ananda tried to see how much Heramba still missed his wife by asking this question. He only felt that Ananda had not yet lost her natural feelings. Ananda was not so heartless as to feel happy to learn that one could forget his wife so soon.

But it was impossible for Heramba to tell a lie, 'Ananda, it was not unfair of you to think of my dead wife when you said that. Isn't it natural that so many relations and acquaintances leave us for ever? If they matter little to us when they are alive, why should we care so much for them when they are dead? If we do so we shall be too afraid to accept death as a fact. We shall live under the shadow of death and we'll be sick both mentally and physically.'

'But—' Ananda could not finish.

Heramba said, 'You can say just as you please, I've no objection.'

'I think it rather embarrassing because what I was saying somehow related to your wife. Anyway, let me finish. I don't like suppressing what I feel like saying, I think you are not right. If there is real love you can't avoid mourning its loss. If mourning is false then it means your love too is false.'

Heramba felt rather happy. He liked being opposed and to counter the opposition successfully was a victory he really enjoyed.

'Yes, if there is love, there will be mourning about its loss. But how long does love last? Love is an unbearably self-destructive affair. Had love been eternal, man could not survive. There is not a very long gap between the birth and death of love. If there is true love between two

people and if one of them dies there must be perpetual sense of bereavement. Because there is no premature death of love, it becomes immortal through mourning. But when love is dead, when there is only a habitual attachment and only a game of self-consolation between two persons, one just can't mourn for long the death of the other. A prolonged mourning in such a case is nothing but a symptom of mental sickness—a kind of psychic debility. Ananda, do you know the story of Romeo and Juliet?

'Yes, Father has told me.'

'They died before their love died. If one of them survived, his or her love would never come to an end. But if the love between them had died before one of them died, the one who survived just could not mourn it all his or her life. Have you noticed that the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet does not lie in their death?'

'Where does it lie then?'

'In the fact that their love could not achieve consummation. Romeo and Juliet have no importance to us. Let lakhs of Romeos and Juliets die, nobody will care. But the very thought that they died while they loved each other so much bring tears to our eyes.'

Ananda commented rather abstractedly, 'Really? Well, you may be right.'

Heramba said emphatically, 'Don't say, may be. I know I'm right. We suffer when we try mutually to give their unfulfilled love a sense of completion. That is the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet. Do you think there is any other tragedy in Romeo and Juliet? They both made any possibility of suffering irrelevant in their life by dying. Whom should we sympathize with? What right do they have to draw a drop of tear from us? They did not suffer in the real sense of the term. They just bypassed the possibility of suffering when their love was just on the point of being fulfilled. We mourn for their unconsummated love, not for them.'

Ananda said, 'How long does love last?'

Heramba said with a smile, 'That is a different question, Ananda, you can't judge it in terms of years. But it does not

last long. One day, one week, one month at the most.'

Ananda seemed scared at this.

'Is that all?'

Heramba again gave a smile and said, 'Isn't it enough? Can anyone love for more than a month? One will just die if he has to nurture love more than a month. You can spend a day or two in a state of intoxication. Love is to alcohol what alcohol is to water. Love is such a strong addiction.'

Ananda groped for words. She pushed backward with her hand the hair that fell over her face. Biting the little finger of her right hand, she began to scrape the dust off the nails of one foot with the toes of another. Heramba felt sorry to have hurt her feelings, but he just could not help it. He was unable to hide the truth from Ananda. Besides, he knew it would be unjust to teach one, whatever the circumstances might be, that love was eternal. Heramba believed that the sooner this myth was exploded the better it would be for the world.

Ananda suddenly asked, 'What remains when love dies?'

'Everything except love. Everything that you need for a happy domestic life. Besides, there are children—there is the prospect of another kind of love. And you can't say that is unimportant.'

'But you see if love is dead, the most important thing is gone. Is happiness possible after this?'

'Happiness is like a dried fish and man's capacity for taste does not care for dignity, so he has to live somehow tasting all along any kind of happiness. Life is so dull, so insipid, life is so slow. Man lives in a kind of stupor; the thrill of love is therefore like a bonus to him.'

'Happiness is dried fish? I seem to have heard it before.'

'Your mother was trying a little while ago to convince me.'

'Yes, mother was saying that. But what you are saying now is enough to make me cry.'

Heramba put one foot on the lower step and said, 'It won't do to cry, Ananda. You must know how to laugh. The sight that will shake your heart must be turned into a source of joy, into songs. If man needs any religion, any *tapasya*, then that is his religion, his *tapasya*. What else

can man do? He lives fifty or sixty years, yet he has nothing to do.'

'What do you mean he has nothing to do?'

'What do you think man can do? Working out sums, making engines, writing poems? That is nothing but a pretence—a kind of make believe. Nobody in the world wants all this. Once man had no knowledge, no science, no civilization, but man just didn't care. Today man has got everything, yet it does not matter. But he can't help it. He must fill one way or another the void that is at the centre of his being. So man has to take recourse to complex calculations, impressive emotional gestures, use of steel or similar rubbish of various kinds just to fill the void in his life. Look at the world, men make so much fuss about life. What a race for being busy! Work! Work! Everyone works! The scientist is busy searching for a new formula when he makes his wife shed tears—everyday he does this. The businessman is making money as quickly as possible with his show-rooms and advertisements all around. The rebel poet writes poetry of protest, sitting in the obscure corner of his room in front of an earthen lamp. And then there is the artist doing his painting all day and drowning his life in drink. Nobody is idle, Ananda, coolie, labourer, coach-driver, everybody is working so hard. But why, Ananda? Why are they working like mad? It is because man has no real work to do. Man has nothing to do except being restless.'

'But what is this real work that man is not aware of?'

'Ananda, nobody can answer this question. Man cannot know what he lacks. It is not difficult to realize that man does any kind of work because he has no real work to do. But nobody can tell what else he could have done. Do you know why? Man and the purpose of his life belong to different levels. Like God, like the ultimate truth, like the meaning of "I", it is also beyond man's reach. Life surely has a meaning—a culmination—nothing in the world exists without a cause. It is quite easy to realize that when you notice a harmony among the laws of the world. But life does not culminate in life. Man will always

search for the fulfilment of his life, but he will never be able to achieve it. Everyone has failed in this—yogis, philosophers, poets, everybody! It will go on like this. For how can man possess that which always lies beyond his being?"

Heramba was so engrossed in talking that he forgot everything else for the time being. His infatuation with words temporarily replaced his infatuation with Ananda. After finishing his lecture on life he again felt fully the physical presence of Ananda, and then he was surprised to find out that Ananda had so far been to him only a listener. He had so far been aware of Ananda's capacity for hearing only—not any other aspect. Heramba understood that it was not something he should be perturbed about. Nevertheless he was surprised like a child at such triviality as his indifference to Ananda.

Heramba also realized that Ananda was not eager to hear from him a sermon on life. She was rather annoyed at the philosophical discourse on the nature and purpose of life. Heramba did not know whether Ananda could have appreciated all this on other occasions but it seemed that this time Heramba's disquisition was like a torture to her. Ananda seemed rather relieved as Heramba stopped his lecture. She would like anyone talking on Romeo and Juliet or love, but she would draw the line there. She did not care to know or think of the totality of life that harmonises conflicting emotions.

Well, she had every right to do so, Heramba thought. He asked, 'What is this *chandrakala* dance like, Ananda?'

Ananda said, 'Suppose I'm dead. I don't exist like the moon on a moonless night. On the first day after that a little life is infused into me. Such a tiny life that you can't perceive it properly. Then like the moon my life too grows little by little everyday. When the full-moon night comes my life too becomes full to the brim. Then again I die slowly.'

'Ananda, it is not a good dance. I must say.'

'Why?'

'Suppose this dance of slow death makes you wish for

death?"

Ananda gave a little laugh and then said, 'Why should I wish to die? I only feel sleepy. I just can't stand on my feet for a minute after this dance. I somehow manage to drag myself to bed and then fall into a deep sleep. You know what mother says—'

'Yes what does she say?'

'I'm rather ashamed to tell you.'

'You close your eyes and pretend that I am not here.'

'What a suggestion! I can't say it.'

Heramba said with a smile, 'When I first met you I didn't think you were such a coward. Is it fear or shame, Ananda?'

Ananda said, 'I'm not scared of men.'

'Then you must be very immature—you're so shy.'

'Immature? Do you know you're insulting me by calling me immature?'

Ananda suddenly giggled and tapping the knee of Heramba with her hand said, 'I'm not that young. You must care for my dignity.'

Heramba knew it was only an evasive tactic. Ananda wanted to tell it—what her mother Malati had said about her dance, but somehow could not manage to utter it.

Heramba laughed softly and then said, 'Why should I care for the dignity of one who is so immature?'

'Why do you say, I am immature?'

'Only those who are immature feel so ashamed of speaking their minds.'

Ananda answered quite arrogantly, 'Who do you think feels ashamed? Me? There is nothing in the world I feel ashamed of talking about. Seeing me drop off after the dance, mother says, 'You don't need to marry Ananda.'

After finishing her speech she said in an aggressive tone, 'You're a brute. You don't know how to speak to a woman.' She seemed to be preparing to leave. Looking at Heramba she suddenly turned away and her lips began to quiver.

With a ruthless glee, Heramba enjoyed exposing the conscious self-control of a nervous, blushing Ananda, and

said, 'Go on, Ananda.'

'No, I won't say a word. Why should I?'

Heramba became more ruthless. 'Ananda, you are not an old woman, are you? Why are you so cross without any reason? You have been cheating me so long, haven't you?'

'Please, go away. I'm not dancing before you.'

'Don't, if you like. I have seen plenty of such dances.'

'Then why are you still sitting here? It is so late at night. Why don't you go back to your place?'

'All right. Call your mother. I must say "good bye" to her.'

Ananda was sitting silently. Heramba could feel what she had in mind. She was angry with herself, not because Heramba was unsympathetic to her, but because she had really exposed her immaturity. Ananda was rather puzzled. The very thought that she derived the same pleasure and fatigue from her dance as a woman does from marital sex was never too embarrassing for her to tell Heramba. Ananda believed that she was old enough to tell Heramba about it all. That was why she became so angry with herself as she made a mess of the whole matter out of irrational shame. She repented of not being silent to hide her shame or keeping up a show of jocularity. Though she was eighteen she wanted to behave as a smart mature woman of twenty eight, but now she could not forgive herself for behaving like a thirteen-year-old girl.

But Heramba was rather amused at Ananda's sense of embarrassment. He flattered himself for showing his hard heartedness to Ananda after overcoming his fear that it might make her angry. It took only a brave man to hold his sway over one whose physical presence could make him oblivious of himself. Heramba suddenly acquired a new strength, a new power.

At the same time Heramba just could not deny that he had all along been scared of Ananda. He had a suspicion for a while that she could destroy him, and it was still lingering in his mind. He gradually became aware of how and when this fear crept into his mind. He realized that he had actually surrendered himself to Ananda long long ago. He had accepted Ananda's dominance in so many

things. He had willingly given away a part of his liberty to Ananda so that he did not feel depressed. Her authority in his life was no longer insignificant, she could easily be playful with his feelings.

Malati seemed to be deliberately late in coming. 'I see, you have become rather intimate now.'

Ananda said, 'He is my friend, mother.'

'You call him friend?' There was resentment in Malati's voice, 'He is much older than you. You must respect him.'

'Doesn't a friend deserve respect, mother?'

Malati came with a flaming earthen lamp. Opening the door of the temple and getting into it she lighted another big lamp. Heramba got up and stood near the door. The temple was quite wide, the floor was made of red cement. The idol was the child Krishna, standing on a small pedestal in a posture that was intended to attract paternal affection. Malati was making *naibedya* on two plates. She did not see Heramba, yet she could feel that Heramba was looking at the Idol.

'How do you like the Idol, Heramba?'

'Good, Malati-baudi!'

Ananda did not get up. She was sitting in the same posture. Heramba was back and sat next to her.

'Are you a *Debdasi*, Ananda?'

'No sir, I'm not a maid of anyone.'

'Then why do you dance before the Idol?'

'The Idol is not important to me. There is enough space in the temple, and the floor is also very smooth, I don't dance everyday inside the temple. Only occasionally. Today I'll dance here, on this grassy plot. God has created us, and what He wants from His devotees as tribute is enough for His sustenance. It is our duty to him. But I don't dance for the sake of duty. My dance isn't that cheap.'

'I see you don't have any respect for your God.'

'I shouldn't. Father says, God is annoyed if you show him excessive devotion. Do you know what God has to say? He says, oh, my foolish children, you should think less about Me and more about you. I didn't send you down

here on earth only to be obsessed with Me. Why do you all behave like this to embarrass Me?

Heramba was pleased to hear this and said, 'You talk very nicely, Ananda.'

'Oh, no, it is what my father says.'

'Does your father take great interest in self-reflection?'

'Oh, sure, day and night. There is no end to father's self reflection! He must have felt a little restless today after meeting you, so he is now on his seat of meditation. I don't know when it will be over. Sometimes he spends the whole night sitting like that.'

Ananda leaned towards Heramba, so that Malati who was inside the temple could not hear her.

'That is why mother quarrels so much with father. She says, "If you want meditation so much, why do it at home? You'd better go into a forest." Father is really behaving very strangely these days. He speaks so little that I feel that one day he will go completely dumb.'

Heramba knew this. Anath was always taciturn by nature. He spoke little, not because he wanted to hide his weakness, but because he did not enjoy expressing his feelings.

Malati begun her *arati* in the temple, waving the *panchapradip* and ringing the bell. Heramba said, 'Where are the devotees who would give their *pranam*?'

'They all come in the morning. Who will come here at night walking two miles or so? We don't earn a single paisa in the evening. Today you are here, now you can give us something.'

'So you are trying to extort money from me!'

'Why do you say that? You will willingly offer money so that you can have God's grace. I've only shown you how to earn it,' Ananda laughed. Because the ringing of the bell in the temple stopped, she leant forward. 'But when mother calls you, you should not offer money, do you understand? Mother will be offended.'

'You are scared of your mother, aren't you?'

'No. I'm not scared of my mother. I'm scared only of her anger.'

Heramba took a little bit of snuff. His uneasy feeling had disappeared in course of such frank conversation.

'What about me? Aren't you scared of me?'

'You? I don't know you. I am not acquainted with your anger. So I can't tell you.'

'Why do you say you don't know me? I am your friend, don't you like it.'

Ananda was awfully surprised and said, 'Oh, God! When did you become my friend?'

'You said so a short while ago. Malati-baudi is a witness to this.'

Pat came Ananda's reply, 'I was wrong in saying so. I'm so immature. Don't take it seriously. I know what I say doesn't always make sense.'

'If that is the case with you, Ananda, you should not say anything at all.'

'Oh, I'm not saying anything, am I? I'm just sitting here. If you think I'm talking too much you should know that you are wrong....Look, the moon is rising.'

Ananda raised her face and looked up at the moon. And Heramba looked at her face. His incorrigibly analytical mind set him thinking why a human face looked more beautiful in the soft moonlight than in any bright light. Where was this illusion generated, in the light or in the eyes?

Heramba believed that he had been able to get over the poetic fancy about the moonlight. The moonlight had only one speciality to him—it was so dim, it did not dazzle the eyes, yet tonight the moonlight became so ravishing to a cynic like him simply because it had fallen on Ananda's face.

Heramba's power of analysis gave him a shock as he discovered the hitherto unknown truth. He had long been convinced that poetry could be found only in the note books of the poets, not anywhere in the world, not even in the lives of the poets. But he suddenly realized that he had not yet formed the habit to act according to this knowledge. Though he had known poetry to be an emanation of sick nerves, he was surprised to see that his poetic impulse had still retained its hold on him; the bond be-

tween him and nature had not yet snapped. He was still so enamoured of romance, the unbridled emotional effusion was still the best manifestation of his heart, and the moonlight was still the best light in his eyes. The blind truth nurtured by his heart had all along fought a battle with the pure truth in his head. As a result, he could not maintain his balance, he made mistake after mistake. Because he attached equal importance to the two conflicting truths—consciously to the one and unconsciously to the other—his life was now a bundle of lies. His mysterious nature, his puzzling hypnotic charm that attracted women was all that he could boast of? Heramba asked himself with a sense of acute pain and shame, and the answer he got was that he was nothing but a heap of lies.

Ananda's face dissolved before his eyes. The great shock of self-realization paralyzed his power of observation and hearing. The darkness enveloping a rotting corpse in his mind disappeared with flashes of light, the night of endless frightening dreams was changed to a bright day and that, too, quite suddenly. Heramba never had such a terrible moment in his life. For so many years there were two Herambas fighting with each other in the darkness, tonight when they were both clearly visible in the moonlight that fell on the face of Ananda, it became clear that they had defeated each other out of hostility. Heramba was nothing but a name for this clash between the divided selves of the same person. He had in him so far the symbolic incarnation of the conflict between the survival strategy of a flower and the destructive urge of a worm.

He had carried quite ceremoniously this empty existence. He had moved about throwing up sparks all around, his conflicting selves colliding with each other like two pieces of flint in friction. He hanged Uma from the ceiling. He was a murderer. He sat still motionless. He had recognised his ultimate identity, yet as he was eager to explore it further he was assailed by so many questions—so many memories like the bubbles created by the drawing of a net in a putrid pond.

He replied only when Ananda repeated her question.
'What am I thinking? Something funny, Ananda.'

'What is it?'

'You've given me a proper punishment for all the wrongs I've done to so many people.'

Ananda did not make any facetious comment on this mystifying statement made by Heramba.

'I can't get you, please explain.'

'No, you can't understand it.'

'Yes, I can. I should know what I have done. I'm not as great a fool as you think me.'

With a sad smile, Heramba said, 'I don't underestimate your intelligence. I can't really explain what I've to say. I feel really bad about it, Ananda.'

Ananda looked in front of her and said in a joyless voice, 'Which means you feel bad because of me. How strange you are!'

Heramba replied with a hint of resentment, 'You couldn't be cross with me if you had realized how depressed I feel now.'

Ananda said, 'Do you think you are the only person in the world to have a right to be depressed? You shouldn't forget there are others, too. It is quite easy to say things that mystify one, if you don't need any consideration for others. It is a crime to hurt one's feelings, men have enough reason to feel sad.'

Heramba felt like laughing at Ananda's melancholy.

'What makes you sad, Ananda?'

'What is your reason to feel depressed, tell me? The moon has risen, there is such a gentle breeze flowing, you'll have the *prasad*, then you'll wait to see my dance—you have every reason to be happy. I have a right to feel sad. I'm so bad that I hurt people for nothing and I don't know why people find it sickening sitting next to me, even when I say such nice things. Come on, tell me who is more distressed than I am?'

Heramba thought it was no use thinking about himself. He had so far wasted his life labouring under a mistaken notion of it. Even if he tried to think rightly he would merely waste the night now. It would not be a right thing to regret tomorrow that he had merely spoiled the magic charm of Ananda through his relentless self-ana-

lysis tonight.

'Do you know why I'm feeling so bad?'

'How should I know? You haven't told me yet', Ananda became curious.

'It is not wrong to think that I'm feeling awkward sitting in front of you, Ananda.'

'I know.'

'But do you know why?'

'Yes, I know, I know everything,' said Ananda angrily, 'Why do you ask the same question again and again?'

'I never tell anyone the same thing again and again. I should like to tell you something you've never heard before.'

'Well, I just don't care. You've talked so much. It is bad for your lungs. You'd better be silent now.'

'Oh, no, that is impossible. You must hear me out. Sitting before you I just wonder why I've not met you before. That is why I'm feeling so sad.'

After Ananda's complaint, they spoke without self-consciousness in a low voice. It was as if they would not be able to hear each other's voice. Ananda said, as if to suggest that she was telling a lie, not Heramba, 'I am really surprised at the way you lie.'

Malati locked the door of the temple when she heard Ananda would not dance tonight. 'Oh, you've been sitting here since you came here, Heramba. Come in, please. Ananda, why don't you take a bite now?'

Walking in the direction of her room she said, 'Haven't you seen I've taken *prasad*?'

'Is that enough? Eat something more. She doesn't eat because she dances, you see. What a great dancer she has become.'

There was a clear threat in Ananda's answer. 'Look, Mother. If you scold me tonight, I'll repeat what I did the other day.' Heramba was surprised to see that Malati was really frightened.

'Who is scolding you, darling? I just asked you to eat something. Is it unfair?'

Heramba asked, 'What happened the other day?'

Ananda said, 'Don't tell him, Mother.'

Malati said, 'I just rebuked her mildly. I just said, if you are on fast you can't dance. I said just that. But as I said it—'

Ananda said, 'Come on, Ma. Do you remember how long you told me off?'

Malati said, 'All right, I kept telling you off the whole day. As if I had nothing else to do. Do you know Heramba what my daughter did? She began to cry. Oh, how she cried! I have never seen anyone crying so much. She wouldn't stop. She was rolling all over the floor and crying her heart out. I was so frightened at the end. I caressed her, her father tried to calm her down, but there was no stopping her crying. We were totally exhausted.'

Heramba whispered to Malati, 'Isn't Ananda a bit crazy, Malatibaudi?'

'Well, I don't know. Why not ask her?'

Ananda did not seem in the least ashamed. Quite smartly she retorted, 'Of course I'm crazy. I was only play-acting, just for the fun of it.'

'You also shed tears as a kind of play-acting, didn't you, Ananda?'

'Is it very difficult to shed tears? You just ask me and I'll give you a pool of tears on the floor. Please sit on that *chouki*.'

Heramba sat on the *chouki*. He had got into this room after walking along the narrow passage between the two rooms and coming to the end of the veranda. It was quite clear that the house was rather long and divided by the passage in the middle. On one side there were three rooms, on the other side, there was only one room, and opposite it was a small space with a sloping thatched roof under which two shadowy figures of cows could be seen. The other two sides of the house had brick walls. There was a garden beyond the wall that looked like a dense forest in the moonlight.

This room was at the end of one part of the building. Heramba asked, 'Whose room is this?'

Ananda answered, 'It is mine.'

Then the bed on the *chouki* must be Ananda's. It was the bed that must have been made warm every night by the heat of Ananda's body. Was this the pillow that had the touch of Ananda's cheek?

Heramba was feeling rather exhausted. Taking off his shirt Heramba said, 'Let me lie down here a bit, Ananda.'

'Oh, you're lying down. Why?' Ananda was perhaps too embarrassed to think that Heramba would be lying on her bed.

Malati said, 'Oh, you just lie down, don't hesitate. Give him a thick pillow, Ananda. You'd rather bring the one your father uses from my room, the one you use now, I mean.'

Heramba protested, 'I don't want a pillow, Malati baudi. A thick pillow gives me pain around my neck.'

Malati said with a smile, 'I don't know what kind of a neck you have. I can't sleep without a thick pillow. Well, you just have a chat. Let me go and do my work. Give him something to eat, Ananda.'

Ananda asked gravely, 'What work have you got to do now, Ma?'

'I'll sit down for meditation.'

'So you'll drink that damned stuff today too? Can't do without it for once?'

Heramba had probably brought some change over Malati, too. She said quite calmly, 'What is so special about today? Is it because Heramba is here? It is not a sin I'm committing, so why should I hide it from Heramba? Heramba also can share a bit with me.'

Ananda said, 'Excellent! I only hope you'd spare your guest.'

Malati said, 'You're so young, you don't understand. Don't interfere. Of course Heramba will share it with me. Let me give you a little *karan*, Heramba?' She kept gazing eagerly at Heramba.

Heramba was rather busy pondering on what he should or should not think about Ananda. He was rather surprised and also suspicious as to why Malati was so eager to offer him drinks before she had had enough *karan* to

make herself tipsy. He wondered if Malati-boudi was putting him to the test. Was she just trying to find out whether he drank habitually, if so, how much addicted was he to it?

He now felt that Malati was really trying to find his weak spot as she had been trying desperately within such a short time to establish with her extraordinary simplicity a bond of intimacy with him so that he would visit them again and again. Heramba found out Malati's plan quite early. Malati who left her home one day now wanted desperately a home for her own daughter. Because she would not live eternally, something should be done for Ananda. But Malati knew that people whose life centred round home only could not flout the domestic laws. Malati could not make any matrimonial negotiation for Ananda hiding the fact that Anath with whom she eloped twenty years ago was not her married husband. At the same time she as a woman couldn't just accept the fact that Ananda would not have a man in her life and would not have children. Malati had begun to be hopeful about it as Heramba was here. She probably did not forget the impression she had of Heramba at Madhupur.

Yet she wanted to test him—and see how much Anath's disciple was like him. Heramba said, 'I don't really care for *karan*.'

'You have never tasted it before, have you?

Heramba thought that Malati would not trust him if he said he had never tasted *karan*, so he said, 'Oh, I tasted it one day, in the house of a barrister-friend of mine. But that was enough for me, Malati-baudi.'

Heramba remembered Supriya. He could not forgive her for drinking a little brandy. Today he had to surrender himself to Malati by telling a lie.

Malati was rather happy and said, 'In that case you'd better not have it. I have to drink it for meditation, besides it does not do any harm to me. If you drink *karan* you will be intoxicated, but it gives me concentration. It has a specific ritual, *mantra*—you won't understand, Heramba. Baba says, "if you drink this to be tipsy, it is a sin, but it is not wrong if you aim at spiritual deliver-

ance."

Ananda said imploringly, 'Not today, Mother.' Malati shook her head and walked out.

A lantern was burning at the centre of the room. The glass cover was clean, the wick was neatly cut, the flame was quite bright. It was far brighter than the first days of the full moon. Heramba thought Ananda's face looked rather pale. Ananda said, 'It is not mother's fault.'

'I'm not finding any fault with her, Ananda.'

'May be you are not. But a woman taking alcohol is not forgiven in our society.'

Heramba remained silent thinking of Supriya. Ananda brought a small stool and sat on it. 'But you see, it is not really mother's fault. It is all father's doing. Do you know mother has a serious grievance. She almost goes mad because of this?'

'What is that grievance?'

Ananda was looking with a sad thoughtful expression at the round-shaped flame of the lantern. Without taking her eyes off it she said, 'Mother loves father so much. If he is absent for two days, she will go mad worrying about him. But, father can't stand mother. I've never seen him say a few kind words to her since I was a child.' Heramba was surprised and said, 'But Mastermoshai, I know, is not a person to use harsh words.'

'Do you think harsh words mean shouting at you in anger? Didn't you see how he insulted mother today in your presence? I am with mother twenty four hours under the same roof, can I shut my eyes to mother's condition? Mother is usually very quiet, but when she is on the booze she can't be controlled. She will at once pick a quarrel with father. I try to avoid it running into the garden, but can't help catching a few words. You know, I feel so depressed.'

Ananda paused, then said, 'Father is so cruel.'

Heramba was lying down on his side placing his cheek on Ananda's pillow. There was a faint smell of musk deer. Even while he was hearing the story of Malati's unhappiness he was trying to remember someone's association

with the smell of musk deer. The word 'cruel' uttered by Ananda again drew his attention to her.

'Cruel?'

'Awfully cruel! If mother got a better treatment from father, I'm sure she would not have touched liquor. But father remain indifferent knowing everything. Sometimes I think it would have been better if he had gone away for good. Mother then would have got some peace of mind. If father had left. ...' So Ananda also could entertain cruel ideas if necessary. This new aspect of Ananda became more important to Heramba than Malati's suffering. He felt happy to see that Ananda had the ability to judge properly the undesirable change that had come over Malati. Yet she could be so defensive about her mother's limitations that she was quite willing to send her father away to arrest the degeneration of Malati. Ananda did not give Malati the right to do whatever she liked even as a mother. Not only this, Heramba came to know a charming side of Ananda as revealed in her attitude to her mother. She knew Malati was not doing the right thing. Yet she did not blame her, and did not make any fuss in order to reform her. Ananda knew what had changed Malati. What was more important than knowing this was that she could understand and feel this perverted expression of Malati's mental agony. Ananda knew that there was also an irrefutable reason behind this apparent irrationality of Malati's attitude to Heramba. Ananda's distressed look was a clear evidence.

Ananda was sitting speechless. Heramba examined again and again his own mind. He had been so busy trying to analyse Ananda. Suddenly he began to feel that this analytical attitude only made him suffer. He increasingly felt a dull pain of being drained dry of feeling. Just as a traveller with great stamina felt frustrated when he thought of the endless road ahead, and was weighed down by this thought, Heramba, too, was completely overpowered by a stifling sense of fatigue. It was as if he did not find any comfort in Ananda's intimate persuasion. Heramba climbed on to the bed. Ananda was sitting so close to the lantern that she looked like a dazzling god-

dess in its glow. It was as if the light that illuminated her face was not coming from the lantern. He kept gazing at Ananda's face, helpless and vulnerable. He also found out a new self-consciousness, and felt infinitely puzzled. Heramba had now resolved the mystery of his desperate attempt to understand Ananda from various angles. He was actually keeping up the pretence of understanding Ananda, the actual reason being his desperate attempt to control his irresistible passion which was like the turbulent sea in a stormy night. Why Ananda might be like this or that, but what did it matter to him? This kind of judgment belonged to that world which he had left behind for the sake of Ananda. He had so many inconsistencies in his life, but nothing could be compared with his present state of mind. Since he had met Ananda his defiance of law became a law, his contradiction looked like consistency. There was no other truth in the world for it than this irresistible attraction of Ananda; what was the use of peeling off her various identities? His passion for her had already reached its fullness. Why should he then bring it down to reality and then allow it to ascend step by step to reach the same height again. He knew that it was his own emotional weakness, or was it the same weakness that made man love God imagining His merciful nature? This inexplicably unearthly emotion Heramba had been experiencing about Ananda had in it the mysterious touch of the stars in the sky. It pervaded his consciousness, and made him wish to sever all the earthly bonds to place Ananda in the ethereal sphere of the starlight. But he also felt that because he was incapable of mastering this unearthly emotion he was trying to accept it as an inarticulate experience. He could not pick the flower that bloomed in the never-never land, instead he was trying with infinite patience to plant it in the earthly garden. He wanted to possess Ananda through all sorts of mundane ties which he thought were no less fascinating than one imaginary bond. He wished to transform the feeling of transcendental agony and ecstasy into a familiar experience of ordinary joy and sorrow. This had been his constant endeavour since the evening.

Ananda again asked the same old question, 'What're you thinking?'

'I'm thinking so many things, Ananda. The most important thing is, what is the matter with you?'

'Yes, what's the matter with you?'

'I have a feeling of pain which I can't describe.'

Ananda, excited at this, said, 'I also have the same experience, specially before the dance.'

Heramba asked inertly 'How do you feel?'

'How do I feel?' Ananda thought to herself, 'No, I can't tell. I've a strange—!'

'I can well understand it, Ananda.'

'I can also understand what you feel.'

They looked into each other's eyes and burst out laughing.

Ananda asked, 'Aren't you hungry? Please have something to eat.'

Heramba said, 'You can give me something but only a little.'

Every time Ananda came in and went out like a silent signal, or stood for some time near the window opening its panes or tried to raise her eyes to look straight into his eyes standing just in front of her, Heramba found an inspiration for accepting his mental defeat, and he gradually came to realize that probably he had misjudged his predicament. Probably the question of victory or defeat was irrelavent. But even when Heramba found this reassuring, he could not help scrutinising it as a fastidious examiner, and then Ananda interrupted Heramba's thoughts. She only remembered that while sitting on the steps she could not say something she wanted to. It was this—how could Heramba know that love was a very strong addiction? Ananda was rather ashamed to ask a few minutes ago. But Heramba, you see, Ananda is not feeling ashamed now, she thought to herself, 'Let me tell you the truth. When I called you a friend of mine in the evening it was nothing but a lie. It is only now that you look like a friend of mine.'

'Is it very late now?

'I'm not sure, It may be ten or ten-thirty. Shall I go and have a look at the clock?

'Never mind. I've a watch. It is thirteen to ten.'

Ananda was amazed, 'Oh, God, you have a watch and you wanted to know the time. Heramba smiled, 'I just wanted to see if you can tell the time. Why is Malati-baudi so silent?' Ananda said laughing, 'I'm not that stupid, you see. I won't allow you to evade my question—how did you know that if Romeo and Juliet had lived longer they would have ceased to love each other?'

Heramba did not anticipate this. Heramba was not such a child that he would not be able to find out the reason. Ananda was almost at the end of her resources to act as if she was not ashamed. She was now asking desperately a question that was intensely personal. Her courage was really commendable. But even though he succeeded in evading the question Heramba was rather amazed to see that he was not able to counter Ananda's shamefaced curiosity.

'I knew it by using my intelligence.'

'Only intelligence?'

'Yes, Ananda. Through analysis.' Heramba found a long hair on Ananda's pillow and pressing one end of it with his finger he blew on it so that it stood erect.

'Let me have a little water,' said Ananda and ran away.

Heramba again started reflecting on how he could discover the unknown truth that would make eternal supplication of his heart transcend all the mundane, even high-minded calculations regarding success or failure. Seeing Ananda, touching her, knowing her with his intellect and desiring her from the bottom of his heart, Heramba had at last achieved an earthly bond with Ananda that could not bear comparison with the spiritual bond transcending the sensory perception. It was like a border line that kept these two truths apart but they were neither mutually exclusive nor mutually degrading.

Ananda was taking a long time to come back. Heramba's eager search for her made him fidgety. He

climbed down from the bed and began pacing up and down the room. He walked from one wall to the other, then stopped and again came back. As he stood at each of the open windows he caught a glimpse every time of a world bathed in moonlight. But Heramba's waiting seemed endless. As he came within a few inches of the white wall standing in front of him, he controlled his motion and then he saw nothing before him. Only a flower that was lying on the floor was trampled under his feet.

Heramba knew there would be light in the darkness. The ultimate truth would reveal itself in his heart, catching him unawares quite unceremoniously. He knew too that his restlessness would not be fruitless, he would go to sleep quietly knowing that the ultimate wisdom was quite commonplace and simple. But how long would he wait?

Ananda came back and was surprised to see him fidgeting but did not say anything. Sitting on the edge of the bed she began to follow with her eyes Heramba walking up and down. It was clear that though Heramba had long forgotten to take care of his hair, it had a semblance of tidiness.

He was looking distracted like a lunatic. He seemed to have been walking for ages awkwardly up and down before Ananda thinking like a madman. It seemed that he had forgotten his earthly existence. But living in a strange land as he did, painfully aware of his loneliness, he had always yearned for his homeland.

Heramba was suddenly aware of Ananda's return. But in his present state of mind, Ananda's arrival did not affect him immediately. Heramba suddenly stopped before her.

'I'm doing an exercise, Ananda.'

'If you've finished it, you can take rest now.'

Heramba at once sat down and said, 'Why are you washing your face again and again?'

'It is because of the dust,' Ananda tried to laugh.

It was suddenly revealed to Heramba that they were both so helpless and had nothing to hang onto. It was

meaningless for them to talk and their silence was unbearable. The ground had slipped from under their feet, they had lost their roots. They could have no use for the age-old civilization man had taken pains to build. It was no use talking about philosophy, science, society, and religion, a few minutes of such discussion would only expose their indecent attempt at play-acting. Outside this room there was no knowledge, no problem, nothing indispensable—not even humanity. The outside world was completely erased for them, nothing could bring back this lost world into this room. They had nothing else to talk about except something that was deeply personal. Even so, their temporary dialogue sounded so hollow, so irrelevant. They had an urge to explode like a bomb; instead they had to be content with a mere fillip.

Heramba admitted to himself that such a condition was neither comfortable nor desirable. But he also knew that there was a greater compensation. They both could hear so many unuttered thoughts of each other. So many questions of theirs, not yet articulated, still got silent answers. Ananda pulled down the border of her sari to hide her feet as if to say 'Now you can't see my feet, but, look, I won't allow you to keep gazing at my naked hand like that.' Heramba looking at her face seemed to reply, 'Let me see how you can cover your face.' Ananda's face, blushing with a romantic passion, seemed to protest, 'It is unfair of you to make me so defenceless.' Looking towards the door Ananda seemed to threaten, 'I can get up and leave at once if I like to.'

Suddenly there was a melancholy expression on her face. Her eyes were moist, and she was unmindful. Though this was also intended as an articulate message its meaning was profound, mysterious. Did Heramba know that she had so many questions to ask, so many things to be scared of, such terrible agony of knowing that she was a mystery to herself? Did Heramba take any notice of how restless she had become? Did he know that a consciousness of infinite possibilities was almost crushing her like a river enclosed in a cave? Probably her life of perpetual

woe had begun from today—Heramba imagined that she was smarting under the pressure of this painful apprehension!

Heramba was looking out of the open window with a silent and unkind laughter, his eyes without any expression which seemed to say, 'Don't be scared of sorrow. Sorrow is a rare asset of man. Besides I'm here, I'm.'

At last breaking the long spell of silence Ananda said, 'Come and see my dance.'

Heramba had forgotten that.

Ananda had yet to perform her dance.

'Well, let's go—but won't you change your clothes?

'Yes, I'll, please go and sit outside.'

Heramba went out of the room. While passing the room of Anath, Heramba saw through the window left ajar that Anath was sitting up motionless in a corner of his room. Heramba suddenly thought of man's need for self-indulgence, how man would fulfil this need in so many ways!

Heramba went out and stood in the open space in front of the temple. Meanwhile many things had changed here or there had been a change in Heramba's way of looking at things. The moss that covered the house and the temple looked like a screen of shadows. In the garden the trees looked more mysterious and more appealing. The grassy plot on which Ananda would dance was a chiaroscuro of the moonlight and shadow of the deodar tree. The roar of the sea was subdued at such a distance. Late at night when silence would reign far and wide, it would be more clearly heard.

There was always such a message, such music in the world, and there would always be such things. Heramba cultivated a few years back an indifferent attitude towards everything. He was not dead, he was only sleeping. Waking up from a nightmare of ruins lying about he had again a glimpse of a multifaceted life that was beautiful and at the same time mysterious. Heramba now did not lack that throb of pain which was a vital feature of life and consciousness.

He sat on the steps of the temple. He did not cast his eyes on the door of the house to show his eagerness to wait for Ananda. He had no reason to fidget because he knew Ananda would put on her dress and then come to dance before him. He was rather enjoying this moment of separation. He would not take any offence if Ananda would come late.

But Ananda was not late. Staring at her in the moonlight, Heramba asked, 'You haven't changed your sari, Ananda.'

'No, I haven't. I've changed only my blouse and I've also worn my sari in a new way. Can't you see?'

'Yes, I can.'

'How do I look now?'

'I should not make any comment, Ananda', Heramba was sitting at the top of the steps. As Ananda sat down on the lowest step, below his feet, Heramba walked down the steps.

Without taking any notice of it Ananda laughed. Heramba did not speak, because he felt that Ananda needed silence badly. She was sitting, her hands were fixed on her knees. She had curly hair covering her ears and touching her cheeks. Heramba could even see how she drew breath at short intervals. With a sigh Ananda said 'Clothes! how narrow minded we are!'

'Yes, we men are.'

'No, I mean—women. We have created all this. This is only a kind of trick.' Time passed quietly, and they sat without speaking. Heramba could not move for fear of giving Ananda a shock. He was even afraid of breathing out noisily. The moon was motionless in the sky. As Heramba was waiting for Ananda's dance he also felt that the whole world was also waiting with speechless expectancy.

Then Ananda suddenly got up. She went to the grassy plot and knelt down facing the moon. Touching the ground with her head, keeping her two hands straight forward in the manner of doing a *pranam*, she remained still. Heramba did not notice how long Ananda had danced. The moonlight had got dimmer and dimmer in his eyes.

Heramba was not sure whether he just imagined that under the initial spell of Ananda's dance. The moon had gone behind the clouds. But he had no doubt that Ananda's dance which began at a slow pace gained more and more tempo with the moonlight getting brighter and brighter. Perhaps this was an illusion. Perhaps the explanation of *Chandrakala* dance narrated by Ananda had something to do with it.

But Ananda could not swing back from the full moon to the moonless night. When her dance reached the height of its exuberence, when the movement of her limbs cast its magic spell on Heramba like a sudden flash of light, she suddenly stopped.

As she sat down breathless on the grass, Heramba got up quickly and walked up to her.

'What is the matter with you, Ananda?'

'I am scared', said Ananda in a choked voice. She was trembling all over. Her face was flushed and her body drenched in sweat. Her eyes flashed uncontrolled excited glances with her locks falling over her face, and sticking to it with sweat. Heramba pushed her locks behind her ears and then allowing her just the time for a breather he said, 'Are you scared? Why?'

Ananda answered, 'I don't know why, I suddenly felt a strange sensation in my body, I felt as if I was going to die. I was never afraid of dying. I don't know why I felt like that. I feel usually sleepy after my dance. Today my whole body has a burning sensation.'

'Are you feeeling very hot?'

'No, it is like something burning in my bones. Oh, what shall I do now? I am so puzzled.'

'Take a little rest and it will pass. Would you like to lie down on the grass?'

Ananda lay down on the grass with her head on Heramba's lap. Her breath became more and more regular, but her face showed the same unusual excitement as she looked straight into Heramba's eyes with her own eyes filled with tears.

'What is the matter with me today? Is it because of

you?’

‘May be, I am not like other people, many things have happened in the world simply because of me.’

Like a blind man groping for support, Ananda put forward her two hands expectantly. As she seized Heramba’s hands she felt some relief.

‘I don’t really understand, I am full of sad feelings. Well, you are a poet, can’t you understand it?’

‘I am not a poet, Ananda, I am an ordinary man.’

Ananda protested against Heramba’s polite refusal.

‘You are my poet, only a poet can be so calm, I recognised you as one when I first saw you in the evening. If you were not here, I’d have cried my heart out and that would have been my last dance.’

‘Do you feel better now?’

‘Yes.’

‘Would you complete your dance?’

‘No.’

‘Who can sleep after this dance? It is better to bear this pain. Sleep is like death—a waste of time.’

Ananda suddenly said with great alertness, ‘What is the time now? The bell at the police station over there was ringing. Did you hear how many times it struck?’

Heramba said, ‘That bell is not dependable. It is just midnight.’

Ananda said, ‘I think so. Look, the moon is now just in the middle of the sky.’

With her mind transported to the moon Ananda lapsed into silence, her body searched intensely for shelter in Heramba while she was looking for some dim stars in the distant sky.

Heramba was quite aware of that. Her burning cheeks, the beautiful lines on them, the unfathomable mystery of her dreamy black eyes—none of these was false to him. He also knew that her lips were not just meant for touching, they had also a touch of the moonlight. It was not meaningless for Heramba now to know intimately every little bit of her face. It was neither a crime nor a waste of time.

So long Heramba had not lived a single moment without his habitual act of analysis. The truth he had approached through analysis had gradually shrunk and at last reached the point of evaporation, and Heramba had also lost his ability to grasp it, but he did not regret it, he was quite aware of it. This was indeed his ultimate realization.

He believed in science. And today he accepted poetry with the mind of a scientist. 'Let the eyes see everything, let the body experience all kinds of thrills. Could not care less now. I would remove the veil of moonlight that covers the naked body of Ananda. Not even by million embraces, a million kisses', he thought to himself.

If you say 'God is there,' God must be there for this very assertion. God is a self-evident truth. It does not depend on any other evidence. Heramba's love was similarly a truth, because it existed not because of the limitations of the imagination or because of the wave of feeling not experienced in his life or because of their temporality or because of his inability to appropriate fully this love with a consciousness of his self-love. Love is undeniable because love is there. The lotus of lust is not an apt simile for it. It relates to that part of man which is beyond his reach.

Heramba was not trying to have the feel of love, he was not trying to understand it, he was not thinking about it. He was simply making love. This was the newly acquired function of a new sense he had just got.

Fixing his gaze on the face of Ananda and feeling the soft and lively green grass of the earth between his hands, Heramba was filled with happiness and calm of mind, and he thought that Ananda had done a good thing performing only the dance of the full moon without its sequel—the dance of the moonless night.

Part III

Poetry of the Day and Poetry of the Night

Urbashi is crying in the darkness.
Oh, hark, my friend, stalking the burning ghat
She sings the song of her rendezvous with Death :
'Sabyasachi! I am on fast.'
Saying this the lascivious woman covers her body
With ashes in a frenzy of creative impulse,
And prays for deliverance in the heat or in the cold.
'Sabyasachi! I'm dying with hunger,
And floating on the stream
Flowing on the northern fringe of the burning ghat,
Towards what lies beyond my life of successive failures.
Now, who will wait for me to tell this story?'

It was not the sea out there, but the roar of the sea
inside him that kept Heramba awake well after midnight.
Yet he woke up early in the morning. He thought it was
better to light a cigar than suffer the agony of lying in the
bed without sleep, though he needed sleep badly. Last
night was the prelude to the moonless night. The moon's
complete disappearance following Ananda's dance would
probably occur at a certain moment during the daytime
today.

Heramba got up and stood near the window. He saw
through the gaps between the trees Ananda picking
flowers. Heramba should have been happy at this, but
the thought of his waiting the whole day made him sad.
Heramba did not like the daytime here. Everybody here
was busy with one thing or another, which was as cheer-
less as pulling down the pandal after a party was over.
And Heramba spent all his time in a mood of irritation.
In the morning devotees gathered at the temple. Malati

wearing a red veil and a long mark of red sandalwood on her forehead gave her blessings with the water sanctified by the touch of her toes and amulets. Ananda helped her by making *naibedya*, lighting earthen lamps, and burning incense. She offered food to Heramba, cooked meals and was preoccupied with all sorts of strange, childish activities. She watered the flower plants, picked fruits from the high branches of the trees with a pike, made garlands with the flowers lying in her lap as she listened to the stories told by Anath.

Heramba who had the mind of an old man learnt how to be young in the joyful presence of Ananda, but now he felt sad. He just dozed off on some days, on some other days he went out for an aimless stroll.

He was always preoccupied with his own internal drama of passion, walking in the vast courtyard of Jagannath or in the vast expanse of the sea-beach. Union and separation, separation and union. On the one hand Jagannath was imprisoned in the dark chamber filled with the smell of incense, and on the other, there was the god of the sea and the sky, the limitless space. On the way in certain unguarded moments he also remembered Supriya. The thought of Supriya became a necessity to him just as a lover of poetry also needs something to eat and drink. As long as he stayed within the confines of this house and the garden, he was full of ecstasy and profound melancholy alternately, so his consciousness could not blot out Ananda to reach Supriya. When walking aimlessly, he came near the white building at the edge of the town and became gradually conscious of all the mundane things. He could feel that he was emerging from a hazy but colourful world and facing the broad daylight of the earth. Dusty roads, shops on both sides of them, people walking along them, all this had so far looked like a hazy landscape seen out of focus through a binocular. Now everything became natural and bright as if the focus was adjusted.

Heramba came to know anew the reality of life as he felt deeply that he was not alone, he was surrounded by

innumerable men and women with passionate hearts who were assailed by eternal strange joys and sorrows of life. Supriya seemed like a female intermediary in Heramba's acquiring new perception of this indisputable reality—she was like the symbol of a desirable drink to quench his thirst in the harsh dusty reality of a sun-scorched day.

On some days there was a heavy downpour. Both the temple and the sea simply vanished from Heramba's life. Sitting on the furry rug Ananda counted and sorted out the sea-shells, and played the game of odd and even numbers with them using one hand as the opponent for the other. Sitting against the wall Heramba puffed at his cigar and watched Ananda playing with a sad pensive mind. Not that he lost his acute power of observation in these moments of anguished separation. He could see the flow of blood beneath the transparent nails of Ananda, he could decipher the cryptic signals of her lips and see in the lines of her forehead the signs of the effect of the child's play she had been enjoying. The room slowly darkened as the dark monsoon clouds amassed in the sky. Ananda commented in a rather tired tone of voice: 'Look, how it is pouring! Even the sea seems to be all drenched.'

Heramba did not utter a single word. Time hung heavy for Heramba because of Ananda's aversion to the rains.

The smell of Heramba's cigar made Ananda turn her face towards the window. Heramba thought Ananda would probably tempt him to go out. When Heramba was just getting ready to say 'no' to Ananda's proposal to go out into the garden, Ananda shook her head to suggest that Heramba did not need to go there. Well, this distance between them was much better. Heramba threw away the cigar and went out. If he could not be near Ananda he had better put an end to this exchange of furtive glances.

Taking *gamcha* and clothes Heramba went out through the backdoor of the house and took a dip in the pond on the eastern side. Coming back he saw Ananda sitting next to Anath listening to his tales. Heramba, too, sat near them—not to hear the tales, but to watch how Anath was telling them and how Ananda responded.

Anath was telling his daughter the story of Nachiketa. He started with a Sanskrit *sloka*. Bajashrabas had a son called Nachiketa. Once he at a fire ritual gave away every thing he had, and when the time came for the offerings, Nachiketa asked, 'Father, who are you going to give me to?' In fact, he repeated the question thrice and Bajashrabas replied in anger, 'I shall deliver you to Yamraj.'

Heramba said, 'Not Yama, but Death.' Ananda asked, 'What is the difference?' Heramba said, 'You find the word "Death" in the Upanishad.'

Ananda was not impressed with Heramba's erudition; and asked, 'What happened next, Father?'

Heramba felt he was being neglected by Ananda. It was as if he did not exist at all for her. This was the second time since Ananda had shaken her head in the garden that she showed such indifference. The way the morning started for Heramba could not suggest that his day would be better spent.

Meanwhile Malati interrupted the story of Nachiketa.

'What happened next, Father! You're just up only to hear stories like a little girl.'

Anath protested, 'Why do you speak like that, Malati?'

'Tell me, how should I address her? Should I then bow to my own daughter just to ask her to do some household work?'

Anath stopped talking. Ananda left for the pond to take a bath. Malati occupied the place she had vacated. Heramba thought that she, too, wanted to hear tales from Anath. Heramba's coming here had not affected in any way the relation between these two persons. Malati's wilfulness in response to Anath's unfair indifference was as aggressive as before. But now-a-days Heramba could always detect in her brusque manners a wistful sense of deficiency, a silent vow to change herself completely at the faintest hint of assurance from Anath. It was clear that Malati's arrogance drew its sustenance from Anath himself. That she had made her life so coarse and messy, and blamed Anath for all this, was actually an oblique expres-

sion of a pathetic prayer: Make me clean, make me holy. Sometimes Heramba himself felt disturbed at the callous, uncaring attitude of Anath. At times he felt it was also a kind of sickness. Fever could be high or mild, and these two people likewise seemed to represent the virulent and the mild aspects of the same mental sickness.

Sometimes Heramba thought that Malati was more patient and forgiving than Anath; Malati's *tapasya* was more rigorous than Anath's spiritual one. Anath could think of other things, he could attend to other matters, he could take refuge in his yoga practice, but Malati's daily activities consistently had the same goal, the same sense of direction. She seemed to be spinning in an orbit around Anath, Anath was her world. Anath was her own life. All her anger, jealousy, sorrow and agony centred on him. Anath was also the cause of her wild earthy emotional effusions, the provocation for her alcoholic addiction. Without Anath, her world would just vanish.

Winking at Heramba Malati said to Anath rather seriously, 'Last night I had a dream. You and I had gone somewhere in a very far-off land. In that god-forsaken world there was not another soul except you and me. All the people on the roads and in the homes were lying dead.'

Anath said, 'You always think evil thoughts. That's why you have such morbid dreams of violence.' Malati did not mind what he said. She went on, 'I felt so sad after the dream, believe it or not. Well, let us go together somewhere for a change. Let us arrange for the exchange of *kanthi* for them, they would stay here and then we would go and settle in Brindaban.'

Taking Malati's grave utterance seriously Anath said, as if to warn her: 'Do you still dream of settling, Malati? I can settle in a forest with you, if you like.'

Malati's sudden outburst of laughter shattered Anath's sincere response, 'Why, am I so old that I should live in a forest? Didn't Radhabinod come here that day and request me to have an exchange of *kanthi*? I chucked him out most discourteously since I feared Ananda would

hear it. He will come again. I just asked him to. For you I'm an old woman because you can't see. What do you think, Heramba? Am I that old?"

Malati again winked at Heramba, 'Do you know Radhabinod Gosai? He comes to see me off and on, and has proposed to me—that rascal! He may not be good-looking but he has money. He knows how to treat a *Debdasi*—a *Bairagi* who has taste. Not so unfeeling like your mastermashai.'

Anath said, 'Don't talk nonsense, Malati.'

Malati swallowed and glanced furtively. Heramba was rather surprised to see Malati so hesitant to look him in the face. But Malati changed her stance in the twinkling of an eye. Her arrogance knew no bounds. With a laugh she said, 'Why are you so embarrassed like an ascetic person? Please let me tell Heramba about that scandal. Just listen, Heramba. This meek goody goody chap in front of you who never reacts even when he is beaten up had a fight with Radhabinod Gosai for my sake. What an exchange of blows! It could have made your hair stand on end. If I had not intervened Gosai would have been killed. And now he doesn't care if I am alive or dead.'

Heramba could realize that Malati was really making obeisance to Anath through her sarcasm, wishing her old days to return.

'Come on, let's go somewhere. Why do you make me suffer for the sake of your daughter?'

'Malati, can't you stop talking rubbish?'

Anath got up. Malati threatened in an angry voice, 'If you talk to me like that you must regret it later. Come and sit here, I've much more to tell you.'

After Anath had gone away, Malati heaved a deep sigh, but the next moment her lips curved in a smile concealing her lack of warmth. She was like a beggar a moment ago, now she suddenly became all-forgiving, 'Heramba, he is really a bit cranky, also like a child.'

'May I say something, Malati-boudi?'

'Oh, no, don't say anything,' Malati laughed derisively, 'You don't understand, and I know what you can tell. He has not touched my body for ages, but do you think I'm

dead because of that? I'm now old, I don't want anything now. I want only to apply my mind to a religious life. That old buffer doesn't know that I sometimes enjoy teasing him.'

Ananda after her bath took the key and went to the temple. Malati went into her room and drank some *karan* on empty stomach. Malati was in fact a Vaishnab, but because she wanted to oppose Anath in every way she had become a disciple of a Tantric Guru. After this she had drowned all her holy learning in *karan*. Heramba tolerated all this, but this time he could not stand Malati's drinking *karan* so early in the morning. He walked out.

Stopping at the door he said, 'Ananda, now it is your turn to attend to the devotees, isn't it?'

Ananda had been rubbing a piece of sandalwood on a stone slab. She was not at all enthusiastic about her work.

'No. Mother would come here.'

'She has just drunk some *karan*. Her eyes must be red by now.'

'She is quite used to it.'

Standing there Heramba watched for sometime Ananda working rather indifferently. It was as if Ananda found it so difficult to move her limbs. It seemed that she would finish the preparation for the puja as early as possible. The rain began three days ago. Nobody knew what happened to her since that day; perhaps she did not know herself. She turned grave and sad gradually. The emotional exuberance that struggled in her to find an outlet would not gush out even at any signal made by Heramba. She had lost her spirits and had moved away from him; no, she had only hidden herself behind a curtain. Like that day's overcast sky she seemed to have covered herself with tearful melancholy, and Heramba's mind soaring higher and higher on the wings of love could not reach the open blue sky.

Heramba had not asked anything so far. Today he asked, 'What's the matter with you, Ananda?'

'I'm not well.'

Heramba was struck dumb. Did Ananda really mean it, or was it an excuse she invented to encourage his love? If that was the case Heramba had nothing to ask. He was sure Ananda was quite well.

Just as a man takes a breather after working hard Ananda stopped rubbing the piece of sandalwood and sat down on her knees in a state of exhaustion on the floor of the temple, and said, 'I feel dizzy. My heart is beating so fast—'

Heramba also felt tired and did not even respond with a nod.

—'I am disturbed. Would you please make the sandal paste?'

This was then the brief story of Ananda's melancholy! Maybe there could also be an elaborate explanation of this. But even though from one full-moon night to moonless night Heramba had been a guest in Ananda's heart he knew that he did not have the power to accept by guessing what he could not discover through analysis about her.

But it was not difficult for any one except Heramba to guess that Ananda had a toothache.

'You make the sandal paste, Ananda,' Heramba said, and then left the temple.

Many days ago on a rain-soaked night a disaster struck Heramba's house in Calcutta quite suddenly. He could not sleep the rest of the night as he thought of his dead wife. Today he had the same feeling.

He went into his own room and lay in bed for rest. While coming along the veranda he had seen Anath lost in meditation in his room. A glance at his motionless posture showed that he was lost to the world. Heramba had never witnessed Anath's long spell of *sadhana*, so he was greatly amazed at his quick suspension of consciousness. He had heard from Ananda that Anath had no such power even last year. About four months ago Anath was almost mad because of pain in his head. After that he began to have *samadhi* sitting on his meditation seat.

Heramba had never taken any interest in feeling what death-in-life was like. He had no curiouosity about it. Lying down on his back on the bed he began to pray for

sleep. When Ananda came into the room, he gave up all hope of falling asleep, but he did not open his eyes.

Ananda asked, 'Are you asleep?'

'No.'

'Why didn't you make the sandal-paste?'

Heramba sat up on the bed and said, 'I don't know how to do it. If we marry you can't order me to do such things. I love laziness as much as I love you.'

'Do you really love me?'

Ananda's voice startled him. It was not a simple, innocent question. These days Ananda used words that seemed to stay after they were uttered. The scales that seemed to have covered Heramba's inner eye suddenly fell. Looking at Ananda's face he realized that it was not just her melancholy but a mental agony she was stifling by force—an agony that she felt after finishing her *chandralekha* dance in the first night.

With some trepidation he asked, 'Why did you ask that, Ananda?'

'I've been feeling like that last few days.'

'Why didn't you say it before?'

'Is it always possible to say what I feel? I haven't said it before, but look, now I'm saying it. You said love doesn't last long. You think our love is dying.'

Heramba said emphatically, 'No, why should our love die so soon, since it has not begun the way it should?'

Ananda replied in despair, 'I don't understand anything. Everything seems so puzzling—you and I and our love, everything seems false. Well, is it really impossible to keep our love alive as long as we want to?'

Heramba thought for a while that he should say something even if it is a false consolation. But he knew that neither truth nor falsehood could change one's self-realization. He admitted, 'It is not possible, Ananda, but that shouldn't worry you. What if our love does not last? Our love will have its own reward if it has only a brief life. You may think now how terrible it would be when our love will die, but once that happens, you'll feel differently. When does love die? It dies when you lose your very

capacity for love. For one who can't love it doesn't matter whether love is dead or alive.'

Ananda said in great amazement, 'What do you mean? Don't you feel the absence of something that was alive?'

'Yes, you can feel it, but that won't be very painful, because your mind will change by then.'

'Are you sure? Nothing can prevent it?'

Heramba did not give a straight answer. He assumed the role of a wise counsellor, and said, 'Don't let all this get you down, Ananda. If love lasts long, can it be so valuable to us? Do you mourn when you see the flowers in your garden bloom every morning only to drop a little later?'

'Well, but you see, flowers bloom everyday.'

Heramba felt defenceless at this. He could see that what Ananda said was actually the ultimate truth; whatever he could say now in reply would be nothing but a kind of logic-chopping. Because he could not sleep at all the last few days, his brain was addled. However much he tried to think properly, all his thought got entangled. Heramba who had all along believed in the truth without reservation found himself unable to accept the truth hidden in Ananda's metaphorical language. But now he began to perceive that the human passion is not really like a flower that blooms only to wither; that there is probably a scope for growth, that there is a continual rebirth of love. If man's mortal existence has any meaning, shortlived love has also a meaning of its own.

Heramba could not grasp this meaning as long as he groped for words like a blind man. In his present state of stupor he found it difficult to endure for long the agony of confused thinking. He gradually regained his composure and the mystery of love's mortality was easily resolved to him. He now felt ashamed of himself for his childish excitement at his confusion.

He gave a very pleasing smile and said, 'Ananda, man also loves everyday. For every love that dies a new love is born. We are human beings, not trees and stones fixed for ever. Our consciousness encompasses the whole world. We

share our life with all the men in the world. Just as I represent all human beings, they also represent me. My heart is only a piece of a huge heart, but it still feels its bond of blood with that universal heart to which all men have a claim. It is like the bond that a child feels it has to its mother even after the umbilical cord is cut off from her. You think these are all wild imaginings. No, Ananda my heart has not drawn its sustenance from the sky or the air; it has collected each bit of wealth from human resources. Our life is a huge void, and then we fill it with little bits of riches of every human heart and mind. That's why we are all related to each other, that's why we can each feel our presence in other people. Thus when our love will perish, there will be others who would start loving. Our love will not lose its meaning.'

Ananda looked puzzled and said, 'Are you sure?'

'Oh yes, you know we will all die one day. If we were not human beings, if we could live, cut off from others, we would have thought that because we were mortal our life was meaningless. But, you see, our consciousness tells us that unlike the animals we cannot live without thinking about our life, we cannot die without thinking about our death. The same consciousness makes us realize that men die but humanity does not. The stream of humanity flows with all the human beings taking part in it, so life can't be meaningless similarly—'

'Oh, stop it,' Ananda said in a bitter tone of reproach and burst into tears. Ananda's weeping rather than her rebuke hurt Heramba deeply. Ananda was not after all a poet.

Women cannot be poets; poetry and manliness are alike. Ananda would not be able to merge herself with the whole of humanity and then search in it for the echo of her own heart-beat. There was no one like her in the world, she was not a part of a larger entity; she was complete in herself, but she occupied such a small space.

It was beyond her to realize that the eternal flow of life was the real manifestation of humanity. She was neither troubled by the past nor filled with contentment by the

thought of the future. She had no obligation to link up what was gone with what was to come with her own will power in order to maintain the continuity of the creative forces in the world. Just as the earth makes man stand with its force of gravity, so these women only provide a refuge for human life. Heramba had his kith and kin all over the world, Ananda had none. She was all alone.

They were both silent for a long time. It was difficult to tell who would have the courage to break the silence. At that time Malati's scream was heard.

Heramba gave a start and said, 'What's the matter?' 'Mother is calling me.'

As Heramba stepped on the veranda he realized that something was going on in Anath's room. Going into his room, he saw Anath sprawling on his mat, unconscious, and breathing fast, though faintly. His face was flushed probably due to high blood pressure. Malati was showering kisses on Anath's face like a mad woman.

Heramba pushed her aside and said, 'Come, come. Don't be upset. Please let me see.'

'Heramba, he is dead. I've killed her!' Heramba nursed Anath for half an hour. Water from three pitchers was poured on his head, and about an ounce of Malati's *karan* was also used until Anath opened his eyes.

After coming round, Anath looked about in amazement and said, 'Stop Malati. What are you doing?'

Hermaba asked 'What happened to you?' Malati struck her forehead repeatedly with her hand, 'Just my luck! I went to touch his feet because today is my birthday. Who would have thought that it would give him such a fright that he would fall down in a faint.'

Anath's low-pitched voice became more feeble. He said, 'I've again and again warned you Malati not to touch me when I'm practising meditation. You should know that I've done the hardest kind of yoga. If any thing defiles—'

Meanwhile Malati had somehow regained her self-control.

'Why do you think my touch will defile you? Do you think I haven't had a bath? I know your cranky nature, so I have already taken a dip in the pond.'

'If only one could be spiritually clean with a dip in the pond—'

'Oh, it is just my bad luck that I'm not dead yet.'

Anath said in a tone of helplessness, 'Oh, Malati, you don't understand. It is not a question of spiritual purity or impurity. Look, when I'm in a trance it takes me long time regaining my consciousness. If I get it abruptly it may be fatal for me. I could have died today.'

Malati never conceded defeat, so she said, 'What use is such meditation then?'

Anath replied, 'You won't understand that. But today isn't your birthday, it is tomorrow.'

'Well, I know. Today is the day before my birthday, so it is '*paran*' to my birthday.'

Anath was not in a mood to argue. He took a dry dhoti from the clothesline hanging in his room and strode out of the room. Malati was sitting, dazed. She was wet through and through. Heramba held back a wish to give her some good advice. He was also perturbed to see that Ananda had not come into the room even after such a turbulent scene.

'Have you noticed it, Heramba?'

Heramba wished to make a comment but then thought better of it.

'If I'd known it before, I wouldn't have taken the risk to play a joke on him?'

'Do you call it a joke, Malatibaudi?' Malati replied angrily, 'Of course, I do. Do you think it was a sign of my devotion? Don't talk nonsense. It makes my blood boil. Don't make me say nasty things. Tomorrow is my birthday. On my birthday I always look forward to the moment when I can touch his feet. That is the only day in the whole year when I can feel that he is mine. He speaks to me and loves me; yes, I swear, he loves me, Heramba,' Malati smiled and continued, 'Do you know why? Listen to me. Right at the beginning—when he was quite sane—I made him promise that he could have his way on other days but on my birthday he must do whatever I'd like him to do. He is a bit of a crank, but he has not forgotten his

promise. He still observes my birthday,' Malati laughed triumphantly. 'He can even take poison if I ask him to.'

It was not difficult for Heramba to believe that Anath after all had still some weakness for his wife.

'Next time on your birthday you must offer Mastermoshai something special to eat, Malati-baudi.'

Malati flared up at this and made Heramba leave the room at once.

Heramba could not decide where to go. On the first night when he stood on the veranda and looked at the not-so-distant mango orchard beyond the wall of the garden, it looked like a forest. Now he walked towards it like one who was determined to live the rest of his life in a forest. It was a place resonating with the songs of the birds. There were also insects enjoying love-making. In the water of the dirty pond an amoeba was perhaps splitting itself out of self-love. Beneath the barks of the trees a message of love was being transmitted by the feelers of the ants. A couple of leeches locked in sexual union was slithering near Heramba's feet. And there were two strange looking birds playing merrily on the trees.

After a long time he came back and entered his room. As he looked out the window it did not take him long to spot Supriya in the crowd of devotees assembled on the courtyard of the temple. The puja and the *arati* were just over. Malati was giving away amulets. Sitting near her was Supriya, glaring at Ananda. Heramba felt that there was no difference between Supriya's glare and the bright sun that was fiercely beating down after the last few days' shower.

Just as Anath carried out Malati's orders on her birthday to honour his vow, so Heramba, too, had written a letter to Supriya for a similar reason. Not that Supriya made him promise to write a letter, she just asked him to send his address. Because one cannot send his address without writing a few lines, Heramba had to write a letter. Supriya admitted two kinds of compulsions when he asked about Heramba's address; first, she would not let him forget her, so he would write to him from time to time; second, if she did not know his whereabouts she

would fear he must have been missing or ill or in trouble. She just wanted to spare herself such worries.

But Heramba did not imagine that there could be a third compulsion for Supriya—to come here willingly to spring a surprise on him. Taking a deep breath he took his seat among the devotees in the yard of the temple.

‘When did you come, Supriya?’

Heramba sounded as if he was really expecting Supriya to come to Puri; only he just did not know when she was coming.

‘I came the day before yesterday. How long have you been here?’

‘Fifteen days, to be exact.’

‘You never counted days like this.’ Supriya cast a meaningful glance at Ananda.

Heramba said with a smile, ‘I’ve acquired many such habits, Supriya. Now that you know it, don’t make any fuss about it, for heaven’s sake.’

Malati said snappishly, ‘Too much noise here, Ananda, why don’t you take them to your room? This is not a parlour.’

Supriya felt insulted, ‘Let me go now.’ Ananda pleaded, ‘Don’t go, please, let’s go and sit in my room.’

Heramba, too, invited Supriya, ‘Come, Supriya.’

Supriya got over her sense of humiliation and agreed to go into Ananda’s room. Heramba was sure that Supriya would yield to Ananda’s request. He did not know how much information Supriya had collected from Malati and Ananda, but he was certain that after seeing Ananda Supriya’s curiosity became so intense that she would not miss an opportunity to know the girl better. He could also guess what kind of information would please Supriya. And he was scared at this and with good reason. Supriya who was no longer the same timid creature she used to be could not just prevent herself from being aggressive as the occasion demanded—since her future seemed in danger of being snatched away. Today it was impossible for Heramba to control Supriya who was not the same girl who grew up listening to various tales with bated breath,

doing simple chores, and trying to understand love through obedience and dutifulness. Nevertheless, it now fell to his lot to tackle on this hapless morning both Supriya and Ananda. It was as if two ships were speeding towards him on the sea of life, if he did not step aside their collision would be unavoidable; if he stands still, his own condition would not be enviable. This morning Heramba's muse had fled. Not only that, there was also a threat of bloodshed hanging over his heart, the seat of his muse. He recalled again and again the comment made by Anath: 'If only man can always remember that he was not born to live alone.'

Ananda escorted both of them into her room, and then went away. Supriya said with a smile of appreciation, 'The girl is really very intelligent.'

Heramba was absent-minded. He asked, 'Who are you talking about? Are you crazy? She has not left us together with any particular intention. She has some work to do. Otherwise she wouldn't have budged from here; she would have liked to talk to you.'

'Really? Then she must be very innocent. I didn't know it.'

'Sure? But you've already spoken to her, haven't you?'

'Yes, I've,' said Supriya softly, 'It is my fault. If I were intelligent myself it wouldn't have taken me five minutes to know that the girl was so simple.'

Heramba felt ill at ease as Supriya stared at him. He knew that she was no less simple. She had admittedly more experiences, a greater ability to understand the complexities of the human mind, so she was always tactful in her speech and action. But Heramba never found any pretentiousness in her speech and behaviour. She never took refuge in an illusory paradise. Probably Supriya's cultivated simplicity was more precious than Ananda's inborn simplicity. If one stood for simplicity, the other stood for enlightenment.

Heramba spoke in a different tone now.

'Make yourself comfortable, Supriya.'

'It is better to remain uncomfortable. Nothing is better than this to win people's sympathy. How can you make

people understand that you're in distress if you can't show it properly?

'Supriya, do you think people don't have enough misery, that's why they look for it in others?'

'But don't forget that you also care for certain persons.'

Heramba said, laughing, 'What do you know about it? Moha-Maudgar, Bairagya, Mahanirvan Tantra—they all tell us—'

Supriya spoke in a low voice, 'Why don't you sit near me? Why do you stand there and speak loudly?'

'Tell me where I should sit down.'

'All right, you'd better keep standing.'

Supriya was sitting rather uncomfortably in the narrow space of the window. Heramba could not squeeze in. So he sat on the edge of the bed and said, 'Come and sit here, Supriya. We've just met and you've already started quarrelling.'

She sat on the bed and said, 'But don't you see you are not talking seriously? When are you going to ask me why I've come to Puri?'

'Suppose, I don't ask that question?'

'I'll feel very embarrassed then,' said Supriya with a smile, 'This is your room, isn't it?'

'Yes, I stay here alone—all alone.'

'Do you think I don't know it?'

'Of course you do. Yet I had to make it clear. Don't get cross with me. I've already told you at the beginning that I've got some new habits. And one of them is talking more than I need to.'

Talk, talk, talk! Juggling with words! Fighting with words! Supriya bent her head. Why talk so much? Not for knowing each other, not for any specific purpose, not even for killing the time. They had already known each other, but that knowing was not going to be deeper. There was hardly any chance of making mistakes about their objective, they could easily spend their night without talking. Yet there was talking and talking—with great energy! But can anyone talk like this all his life? Today, too, Supriya stopped talking, as a sense of insecurity gripped

her. Heramba, too, became silent, because he had nothing more to say, but it was not the case, because talking to each other was their main business. Heramba now had nothing more to add.

Though they were sitting so close they thought that they had not known each other. Meanwhile Ananda came in and said, 'Have you any money on you? Could you please give me ten rupees?'

'What would you do with money, Ananda?'

'Father wants it.'

Heramba was surprised, 'Did Mastermoshai really ask for it? What is he going to do with it?'

Ananda could not give any answer, because she did not know it. After she had left with the money, Heramba saw that Supriya was laughing mischievously. Everything became clear to her when she found Ananda's right to Heramba's money. It also relieved her anxiety that was oppressing her.

Heramba wanted to protest but thought better of it. Protest would be not only fruitless but also awkward. Supriya got up and said, flashing a smile, 'Won't you see me home?'

'Must you go so soon?'

'How long can we sit together like this? Please reach me home.'

'Have you come alone, Supriya? If you've come alone, you should also go back alone.'

'Why should I come alone? I took my servant with me. When I learnt that you were here, I sent him back. Come on, let's go.' He did not look for a pretext. He was really very tired, so he said, 'Why don't you stay a little longer?'

Supriya shook her head, 'No, I can't. How can you ask me?'

Heramba was surprised.

'You can come here, and can't I ask you to stay here a bit longer? Do you think I've no sense of decency?'

Supriya said in a grave voice, 'Sense of decency, my foot! You haven't even asked me why I've come here. I'm sure you can't guess even if I tell you why I've come to

Puri. If you don't want to come along with me, why don't you say so? I'm beginning to feel sick. I wish I ran away to save myself. I'm sure you can find me today or tomorrow in Puri.'

Heramba silently slipped into his shirt. As they crossed the veranda and came near the narrow passage leading to the gate, Ananda came out of the other room and stood in front of them.

'Where are you going?'

Heramba said, 'I'm going to reach her home!'

'Please come and have something to eat.'

Supriya said curtly, 'He'll have his lunch at my place!'

Ananda said, 'He should not go such a long way on an empty stomach. Do you know his head swims if he doesn't have a bite?'

Supriya said, 'Never mind that.'

Heramba was nervous to see that they were not taking their eyes off each other. Ananda saw profound hatred in Supriya's eyes.

Standing between them Heramba said with diffidence. 'Ananda, I'm not really hungry.' Ananda was hurt.

'Aren't you? I see what you mean.'

Feeling helpless, Heramba asked, 'Supriya, now you tell me what I'm supposed to do.'

Giving her the role of a mediator, Heramba gave a clear hint that because she was older she should be generous enough to forgo her claim in favour of Ananda.

Supriya said acidly, 'Don't ask me anything.'

'Let me have my meal here. What do you say?'

'Please, don't ask me.'

Heramba remained silent. Ananda gave a faint smile and said, 'Well I really don't understand what right you've got to press him like this? He is our guest, not yours.'

'I'm his friend.'

Ananda gave a broad grin and said, 'So am I.'

Heramba had never known Supriya to make sarcastic comments. It was the first time that he heard it, as Supriya said with a crooked smile, 'Really?' This single word totally dismissed Ananda's claim. Supriya then add-

ed, 'You were not even born when I first became his friend.'

Ananda could not believe it. 'Impossible! How old were you when I was born? How much older are you than me? You can't be more than nineteen or twenty.'

Supriya did not follow Ananda's argument but Heramba knew that what Ananda said was just an innocent query.

Supriya's face darkened with anger. She said snapishly, 'You're a young girl, so I'm sparing you. Don't try to be smart with people who are so senior to you.'

'I'm sorry. I'll try to remember,' said Ananda. Heramba knew well that Ananda would blame him for this offensive behaviour of Supriya. Then she would be grumpy for some time, and Heramba would feel helpless.

Heramba was thinking of Ananda sitting in front of Supriya in the car on the way to her place. But his thoughts about Ananda were intercepted by Supriya's taking the seat next to him.

'Decorum demands that I sit next to you.'

Heramba mused for a while and then said, 'It won't be at least indecorous, I'm sure.'

Supriya gave a laugh and said, 'The fact is I just want to talk to you. Someone sitting behind me would surely hear everything I say to you from there. So I've changed the seat.'

'I see your coming here has a deeper meaning.'

Looking offended, Supriya said, 'You always talk like a Guru. I've always heard you talk like that. You always sound as if you are sermonizing.'

'When you're seriously thinking of something, you just can't help it.'

'Then go on thinking. I'm sorry to disturb you.'

Supriya kept silent until the car pulled up at the gate of her house. From the house where they were staying the roar of the sea could be heard, but the sea itself could be seen only from its rooftop. This time, too, Supriya led Heramba through the most shabby part of the building to her bedroom. He noticed that the room was not well

furnished; it did not even look like a bedroom. It was clear that Supriya who was here on a few days' visit did not care for furnishing her room. Maybe there was another reason. If it was Supriya's bedroom, she used it alone, for the bed on the small cot was not big even for one person. Though Ashok was lying down there on his back it was a privilege he could enjoy only temporarily. Maybe he got it by force. While thinking of all these possibilities Heramba suddenly noticed that Ashok looked as thin as the victim of a famine.

Without getting up, Ashok muttered. 'I see you are Heramba babu.'

'Yes, You're right, Ashok. But you've changed so much.'

'Yes, I'm like my ghost. What you see now is only the outline of a human figure.'

'Yes, indeed.'

'We came to know from your letter that the climate here was very good. She thought you actually invited us to come over here by writing this letter. She brought me here almost by force. Do you know I nearly lost my job writing scores of letters pleading for leave.'

It sounded like a refined expression of sarcasm that Supriya conveyed while she was talking to Ananda.

'What happened to your fingers?'

The middle fingers of Ashok's right hand were chopped off though the wound was healed. It still looked as reddish as the raw flesh when the skin covering it comes off. It was clear that Ashok had not forgotten the whole affair as he examined the stubs of his missing fingers. He said, 'Someone chopped them off.'

'Was it a knife Ashok?'

'God, it was actually a chopper, the one used by the villagers—very sharp. As I tried to grab the bugger's hands, I lost two of my fingers. But it would have been better if my head was chopped off. I still get angry when I think that my head was spared.'

Supriya said, 'Why should you be angry. It was your fault. The police station had so many sepoy's, yet you stick your neck out in this case. How thoughtless of you?'

Ashok gave a bitter laugh, 'I did it deliberately for the sake of my official duty. What you thought is wrong.'

'I did not think anything.'

'Are you sure? Remember what you said when I was going to arrest the dacoits? You said, I was going to sacrifice my life quite willingly. You invited ill luck saying all that.'

'Don't talk nonsense,' said Supriya as she turned pale, 'Shut up, will you?'

Heramba was boiling with anger. At last he could not help displaying his own command of sarcasm.

'Supriya, let him go on. Can't you see it is his way of entertaining a guest? That is actually the duty of the head of the family. Ashok, don't pay any attention to her. You must not deny yourself the pleasure of saying whatever you like to say. Who is going to prevent you from performing your duty?'

Ashok's lack-lustre eyes were suddenly lit up. Heramba did not fail to notice that Supriya was not very happy to see her husband insulted in this manner. But Heramba's urge for aggression was not yet exhausted. He said in an undertone. 'Ashok, don't forget you're the head of the family.'

Turning his face to the wall, Ashok said, 'No, no.'

Heramba asked gently, 'What do you mean, Ashok?'

'Can't you see that the head of the family here is sick. He has no duties.'

Heramba said, 'Then we should not disturb you. Let's go into another room.'

Supriya took him into another room in which there was only a mat on the floor. She said, 'Please, sit down. Let me go and calm him down a bit.'

'It is impossible. He is a rascal.'

'Please don't use such language,' Supriya said and went out.

There was only a mat on the floor, not even a pillow. Heramba drew the mat near the wall and sat on it leaning against it, and relaxed. Full of vitality, he had a capacity to absorb all the shocks caused by different inci-

dents but today he felt totally drained of energy. He wished to run away before the return of Supriya and also from Puri before he had another chance to meet Ananda. He felt sleepy, which was like the blessing of a loving god. He closed his eyes. He now could make out why Ananda spent melancholy, dull hours day after day. It was impossible for him not to admit that just as he could not have a second birth without dying first, he could not have a rebirth of passion in a heart that had lost its warmth. Love had come rather late in his life, and he found that he was no longer fit for loving anyone. The dying tree certainly had some new leaves and flowers at the advent of spring but it had so many branches that were dead, so many branches eaten by the ants. Ananda must have been aware that he had aged. He could not bring himself to share the pastimes Ananda was so fond of; he found most of her exuberance rather meaningless. Ananda knew it so well, as she did not get the responses she expected from him at so many levels, and the little she got was something forced, something contrived to please her. Ananda must have felt that Heramba's love was dying. She had not yet suspected that his love itself was basically weak.

Therefore Heramba concluded that he had deceived Ananda. He had so far used the remnant of his decaying youth to attract Ananda; now even that, too, was gone. He had never realized that only the prolonged youth that was unused, healthy and pure was fit enough to meet the demands of total love. Love does not feed on experience; knowledge of the human mind does not sustain it. One who has played with a woman's passion for the fun of it—a game even played casually for a while—must have disqualified for love. Love comes in man's life only once and then disappears, for only a single love is enough to use up one's youth, the kernel is used leaving behind only the husk. The heart which has been portrayed in poetry as a lotus with hundred petals could blossom only once according to the law of nature; after that the lotus withers. The heart of all ordinary man, the heart of a genius,

all hearts obey this unchangeable law, there is no exception.

Supriya was taking a long time to come. When Supriya came with food for him Heramba realized that she had not spent all her time calming down Ashok.

After eating his meal with great relish he said, 'I was angry with you, Supriya.' Supriya felt happy.

'Really? When were you angry?'

'Just now. I was so hungry that I felt I would faint.'

'Because of hunger only? Not because of my absence?'

Heramba gave a yawn, 'Please give me a pillow. I must go to sleep at once.'

Supriya flung a very awkward question, 'Why? Do you spend sleepless nights there? What makes you so busy at night?'

Heramba, too, retorted with equal ferocity. 'Yes, you are right. Before it is ten o'clock at night all the people including Ananda start dozing and shut the doors of their rooms. What, then, do you think keeps me awake throughout the night?'

Supriya was ashamed, 'You're really so good at telling stories. Looking at you I can't say that you're well looked after there.'

'What about you, Supriya?'

'I'm ill, you know. I've hysteria, you should not compete with me in this matter.'

'Who knows I may be suffering from some disease, Supriya.'

Supriya broke into laughter, 'I know you have to be ill because you just want to beat me in everything by your arguments. Please bear with me—I'm bringing a pillow, but I must first put a cover on it, I've become so lazy these days that I don't mind using dirty pillows without changing their covers. Maybe my days are numbered.'

Ashok came in before Supriya returned with the pillow.

'Dada, you must have your lunch here.'

Hearing the intimate tone of invitation Heramba had a feeling that Supriya had been superbly successful in

soothing Ashok's feelings. He was quite familiar with this ability of Supriya. She had a profound and sincere affection for her husband which was expressed in her constant attention to his comforts and her tireless nursing. This was enough to make Ashok forget his excessive feeling of misery and humiliation.

Supriya was so quiet by nature. She never believed that man was irrational. She did not like any sentimentalism in the practical business of living. She would never forego her claim to everything she needed in her life. You cannot waste your life; nobody is ashamed of demanding as much as possible and getting it, and then making it available for others. One should make one's life as comfortable as possible. One should also make other people comfortable.

She had spent such a long time experiencing all kinds of unpleasantness, such as mental unease, anxiety, suspicion and jealousy with regard to Heramba and consequently had hysteria. Nevertheless she had always made an honest attempt to be loving and caring towards other because of her outlook on life. Therefore, she also wanted others to behave towards her in the same manner. Even when she hurt one in anger she always regretted it later. One could not nurse any grievance against Supriya, Heramba thought to himself.

Heramba accepted Ashok's invitation, 'I won't mind.'

'If it is not trouble to you, please take her out in the evening and go for sight-seeing. As you see, I'm too weak to do that.'

'Don't worry. I'm all for it.'

Ashok said in a whisper, 'You won't believe, Dada, how religiously she had done the nursing for me, going without food or bath herself. You had only to see it. She is still doing so much for me. She thinks I'm an ungrateful wretch. But let me tell you I shall never forget her nursing.'

Heramba tried to correct him, 'She doesn't need your gratitude.'

'Yes I know it. She is so generous.'

As Supriya came back with the pillow, their conversation stopped abruptly. Seeing Ashok in this room, she was suspicious. Flinging the pillow on the mat, she said, 'Herambababu needs some sleep. Please let's leave now.'

Ashok got up.

'I've invited Herambababu to lunch, Supriya.'

'Thank you. Now you go and do the cooking for him. I can't.'

Then she burst out laughing. Heramba had never seen Supriya in such a mood.

Awakened by peals of thunder Heramba saw that as he was sleeping the sky had ominously clouded over. A strong wind was blowing and the roar of the rough sea was rising in volume. He was nonplussed when he tried to come out of the room. The door was locked from the outside. His shouts brought Supriya to open it. He heard the sound of unlocking the door. When the door was opened he could not see the lock. He was suspicious and said to Supriya, 'Let me look at your hand, not that one, the one you've hidden under your *anchal*.'

'Why?'

'Let me see what you're hiding. Is it a lock? May I know why you locked the door?'

Supriya said with an impish smile, 'Is it difficult to understand? I just didn't want you to run away. I know you're quite capable of it.'

Heramba said, 'Why? Did you think that Ashok would come into my room with a knife?'

Supriya said in a low voice, 'Why do you speak loudly? No, he didn't come into your room. But he could.'

Heramba laughed and said, 'You're so suspicious, Supriya. You're really a *Daroga's* wife. Where is he now?'

'On the rooftop.'

'In such a stormy weather?'

'He is up there to see the sea. He said, 'I can't miss this chance to see how the sea looks when there is a storm.' He almost dragged me up there. I had to struggle to free myself and then I came down.'

‘Struggle! why?’

‘Surely there was a reason. He tried to push me off the edge of the roof. Just one of his strange whims.’

Heramba returned to his mat and sat down. The two windows in the room were snapped shut by the force of the stormy wind. When there is such a natural turmoil, Ananda usually enjoyed playing with sea-shells in her room casting glances at Heramba from time to time and talking as she pleased. There was nothing to disturb the serenity of the scene, though their love was not without its problems. They were not bothered about anyone else in that room, not even Supriya—in fact, Heramba found it quite easy to forget Supriya. But things were different when he was with Supriya. He was sure to have some trouble. The atmosphere would be changed, there would be one or another kind of accident, or even news of disaster. He was deeply disturbed at Supriya’s account of the incident on the rooftop; he also wondered if Supriya was going to be another Malati?

‘What happened really?’ asked Heramba.

‘Don’t misinterpret it. He had no bad intention when he took me to the rooftop. It was just a childlike curiosity. He just couldn’t control himself when he saw me standing near the edge of the roof. Suddenly he cried, “Supriya” and embraced me and we nearly fell down.’

‘I don’t believe it.’

Supriya never quarrelled with Heramba, so she fell silent. He said quite affectionately, ‘I don’t mean you’re lying deliberately. You just didn’t understand the whole thing.’

‘I know I can’t understand anything.’

Heramba remained silent for a while and then said, ‘Maybe in such a stormy weather he became very emotional standing there with you on the terrace—’

Supriya suddenly touched Heramba’s feet in a mock gesture of *pranam* and said, ‘Please, don’t analyse. Emotion, my foot! As if emotion could drop like rain from the sky.’

Heramba was surprised.

'You don't believe in emotion, Supriya, don't you?'
Without a word, she wiped her tears.

None of them was interested in analysis, neither Supriya, nor Ananda. But it was like a curse that Heramba could not prevent himself from analysing the very fact that these two women were not interested in analysis. Was it for the sake of acquiring knowledge only or did he want to know the essence of human life by studying women's nature? What would he gain by it? He had lost so much in his life simply by analysing things. This very thought suddenly made him lose all interest in enjoying life. Scanning Heramba's face, Supriya said with hesitation, 'Won't you bring him down. Do you want him to get drenched and die?'

'Oh no, I can't allow it.' Heramba sprang to his feet.

There was no let-up in the rain. Heramba and Ashok came down, took their bath and then ate their lunch. Before taking leave of Ashok he said he would try to come in the evening to take Supriya out for sight-seeing.

'Why do you say you'd try?'

'How can I come if it is not possible for me, Supriya?'

'If you don't come by four I'll take it that you are not coming.'

'If I come, be sure I'll be here by four.'

As Heramba entered the garden he ran into Ananda. She said holding her breath, 'Why are you so late? Mother is furious.'

Ananda broke the news in such a way that Heramba could well guess that Malati's tantrum was due to his going out with Supriya. He said curtly, 'What can I do if she is angry?'

Ananda said, 'As mother found that father had left—you see, no sign of his rug, or books—she was hopping mad.'

Heramba was puzzled, 'Where has Mastermashai gone?'

'Father has left us for good.'

'But why?'

'I don't know. When I gave him the money I had taken from you, he said nothing. After you had left he took me

aside and said, "I'm going, Ananda. Don't tell mother, she will raise hell." I asked, "Where are you going, Father? When are you coming back?" He said. "I don't know." I could guess what he meant, so I started weeping.'

Ananda wiped her tears. Heramba could not say anything to console her. Trees were dripping, shaken by the wind. Heramba was drained dry of feeling. He went in with her. Since the windows were open there was a pool of rain water on the floor. Heramba's bed was also wet. He turned over the bed clothes and sat on the rug spread on the bedstead. Ananda, too, sat next to him. She was shivering a little, probably due to her being drenched. Heramba thought that Ananda needed security rather than consolation. But since Heramba could not find any justifiable ground from his point of view, he offered her neither consolation nor protection. He had all along noticed that help without proper understanding in such cases could have unpleasant consequences.

Ananda said, 'Do you know what mother has done? She has beaten me because I gave money to father.' Turning her back to Heramba, she drew back her sari to show it. 'Look at what she has done to me. It is still aching. I've taken off my blouse because it hurts me there. I'm feeling so cold—yet. Do you know what she has beaten me with? She used father's broken stick.'

Her back showed red lines left by the stick. Heramba held his breath and said, 'Oh, how could she beat you like this?'

Ananda covered her back with her sari.

'She could have gone on beating me if I didn't manage to run away. I was sitting on the veranda when it was raining. I was dying to see you, perhaps she didn't let you come, the one you went with.'

'Yes, her husband insisted on my having lunch with him. Shall I run my fingers on your back?'

'Oh, no, it will be smarting.'

Heramba said concernedly, 'Something must be done to relieve the burning sensation. What about putting a warm piece of cloth on it?' and added, 'Of course that won't be of much help.'

'Now I'm feeling all right.'

'Oh, no, it is just because you've got used to it by now. Your back has gone numb. The best thing would be to rub ice on it.'

'I think so. But we've no ice here. You'd better run your fingers very gently on my back.'

'Wait. I'm going to get ice for you.'

Without paying any heed to Ananda's protest Heramba went away. He had to walk up to the town to get ice and then came back. Meanwhile Ananda had mopped up the rain water on the floor and changed the bed sheets. Which showed that she was not really a lazy pampered girl.

Though Heramba had taken pains to get ice, Ananda did not allow him to rub it on her back for a long time, for she felt unbearably cold. Ananda had to lie down quietly or sit with her hands clasped. Heramba just could not believe that Malati could beat her so mercilessly whatever the reason might be.

The sun was shining brightly in the cloudless sky. The earth was still wet and soft. Heramba ordered Ananda to lie down and then went out and stood on the veranda.

Malati was sitting there. She asked him to come to her. But he just ignored it. Malati came staggering to him. It was clear that she had taken too much *karan*, but she was not totally intoxicated.

'Why don't you say anything?'

'You know why.'

Malati found it difficult to keep standing there. She sat down abruptly.

'Let me hear it.'

'I'm sure you're intelligent enough to guess it, Malati-baudi.'

Malati changed the subject. In a very low voice she said, 'Why do you call me Malati-baudi, Heramba, it sounds so odd. I'm just thinking that I'll very soon arrange for you and Ananda to exchange *kanthis*. I hope you won't object? Please don't. We are Vaishnavites. I also exchanged *kanthis* with your Mastermoshai. You should also follow us. After that you can go for your legalites. I won't mind.'

All I care for is that I've fulfilled my obligation to my religion.'

But it was not possible for Heramba to please Malati. So long as Supriya was in Puri he was still bound by his six-month's vow to her. He would first have a clear understanding with her. She had not released him from his vow even after her meeting with Ananda. Even if he like the nabobs of old could keep a harem of beautiful women Supriya would not grudge him. She would be happy if only she was assured of her love. There was a time when Heramba could just break any contract with Supriya but now he found it rather hard to sever any kind of relationship. So he had no alternative but to postpone the exchange of *kanthis* for a few days.

Malati suspiciously demanded an explanation. Heramba did not hesitate to tell a lie. He said, 'Let's wait till the full-moon night. That is the next full-moon night. Meanwhile Mastermoshai may come back. Isn't it good to wait for him?'

Malati said expectantly, 'Do you think he may come back?'

'Why not?'

Malati could not believe it.

'No, he won't come. The devil has gone for ever.'

Heramba said, 'Maybe not. Who knows he may come back tomorrow. You had no reason to beat Ananda like that.'

Malati's voice was tinged with mild anger, 'No reason? She was lucky. I didn't kill her. Who knew I'd conceive such an enemy in my womb?'

Heramba said harshly, 'I can't understand why she should be your enemy. If she had not got ten rupees from me, do you think Mastermoshai would not have budged from here? Malati-baudi, you can't stop a man going away if he is bent on it.'

Malati said, 'You don't understand. I'm not bothered about that. Why did she not tell me about it? Do you think he'd have dared to go if I were told about it?'

Resting her body on her hands behind her, Malati said

again, 'Just my luck, Heramba. Today is my birthday. He had fled because he know that I'd be pestering him about this or that.' Malati's cheek and chin wrinkled in a grimace and tears rolled down from her blood-shot eyes.

'He is nuts. Anyway it is good he is gone. I'll wait a few days more, and then I'll set fire to my house. You shameless trouble maker, why are you peeping from there? Come here, you unlucky girl.'

Ananda did not come. Heramba called her, 'Come over here, Ananda.'

As Ananda came with hesitant steps, Malati seized her hand immediately and made her sit near her. She removed the sari from her back and looking at the red bruises said, 'Were you off your head, darling? Why didn't you run away before I began to beat you, you naughty girl?'

Ananda said sullenly, 'But you saw me ran away, didn't you?'

'If you'd run away earlier I couldn't have beaten you like this.' Malati's voice almost cracked in despair, 'How wayward! You are like your father. She bore the beating silently. As I said, "get lost" she refused to go and came forward to take more beating from me.'

At last mother and daughter were thus reconciled. Heramba had neither a sense of relief nor any cause for rejoicing. He experienced a new kind of melancholy that revealed everything in its true colour.

Then Malati asked, 'Why didn't you put some coconut oil on your back?' Nobody mentioned ice for this purpose. Malati made Heramba bring the bottle of oil and then spread some of it on her daughter's back.

Heramba did not expect that Malati would simply let off steam by beating Ananda. She had no doubt that Anath had deserted her. Losing the loved ones in this manner is usually more painful than their death. Heramba was quite nervous thinking of how Malati's sense of loss would be vented. He could not understand why Malati was so composed now. *Karan* was possibly one of the reasons.

Suddenly Heramba thought of Supriya. She was wait-

ing for him. He told her he would go to her by four o'clock. Looking at his watch he realized that it was already too late. But Supriya would not mind him coming late. The trouble was that he was not feeling up to it.

In his presence Supriya would beam with happiness and droop with sadness alternately. She still searched with an irresistible eagerness for any sign of love in his eyes. She also overcame her frustration every time with great tenacity. Heramba had to be on his guard whenever he was with him. By trying to distract Supriya's mind continually Heramba had a growing fear that instead of dousing her passion he had only succeeded in kindling it. He knew that after meeting Ananda it would not be possible for him now to show even a benevolent indifference to anyone. If Supriya could express her desire for him, as she was doing now so boldly, one late night at Rupaikura, it would have been easier for him to drop her for ever. But she had no intention to forget her six-months' agreement. Meanwhile Supriya's obsession with her private life—a selfishness justifiable in her eyes—became more and more irritating to Heramba. If Supriya was happy to talk to him for a while, if she only reminded him of her all-consuming love she had nurtured so long, Heramba had no right to deprive her of this pleasure. But what happened to him? He was really hard-hearted, the little joys and sorrows of life did not matter to him, he never cared for anyone's craving for his love. But today he had become so soft-hearted that he was ready to dissolve like melted ice. He seemed to be ready to surrender to all those who were yearning for him.

Sitting in the room Heramba felt exhausted with anxiety. He wished to run away again. When life had become a battle field why would he make himself more vulnerable in his defenceless condition? If Supriya's sudden arrival had brought him to such a state it was not difficult to imagine what his condition would be at the end.

Heramba suddenly wished for the mental strength and inclination he had in the past. Once he had this mental strength to break hearts or home; now with that strength

he could re-build them like a saviour. Mental strength could solve a lot of problems in one's life. Heramba needed only a little space in this vast world for interacting with Malati, Ananda and Supriya. Both Supriya and Ananda would be two poles of his existence and have each a sense of fulfilment with Heramba, without knowing that he was cut in two and without realizing how Heramba had deceived them by dividing himself. Though it was not an impossible thing for Heramba, today it looked like an idle fancy, a daydream of a disabled person.

Fancy indeed! Today he was day-dreaming while rubbing ice on Ananda's back. Supriya was staying in a two-storeyed building in a crowded area, and Heramba was like a domesticated yogi in her pleasantly decorated room. In the evening he returned to the cottage surrounded by a garden where Supriya had planted flower plants by herself. Supriya cooked meals for him, but Ananda entertained him with *chandrakala* dance. Heramba seemed to offer such strange gifts of fancy to the starving god who resided within him. He offered them with diffidence, with tears in his eyes. He had already found out that such flights of fancy misdirected self-love was actually a sign of his ageing. All were no indication of a possible trip back to his adolescence. They were like a proclamation of the end of his youth.

It seemed that Malati had taken Heramba in her custody, she would not leave him alone even more than ten minutes. She said, 'If that ruffian stayed one more day, I could have celebrated my birthday. All right, I don't care. Let him go to the dogs. We'll both have peace of mind.'

'Yes, peace is what everybody needs,' Heramba quipped.

Malati said laughing, 'What profound thoughts! Do you know the actual fact, Heramba? He no longer liked me. His yoga was only a hoax, a kind of hypocrisy. When you can't stand anyone you usually resort to such tricks. Well, I've never seen anyone becoming a yogi unless he gets tired of domestic life. When you no longer enjoy life, you turn to religion. You menfolk are like birds of fine weather. Your religion is to welcome whatever gives you

pleasure. What a detestable tribe you are!"

Finding Malati's company insufferable, Heramba made a move for the door. Ananda asked, 'Are you going to her place?'

'Yes, do you think I shouldn't? If you ask me not to....'
'Why should I.'

'I'll come back in the evening.'

Ananda said sadly. 'All right. But I'm feeling so restless today.'

After a little hesitation Heramba said, 'Ananda I'd better not go now. Let's go to the sea-side for a walk.'

Ananda said, 'No. I must be with mother.' Heramba did not hesitate this time. 'I'm not really going, Ananda. Of course she asked me to go. But I can go tomorrow.'

Ananda did not allow him to change his mind.

'Oh, no, please go now. If you don't go now, she is sure to come here. Please go and see her. After dark you won't go anywhere. You'll be here with me.'

Heramba knew that Supriya would be waiting for him casting her glances on the road and wondering why he was so late. But little did he think that Supriya would join him as soon as he approached her house. It was not unnatural for Supriya to be so impatient. She herself gave the excuse.

'His elder brother and sister-in-law have come. Let me run away with you just now.'

'Run away? Why?'

She was impatient. 'Please, let's leave this place at once. We may be seen here. There will be enough time to explain.'

Supriya strode quickly. Heramba felt compelled to follow her like one who was in a trance. She did not slacken her pace until she reached the seaside. It looked as if she was running away after stealing something. Heramba was embarrassed that people were all staring at a Bengali woman trotting so speedily. She was barefoot, her sari was not very clean, her braid was hanging loosely. Supriya was no longer young; she had given birth to a child about four years ago.

Heramba did not speak until he reached the sea-shore.

As she stopped there, he said in a soft but firm voice, 'You have only made people laugh, Supriya.'

'I just don't care. Oh, dear, I'm out of breath walking fast such a short distance.'

Supriya breathed in noisily inflating her bosom defiantly, her hair flowing and her *anchal* waving in the sea-breeze. Heramba remembered with a shudder that Supriya behaved similarly five years ago at Rupaikura when she accused him of coaxing her into marriage.

'Don't stand here. Let's walk'. Supriya began walking along that part of the sea-beach where the waves washed one's feet. Though the sun was still very hot, the strong wind took away much of its sting.

Heramba asked, 'What's the matter, Supriya?' 'Nothing serious. There are visitors in my house, so I've brought you here on the sea-beach just to have a chat with you.'

'What excuse will you give, back home?'

'I don't need it.'

They walked on in silence. The walking was a pleasure on a beach that stretched as far as the sea. Walking with a companion has an advantage—the sound of the sea fills the silence that hangs between the two people walking. The silence between Heramba and Supriya, thus, was not a torture to them.

After walking some distance Supriya asked, 'Why didn't you write about this girl in your letter?'

'Didn't I? Oh, that was just a mistake.'

'I came to know it. My husband came to Puri to act as a witness in a case. He told me you were having a hell of a time in a Tantric den.'

'Not Tantric, but Vaishnab.'

'I didn't like the girl the moment I saw her. Her mother is worse.'

Heramba said, 'You've forgotten, Supriya, there are certain things you should not say.'

Supriya was in a real mood to quarrel. 'Why should I keep silent? No, I can't. I'm a woman. I can't be all-forgiving. Let me tell you that I can kill this hag by poison or by strangling.'

Heramba was as unperturbed as Anath. 'I see. You're gradually behaving like Malati-baudi, Supriya.'

'Who is this Malati-baudi? Her mother I suppose. What a sweet form of address.'

'She looks beautiful, Supriya.'

'Yes, they both look beautiful'

Heramba was rather offended at this insinuation. This trick of Supriya looked ominous. At Rupaikura she tried to raise their relation to the level where even a practical man could discover a dreamland overflowing with passion and beauty. There Supriya tried heart and soul to make Heramba realize that commonsense and pragmatic thinking could not be suppressed for long. Now Supriya wanted to wake him from his trance; she would not allow him to go on labouring under the impression that he was not flesh and blood. Like a bird attached to its nest, she had tried to attract this aimless wandering bird to come down to the earth, and to make him feel that the sky could provide neither shelter nor food nor water.

Heramba walked slowly. Supriya was not wrong. Ananda had only beauty, nothing else. But she had both external and internal beauty, and her beauty was heavenly, uncontaminated by earthly use. She was like a poem printed in colour. Or she was like the sky in the depths of which a bird can enjoy its flight, but it has to depend on its wings without which it will fall to its death. One could think of Ananda only as a devotee in the temple of love, not at any other ritual. She would vanish with the last faint breath of love. But did not Heramba realize now that though he could find comfort in the narrow world of Supriya's boring little acts of affection, Ananda's company gave him both an unspeakable thrill of ecstasy and an unbearable agony? For every kind of pleasure that he derived from Ananda there was a price he had to pay by suffering terribly. Supriya gave him neither this feeling of ecstasy nor any unbearable pain.

Yet he could not help opting for this agonising experience. He could not turn his back on it.

'Let's go back.'

'Oh, no, let's walk a little more. Look how the silence here gets deeper.'

'I hope Ashok is not ill. He was drenched through in the rain that day.'

This abrupt reference to Ashok surprised Supriya and she cast a meaningful glance at Heramba.

'He is running a high temperature.'

'Why did you come then?'

'You're thinking I'm very selfish, aren't you? I wouldn't have come if there was none in the house to look after him. He has his elder brother, sister-in-law and neice at his bedside. I'm only an outsider.'

'What's the matter with you?'

'Don't you understand? My mind has changed absolutely. How absent-minded I'm these days.'

It all sounded to Heramba like an unnecessary self-denigration. He could not believe it.

'Supriya, you could easily have made Ashok happy.'

Supriya stood still.

'Since you've mentioned it, let me tell you I couldn't do it. Nobody in my place could do it. If it were a child's play, I'd have played it well. But living with one for twenty-four hours isn't however a child's play. Suppose he dies through no fault of his own. How can you prevent it? Such things happen in life. His is a hopeless case.'

Gazing at the distant horizon Heramba said, 'Yet if you could be happy with Ashok I could have spoken highly of you, Supriya.'

'Do you really mean it?'

'Yes, I do. You've unburdened yourself, you haven't tried to hide anything. I'm saying this because you have shown the courage to face the truth. Why get upset. You can't deny that you have obligations towards his well-being.'

Supriya answered acidly, 'What you're saying doesn't make sense. What have I got to do with his well-being? At Rupaikura, too, you said all this to insult me. You are wrong there. My husband isn't my problem. You have used him like a *Shikhandi* and from behind him you're

fighting with me.'

Heramba should have kept quiet. But it was not in his nature to accept defeat under any circumstances.

'You have started the fight, not me, Supriya.'

Hearing this unkind charge Supriya said like an offended child, 'If you had said this deliberately to insult me I would have taken poison.'

Heramba accepted the suggestion. 'Let's go back and take poison together.' Supriya retorted in a lighter voice, 'It's better to sit down here for a bit.'

Walking a little way from the sea they sat on the dry sand, but did not speak. Heramba realized that Supriya was still going by their six-month's agreement at Rupaikura. There was no denying that they were more intimate now. They could not have discussed Ashok the way they did if they had any fear that it would only trivialize their relation. If it was so, they would have quarrelled until they began to hate each other. Those who do not know each other's mind are quite capable of hurting a pure uncontaminated soul. They seem to say—'Look, this is sin. Your sin is the incurable disease of your inner being.' Was it because of Ashok that Supriya and he had at last been able to overcome such ignoble impulses? Was it Ashok again who tried to push Supriya over the edge of the terrace and thus unwittingly effected a noble tolerance between him and Supriya?

If that was not the case—looking at the serene expression on Supriya's face Heramba uttered what he was thinking at the moment only to make himself hear it—Supriya's face would have darkened with sadness. Also she would have cried at his last comment.

Heramba was greatly surprised at Supriya's prolonged silence. They had come here to talk in solitude and now he felt that he had nothing to say. The daylight began to fade, yet Supriya did not speak a word. It was not difficult to see that Supriya's silence was not a sign of her anger or hurt pride. The expression on her face or the way she moved towards him also suggested it. She did not care to plait her hair which fell over her shoulders. She had

put her *anchal* round her neck, only a few locks were tossing in the air on her uncovered head. She placed her hand on that part of Heramba's shirt that was lying on the sand, the hand that also supported the upper part of her body as she was sitting with her knees bent under her. It was as if she would not allow Heramba to get up, so she caught hold of Heramba's shirt, or perhaps she was like a flower ready to drop in the lap of Heramba and was just waiting for her hands to go dead.

Heramba could easily forget Ananda if he made a little effort now. It was certainly not difficult to savour the feeling of unconcern induced by the fading light of the day on the deserted sea-beach licked by the surfs and to recollect languidly the life-story of the woman sitting next to him. Who else could remember Supriya's long-cherished dreams, her yearnings and resolutions and her eagerness to sit next to him in such a relaxed manner? Such thoughts made him feel so weak and helpless.

Supriya suddenly gave a smile and said, 'Surely they are now looking for me.'

Heramba said, 'Let's get started now.'

'So soon? Let us wait till dark. Then I'll decide if you should go.'

'What do you mean?'

'It is simple. I may not go. It depends on me. Look at the bed of sand here. You can lie down if you find sitting uncomfortable. Of course, it will be unpleasant if it rains.'

Heramba was deeply affected by Supriya's reaction.

'What next?'

'We'll go to the Railway station and then board a train. Your college has already reopened. If you stay away from college you're sure to lose your job.'

He was speechless.

Supriya continued, 'You can't afford to lose your job. We need money. I can't live in a small house. I need one with seven or eight rooms and a wide terrace.'

This sounded like Supriya's last request. He groped into his pocket for his cigar. He took a long time lighting his cigar and then said, 'But I'll have to go back to the

Ashram to get my purse for the train fare.' Heramba thought that Supriya would take it as a joke; to worry about the train fare for Calcutta after spending the whole night on the sea-shore speculating about an elopement was nothing but Heramba's typical way of laughing at Supriya's proposal. But she took his plea quite seriously this time.

'Oh, you needn't worry, I've my ornaments, can't you see?'

After a few moment's reflection Heramba decided what to say.

'Listen to me, Supriya. I couldn't give you even a gift on your wedding. And can you think I'm the man who will accept your jewellery to buy tickets for the railway journey to Calcutta? How could you think of it? Didn't it strike you that rather than accept your offer I will commit suicide by jumping off a running train?'

Supriya's hands had probably gone numb by now; it would have been quite natural if her hands had slipped with the result that the upper part of her body would collapse on Heramba's lap. But she was still sitting upright like a still wooden figure. She was sitting in the same manner on the field of dry grass when she first went there with Heramba at Rupakura. Heramba still remembered that the sun had already gone down and the evening began to cast its shadows. Today the sun was about to sink and a tiny cloud came rushing at a great speed as if to hide its exit. As Heramba took his eyes off Supriya's face and looked up at the sky his face turned pale. He was sitting leaning back on his hands. Feeling the cold grains of sand under his palm he thought that the earth that wanted to be covered with green grass had now become a vast desert.

Heramba walked back at a very slow pace to the Ashram like a guilty person. Crossing the dark garden he gently knocked on the door and called Ananda. It was as if he had just served his term on earth like an angel living under a curse and now waiting in a pensive mood at the gateway of the heaven. But he had no longer the courage to shout 'Open the door'.

Ananda opened the door with a lantern in hand and stepped aside in silence.

Heramba said softly, 'Sorry, I'm late.'

'Where have you been?'

'I took a stroll on the beach and then went to the temple.'

'Didn't you go to her place. I mean the lady who came here this morning?'

'Yes, I did. She was with me on the sea-beach. After seeing her home I walked around a bit and then came near the temple, I entered it and sat there for sometime. I was feeling sad, Ananda.'

'Why?'

'She said she loved me. She was hurt when I told her I did not love her. You feel sad when you hurt one's feelings, don't you?'

'She must have been in love with you for a long time, am I right?'

'Yes, she admitted it.'

They both went into Heramba's room. There was no sign of Malati. Only a few lamps were lit making the interior darker and the silence deeper. Ananda put the lantern delicately on the floor and then said, 'It is only two days that I'm in love with you.'

Heramba replied in a voice choked with emotion, 'Why are you counting the days, Ananda?'

His words sounded like an affront, Ananda was embarrassed.

'Sorry, I just said only casually. I didn't really mean it.'

Heramba shook his head sadly.

'Nobody says anything just for the sake of saying it. I've never seen anyone doing that. I think you're jealous.'

What Ananda said casually was enough to shock Heramba.

'But can you tell me why? Is it because I've a narrow mind?'

'No, jealousy is quite natural, Ananda. Nobody is free from it?'

'Let everybody be jealous. Why shouldn't I be free from

it?"

Heramba could not make out why Ananda said this. If it was just an expression of Ananda's vanity, he had nothing to say about it. But if she naively believed that her extraordinary love was free from jealousy, then he would feel compelled to give her a talking-to. He would certainly say, 'Ananda, don't you feel hungry? Don't you feel sometimes that you're guided by nature? Jealousy is also a law of nature, you know.'

Ananda seemed rather offended at the silence of Heramba. She sat down where she had been standing so far. Heramba did not have the mental strength to request her to sit on the bedstand. The sense of solitude that enveloped his mind after coming from the noisy seaside was still pressing on him like a heavy cloak. He recalled Supriya's relaxed style of sitting, reclining on her hands. When Supriya slipped into the house she had left in disdain at sundown, Heramba stood a while in the darkness on the road. Because he was only flesh and blood he could still hear the clamour in his heart of numerous desires that got the better of his yearning for the bliss of heavenly love, while he was standing there. He was overcome with fatigue, his mind was singed by burning passion.

Ananda asked, 'Can you tell me what has happened to me?"

Heramba looked inquisitive.

'I've a feeling since morning that I'm polluted. I'm thinking only mean thoughts, I'm thinking of all sorts of debasement. I feel restless with so much anger and abhorrence in my heart. It is as if I've spent the whole day in hell. How terribly I've suffered! I was once an innocent pure child. Now I feel I'm a sinner. That's why I asked you to stay with me after dark, not to go away. I've sunk so low. Can you please help me to stand up and hold my head high?"

Heramba was shocked seeing the same sign of intense agony on Ananda's face as he saw when Ananda failed to finish her dance on the first full-moon night.

'What are you saying, Ananda?"

'Can't you see looking at my face that my mind is still

unclean? I can't think of anything good. I've lost peace of mind.'

Heramba groped for words like a fool, 'It is not just jealousy, Ananda.'

Ananda said in a tired voice, 'Why do you think it is jealousy? I've debased myself. Do you know what I was thinking a short while ago?'

'What was it?'

'See, it is too painful for me to speak.'

'Don't worry, please tell me.'

Ananda traced a few lines on the floor with her fingers and then said, 'I know I should not say it. Other girls would't have said it, you know. I had never a chance to know other girls. If it is improper to tell you all this, for heaven's sake, don't be angry with me. You must forgive me. Look, it was so mean of me to think a few minutes ago that I thought you were a wicked man.'

Heramba could not guess what kind of wickedness Ananda was suggesting. Her comment surely had something to do with Supriya. Ananda was not perhaps aware of it, but it was nothing but a very pathetic expression of jealousy. Yet Heramba could not say anything unless he was sure about what she actually meant. He asked, nervously, 'Why did you think so?'

'I don't know really. I thought you took advantage of my childishness, because you were only too eager to have me.'

Heramba was shocked.

'Who will not feel like that looking at you, Ananda? I certainly did. But that does not make me a wicked person.'

'It is not just that. It is because you just wanted to enjoy my body, and didn't care for anything else.'

'Do you mean to say my love for you is false?'

Ananda lifted her face and said reproachfully, 'You promised you wouldn't be angry, but see, you're already angry with me.'

'But I didn't say I wouldn't be angry.'

Ananda was on the verge of tears. She lowered her

face and said, 'You're still quarrelling with me. I told you right at the beginning that it is very mean of me to think like that, didn't I? Would you quarrel with me if I were seriously ill?'

Heramba made an effort not to make a cutting comment.

He said in a low voice, 'I'm not quarrelling with you. I'm not angry with you even after what you have thought about me. If there is any reason for my irritation it is because you have a strange notion of yourself. Do you think you're a goddess, not a human being? Are you really free from all kinds of meanness a human being is capable of? A man can be mean and may even feel embarrassed discovering his meanness, but nobody feels so perturbed at this trivial matter.'

Ananda said, 'If only you know how much I've been suffering—?'

'I know, but is it desirable? You said only a while ago my love was dead, and now you're saying I've never loved you, I've only cared for your body. This is but a case of mental confusion. You should ignore it.'

Ananda lifted her eyes, but the way she looked at Heramba made him apprehensive. It seemed that Ananda was beginning to understand him, her wrong ideas which were so dear to her were fast disappearing. She was amazed. She was also distressed. Heramba was also embarrassed to find out his own mistake. Did he lose his senses? He had not remembered that Ananda had not seen much of the world like him. The tolerance with which people in the world accept both the light and darkness of life was nothing but another name for defeat to her. Heramba recalled her state of mind during the time he spent here before the arrival of Supriya. He could not imagine the euphoric state of mind he would be enjoying here. What a profound yearning it was! Words would fail to express it. Here was the place—in a corner of this house—to feel the thrill of unmixed pleasure to be derived from an awareness of the harmony of all the noble mental powers, to savour the celebration of universal life force

from a run-down hut to a royal palace. Who would have cared for little commonplace affections and compassions in such a state of mind? The criss-crossing of light and shadow in a mind like this never vanished as suddenly as the interplay of a shaft of sunlight on the yard and the faint shadows of the trees. To think of Supriya now was to look for her on the dusty roads of the town in this state of mind. He had come away from her this evening with his mind deeply affected by her little acts of affection and hospitality, little joys and sorrows of her conjugal life. He could not forgive himself for trying to sit in judgment on Ananda in such a frame of mind.

His remorse knew no bounds, so when Ananda asked, 'What's the matter with you? You don't seem to understand anything.' He only kept staring at her in bewilderment and could not speak a word.

Ananda tried to make Heramba see her point, 'Look, a change came over me when I first met you here; I used to dream even when I was awake. I used to hear a strange melody all around. I saw all sorts of coloured lights. A strange wave of something—I don't know what was rocking me.' Ananda suddenly stopped and shook her head with her eyes wide open. 'Oh, dear, I'm forgetting everything!'

It was as if Heramba was responsible for her not being able to remember, so she suddenly asked in a shrill voice, 'Why have I forgotten it? Why can't I say it?'

Heramba said almost in a whisper, 'Ananda, You haven't forgotten anything. There are certain things no one can utter.'

But Ananda was not convinced, 'Why not? You won't understand if I don't tell you. Everything was so clear, do you know? Sometimes I even dreamed to breathe out as if everything would just vanish.'

Heramba was speechless. Ananda who was so excited remained silent for a long time and then calmed down.

'I was quite aware of what was going on around me. I used to act like a machine. Since the day I began to feel that our love was dying, I have been suffering terribly.

Well, are you feeling very hot?

'No, it is not very hot tonight.'

Ananda got up and said, 'I'm dripping with sweat. Can you tell me what has happened to me?'

Heramba said with a grave, sad look, 'Sit quietly, I see, you're running a temperature.'

As the night went on, the air was filled with the chirping of crickets and the croaking of frogs. Heramba who felt drowsy wished to make a desparate attempt to provide both solace and mental peace to Ananda. But he did not find the irresistible spirit and the indomitable energy he was so proud of in the past. His tongues felt stiff and his speech became indistinct. He had no choice but to welcome the impending disaster. 'Let the heaven collapse,' he thought to himself, 'Let man who is nothing but flesh and blood see that his ambition to be a heavenly creature is doomed to failure. Love? A new religion created by a new concept of man? Man created it. Let anyone take the trouble of keeping it alive. I'm just helpless!'

Ananda also said tearfully, 'You, too, have made me feel that I would be lost without you.'

He said in a tired voice, 'Everything will be all right to-morrow, Ananda.'

It was nothing but deception, but Heramba knew he could not help it.

The cooking was not done to-night. But Heramba had no difficulty in getting his food. There was no shortage of fruits, milk and sweets in the ashram. Such food was more desirable than *bhat* in such a place. Ananda at first did not show any interest in food, but at the suggestion of Heramba that she was not eating anything because she was upset, she got angry and took a huge amount of food for herself.

Heramba asked, 'Are you sure you'd be able to eat all of it?'

'Yes.'

'I'm happy to see that at last you have the good sense to do that.'

As Heramba lay on his back and closed his eyes, Ananda took her food only to throw it outside the house and then came back after washing her hand and mouth. There were some cardamoms and cloves beside Heramba's pillow. Ananda broke one cardamom, and putting some of its seeds into Heramba's mouth, began munching the rest. She said, 'May I go to bed now?'

Heramba opened his eyes, 'Yes, you may.'

That looked like their last conversation tonight.

Heramba thought that he would soon sink into deep sleep due to his physical and mental tiredness. But he could not sleep. There was no end to this tiring wakefulness. His consciousness was as faint as the hazy glow of the lamp in the room. Then he got up and went out. Malati had left her room to sleep in Anath's room tonight. The door of her room was fastened with an iron chain hanging on a peg on the top of the door frame. She had perhaps lit a lamp in this room in the evening, and Heramba saw through the window that the oil of the lamp was almost used up with the wick spluttering. He brought a lantern, untied the iron chain on the door and slipped in like a burglar. The almirah was like a cellar of *karan* for Malati, but she had taken the whole lot with her into Anath's room. After groping around he found a little *karan* in a small earthen pot which was brought from Benares. He drank it at a gulp and then returned to his room chaining the door.

Malati's *karan*, however, made him a little tipsy, but could not induce sleep. Though his fatigue was slightly relieved, sleep eluded him. Sitting on the bed he kept gazing into the darkness outside.

At that time Malati's cry was heard. She was calling Heramba and Ananda's names at the top of her voice. They both rushed into her room at about the same time. Malati had messed up Anath's room which was rather clean, though unfurnished. There were dirty muddy foot prints all over the floor, in one corner of the room was a plate of food not eaten by her, peels of fruits and stones of mangoes were scattered all over the place. There was

a small pool of *karan* towards the drain. A pungent smell filled the whole room.

But Malati's appearance showed that she had not taken much *karan*. Her eyes were quite normal and her speech was rather distinct. She said, 'I can't sleep alone. I'm scared.'

Heramba asked, 'Why?'

Malati said, 'I don't know. I've my heart in my mouth. Come and sleep in this room.'

Heramba was embarrassed, 'What do you mean?'

Malati said, 'Very simple, I'm just saying that I'm scared, I can't stay here alone. Yet you ask why. Ananda, why don't you bring a broom and sweep the floor and then make the bed on it.'

Heramba said, 'Well, Ananda may sleep here. But I'd rather not.'

'Oh no,' said Malati, 'She is just a child. I can't stay here with her.'

Heramba looked at Ananda's face. But the expression on her face was of no help. Heramba said, 'Then let's go into another room. This one is not fit for sleeping.'

Malati said angrily, 'Don't talk nonsense, Heramba. Don't put on airs. Do as you are told. Ananda, go and get the broom, will you?'

Ananda got the broom and swept the floor. Heramba's bed was made in the direction of the temple. Ananda made her bed as far away as possible from Malati's bed. When Malati complained, she only said, 'I can't sleep if anyone lies down close to me.' When everybody was in bed, Malati said, 'You must be alert. Don't fail to respond if I call you.'

Heramba quipped, 'You want us to be ready to respond when you call us, how can we go to sleep then? I'd better sit up throughout the night.'

Malati said acidly, 'Don't try to be funny, Heramba. You're joking, when I'm at my wit's end.'

Heramba did not make any special effort to remain wakeful. It was certainly easier not to sleep than to keep a watch on the two women while trying to get some sleep.

Silence reigned in the room. Ananda was lying down, her face covered with her *anchal*. Her shadow cast on the wall by the glow of the lamp gave it an uncanny look. Within a few minutes it was not clear who was lying awake and who was sleeping in this room.

Malati very softly called, 'Heramba.'

'Don't worry. I'm awake.'

'Well, tell me please what should be done to find a missing person?'

'You should go around in search of him.'

'Will you go, Heramba? Please try to trace him. I shall bear the expenses.'

Heramba said in a tone of irritation, 'Do you think Mastermoshai is a kid who should be brought back by the scruff of his neck if he was found? You know him perfectly well. Is it possible to make him do anything against his will?'

Malati remained silent for sometime.

'Heramba.'

'Yes.'

'It is quite possible, isn't it, that he wants to come back now, though he feels too ashamed to do so? He is so headstrong, but he must be regretting his leaving home. Maybe he is just waiting for someone to call him back home.'

Heramba again said harshly, 'He may come back on his own. But if you search for him he may feel so annoyed that he wouldn't return at all.'

Malati was close to tears. She said in a tearful voice, 'Go to hell, you came here like an evil omen. The moment you came here, the head of the family disappeared. He had never done this before.'

Heramba again fell silent. Ananda said softly, 'Go to sleep, Mother.'

Malati rebuked her, 'I see you are listening to what I was saying.'

'Yes, I couldn't sleep because of your talking.'

Heramba was no end amazed when he found that Malati instead of using her familiar invictives, said very affectionately, 'Ananda, come here, darling, and lie down

beside me.'

Heramba was all the more amazed at Ananda's callousness. 'Stop being crazy at this unearthly hour of the night and go to sleep.'

Heramba saw for the first time that Malati took the scolding from her daughter very lightly. His head had started reeling by now. This Ashram was a cursed place, the air was polluted with Malati's repressed desire. If anyone had to spend here a wakeful night with Malati in the same room, he would definitely go mad. After a long pause, Malati said, 'Ananda dear, are you asleep?' Ananda did not respond. 'Heramba!' said Malati, sitting on the bed.

'I'm still awake.'

'I find it unbearable. I can't breathe here. I find it so stifling.'

'Unless you try to be patient—'

Malati cuts in, 'Don't say anything, Heramba. Please get up, but don't wake my daughter.'

Malati stood up and coming over to Ananda kept gazing intently at her daughter who was sleeping quietly. When Heramba came to her, she whispered, 'Look, her face is covered, can you uncover her face without waking her up? Let me have a look at her face.'

Heramba very carefully removed the *anchal* that covered her face. After taking a long look at Ananda's face, Malati touched her chin with her fingers and then kissed them. Then she tiptoed quietly out of the room.

She stopped in the garden, Heramba followed her silently. Malati untied her bunch of keys from the *anchal* and said, 'I'm going. Heramba.'

Heramba said in a quiet voice, 'Well, I'm leaving, too.'

Malati said, 'Are you also crazy? Ananda will be alone if you go. As if you've started caring more for me than for Ananda.'

Heramba said, 'How can I forget my responsibility? I can't let you go alone at this time of night.'

Malati said, 'Don't be silly, Heramba. I left home at dead of night when I was young. Mother, father, my

brothers and sisters—none could stop me. I've gone through hell, how can you stop me? Don't think that I'm thinking only of my own suffering. It won't do any good to Ananda if she lives with a mother like me. I drink *karan*, I'm eccentric. I'm insufferable. Your mastermoshai has ruined me completely.'

Heramba kept silent. There were scattered clouds in the sky driven by the wind. The roar of the sea could be heard from here.

'Please look after Ananda. Don't make her unhappy. Let me hope she wouldn't suffer the same fate as I did in the hands of your mastermoshai. I've left all my earnings here. You'll find some gold ornaments and silver utensils in the wooden almirah in my room. The longest key is meant for the almirah. There are seventeen gold coins in the brass pot just behind the seat of the idol in the temple, please take them and keep them properly in the room. Don't stay here long. Go to Calcutta as early as possible. Don't bother about the household god, I shall make some arrangement for the puja.'

Heramba asked, 'But where are you going?'

Malati said, 'Tell Ananda, I'm going to find his missing father. And if your mastermoshai ever comes back here, tell him I'm staying at the ashram of Gosai Thakur. If ever he dares to see me, I'll just set dogs on him.'

Malati began to walk. Stopping at the gate of the garden she turned round and said, "Go inside, Heramba. And look, are you really going to marry Ananda?"

—'Yes!'

'You'll have no problem. We both got married according to the cult of the Bairagis before Ananda was born. Heramba, I have still some witnesses, I tell you. One day I just wanted it, so I invited ten Vaisnavs to perform the ritual. If you just try to make her one of your own society,'—Malati tried with a wistful look to study the expression on Heramba's face in the darkness—'educated people are so different.'

Heramba seemed to agree, 'You're right Malati baudi.'

Malati stepped out on the road and started walking in the direction of the town.

Going inside the house Heramba saw Ananda sitting on the bed. He sat down next to her.

'Your mother has left in search of your father.'

'I know.'

'You were not sleeping, then?'

'Can anyone sleep in this mad house?' Heramba was taken aback at Ananda's way of talking. He expected Ananda to shed a few tears at the news of her mother's going away and not to forgive her for deserting her in this way. But there was not a sign of it in her eyes. She was supposed to be sleeping with her eyes closed, resting her head on a soft pillow. Instead, her eyes were shining with a new kind of brightness.

Heramba said, 'I tried hard to stop her. I even wanted to go with her—'

'Don't try to console me, please. I know everything. I heard from a distance.'

Heramba could not look at Ananda. He also stifled a wish to console her. It would be rather awkward now. Tomorrow it would be easier to look into her eyes, to talk to her, to play with her hair and plant a kiss on her pale cheek. But today nothing would be more awkward than showing affection and sympathy. Now they would have to sit through the rest of the night in a state of drowsiness. At the break of dawn he would not stay here even one hour in the putrid atmosphere of such a cursed house. He would go anywhere he liked with Ananda.

Ananda broke the silence, 'Do you know what I'm thinking?'

'What are you thinking, Ananda?'

'I'm wondering if I have a similar fate as mother's.'

Heramba said in a tone of apprehension.

'Don't think such things.'

Ananda lay down with her head on Heramba's lap. Her eyes were sparkling with suppressed excitement. Her pale cheeks showed a quick rush of blood and then its sudden disappearance.

'I have no longer any faith in providence. I've known you only recently, but I've already lost my peace of mind. Who knows what's going to happen next.'

‘Ananda, you’ll have peace of mind again.’ Ananda was not convinced.

‘Yes I know. But it will not last. Who knows, I’ll be a pain in your neck. In the first day of our love we soared so high, almost near the heaven. See, we’ve sunk so low.’

‘No, we haven’t sunk to such a level. You should say we have been dragged down here by people around us. Let me tell you we’ll again rise above everything. We’ll set up home away from the crowd, nobody will be able to disturb us.’

Ananda said, ‘We don’t need anyone to disturb us. Because we are human beings, we’d give each other enough trouble.’

‘Has Ananda lost her faith in man? Does she now hate man because all her dreams are dashed? Does she know now that man has no right to a higher kind of life? It is not her fault, if she has come round to this view after having been deceived by a lover who is past his youth,’ Heramba thought to himself. But he had cold feet when he came to think of the loss of his power to generate love as he showed in that evening when the moon was full. If only he could get back that feeling of bliss for tonight! Maybe that full-moon night would come in his life in the future. But how could he cheer up Ananda today?

After looking wistfully at Heramba’s face for a long while Ananda closed her eyes.

‘Are you falling asleep?’

Ananda said, ‘No.’

‘If you don’t sleep, why don’t you dance for me?’

Ananda’s eyes showed a sense of pleasant surprise, ‘Shall I dance?’ Heramba observed that blood rushed to her cheeks again in the twinkling of an eye. He also felt drawn to it.

‘Yes, Ananda, you should dance. We have become so listless, haven’t we? Let your dance make us both come alive again.’

Ananda sprang to her feet and said, ‘Right you are. Dancing will be good for us. Thank you for reminding me. If I dance, I’m sure my mind will be clean again, my

misery will come to an end.'

She gave a pull to her loosely tied braid, and her hair fell on her back. 'Let's go to the yard. I'll show you a dance you've never seen in your life. It will make your blood dance, too. Just look, my feet can't be controlled.'

This infectious exuberance of Ananda quickened the flow of blood in Heramba's veins like her own dance-hungry feet. Clasping each other's hand firmly they came and stood on the open yard. It was dry after the morning shower, but the tall monsoon grass all over the courtyard felt rather wet and cold. It was as if this soft soothing carpet was spread under the nocturnal sky only for Ananda's dance. 'Which dance would you like to do, Ananda? *Chandrakala*?'

'No, that is a dance for the full-moon. Tonight I'll show you a different dance.'

'What do you call it?'

'It is called the dance of the fairies. Fairies in the sky are very fond of the dance. But I must have enough light first.'

'I'm arranging for it. Don't worry, Ananda.'

After searching all the rooms Heramba brought three lanterns and a lamp. He lit them and placed them at equal intervals.

Ananda said, 'This light isn't bright enough. Do one thing. Get some firewood from the kitchen and then light a fire in an earthen vessel.'

'Dhuni, you mean?'

Ananda said impatiently, 'What are you waiting for? I'm not in a mood to speak, you know. If the fit on me is gone, I can't dance.'

Ananda was trembling all over with excitement. Heramba was a little shaken looking at Ananda's face. The melancholy that was writ large on her face last few days had vanished, and an effusion of a new kind of pleasure showed through her eyes. He did not find the courage to stand and stare for long at Ananda. He went into the kitchen and came back with a bundle of logs.

Ananda shouted, 'Bring more. Bring them all.'

'Why'

'Do please. I need more. The brighter the light the better the dance, you should know. Do the fairies dance in the dark.?"

He brought all the firewood he found in the kitchen and piled them on the yard. Though he felt secretly scary, he had no choice but to hold back his wish to protest. He did silently whatever Ananda ordered him to do; bringing a whole tin of *ghee* from Malati's room he poured all of it on the piles of logs, but could not help commenting :

'It will be a tremendous fire, Ananda.'

Ananda's answer was brief. 'It is just what I want.'

'People will come rushing here thinking that the house is on fire.'

'Where do you find people in this part? And let them come, if they want to. Come on, please, and light the wood.'

After lighting the fire Heramba stood near Ananda. The *ghee*-smeared logs burst into flames like the fire ritual of ancient times. The whole yard was lit up with a golden light. Ananda was thrilled at this.

'This is just the light I need.'

The wall on one side and the house on the other was suffused with the glow of the fire. It was not possible to guess how far the smell of burnt ghee was being carried by the wind. Heramba suddenly caught hold of one hand of Ananda. Ananda freed her hand and said, 'You sit on the steps and watch me dance. Don't you ever call me and please don't try to talk to me.'

Heramba sat on the step. Ananda was standing near the fire, so near that Heramba feared that she would get several burns before his eyes. But the elaborate preparation for the dance and Ananda's wild enthusiasm made Heramba speechless. He sat motionless like a wooden puppet looking helplessly at Ananda's pained expression in the heat of the fire.

Standing still for sometime before the fire Ananda took off her clothes one after another and threw them like offerings into the fire. She had a golden necklace with an

amulet, a ring of *tulsi* round her arms and gold bangles on her wrists. She took them off and threw them one by one into the fire. Heramba just could not figure out what kind of dance Ananda was going to perform without her clothes and ornaments.

Ananda began to walk at a slow pace round the fire. Her eyelids quivered rhythmically. This was also like the rhythm of the *chandralekha* dance. That dance infused life bit by bit into Ananda's body, tonight her dance increased its tempo in a similar manner. The quick movement of her body showed step by step the harmonious interactions of her limbs. Heramba could not perceive its source, he saw only a slow build-up of a total dance form. At first Ananda hung her hands very close to her body, but as she stretched her hands, moving up and down like a wave before the flickering light of the fire, her dance round the fire also increasingly quickened its tempo. Even a man who was not familiar with this dance would realize at this stage that it was the culmination of her dance. It gave Heramba a great sense of contentment. All his apprehension and fatigue and inertia gave way to a unique sense of fulfilment. He experienced something supernatural at the end of Ananda's first dance in front of the temple. Now he began to feel relieved and calm at the prospect of the return of the same experience.

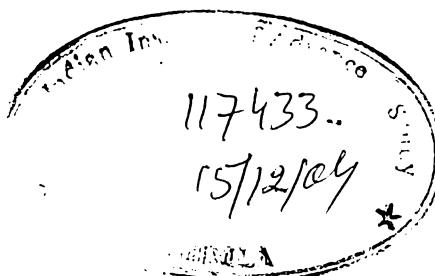
But this time, too, Ananda suddenly stopped her dance. Coming to the edge of the fire she stood still. The flames were shooting up far above her head and Ananda herself looked like a flame. Next moment she fell down sideways into this sacrificial fire of the fairies.

Heramba was transfixed to the spot, staring blankly. Nothing could be done. Ananda had long been dead. It was only her body that was waiting to climb the blazing pyre.

Glossary

<i>Anchal</i>	End of a sari
<i>Alurdom</i>	Spicy curry with unsliced potatoes
<i>Arati</i>	Ritual with lamps at a Hindu temple
<i>Baba</i>	A form of address for a yogi
<i>Baudi</i>	Elder brother's wife
<i>Bhakta</i>	Devotee
<i>Bhat</i>	Boiled rice
<i>Bairagi</i>	A monk belonging to the Vaisnav sect
<i>Chadar</i>	A piece of cloth for covering the upper part of the body
<i>Chhana</i>	A milk product for making sweets
<i>Chira</i>	Ground rice
<i>Chouki</i>	Cheap wooden bedstead
<i>Dada</i>	A form of address for an elderly man
<i>Dal</i>	A kind of pulse
<i>Daroga</i>	Sub-inspector of police in charge of a police station in Bengal before the partition.
<i>Debdasi</i>	A female devotee who dances at a Hindu temple
<i>Dhuni</i>	An incense burner
<i>Gandharaj</i>	A sweet smelling white flower
<i>Gamcha</i>	A kind of towel
<i>Garad</i>	A kind of silk fabric
<i>Ghee</i>	Clarified butter
<i>Guru</i>	A spiritual teacher
<i>Jamadar</i>	Head constable or a head sweeper
<i>Karan</i>	Wine offered to the gods
<i>Kanthi</i>	The holy basil-necklace worn by the Vaishnavas
<i>Khunti</i>	A cooking tool
<i>Mastermoshai</i>	A form of address for a tutor or school teacher
<i>Malpo</i>	A Bengali sweet

<i>Paran</i>	The first meal after the completion of a fast
<i>Pakha</i>	A hand fan
<i>Pranam</i>	To show respect by touching one's feet.
<i>Panchapradip</i>	A metal lamp with room for five wicks
<i>Prasad</i>	Food offered to the gods and then eaten by the devotees
<i>Naibedya</i>	Offering of rice and fruits to the gods
<i>Rasagullas</i>	A popular Bengali sweet
<i>Samadhi</i>	Loss of consciousness during meditation
<i>Sandesh</i>	A kind of sweet
<i>Sarbhaja</i>	A kind of sweet
<i>Siddhi</i>	A narcotic plant
<i>Shikhandi</i>	A mythical eunuch clad in sari
<i>Sloka</i>	Verse of Hindu scriptures
<i>Suji</i>	Ground wheat
<i>Tapasya</i>	A prolonged meditation to achieve one's objective
<i>Tantric</i>	Follower of the doctrines of a Hindu religious rite
<i>Tulsi</i>	Basil
<i>Urbashi</i>	A mythological woman of exceptional beauty



Divaratrir Kavya, despite its title, is not concerned with the poetry of love ; rather it interrogates Bengali reader's romantic perceptions. Within its short span the novel seems to intertwine the psychological, the philosophical and the symbolist perspectives on a solid base of realism. It shows something of Tolstoy's concern in *Anna Karenina* for the question of family happiness (as in the case of Anath-Malati and Supriya-Ashok episodes) and something of the supreme unconcern of Camus' hero in *The Outsider* for traditional conception of human bondage (as in the case of Heramba). No other novel in Bengali of its time raises so many questions about love and marriage, intellect and passion, life and death, sex and religious ritual.

Manik Bandyopadhyay (1908-1956), an eminent Bengali novelist and short story writer dedicated himself completely to creative writing since his first story published in 1928. His major works are *Putulnacher Itikatha* (The Puppet's Tale) 1936, *Padmanadir Majhi* (The Boatman of the Padma) 1937, *Pragaitihasik* (Primeval) 1937 including this novel *Divaratrir Kavya* (1935) which he wrote only at twenty one. Besides these he has written quite a number of novels and short stories.

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