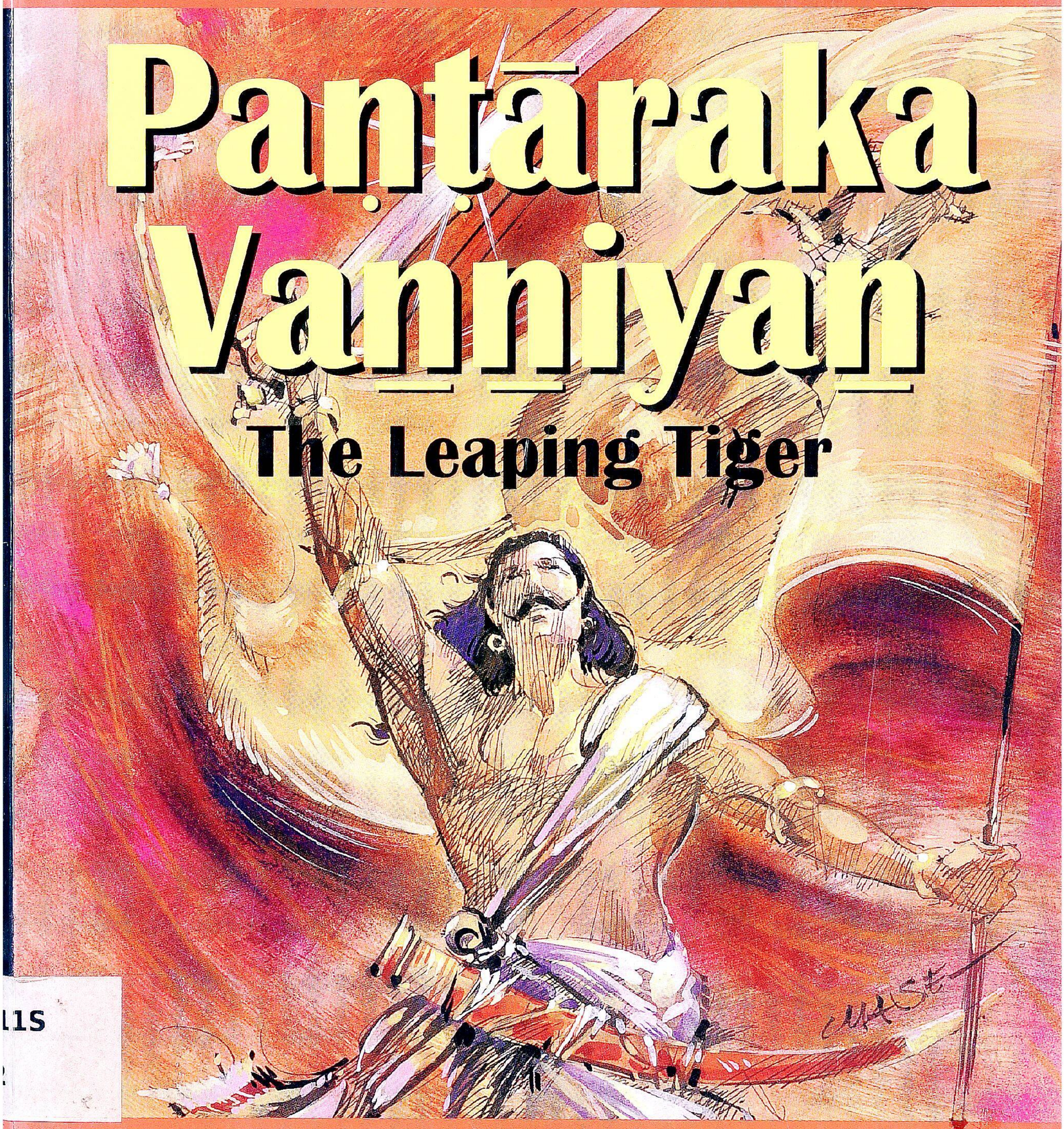
Kalaignar in English Translation

Pantāraka Vanniyan

The Leaping Tiger



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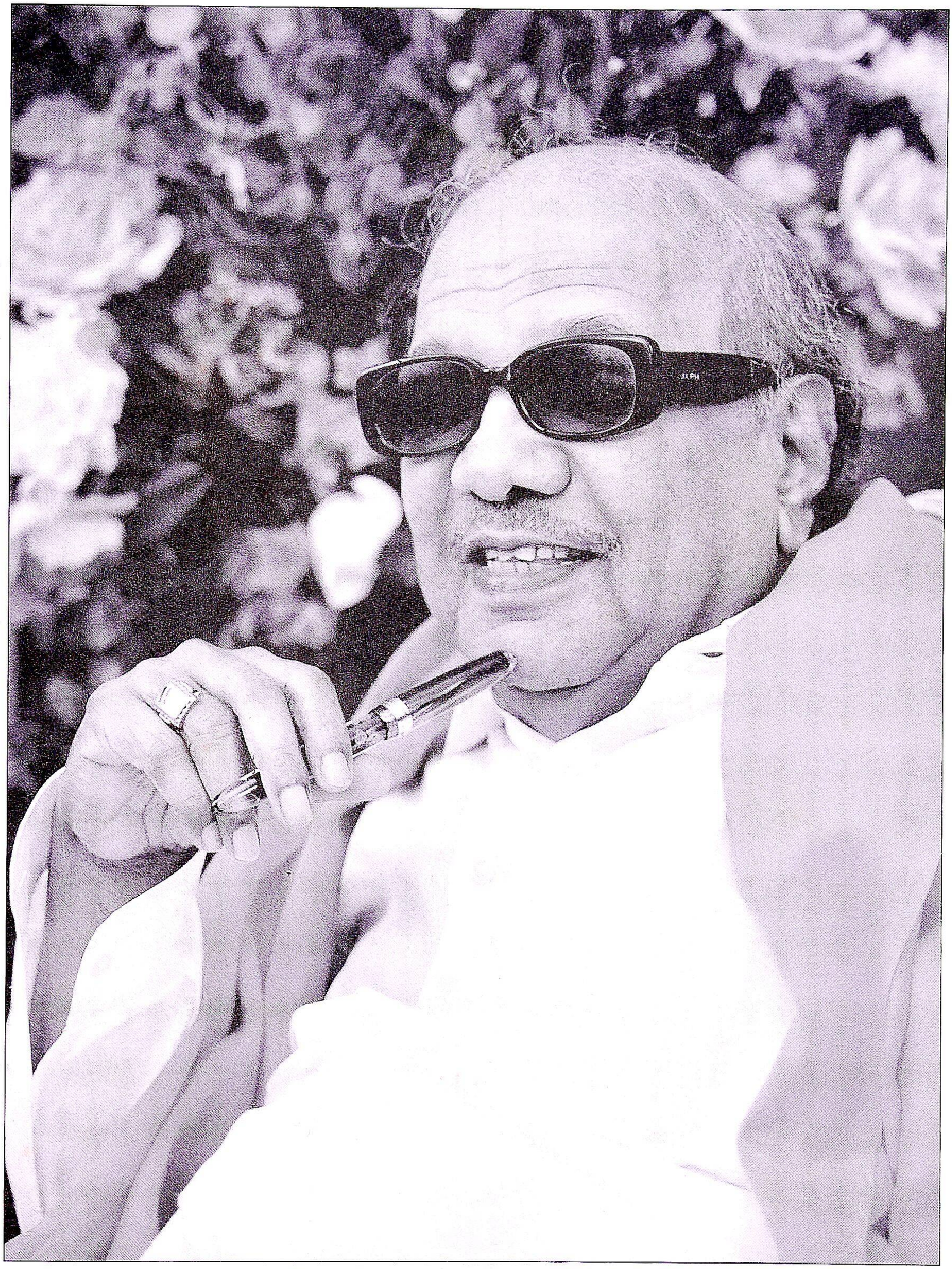
BHARATHIAR UNIVERSITY

Be they his critical expositions of the ancient Tamil classics such as Tirukkuṟaḷ and Tolkāppiyam or historical novels like Rōmāpurip Pāṇṭiyaṉ and Pāyum Puli Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ – Kalaiñar M Karunanidhi is passionately concerned with art as 'work' rather than art as 'play'. He examines the literary or historical material in order to see what the past can convey beyond its own time to the present. In fact, most of Kalaiñar's writings come to reveal their meanings through a historicist reading.

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ the Leaping Tiger is a moving saga of a Sri Lankan Tamil freedom fighter, whose life and exploits define the freedom movement of the day in this island country. Kalaiñar's brilliant inventiveness and narrative skill encompasses a wide spectrum of events and personalities drawn from history and imagination and weaves them into a tale of gripping read. There is Kalaiñar's finest stroke of genius that establishes a narrative link between the protagonist Paṇṭārakaṉ of Sri Lanka and the mainland Tamil freedom fighter Vīrapāṇṭiya Kaṭṭapomman, thereby envisioning a larger picture of the freedom movement launched very early by the Tamil heroes. The novel is a fictional record of the contribution of the Tamils to the composite freedom movement, and to the making of the modern multiethnic Sri Lanka as well.

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Dr Kalaignar M. Karunanidhi

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Kalaignar in English Translation

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ the Leaping Tiger

8832

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Coimbatore, India

MACMILLAN

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First published 2009

MACMILLAN PUBLISHERS INDIA LTD
Delhi Bangalore Chennai Kolkata Mumbai
Ahmedabad Bhopal Chandigarh Coimbatore Cuttack
Guwahati Hubli Hyderabad Jaipur Lucknow Madurai
Nagpur Patna Pune Thiruvananthapuram Visakhapatnam

8832

Companies and representatives throughout the world

ISBN 10: 0230 639240
ISBN 13: 978 0230639249

894.8113 P
KAR

Published by Rajiv Beri for Macmillan Publishers India Ltd
2/10, Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi 110 002

Typeset by Bharati Composers
159/1, Pocket D-6, Sector-6, Rohini, Delhi 110 085

Cover Picture : Maniam Selven

Printed by S.M. Yogan at Macmillan India Press, Chennai 600 041

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M. Karunanidhi
Chief Minister

Secretariat
Chennai – 600 009
Date: 12.05.2009

Foreword

I am extremely happy to know that Bharathiar University, Coimbatore, has taken the initiative to bring out a selection of my writings in English.

Bharatidasan, a formidable revolutionary poet, instilled in the Tamils an intense love for Tamil in such exhortations as

May you thunder, O Conch!
That the never diminishing Tamil
Is our life-breath and our prosperity.

Periyar E.V. Ramasamy and Perarignar Anna devoted their entire lives to promote among the Tamils an awareness of the dignity of their race. Following in their footsteps, from my childhood to this day I have immersed myself in the task of writing in order to keep the Tamil youth ever vigilant because of my desire that the Tamil land and the Tamil society should progress rising to the level of the rest of mankind. With this end in view, my writings have taken numerous forms such as poetry, drama, fiction, essay, epistle and travelogue.

Many have admiringly observed and continue to observe that my literary output has also contributed to the onward march of the Tamils in several spheres. In such a context, let me unreservedly and to my heart's content praise Bharathiar University, especially its Vice Chancellor, Dr G. Thiruvasagam, for his efforts to publish the most significant of those writings in English.

My thoughts have always centred round the idea that the Tamils should awaken and that the Tamil land should achieve worldwide progress. May these translations effectively serve that cause dear to my heart!

To
Dr G. Thiruvasagam
Vice Chancellor
Bharathiar University
Coimbatore

அன்புடையவன்

(M. Karunanidhi)

Vice Chancellor's Note

There is a close parallel between the nationalist Tamil poet Subramania Bharathi (after whom this University is named) and Kalaignar M. Karunanidhi in that both of them have a deep-rooted conviction in art being an agent of social transformation and the writings of both seek to release people from the shackles of slavery and show them the way of dignity and self-respect.

Bharathiar firmly believed that at the root of all social problems lay the evil of the caste system. All his life, he stressed that there were only two castes – the righteous and the unrighteous, the former superior and the latter inferior. A standing example of the might of the pen over the sword, Bharathiar's writings played a very significant role not only in gaining freedom for India from foreign yoke but also in unfettering his countrymen from the utterly dehumanizing beliefs and practices of the Indian society.

Kalaignar, remaining in the forefront of the fight against social inequality in all its forms, is a writer with ingrained social consciousness and has fathered numerous social reforms as the head of the government and as the leader of a political party, thanks to which people from the sections of the society once looked down as being incapable of thought and knowledge are today intellectuals, professionals and leaders of men.

A grand fusion of Periyar, Anna and Bharathiar, Kalaignar stands as a towering personality. Kalaignar now at 86, age has not withered his intellect nor has time made his writings stale.

Determined to secure a presence for Tamil literature and culture on the global scene, this University has already translated Bharathi's poems into English and conferred the"Bharathi Tamil Chemmal"award on Kalaignar in 2007, the University's Silver Jubilee year. The present endeavour, translation of Kalaignar's works into English, is a major step towards realizing this goal.

G. Thiruvasagam

Prologue

Kalaignar M. Karunanidhi's literary works in English translation should constitute a gift of the Tamil language to world literature.

In so far as Kalaignar is both a visionary writer and an active practitioner of his vision, he is a phenomenon unto himself, standing a rung or two above his fellow artists of all genres.

Kalaignar's significance in the history of Tamil literature primarily lies in his restoration and renewal of the pristine glory of Tamil, the language that is the mother of the Dravidian family of languages and that is one of the primary classical languages of the world.

Kalaignar's creativity began to manifest in his concern for the ethnic identity of the Tamils and the aesthetic exuberance of the Tamil language, and today it has matured into a seminal contribution to world literature.

Looked at the need for winning international recognition for Tamil literature, especially in the context of the other pan-Indian language, Sanskrit, enjoying worldwide attention and study, the present translations of Kalaignar's selected works into English are an attempt in the right direction.

Such of these translations are also a need of the hour for the Tamil language to demonstrate its capacity for indestructibility and rejuvenation, at this hour of the prognosticatory threat of the social scientists that globalization would in its wake see the languages of ethnic communities either wear off or die out.

Kavipperarasu Vairamuthu

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Introduction

Kalaignar M. Karunanidhi, born in 1924 in a hamlet of Thanjavur in the southern part of India, has eminently succeeded in making spectacular contributions both as a statesman and as a man of letters. His has been a full life providing ample space for diplomacy, social reformation and creative writing. Neither a philosopher nor a full-fledged academic living in an ivory tower, he has the courage and the wisdom to think and to act remarkably. A prolific writer endowed with unusual powers of observation and meditation, he has been ceaselessly adorning his beloved Mother Tamil with a steady stream of writings, leaving no genre untouched. It may be poetry or prose, song or verse, essay or story, play or fiction, social novel or historical novel, creative writing or criticism, memoir or autobiography, script for a film or a play, broadcast or speech – he can handle it with astonishing ease. What he has written till today may run to more than fifty volumes of 300 to 400 pages each.

What Karunanidhi states in the first volume of his autobiography about the year in which he was born is a telling comment on the ethos of the times as well as on the political, social and cultural forces that moulded his world-view. That was a year that witnessed momentous events. Lenin, the supreme architect of the communist revolution in Russia, died and Stalin came to power. Trotsky's advocacy of violent worldwide revolution was abandoned in favour of Stalin's plan for *"socialism in one country"* and the communist leaders decided to adapt the movement to the differing situations in various countries. Turkey became a republic under the presidentship of Kemal Ataturk during whose fifteen-year reign, the country's political and economic structure as well as its religious and social bases was totally transformed. Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, written during his incarceration in Bavaria, preaching anti-semitism, power worship and disdain for morality and outlining his strategy for world domination later became the bible of

the Nazi party. Since all the empires had been weakened by the first world war, many colonies boldly rose in revolt against them.

When Nazism, Fascism and Communism were becoming prominent in the West, Gandhian ideology started taking shape in India. It was in 1924 that Gandhiji, released from prison, became the President of the Indian National Congress and Jawaharlal Nehru was elected its General Secretary. India had awakened from its deep slumber and Gandhiji's appearance on the political scene electrified the Indian masses. The Belgaum Congress meet had the party's future course of action mapped out. Though most of the Indian political leaders were unanimous in their view that the British should be driven away from the country, they were hopelessly divided with regard to the strategies to be developed for dealing with the foreign power. The labour unions in the country were gradually becoming stronger and stronger. The feudal lords and zamindars were waging a losing battle against the tillers of the soil. If in the south seeds were sown for organized fights for social justice, in the north there appeared signs of disruption of communal harmony.

It was in 1924 that Periyar E.V. Ramasami planned an epic battle against the evil of untouchability that later earned him the title of Vaikkam Hero. Besides laying a firm foundation for the labour movement in Tamilnadu, Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundara Mudaliyar became a fierce fighter for the country's freedom. Finally, Karunanidhi significantly adds that it was the year in which "the revolutionary of revolutionaries, who dispelled the thousand-year-old darkness of the Tamil land," Arignar Anna, was a high school student equipping himself for the historic role he was going to play.

In this chronicle he is able to identify, of course with the benefit of hindsight, the intellectuals and men of action who later became his models as well as those against whom he had to define himself. Though all those personalities, movements, parties and ideologies might have attracted his attention at an impressionable age, he was going to choose Periyar and not Gandhiji, Arignar Anna and not Jawaharlal Nehru, the party wedded to Dravidian ideals and not the Congress, Periyar's Marxism and not Nehruvian socialism, and Tamilnadu and not India. To him, as to his guides and companions in the Dravidian Movement, the social and cultural emancipation of the Dravidians was of greater importance than even the political freedom of the country.

Even as a fourteen-year-old adolescent, Karunanidhi was captivated by the self-respect movement of Periyar E.V. Ramasami, whose fiery speeches and writings exerted an irresistible influence on several thousands of young men and women of Tamilnadu during the early decades of the twentieth century. To the politically, socially, economically and culturally oppressed of the Tamil land,

Periyar appeared as a new messiah who could save them from the atrocities perpetrated against them in the name of religion. His words and deeds, ideas and activities, principles and practices took the southern part of India by storm as he travelled the length and breadth of it tirelessly, asking the Dravidians to become aware of their racial identity and to boldly fight for their release from the shackles of slavery, superstition and inferiority complex which, in his view, had been the handiwork of an alien race. The young Karunanidhi was one of his prize catches.

If Periyar's thoughts made an indelible impression on him, Arignar Anna's powerful oratory became a perennial source of inspiration. He thoroughly soaked himself in Anna's speeches and writings, committed numerous admirable utterances of his to memory and revelled in quoting them as often as possible. When it came to his own speeches, he didn't slavishly imitate Anna but scrupulously developed a distinct style of his own. If Anna's ornate and colourful prose is almost verse and if every paragraph of his can be turned into a *viruttappā* by a few slight modifications, Karunanidhi's prose is punchy, heavily ironic and full of witticisms. If every sentence in the former's speech, having a lyrical charm of its own, is a case of "linked sweetness long drawn out," every sentence in the latter's speech moves fast and quickly reaches its carefully planned climax. If Anna's mastery of Tamil prose is almost unsurpassed, every speech of Karunanidhi is a sparkling performance. One would be reminded of the comparison Dryden draws between Demosthenes and Cicero:

> One warms you by degrees; the other sets you on
> fire all at once and never intermits his heat. ...
> One persuades, the other commands.

Of all the modern poets, it was Bharatidasan, the organ voice of the Dravidian movement, who won his heart by a poetry that galvanized the Tamils into action. He can use Bharatidasan's similes, phrases, lines and whole poems to dramatic effect in his own speeches and dialogues for films. Inspired by Bharatidasan's play *Iraṇiyaṉ allatu Iṇaiyaṟṟa Vīraṉ*, he reconstructed the myths relating to Ravana, Vali, Hiranya and Indrajit. The Dravidian stance on many more legends, myths, literary representations and historical personages was later exquisitely articulated by Karunanidhi in different genres and modes.

Kalaignar's lack of college education or of classroom learning of ancient Tamil writings never stood in the way of his becoming an accomplished writer and competing with the university wits of his time. Energetic and strenuous self-schooling more than made up for it. Plunging into studies of classical and modern Tamil works, he got as much out of them as any contemporary Tamil scholar

could. He took to *Tolkāppiyam, Tirukkuṟaḷ, Eṭṭuttokai, Pattuppāṭṭu, Cilappatikāram, Maṇimēkalai, Kaliṅkattupparaṇi* and Sundaraṉāṟ's *Maṉōṉmaṇiyam* just as fish take to water, and a sound knowledge of these stood him in good stead by shaping his vision of life and having quite an impact on the texture of his prose and poetry. Besides writing learned expositions of some of these texts, he could provide new renderings of many of these into lucid modern Tamil so that they could easily reach the masses. Because of his re-presentations of *Tirukkuṟaḷ* in more than one form, Tiruvalluvar became a household name in Tamilnadu.

There is no simple yardstick with which the performance of any writer can be assessed. It has to vary from group to group if not from individual to individual for there are writers and writers. Their missions vary; their methods differ. Gandhiji was a prolific writer but would never claim the title of an artist. Among those that have produced many works of lasting value, there have been political revolutionaries such as Lenin, Trotsky and Mao Tse-Tung, political theorists such as Hobbes, Thomas Paine and Karl Marx, statesmen such as Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill and Malraux, philosophers such as Voltaire, Bertrand Russell and Sartre, activists such as Mahatma Gandhi, Periyar E.V. Ramasami and Martin Luther King and scientists such as Charles Darwin, Julian Huxley and Einstein. The writings of these can't be measured against those of creative artists such as Flaubert, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, who firmly believed that artistry was of primary importance and that their loyalty to language came before everything else.

Karunanidhi is almost equally split between his responsibilities to art and politics. He may be in or out of power; he may be the Chief Minister of Tamilnadu or the Leader of the Opposition but his creative vigour shows no signs of abating. The older he grows, the more voluminous the literary output happens to be. For the life, career and achievement of Karunanidhi, we can find three amazingly close parallels in contemporary world histoy: Arthur Koestler, Pablo Neruda and Wole Soyinka. Koestler, who, interestingly begins his autobiography with an account of what happened in different parts of the world on his birthday, was a communist when he was in his twenties, left the party during the Stalin purge trials, became an influential spokesman of the non-communist left and is now remembered for his writings characterized by an impressive journalistic style and a sense of commitment. Neruda earned a name as a poet, diplomat and communist leader, received the Nobel Prize for literature while serving as ambassador to France and is known for his highly personal poetry in the collection *Twenty Love Poems and One Song of Despair* and for his writings that glorify his home country's landscape and condemn the exploitation of the Red Indians. Soyinka, a Nigerian

revolutionary, playwright, poet and novelist, has won international acclaim for his writings which combine Western and Yoruba traditions.

Karunanidhi's writings, dashed off in the white heat of inspiration in the midst of a hectic schedule, are in Tamil, at once a classical and modern language that has, because of several centuries of constant use, become a supple medium of prose and verse. They have to be made available in English if the world at large, especially the West, has to recognize their power and glory.

Prof. P. Marudanayagam

Preface

The versatile genius of Dr M. Karunanidhi the *literati*, fondly called Kalaiñar in Tamiḻ, has expressed itself in various domains of the Tamiḻ life from self-respect movement to philosophical schools of thought through the literary, social, political, economic and educational mappings of Tamiḻ Nāṭu. A person of prolific output in all his endeavours, his literary output comprises not only various genres but also a wide spectrum of themes from the pre-historical down to the most recent issues of relevance to the man on the street as well as to those at the highest echelons of the society.

Kalaiñar Karunanidhi has always been comfortable with any subject about which he has been writing in whatever form, right from his letters to his party cadre in *Murasoli* up to the most complex literary creations. Though he is classed with the Dravidian school of writers in Tamiḻ, he has transcended the boundaries of any school of writers that can be reduced to a name. A person of prolific reading through the gamut of Tamiḻ literature with fairly frequent streaks through world literature in translation as well as in the original, Dr M. Karunanidhi has become a school by himself.

Tamiḻ as a classical language has the privilege of having profound literature especially in poetic form going back beyond recorded history. Extant pieces of classical Tamiḻ literature go back to Caṅkam age passing on to the age of devotional literature through the age of the epics, with an intervening period of a considerable number of years of the rule of the Kaḷappira kings. Though in the same language, that there is a missing link between the Caṅkam and the devotional literature in Tamiḻ is fairly obvious in that they appear to be totally different lieratures with the language and metrical composition alone marking them as the literature of the same people. In the absence of recorded historical evidence, what might have happened during the intervening period remains anybody's guess. And again, between the age of devotional literature and modern Tamiḻ literature, there

is a dearth of literature *per se* and this period was marked by experiments in writing particularly during the period close to the modern days. When modern Tamiḻ literature evolved, there was such a resurgence that it came to assimilate the tradition of the classical Tamiḻ literature along with Sanskrit and European literatures owing to the onset of the northern ritualistic orthodox Hinduism as well as the heterodox Buddhist and Jain influences in Tamiḻ Nāṭu on the one hand, and on the other European intrusion into the East in general and India in particular and its aftermath including the evolving of a national political conscience. Another significant influence was the rediscovery of the classical literature in Tamiḻ by U.V. Saminatha Aiyar and its availability in print, contributing to a sense of distinct Tamiḻ conscience. It is in such a general context that modern Tamiḻ literature is to be understood for what it has become.

The versatility of Subramania Bharathi, for example, owes to the versatility of his own distinctive genius as well as to the diversity of the influences on Tamiḻ literature. Thus, when the Dravidian literature and movement came to be, there was a certain sense of pride about Tamiḻ literature as well as Tamiḻ culture and tradition leading to revivalistic literature. Dr M. Karunanidhi is one of the foremost in the domain of revivalistic literature.

Post-Independence literature in Tamiḻ acquired many dimensions and perhaps Tamiḻ literature in post-Independence India is one of the most complex confluences of political, social, domestic, international, and other currents. The historical novel has been the most powerful literary genre at the service of the Dravidian movement. It was immensely successful in popularising the golden era in the history of the Tamiḻ people. The portrayal of a heroic past and the courageous deeds of various mythical, legendary and historical Tamiḻ kings and chieftains has contributed to the propagation of a Dravidian Tamiḻ identity. The golden era along with the uniqueness of the Tamiḻ language was part of the Dravidian ideology. If the Caṅkam epoch symbolised the purity of the Tamiḻ language and culture, it was the epoch of the Chola kingdom that symbolised the golden era. Many novels were about that zenith of Tamiḻ power when the military and naval might of the Chola kingdom subjugated many parts of southeast Asia. The armies of the Chola kingdom marched with the flag which writers and poets of the Dravidian renaissance transformed into the symbol of Tamiḻ might, the flag of the leaping tiger.

Krishnamurthy, writing under the pen-name Kalki, and Rangabashyam, writing under the pen-name Santilyan had been the forerunners in the domain of historical fiction in Tamiḻ. There had been later day historical fiction by a handful of writers. Kalki had almost only one item on his agenda as a historical writer and that was the recreation of the splendour and valour of the characters of the aristocracy and

nobility of the Tamiḻs in context with a certain accuracy of imagination that was phenomenal. Santilyan, on the other hand, was interested in making a romance of historical fiction that made a few critics class his writings as pulp fiction, which estimate, however, would be to underestimate the scholarship that had gone into the making of his works. While Kalki addressed the elite audience, Santilyan addressed diverse audience, each finding something that appeals to the personal sentiments and passions in an inimitable manner. Kalki who wrote earlier than Santilyan was inspired by Dumas, Austen, et al. Santilyan's models and inspiration were from the next generation of historical fiction writers such as Rafael Sabatini, Stanley Weyman, etc. Kalaiñar M. Karunanidhi as a historical writer is distinctly different from the two. He refers to the past with a particular appeal for its relevance to the present.

Pāyum Puli Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ is a novel that celebrates the valiant life of a Lankan martyr who had fought against the Portuguese and the British in Lanka during the sixteenth century. For those in India, Western rule meant the rule by the British. That the Portuguese and the Dutch had also exercised military and political power on the land is but a peripheral detail in the general context of the activities of the East India Company and the British government in India. The story is different when it pertains to Lanka. It is said that long before the 'Silk Route' was used, the enterprising Dravidian merchants were sailing around the Indian coast and to the Persian Gulf as early as 3500 BC. The voyages of ancient Tamiḻs towards the East of India had been instances of political, cultural and incidental trade significance. The stake of India in the spice cauldron of the Far East was more of trade and adventure than spreading of religion or culture. So much so, when the ancient Tamiḻs set sail from the east coast of Tamiḻ Nāṭu towards the West, they went through Lanka and thus came to establish their political authority over the Island. What is more relevant to the context of the story of *Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ* is that the 'Island-Paradise' and the 'Pearl of the Indian Ocean' that Lanka had been, during the 15th century, there was an advent of the Westerners into the island. G.K.Rajasuriyar writes:

> They (the Europeans) came from distant lands from the West in sail boats by the hundreds, in quest of that elusive commodity called spices - of pepper and cinnamon - and the lure of pearls, gold and the gems of Ceylon. They called it adventure, but the abject greed that overtook their good intentions made them commit the most heinous crimes against the people they came in contact with, all in the name of the wealth of the East and attended with such barbarity contrary to Christian teachings they set sail to propagate.

The story of the Portuguese and the Dutch presence in Lanka, monitored from their bases in Tamiḻ Nāṭu is intertwined with political, religious and commercial intricacies. During those days of such manoeuvrings, the chieftains of the Vaṉṉi region had played a significant role for the preservation of native rights and interests. G.K. Rajasuriyar writes :

The chequered history of the Vanni during the ancient kings of Ceylon and the period of foreign occupation could be better understood in the words of Tennent. Of its history no satisfactory record survives, beyond the ascertained fact that, after the withdrawal of the Sinhalese sovereigns from their Northern Capitals in the fourteenth century, and the abandonment of their deserted country to the Malabars, the latter disorganised and distracted in turn by the ruin they themselves had made, were broken up into small principalities under semi-independent chiefs, and of these the Vanni was one of the last that survived the general decay.

Be that as it may, the wilds of the Vanni were never tamed by either the Tamil or Sinhalese kings. It was a buffer-state to both these kingdoms from time immemorial and it was referred to as the ' ADANKAPATTU', the rebellious state. The Vanni was colonised by Tamil colonists from Southern India by the kings of Jaffnapattinam. They consisted of all castes from Vellalas. During times of war, whether caused by internal dissension or external threats, the kings of Jaffna found the Vanni as a safe haven of refuge. They hid their crown jewels in the wilds of the Vanni when there were any signs of war. A relic of the past has been recorded by Lewis as follows:

The division of 'Cheddikulam is said to have been colonised previous to this in Kaliyuga 3348 by a Chetty from Madura, who with some Parava pearlfishers had been wrecked on the coast of Ceylon'.(MVD,p 12). It is also stated that the Portuguese occupied Cheddikulam and that some of the old maps have the place marked as 'Parangicheddikulam'. According to the Yalpana Vaipava Malai, Kulakkodan Maharajah of Kaveri came to Ceylon in 436 AD, on a pilgrimage to Trincomalee and Tampalakaman and repaired the temple at the latter place.

He then cultivated seven large tracts of land and planted all kinds of fruits and established fertile fields. Having done this he got down Vanniyas from the coast of South India and placed them in charge of these cultivations to upkeep the temples from the income from these fields and the fruit groves. As warring Turkey was the 'sick-man of Europe', so too were the Vanniyars a thorn on the side of the kings of Jaffna and Kandy. During

the reign of Varotaya Singhai Ariyan alias Segarajasegaren (1302 AD), as the Vanniyars were inciting the Sinhalese subjects in the Jaffnapattinam to rise in revolt, the Tamil King Segarajasegaren succeeded in reducing them to subjection 'rapine and plunder'.The Sinhalese King declined to assist the Vanniyars in their campaign against the King of Jaffnapattinam. The Vannis then made peace with their neighbours but had to pay tribute to the King of Jaffnapattinam.

With the capture of the kingdom by the Portuguese, the Vanni was under their control and 'Parangicheddiculam' of the Vanni may have been the fort of the Portuguese. With the arrival of the Dutch on the scene they were only able to exact yearly tribute of 42 elephants. About the year 1782 the continued conflicts came to an end when the Dutch once and for all defeated the Vanniyars. Every foreign power found the Vanniyars a formidable foe and this could be explained in the words of Lewi: 'It is characteristic of the spirit of this people that the Dutch met nowhere a more determined resistance than from one of the native princesses, the Vannichi Maria Sembatte, whom they were obliged to carry away as prisoner, and to detain in captivity in the fort of Colombo'.(MVD,p 17 & 18).

The Vanniyars, thence commenced to live a wild and marauding life and carried on a predatory warfare against the Dutch in Mannar and Trincomalee and even penetrated to the Jaffna Peninsula. The Dutch had to build forts along the river to keep them at bay. Even with the advent of the British, Pandara Vanniyan started a revolt to expel them from his district with the assistance of the Kandyans. He attacked the government house in Mullaitevu and drove out the garrison which was under the command of one Captain Drieberg and seized the fort. The victory of the Vanniyars was shortlived. Three detachments from Jaffna, Mannar and Trincomalee were despatched and the Vanniyars were defeated in the Mannar district.. Although Pandara Vanniyan was active again, his grandiose scheme to rule the Vanni faded away.

It is this point of the history of Lanka pitted against the British that Kalaiñar Karunanidhi has made a novel of. The novel presents the last few years in the life of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. Kalaiñar begins the novel with an account of the visit of an envoy from Vīrapāṇṭiya Kaṭṭabommaṉ to Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ in the context of political uncertainty at the kingdom of Kaṇṭi. Prompted by the message from Vīrapāṇṭiya Kaṭṭabommaṉ, Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ makes a trip to Kaṇṭi. He is instrumental in a marriage of political expediency between Vikramarāja Siṅghē and the daughter of Pilimataḷāvai, the first *adikār* of Kaṇṭi. Betrayed by

his wife into believing that she had been killed by him, Vikramarāja Siṅghē is reduced to the status of the king of Kaṇṭi only by title and Pilimataḷāvai assumes all political powers. The subsequent death of his daughter at the hands of the pervert of a British Governor at Colombo leads to the British attack on Kaṇṭi which is defeated with the help of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ and his army. Thereafter Paṇṭ āraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ stays back at Kaṇṭi for an unduly long time which leads to certain permutations and combinations in the military equations finally resulting in the defeat of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. Such is the story the novel unfolds.

The inventiveness of Kalaiñar Karunanidhi goes into creating principal characters like Kuruvicci Nācciyār, Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's fiancée; Nalla Nācciyār and Umaicci Nacciyār, Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's sisters; Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ, Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's rival; Lord North, the British Governor at Colombo; Piyacīli, the daughter of Pilimataḷāvai. These characters play an organic role in the development of the plot of the novel. Each of these characters is created with a certain uniqueness that is unmistakable in its appeal of appetency or aversion. With minor characters like Caṅkili, Taṇikai, Marttaṇi, Van Dreberg, Edward Madge, General McDowell and others whose roles in the novel make them not only realistic but also functionally indispensable, the plot weaves its way through interesting episodes that bring out elements of heroism, valour, patriotism, romance, affection, deception, perversion, indulgence, connivance, betrayal, military expediency, poetic justice, pity, frustration, simpleton affection, resolve and many such kaleidoscopic twists of the drama of human psychology each consistently developed in accordance with the delineation of the characters who make their inimitable presence in the novel. In short, the novel provides a huge corpus to anyone who will be interested in the various manifestations of human psychology.

Incidental to such brilliant art that has gone into the making of the novel, the finest stroke of the genius of Kalaiñar Karunanidhi is to be found in his bringing in the drama of the uprise of Vīrapāṇṭiya Kaṭṭapommaṉ in Tamiḻ Nāṭu against the British by virtue of his contemporaneity with Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. In fact, Cuntaraliṅkam, the envoy from Vīrapāṇṭiya Kaṭṭapommaṉ to Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉ-iyaṉ, is a veritable personification of empathy that exists between the Tamiḻs in Tamiḻ Nāṭu and the Lankan Tamiḻs.

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Transliteration Key

Vowels

Short		Long	
அ	a	ஆ	ā
இ	i	ஈ	ī
உ	u	ஊ	ū
எ	e	ஏ	ē
ஒ	o	ஓ	ō

ஐ ai

ஔ au

Consonants

Hard		Soft		Medial	
க்	k	ங்	ṅ	ய்	y
ச்	c	ஞ்	ñ	ர்	r
ட்	ṭ	ண்	ṇ	ல்	l
த்	t	ந்	n	வ்	v
ப்	p	ம்	m	ழ்	ḻ
ற்	ṟ	ன்	ṉ	ள்	ḷ

Āytam

ஃ ḵ

1 Preamble

From wheresoever valour, prudence and sacrifice may shine, I have always been enthusiastic to make an epic of the same.

Particularly, when the valour, prudence and sacrifice happen to be the assets of the Tamiḻs, I have always been particular that they should not be lost in the annals of time, uncared for.

It is out of such concern that I have been able to write the long and noble novel *Rōmāpurip Pāṇṭiyaṉ,* based on the ancient history of the Tamiḻs. And it was followed by *Teṉpāṇṭic Ciṅkam,* chronicling the life of a latter-day Tamiḻ, and *Poṉṉar Caṅkar,* a novel made out of the Tamiḻ legends celebrating the valour of the brothers by the same names.

It is a similar concern that has made me try my hand in presenting the valiant life of the Lankan martyr, Paṇṭārakaṉ, under the title *Pāyum Puli Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ.*

About six years ago (1982), the District Development Council of Wavuniya in Lanka had made arrangements for installing a statue of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ at Kaṟcilai Maṭuvu in the district. I sent a message of appreciation to the souvenir brought out on the occasion, which ran as follows:

I am immensely happy that the District Development Council, with our dear friend and the Member of the Sri Lankan Parliament T. Sivachithambaram and others as members, have decided to install a statue of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ, the valiant martyr in the battle for freedom who fought until his last breath inspired by the pledge "It is freedom if there be, or else no life!" and whose mettle matches that of Vīrapāṇṭiya Kaṭṭapommaṉ in Tamiḻnāṭu who fought against the British and sacrificed his life. I understand that a *Muttamiḻ Viḻā* (Celebration of the Threefold Tamiḻ) is also to be held on the occasion. It is appreciated that this occasion bears witness to the fact that

even if the present fails to honour martyrdom, the future would certainly pay its due.

Right from then on, I have been interested in collecting information about the great hero from various sources. Such information was, however, not readily available.

Professor Dr Vithyananthan, the Vice Chancellor of the Yāḻppāṇam University, addressed the meeting on the occasion of the installation of the statue and said,

> Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ is the great hero who fought against the British to the end to uphold the dignity of Aṭaṅkāpparṟu in the Vaṉṉi region. He was a patriotic ruler interested in the welfare of the people. Van Dreburg, the English lieutenant, installed a stone inscription to celebrate his victory over Paṇṭāra Vaṉṉiyaṉ at Karcilai Maṭuvu. To celebrate the valour of Paṇṭāra Vaṉṉiyaṉ, the District Development Council is installing his statue today at Wavuniya. We can expect that this statue will instil confidence not only in the minds of the people of the Vaṉṉi region but also in the minds of all the frustrated Iḻam Tamiḻs and make their hopes, patriotism and voice of rights rise sky-high. Let the installation of this statue pave the way for people to identify and accept the leadership of right quality.

It is said that Van Dreburg installed a stone inscription to perpetuate the glory of his victory. The inscription in English on the stone declares that Van Dreburg defeated Paṇṭāra Vaṉṉiyaṉ on 31 October 1803.

Was that hero really defeated? Did the call for resistance end with him? Or, did it surge forth with renewed vigour? *Pāyum Puli Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ* will answer these questions. It is an answer with all details needed; an answer that brims with valour.

When the statue was being installed, Mr Amirthalingam, the Leader of the Opposition, Sri Lankan Parliament, said in his address,

> Though the Tamiḻ and Sinhala kings in different parts of Lanka lost their sovereignty when the English invaded Lanka, the last king of Vaṉṉi, Paṇṭāra Vaṉṉiyaṉ fought to the end to retain the sovereignty of his people. It was not only the imperialistic British but also the betrayal of Kākkai, one of the same clan, that was responsible for his defeat. Kākkai was like a congenital disease to the clan.

Though he had to deal with such betrayers, he did not lack good friends. Vikramarāja Siṅghē, also known as Kaṇṇuccāmy,who had ruled Kaṇṭi until 1815

A.D., and was subsequently arrested, imprisoned at Vellore in Tamiḻnāṭu for sixteen years and died in the prison, was Paṇṭāra Vaṉṉiyaṉ's bosom friend.

There was also one Kuruvicci Nācciyār, a damsel who was a veritable tree of comfortable shade who softened the volcano of the valiant Tamiḻ who had been greatly hurt at heart by such betrayers. The palace of love between them was built on firm resolve and was a palace of resolve. It was also a palace of sacrifice.

Though the Tamiḻ and the Sinhala kingdoms in Lanka fell one after the other at the advent of the Portuguese, the Dutch and the English, the kingdom of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ and the Kaṇṭi kingdom had the might to oppose the British who had established their imperial rule.

A folksong would describe the situation thus:

Holding fast to the regions conquered,
Colombo, Kōṭṭai, Maṭṭakkaḷappu, and
The fecund kingdom of Yāḻppāṇam
Rule did the British.

This song explains the extent of the hold of the British over Lanka.

It was in the context of such British imperialism that Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ ruled over the region that extended between the Yāḻppāṇam Paravai sea on the north and Aruvi river on the south; Triṅkōmalai on the east and Maṉṉār District on the west.

He had to withstand the onslaught of the British and the Dutch. When one comes to know from sources of history that his sisters, Nalla Nācci and Ūmaicci Nācci supported him with the administration of the Triṅkōmalai border on the east and Paṉaṅkāmam border on the west, one could understand the aptness of the people of the region hailing Kaṇṇaki as their deity.

Cēraṉ Ceṅkuṭṭuvaṉ of Tamiḻnāṭu went all the way to the Himalayas to bring the stone for the statue of Kaṇṇaki. He defeated the kings of the North, Kaṉaka and Vicaya and made them carry the stone all the way to Tamiḻnāṭu. It was at that time that Kayavāku, a Lankan emperor, brought Kaṇṇaki worship to Lanka. Such is the information that *Cilappatikāram* provides. There is a belief in the region that Kaṇṇaki whose rage could not subside even after burning the city of Maturai went to several places and the tenth place she reached was Pattāppaḷai in Lanka. The name has now changed to Varṟāppaḷai.

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ who had the fortune of having the descendants of Kaṇṇaki like her sisters and his love Kuruvicci Nācciyār, ascended the throne at a very young age and established his honour and valour through his death on the battlefield when he was only thirty-four.

He is called Paṇṭāra Vaṉṉiyaṉ in history and in this novel, he is named Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. His original name was Kulacēkaram Vairamuttu. Kulacēkaram is the name of the line of kings and Vairamuttu, the hero wielding the sword, was a descendant in the line.

Mr M. Sivachithambaram declared at the time of the installation of the statue of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ as follows:

> Whatever form imperialism takes, when it attempts to reduce the sovereignty of a race, it is but natural for the race to rise in rage and fight for its rights. That is the message of the life of Paṇṭāra Vaṉṉiyaṉ. I am proud to acknowledge the fact that the descendants of Paṇṭāra Vaṉṉiyaṉ still living in his land have expressed their political will in the political history of Lanka. The honour bestowed today is not on Paṇṭāra Vaṉṉiyaṉ the person. It is his ideal and thirst for freedom that are being honoured today.

Even Premadasa, the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, in his message on the occasion had said, "It is our moral responsibility to honour those who deserve to be honoured. I have to declare firmly that to install a statue in memory of the great hero Paṇṭāra Vaṉṉiyaṉ is the most correct deed." His remark is but a declaration of acknowledgement of the glory of the hero.

Kulacēkaram Vairamuttu, who had the sword inscribed on his flag, was tall, broad-shouldered, narrow-waisted; his forehead was broad; his shoulders were strong; his eyes were sharp and piercing. I will narrate the story of the hero who knew nothing of fear.

My friend and a writer himself, Mr S. Yoganathan, who had been a government officer of the rank of District Collector in Mullaittīvu and Wavuniya regions, had provided me with extensive notes on the life of Paṇṭāra Vaṉṉiyaṉ. I acknowledge the help rendered by Tamiḻkkuṭimakaṉ, the Principal of Yadava College, Maturai and Sachithanandham of Kāntaḷagam and let me proceed with the story.

2 A Secret Dispatch

1798.

It was during the times when the Pāḷaiyakkārās in Tamiḻnāṭu had been resisting the onslaught of British imperialism, like trying to stop the torrents of flash floods with empty hands, that the kingdoms of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ and Kaṇṭi were raising battle cries against British occupation in Lanka.

It was during a night in the year 1798 that three persons were walking along the Rāmēsvaram coast warily and fast. One of the three had a headgear made of silk and his upper garment bordered in jari shone along his shoulders, fluttering in the sea breeze. The dhoti he wore tightly around his hip cupped his calf muscles and gave him an appearance of grandeur. His long moustache and large eyes declared his valour. On one side of his hip, he wore his sword in its sheath and on the other, a scroll rolled up.

The other two who walked beside him were donned like common people. They walked one step behind him in all deference.

Though it was night time, darkness had not swallowed the world. One could see the stars in the sky like boiled rice splashed on a banana leaf. Hiding one half and showing the other half, the moon, walking along the sky, bathed the sand; the sea was trying to embrace the shores with its arms of waves. So, one could have a good look of the three walking along the shore. Walking a little distance, they stood huddled together close to a boat. Their arms pushed the boat into the waters of the sea. Though the boat did not get into the waters, it started floating. Even

then, they were looking cautiously around the shoreline. Though they could see none, they could not help but heave a sigh.

One of the two dressed in informal wear, jumped into the boat and took the oar in his hands. For a fraction of a second, there was a little hesitation as to who should be the next to board the boat. But before they could decide, the one in the boat cautioned them. "sh... hide yourselves!" His voice was soft. The other two went round the boat and hid themselves, standing in the water. The one aboard the boat also hid himself in the boat. He was looking cautiously at the shore.

A few horses' hooves were heard tearing the silence of the night. White soldiers mounted on them were on patrol duty. They were holding guns. The three men waited for them to pass the spot where they had hidden themselves and once they were off, they went ahead with their business. The one in the boat rose up slowly and signalled the other two to join him. When both tried to board the boat together, he said, "One by one! Let Cuntaraliṅkam be the first!'

The man with the silk headgear boarded the boat and took his seat. Lastly, the third also boarded the boat and took the other oar. They were boatmen escorting Cuntaraliṅkam. Though they appeared to be on duty to ensure the safe passage of Cuntaraliṅkam, one could guess from their demeanour that they should be his friends who could maintain a sense of equal status with him. Once the boat was a little way through the sea, Cuntaraliṅkam eased himself, took a few betel leaves along with areca nut. He made a roll of them and offered it to his friends to chew. He also gave them a sheaf of tobacco.

There were thus the three boarding the boat stealthily at Rāmēsvaram through the night. They hid themselves at the sight of the White soldiers on patrol duty. Who could they be?

It is for sure that the two rowing the boat could not be just boatmen but close allies and friends to Cuntaraliṅkam. One was Marutaṉ and the other was Parataṉ. Both of them were fishermen. They owned the boat. They were also the sons of the soil.

And then, who could that Cuntaraliṅkam be? Is it enough to introduce him as a friend of Marutaṉ and Parataṉ? Oh, no!

He was one of the lions of lieutenants in the army of Vīrapāṇṭiya Kaṭṭapommaṉ and a bosom friend to Veḷḷaiyattēvaṉ, the general. He was a man of great valour. Born in the backward class in the caste conscious Indian society, he was declaring his valour in resisting foreign aggression on the Tamiḻ soil.

Wherefore was that Cuntaraliṅkam taking up a voyage through the night so stealthily in the company of Marutaṉ and Parataṉ?

One could answer the question only if one could read the message he was carrying in the scroll on his hip.

The boat went on with its journey climbing up and falling down the waves like a little child leaving the father's shoulder and jumping on the lap of the mother.

Marutaṉ and Parataṉ alternated the lines in a song of freedom and resistance to British imperialism.

The sky pours;
The soil yields;
Wherefore tax
For the field of the king?

Their loud voice and the question thereof fell on no ears on the wide expanse of the sea. But Cuntaraliṅkam's heart was boiling. Rightly was it so. Was he not the one who was asking the same question at the blade of his sword and the tip of his spear as he faced the British?

He had to reach Mullaittīvu at Lanka after a night's journey across the sea. He should cross Paruttitturai and turn south towards Mullaittīvu. He had to return to Tamiḻnāṭu as soon as he completed his mission. Their concern and commitment to the job on hand had enthused him largely.

Didn't the stars in the sky shine like boiled rice strewn sparsely on a piece of banana leaf? Perhaps they were suddenly eaten away by dark clouds. Perhaps the lady moon showing half herself was also scared of them. There was a drizzle. Then the winds. Then it started raining heavily. It was a storm.

The boat struggled through the rains and the winds. Marutaṉ offered the shelter of a bamboo mat to Cuntaraliṅkam.

Cuntaraliṅkam said in concern, "You both are getting drenched!"

Marutaṉ said impishly, "Don't you worry about us. We are catamarans always doused in water. Don't think it is out of concern for you that I offered the bamboo mat to cover yourself. I gave it to you lest the letter you carry should get wet."

"Oh, yes. It is an important dispatch. It should reach the hands of an important person", said Cuntaraliṅkam.

"You have taken up this journey with a lot of faith in us, haven't you? What if we push you into the sea, take the letter and read its contents?" said Parataṉ in an intimidating tone.

Since Cuntaraliṅkam could appreciate his jest, he laughed aloud. But however loud he laughed, it could not be heard even within the boat through the raging storm.

"Is not one Eṭṭappaṉ enough to betray us? Should you also join the band?" Cuntaraliṅkam squeezed his shoulders gently with these words.

Marutaṉ and Parataṉ were struggling hard to have the boat under control. They were scared of the boat being suck into the waves any moment.

It appeared as if the storm with its cruel hands splashed the whole of the waters of the sea up into the sky and the boat was a split coconut shell thrown up and down.

The situation continued through the small hours of the day. Only after several hours after the morn did the storm subside and they were happy to note that they were approaching Mullaittīvu.

Cuntaraliṅkam could not hide his happiness. He drew both his friends and held them each by his sides, squeezed their arms and said, "My friends! I could never forget your service tonight. I can never forget the daring of yours."

As Marutaṉ said, "Cuntaraliṅkam! Can't you at least now tell us the details of the dispatch?" Parataṉ appeared to second him.

"This is a letter in the hand of Veḷḷaiyattēvaṉ, the Pāñcālaṅkuṟicci General. If ever I were to reveal the contents of the letter, I would turn a betrayer of not only my land but also my best friend." said Cuntaraliṅkam.

"O yes, you cannot reveal the contents of the letter. But have faith in the friends of long standing. You should at least tell us to whom the letter is meant. I ask you of this with a purpose. If ever something were to happen to you and you were not able to deliver the scroll, we should take it safe to its destination, you see!" said Marutaṉ.

Cuntaraliṅkam could only laugh mildly. Then he held the scroll in his hands and said, "I need not tell you. The address is written in bold letters right on top of the scroll." He showed the address for them to read.

But Marutaṉ and Parataṉ pretended indifference, saying, "Oh, no, no! Why should we get to know such a great secret and that too regarding the business of the state?

With a smile of his face, Cuntaraliṅkam said, "Hey, don't be so sensitive. I myself don't know the contents of the letter from Veḷḷaiyattēvaṉ. It's all right! Nothing will be lost if you read the address. Come on!" He took the scroll very close to their faces. Both of them screwed their eyes to read the address.

The letter was addressed to Kulacēkaram Vairamuttu alias Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ.

3 The Old Man Met on the Way

Mullaittīvu was not only the name of a dock but also that of the whole region. As the boat approached the Mullaittīvu dock, Paratan̲ looked at Cuntaraliṅkam and said, "Where shall we dock? Mullaittīvu? Or Aḷampil? Or Cilāvattai?"

Cuntaraliṅkam smiled as he said, "What is this Paratan̲, you ask as if you are ignorant of the topography? Shouldn't one reach the fort of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ only after crossing Var̲r̲āppaḷai? So take me to a dock nearer to Var̲r̲āppaḷai."

Marutan̲ responded immediately. "In that case, Cilāvattai dock is the right place."

Cuntaraliṅkam had a wider smile as he said, "Anyhow, I have taken up the journey only in full faith in you two. Take me to some place you consider the right one."

Paratan̲ sounded a little sarcastic as he said, "Is it enough if we take you there? Shouldn't we take you back?"

They thus exchanged small talk until they arrived at the shores of Cilāvattai.

Cuntaraliṅkam left the boat saying, "You stay back. I will be back early through the night."

"Should you go alone? What if one of us accompanies you?" said Marutan̲.

Cuntaraliṅkam said teasingly, "If one of you were to come along with me, the other would be alone here, you see. So better be together."

"There is nothing to be afraid of on the shore. But you have to cross Vaṟṟāppaḷai to reach the palace. The way lies through dense jungle. Other than tigers and lions, all other animals are there. That is why I suggest that you have company on the way."

"Here is my company!" said Cuntaraliṅkam touching his sword and took leave of them.

The rays of the sun pierced through the gaps in the dense foliage of the forest. The whole path was wonderfully beautiful. Cuntaraliṅkam kept walking, enjoying the beauty of the landscape. Though the path lay through dense jungle, there were hamlets to be seen then and there. He had to find his way through the meandering paths along those hamlets.

Cuntaraliṅkam evinced interest in the architecture of the houses in that region. That made him reduce his pace as he walked through the villages.

The houses were constructed on long squarish plots. There were houses with slanting roofs, conical roofs and domed roofs. Such roofs were made of coconut or palm fronds. The walls were usually of mud. A few houses had a pyal. Some of the larger houses had shady tents through the frontyard. Logs of *kāyā, mutirai* and *veṭukkunāri,* known for their strength, were used for the pillars in the structure.

A cursory look at the pyal and the frontyard made Cuntaraliṅkam feel that the people were particular about keeping their surroundings clean and tidy.

They had planted *pattiri, tōṭai, tēcikkāy,* pomegranate, drumstick, mango and jack trees in front of their houses and they had grown tall and shady. A little way away from the house one could see *komaṟai,* the structures used to stock paddy. There were cows and buffaloes grazing around.

What attracted the special attention of Cuntaralin^kam were the festoons with green leaves and banana tree trunks at the threshold of every house. He could not understand why every house wore such a festive décor. He became curious. But there was no one to be seen in any of the villages he happened to cross on his way. He became more inquisitive to know the why and wherefore of the decorations.

There were patches of villages. The houses wore festive décor. But none was found anywhere celebrating any festival. He became puzzled.

He crossed a few such unpeopled villages. Finally, in one of them he was able to spot an elderly person sitting on the pyal of a house, leaning against the wall. He became immensely happy at sighting him. He approached him with the hope of getting an explanation.

On seeing Cuntaraliṅkam, the elderly person straightened himself and asked who he was. The slight movement made him cough so heavily that Cuntaraliṅkam could understand his difficulty. He tried to ease him with a gentle rub on his chest and offered a little water to drink off a small vessel on the pyal. The elderly person was fit enough to speak then. He asked Cuntaraliṅkam, "Who are you? What is it that you want here?"

"I am from Tamiḻnāṭu, sire. I have an important assignment at the court of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ."

"Oh, really! I am happy about it."

"Sire! I happened to come across a few villages on the way. I am here in this village now. Everywhere I could see festive decorations. But I could find no one anywhere. Why?"

"Oh... The Visāka festival ends today. There will be such festivities at the Kaṇṇaki temple at Varṟāppaḷai. All people of this region will be there in the temple. Only the old and decrepit like me remain at home. The décor you find everywhere is to mark the Visāka festival. And, this year it is something special, you see! Kuruvicci Nācciyār herself conducts the festivities. It is wonderful indeed. Poor that I am, I could not attend the festivities."

"Sire, who is that Kuruvicci Nācciyār ?"

"You see, my dear! Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ is a young man. There is no one to equal him in his resolve. Ever since he became the king, he had always been in the war field. His life has become one long struggle. His relatives had been all out to get him married. Do you know what condition he laid for his marriage?"

"Really? What could such a condition be?"

"I don't want to settle down to marriage until the British are chased away from this land and freedom is ensured. Whoever is the lady who would like to get married to me shall join hands with me right from now in my fight against the British imperialism. That is the strict condition he has laid."

When the elderly person said this, Cuntaraliṅkam's heart started beating fast. He was impatient to know more. And the elderly person continued.

"Kuruvicci Nācciyār is the lady who has come forward. Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ has accepted her as his love declaring that he would marry her once his mission had been accomplished. Kuruvicci Nācciyār acknowledges her gratitude to the deity Kaṇṇaki for Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's acceptance of her as his love. That is why she is conducting the festivities. It is widely said that the king may be one of the participants in the festivities."

Having spoken at length, the elderly gentleman was through another fit of cough.

Cuntaraliṅkam gently rubbed his chest again and made him lie comfortably. The elderly person managed to suppress his cough and said, "You haven't told me who you are. You mentioned Tamiḻnāṭu in all generalities".

"Tamiḻnāṭu is also now so unsure of itself, you see sire." There was a note of frustration in his voice.

"Why do you say so? Is it not a fertile region?"

"You are right. It is, of course, a fertile region. But it is only the flag of the alien imperialism that keeps fluttering there. Rights are denied. The passion for retrieval of lost rights is being lost in slow degrees. There is no unity among the Tamiḻs. There is no self-respect. There are many who are growing in number and desirous of enjoying the benefits of office betraying those who are ready to fight for rights and to lay down their lives in the struggle."

There were tears in the eyes of the elderly person. Some kind of a feeling or a sentiment choked his voice.

"You are right. We see such things happening here too. It is only our Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ who opposes the British. The others have knelt down. And I should tell you. Ninety per cent of people around here in Mullaittīvu are still in support of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ."

"It is the same over there in Tamiḻnāṭu too. To explain the state of affairs there and to get to know about the prevalent situation here am I on my way to Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's palace."

"You haven't yet told me your name."

"I am Cuntaraliṅkam; a lieutenant in the army of Pāñcālaṅkuṟicci Kaṭṭ apommaṉ."

"Wow! You are that lion of a man from the lower caste! I have heard that you and Veḷḷaiyattēvaṉ are almost like brothers."

"Really? Sire, you seem to be well versed in the affairs in Tamiḻnāṭu. Do you have any connections with the palace here?"

"I had, once. I was a lieutenant myself. See this! I lost one of my legs in a war."

The elderly person moved the sheet covering his legs. Cuntaraliṅkam felt a special sense of respect for the elderly person.

"Sire! May I know your name?"

"They call me Lieutenant Caṅkili. Now I am known as Caṅkili the grandpa."

"Does the grandpa have any grandchildren?"

"No grandson but a granddaughter who has lost her parents. Do you know her name?"

"What is it, sire?"

"Kuruvicci Nācciyār."

4 Kuruvicci Nācciyār

While taking leave of Caṅkili, Cuntaraliṅkam had sought clear directions to reach the palace of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. He had to traverse through footpath in the jungle. There were occasions when there was not even a path and he had to wade through stones and thorns. In his anxiety to complete the mission on hand, he had even forgotten the weariness consequent upon the boat travel through the storm and walked fast. He appreciated the beauty of the yellow wild hibiscus and the white *erukku* in abundance. He felt then as if he was in the southern parts of Tamiḻnāṭu.

Way back during the hoary past, Lanka and Tamiḻnāṭu were parts of the same landmass. They had been thrown asunder because of a geological catastrophe. So Cuntaraliṅkam was able to see the topographical similarities between Tamiḻnāṭu and Lanka.

Duty-bound that he was, his mind was preoccupied with the last information Caṅkili had given him. "My granddaughter's name is Kuruvicci Nācciyār."

A middle class house in a little village. Kuruvicci Nācciyār, like unto a bright lamp in the household. A grandfather who had once been a lieutenant and had lost his leg in the warfront. His granddaughter and the king of the nation in love with each other. And the love bloomed into a flower but remained in hidden fragrance. Perhaps she was a welcome relief to the king who had to be always on his heels in the battlefield! Though living in an ordinary house, she was not the granddaughter of an ordinary person. Whatever may it be, she was a lucky woman indeed. She is

fortunate enough to have as her lover the leader of a valiant clan applauded by the valiant.

When there were so many beautiful women through the Vaṉṉi and Mullai regions, and so many such in affluent families, if the king of the land had fallen in love with her, there should be something special about her too.

A beauty? Intellectually endowed? Valorous? Or a lamp of sacrifice?

With such thoughts about Kuruvicci Nācciyār, Cuntaraliṅkam had reached the dense forest. Perhaps there was just a short distance between him and the Vaṟṟāppaḷai Kaṇṇaki temple. Though it was daytime, there was considerable darkness around. So thick was the foliage that it did not allow the rays of the sun to penetrate.

The festive music from Vaṟṟāppaḷai Kaṇṇaki temple reverberated through the forest. The drums were heard like thunder. There were other indigenous instruments like the *ekkāḷam*, *tārai* and *kompu*, which blew their music loud. Smaller beating instruments like the *tappaṭṭai* were also making loud sounds. The impact of the music made even the tree tops tremble. The façade of the Kaṇṇaki temple was decorated with a wonderful arch bedecked with thousands of colourful flowers. A kind of long grass was spread like a large mat all around and as people stepped on them, they broke with the noise of chorgum being roasted. It was a source of amusement for the children who clapped and laughed in mirth. Around the temple, one could see the banana trees and areca nut fronds bound to makeshift pillars for décor. Women carried large hollow plates with water at the bottom. Ghee floating on the water was the fuel for the wicks of lamps lighted thereon. Carrying such plates with burning wicks, the womenfolk were dancing in the temple precincts.

The centre of attraction among the dancing damsels was a lady who shone like sandalwood paste and who had a forehead of a crescent, gnats on blue flowers in bloom for eyes. She had a grace of gait that made none equal her. She too carried a ghee plate lamp and danced along with the others.

Princess of chastity our Kaṇṇaki deity!

Soul of the noble Tamiḻ femme!

So ran the song with the dance. The song and the dance mesmerized men and women in thousands. There were a few Sinhala women also among the dancers. They also sang the song in praise of Kaṇṇaki as emotionally as the Tamiḻ women did.

When the dance, music and offerings were at the peak, a wild elephant in musth came fast to the façade of the temple. The sudden arrival of the elephant scared the gathering and people started running helter-skelter. Kuruvicci Nācciyār

understood immediately that the wild elephant should have been scared by the loud music from the various musical instruments. She leapt on to her horse with a spear in her hand. She spurred the horse on to chase the elephant away. As the horse sped like wind, the elephant ran into the forest.

The frightened elephant ran amuck. It had grown wild enough to await an opportune stance to attack Kuruvicci Nācciyār and her horse in hot pursuit. It brought down many a tree trunk in its fury.

Kuruvicci Nācciyār plodded her horse close to the elephant. With Kuruvicci and her horse so close, the elephant became furious, brought down many a tree, and trampled on the shrubs. Then it shot through a diversion.

Cuntaraliṅkam was walking along the side that the elephant turned. Surmising that it should be a wild elephant, he got ready to defend himself with his sword. The wielding of his sword became ineffective against the furious elephant. The elephant carried a branch of a tree in its trunk and wielded it as its weapon. Cuntaraliṅkam tried desperately to sever the trunk of the elephant with his sword. He knew that if he could succeed to wound the elephant badly, he could be safe.

His attempts were not successful. The elephant dropped the branch of the tree and snatched his sword away from him. Before he could decide upon what he could do next, he was caught in the grip of the elephant's trunk.

Knowing that he was nearing the end of his life, Cuntaraliṅkam shouted, "Woe is me! I could not deliver the letter to Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ."

Even at the threshold of death, the grateful hero that he was, Cuntaraliṅkam could only regret that he could not accomplish his mission. Caught in the trunk of the elephant, Cuntaraliṅkam was like an insect caught in a spider's grip. If ever the elephant were to raise its trunk above and beat against the earth and then trample on him, he would be flattened on the ground.

As one of the lieutenants of Pāñcālaṅkuṟicci, the hero of heroes, Cuntaraliṅkam had stood with his head held high. Such a one was about to be killed by a wild elephant. But he was not scared of death. He only regretted that he could not deliver the letter he carried to the addressee.

The elephant trumpeted aloud and lifted Cuntaraliṅkam up in the air. If he were knocked down from such a height, he was sure to be broken to pieces.

Suddenly, Kuruvicci Nācciyār's spear pierced through the elephant's trunk. The lifted trunk slackened into inaction. Meanwhile, Cuntaraliṅkam freed himself from its grip and stood on the ground.

With blood flowing profusely from the wounded trunk, the elephant became more furious. It turned around to attack Kuruvicci Nācciyār on horseback. Realising the danger she faced, Cuntaraliṅkam retrieved his sword from the ground and started

attacking the elephant fiercely. He sank his sword repeatedly into the abdomen and the shoulders of the elephant very fast. The elephant with its wounded trunk could stand his attack no more.

At the same instant, Kuruvicci Nācciyār heard the gong of the temple bell. The bell is sounded only on the last day of the Visāka festivities. It was the announcement of the arrival of the king at the temple. Kuruvicci Nācciyār on horseback was brought back to the world around herself with a sudden shock. Her lips said softly, "O, he has come down." She waited not even a single moment. She spurred the horse back to the temple. The horse galloped like an arrow shot.

"Who could this lady be? She saved me from danger. I saved her from danger too. But she did not utter a single word before she left." Cuntaraliṅkam said to himself and looked around. Just then, about ten armed soldiers surrounded him. The leader ordered the others to arrest him.

Cuntaraliṅkam became irritated. He said, "Why should I be arrested?"

"You have killed a wild elephant which is government property. This is a great offence. So you are being arrested."

"Listen to me!"

"You need not say anything. Come along!"

5 At the Hall of the Four Pillars

As she jumped off the horseback in haste, Kuruvicci Nācciyār ran into the precincts of the Kaṇṇaki temple. She saw Kulacēkaram Vairamuttu known as Paṇṭāraka Vaṇṇiyaṉ offering his prayers to the deity with his eyes closed. She stood aside looking at him steadily.

He had conformed to the tradition of the temple worship common to all including the king in that he had removed his upper garment and had wound it round his waist. Looking with wide eyes at his broad shoulders, strong arms and sinuous chest, she was awed by his musculinity. Grateful to Kaṇṇaki the deity in that she had bestowed the love of such a hero on her, she shed tears of happiness streamlike and bowed down in worship.

The people of Vaṉṉi and Mullai regions who had assembled there for the *Visaka* festivities observed how humble and devoted the two were while in the temple precincts, offering their prayers to Kaṇṇaki deity despite the dance of youth and blossoming of beauty that could have expressed themselves on seeing each other. They were surprised and happy at their devotion.

Their marriage was expected to be solemnized in the temple even during the festival of the last year but had been disappointed. They waited anxiously for the event at least that year.

Having offered her worship to the deity, Kuruvicci Nācciyār fell at the feet of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ in respect. He held her by her shoulders, lifted her up and adorned her hair with a bunch of flowers. He took a little of the *kumkum* from the plate offered to him and made a *tilak* for her. Then both prostrated in front of the deity and stood up.

They did not talk to each other until they were off the hall of worship. Their hearts, however, disobeyed them and had been singing together. An old woman who was looking at the lion of a man that he was and the damsel far exceeding in grace that she was, said to a middle-aged woman by her side, "Lest the blight of my own eyes should affect them..." She squeezed a lemon and offered it to remove the evil of the blight of the eye of those looking at them.

One of the men observed, "The marriage does not seem to take place today too."

The other smiled and said, "What of that? Aren't they man and wife already?"

Yet another warned him, "Not so loud! Let not anyone be within hearing."

Someone else said, "They got engaged last year. This year the *Visāka* festival for gratitude. And next you can see for yourself, the marriage will certainly be solemnized."

With no mind to take notice of them or pay heed to their words, the two went to their horses. More than twenty mounted soldiers with shining spears waited on guard on both the sides of their horses.

They mounted their horses. Vairamuttu looked at her. She also attacked him with the spears of her eyes. His aides rushed in to don him in his upper garment and tendered his sword with all due reverence. He took off the piece of cloth he had wound round his waist until then, swung it around his shoulders, and looked at her again. Kuruvicci Nācciyār waited anxiously to listen to anything he had to say.

"Kuruvi, I hear that you went chasing an elephant."

The endearment "Kuruvi" made her feel comfortably cold through and through and she giggled like a child.

The next moment she recalled what had happened a little while ago with the speed of magnet attracting a piece of iron.

"I committed a mistake in my anxiety to rush to where you were."

With his fingers on his moustache, he said with a smile on his face, "What is the mistake, dear?"

"I chased the elephant in musth lest it should harm the people. And then, I don't know who it was, there was one in danger of being killed by the elephant. I saved him. Then, the elephant sprang on me. Meanwhile, he attacked the elephant with

his sword. Before I could see what followed, I heard the temple gong and rushed to meet you. I don't know what happened to him."

"That is all right. Let us now go to the spot where all these happened. Let Kuruvi lead us." He appeared to be apprehensive and at the same time sounded a little impish.

Kuruvicci Nācciyār steered her horse to that spot. He followed her. The guards lined up on both their sides.

The ten soldiers who had arrested him were leading Cuntaraliṅkam to them. Cuntaraliṅkam was walking in their midst with a graceful gait and like a tiger with no trace of fear on his face.

"Look! It's he! Our soldiers are bringing him," said Kuruvicci Nācciyār.

"They don't seem like bringing him. They seem to have arrested him." With these words, the king moved towards the hall of four pillars and waited at the shade of a tree. She followed him and stood in the shade. The king ordered two of the guards to go and bring the retinue to where they were. The soldiers with Cuntaraliṅkam had also seen the king by then and they sped fast towards him.

"Please ask them first why they have arrested him." Kuruvicci Nācciyār said softly to Vairamuttu. She might have thought that it would not be proper for her to ask the question when the king was there. Anyhow, she felt relieved when she saw Cuntaraliṅkam off the danger.

As Cuntaraliṅkam and the soldiers approached him, the king jumped off his saddle and embraced Cuntaraliṅkam, "Oh, it is you! You should excuse me for what has happened." His voice was full of love and affection and it faltered in emotion. Cuntaraliṅkam gently released himself from the king's embrace and said, "It's all right!" Vairamuttu looked at the soldiers who had brought him prisoner and said, "Why did you arrest him?" There was anger in his voice.

"My lord! The wild elephants shall not be hunted down without the express permission of the government. And this gentleman had killed an elephant just with his sword." Before the soldier could complete, Kuruvicci Nācciyār said in a low tone audible only to the king, "Had he not killed the elephant, it would have killed both of us."

Vairamuttu looked at those around him one after the other. His soldiers were used to the way he looked at them and knew what he meant. There was the rare blend of the softness of the moonbeams and the fire of the sun in his eyes.

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ continued in an apologetic tone, "Let me once again apologise for what has happened."

Kuruvicci Nācciyār needed not much time to understand that they two should be already known to each other. Similarly, Cuntaraliṅkam could also guess that

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the lady beside the king should be Kuruvicci Nācciyār. He tried the gift of the gab to confirm it. Looking at the king who apologized again, he said, "Why these formalities between us? Your soldiers did not know me and there ends the matter." Then he looked at Kuruvicci Nācciyār and said, "On my way here I met your grandfather Lieutenant Caṅkili." She was surprised at the information. She came out with a smile that appeared like a flower falling softly off a creeper and said, "Really!"

When the king said, "Kuruvicci! I should have introduced the gentleman to you," she cut him short with an impish smile and said, "You should have done that first."

"This is Cuntaraliṅkam."

"You have already addressed him by his name."

"Let me tell you the other details. You know, of course, that Veḷḷaiyattēvaṉ, the general in the army of Pāñcālaṅkuṟicci Kaṭṭapommaṉ is a bosom friend of mine. Cuntaraliṅkam is a friend to that friend of mine. He is also a lieutenant of an army division. Veḷḷaiyattēvaṉ had been born in the *tēvar* clan; Cuntaraliṅkam had been born in the *tēvēntira* clan. But then, other than the fact that they are not the sons of the same womb, they are otherwise brothers. They are involved in freedom struggle like us."

As she was listening, one could see a ray of brightness across Kuruvicci's face. She looked at Cuntaraliṅkam with affection and greeted him with folded hands. He responded appropriately.

Vairamuttu said with a note of concern, "The storm should have caused you hardship last night."

Cuntaraliṅkam said, "For us resisting the storm of foreign imperialism, the storm at the sea is nothing."

"I have heard that Cuntaraliṅkam has been born in the lineage of Veṭṭum Perumāḷ who fought for preserving the rights of the Paṇṭiya kingdom. See Kuruvicci! His talk is commensurate with this lineage."

"Oh me, I have forgotten the business on hand. I have to return to Tamiḻnāṭu immediately."

"Let us first go over to the palace. You have to be my guest at least for a day."

"General Veḷḷaiyattēvaṉ has asked me to discuss certain matters of importance with you. He has also sent you message through this letter of his."

"Veḷḷaiyattēvaṉ is my friend. So also are you. So, it will not be proper on my part to read his letter and discuss matters over with you on the roadside."

"I am of the opinion that when the exigencies of war loom large all around, one need not bother about formalities. So let us sit here right in this hall and talk. I have to return right today, you see!"

"You are unyielding. All right. We will sit here and talk matters over."

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ told Kuruvicci Nācciyār, "Take a few soldiers with you and keep vigil at Muḷḷiyavaḷai road. I heard that a dispatch of the British army is at large reconnoitering. It will be good if you keep vigil of the Muḷḷiyavaḷai road."

She responded immediately. She took a few soldiers with her, left the place, and headed towards the Muḷḷiyavaḷai road.

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ stretched his arm and said, "Can I have the letter from Veḷḷaiyattēvaṉ?"

"Here it is!" Cuntaraliṅkam was shocked to find the scroll missing.

6 Rivalry at Kaṇṭi

Both concluded that the letter should have been lost where Cuntaraliṅkam had confronted the elephant.

"I know all the information in the letter, of course. The letter contains information pertaining to what is happening there and what actions you may have to seek recourse to here. I can tell you all that. Kaṭṭapommaṉ and Veḷḷaiyattēvaṉ had both told me that a letter was not necessary at all and that I could tell you all in person. But then, I insisted that a letter would be well in place. Who knows, I may have to confront the foreign army on my way. If such an exigency were to prevent my reaching you, I could at least send the letter to you. That was my argument, you see."

"That letter cannot go too far. If we look for it in the spot where my soldiers saw you, we may be able to retrieve it. I will send a few soldiers immediately to that spot." He raised his arm and a few soldiers immediately rushed to him.

"Go immediately to the spot where he killed the elephant. A letter addressed to me and with the stamp of Pāñcālaṅkuṟicci can be found there. It may lie off easy sight. It may lie hidden in the bushes or a pit or a hole in a tree trunk. Search thoroughly and retrieve it."

Then he turned to Cuntaraliṅkam, "My friend! They may take a little time to come back. Meanwhile, you can tell me about the contents of the letter. We can discuss."

"Let me first tell you about the situation there and what has happened there recently."

Kulacēkaram Vairamuttu had always been proud of the fact that a righteous resistance to foreign imperialism was afoot in Tamiḻnāṭu as in Lanka. He was all ears to hear what Cuntaraliṅkam had to tell him.

"Since the British collectors could not tame Pāñcālaṅkuṟicci, they had sent one Jackson as the collector now. He is both wild and foolish. Nevertheless, he is an experienced soldier and general."

When Cuntaraliṅkam said this, Vairamuttu nodded his head in concurrence, "I too happened to hear about him. He is supposed to be a heartless fellow." His face betrayed his anger.

"The English generals have vowed to win over Pāñcālaṅkuṟicci before the end of next year, 1799." The enraged Cuntaraliṅkam continued, "As soon as Jackson assumed office, the Pāḷaiyakkārar of Eṭṭayāpuram and a few others met him and pledged their allegiance to him. Since we don't have such cowardice and we lack such foxy character, we were unmindful of Jackson. He should have felt bad that we did not make obeisance to him. He waited and waited and finally sent a letter directing Kaṭṭapommaṉ to meet him immediately. However, Kaṭṭapommaṉ paid scant regard to the letter. Then Jackson continued with many more such letters. Kaṭṭapommaṉ wanted to know what his intentions were and decided to meet him. We started to Tirunelvēli with an army of four thousand. When he came to know that such a large retinue accompanied us, he wanted to insult us. He left Tirunelvēli and went to Kuṟṟālam. We were not to give up. We followed him. Jackson left Kuṟṟālam pleading urgent business at Cokkampaṭṭi. Kaṭṭapommaṉ thought that the Englishman was afraid of the army that accompanied him and told us that he would meet him alone. We refused to go back. We marched to Cokkampaṭṭi too. But Jackson started playing tricks on us. From Cokkampaṭṭi he moved to various places like Civakiri, Tiruvillipputtūr, Pēraiyūr, Pāvāli Paḷḷimaṭai, Kamuti and finally reached Rāmaṇāthapuram.

Though many of us wanted to return to Pāñcālaṅkuṟicci, Kaṭṭapommaṉ insisted that we should know the intentions of Jackson and that we followed him wherever he went.

We received information that he had lodged in a small palace called Rāmaliṅka Vilācam at Rāmaṇātapuram and that the palace was guarded by thousands of his soldiers.

Jackson intended to trap us at Rāmaliṅka Vilācam and sent an invitation to Kaṭṭapommaṉ to meet him there. Do you know what the important condition he had laid down for the meeting was? His forces should not accompany Kaṭṭapommaṉ. He shall come accompanied by a few of his personal guards. We did not become apprehensive of the condition. We firmly believe that the mercenary soldiers of

the British cannot stand anywhere in front of us who have pledged to offer our dead bodies as manure for the plant of freedom to grow on our soil. Forty of us including Kaṭṭapommaṉ, Tāṉāpati Piḷḷai, Umaitturai, Veḷḷaiyattēvaṉ and myself went to Rāmaliṅka Vilācam. Jackson was looking at our arrival from the top floor of Rāmaliṅka Vilācam and sent word that Kaṭṭapommaṉ alone shall meet him in his chamber at the top floor. When Kaṭṭapommaṉ agreed to it and climbed up the stairs, Tāṉāpati Piḷḷai and Umaiṭṭurai pushed the soldiers aside and accompanied him. Jackson lacked the basic dignity of receiving guests with due respect and started accusing Kaṭṭapommaṉ of a score of charges. He asked Kaṭṭapommaṉ to respond."

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ interrupted Cuntaraliṅkam and said, "What were the charges like?" His moustache fluttered in anger.

Cuntaraliṅkam continued. "Not having paid the taxes due to the East India Company is one charge against him. Not getting along well with the Eṭṭayāpuram king who was the servant of the British is another charge. Collecting taxes without the permission of the British is a charge. Occupying a few areas belonging to the East India Company is yet another charge. Not seeking the protection of the British is another charge. To organize the other Pāḷaiyakkārās against the British is one more charge."

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ interrupted once again. "That is to say, the same charges levelled against me are the charges levelled against him. I can understand. Please proceed."

"How long could Kaṭṭapommaṉ remain patient? Those who came to eke out a living in our country had started chasing us away. Kaṭṭapommaṉ rose in rage like a volcano, the forest fire and a tempest. But Jackson immediately rang the bell to signal the implementation of his treachery. The British soldiers who had hidden themselves in the chamber sprang on Kaṭṭapommaṉ. The brave Kaṭṭapommaṉ resisted them with his sword. Lieutenant Clerk fell down in several pieces at the sword of Kaṭṭapommaṉ. When we heard the noise within the Rāmaliṅka Vilācam, we called the Pāñcālaṅkuṟicci army in. The British forces rained bullets on our soldiers. We left the palace defending ourselves with our swords and spears. Kaṭṭapommaṉ honoured Veḷḷaiyattēvaṉ with the title of Bahadūr for the valour he exhibited on the occasion and my heart swelled in pride at the honour bestowed on my friend. Veḷḷaiyattēvaṉ embraced me in exultation. But one thing. The British caught Tāṉāpati Piḷḷai. Later they freed him."

When Cuntaraliṅkam concluded, there was a ray of bright light across Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's face. He was proud of our people in Tamiḻnāṭu resisting the British imperialism with such a spirit of sacrifice and valour.

"My lord! These are what are happening over there. I have now to tell you about the request from Bahadūr Veḷḷaiyattēvaṉ to you as desired by Vīrapāṇṭiya Kaṭṭapommaṉ."

"What comes from friends cannot be a request but an order to me. Come on!"

"We have received information of the demise of Rājasiṅghē, the king of Kaṇṭi, a few days ago. We have also received certain information about the prevailing conditions at Kaṇṭi subsequent to his death."

"What kind of information? Let me have the details."

"Since Rājasiṅghē does not have any heir, there is a great confusion regarding succession."

"Good! You are well informed of what is happening in Lanka."

"Don't we have a common enemy? That is why we have collected such information in all due concern."

"OK. What else would you like to tell me?"

"One of the widows of the king has a brother and another widow also has a brother–Kaṇṇuccāmy and Muttuccāmy."

"You are right."

"Kaṭṭapommaṉ through your friend Veḷḷaiyattēvaṉ and your friend through his friend, this Cuntaraliṅkam requests you that you should consider carefully as to who will be the right successor to the Kaṇṭi throne given the context of resisting the British. You shall act to that end."

"Who in your considered opinion is going to fawn on the British?"

"We hear that it would be better if Kaṇṇuccāmy succeeds the throne. We also hear that Muttuccāmy is a slave to the British."

"True!"

"Our desire is that you shall intervene and prevent that Muttuccāmy, the British slave, from succeeding to the Kaṇṭi throne. That brought me here."

"That is a good counselling! That is a good desire! But Pilimataḷāvai, the Prime Minister at Kaṇṭi is a wicked fellow, you see!"

When Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ uttered these words with a deep thought running through his mind, one could hear the sound of bullets being fired fiercely.

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ sprang upon his horse telling Cuntaraliṅkam, "Wait here, please. I will be back."

7 The Evil on the Island

Like unto a stone thrown up into the sky falling back to the ground fast, Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's horse sped in the direction of the sound of gunfire. As he approached the place, he could see a skirmish between two small groups of people at a spot between the road to Muḷḷiyavaḷai and that from Varṟāppaḷai to Mullaittīvu. He narrowed his eyes and focused his vision. He could see the British soldiers on one side. On the other side, Kuruvicci Nācciyār led the Mullaittīvu soldiers. Bullets were shot from the guns of the British. The weapons wielded by the Mullaittīvu soldiers against them were but spears and swords.

Before Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ could spur his horse on fast and reach the spot, the skirmish had ended.

The British soldiers could not withstand the valiant attack of their Mullaittīvu counterparts and started running away. One of them was a little late to mount his horse and the spear that Kuruvicci Nācciyār threw stuck him on his side. He fell off his horse and rolled on the ground seriously wounded. The horse ran away leaving him to his fate.

Kuruvicci Nācciyār rode closer to the fallen British soldier and dismounted. Meanwhile, Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ had also reached the place.

"What is the matter, dear?" as he said this, she heaved a sigh of relief. One could understand how relieved she would have felt in averting a sudden and furious attack on him by the British soldiers. She did not respond to his words and approached the soldier on the ground. His eyes were fixed on her. She did not notice it but instead took notice of something on his left hand, which he tried

to hide. She bent forward to check it up. She was particular about snatching it away from him. With that single thought in her mind, she bent at his side and he suddenly raised his arm with a gun aimed at her forehead.

Just then, his arm was stamped on. That was Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. The bullet from the gun was lost in an aimless direction. Then only Kuruvicci Nācciyār understood that her lover had saved her life. Meanwhile, she had taken away what she wanted from the British soldier. He breathed his last.

The king looked at what Kuruvicci Nācciyār offered him. It was the scroll that Cuntaraliṅkam had lost.

Before the soldiers sent to retrieve the dispatch, the British had reached the spot. They had taken the scroll away. When the Mullaittīvu soldiers tried to retrieve the letter from them, there had been a skirmish. Before Kuruvicci Nācciyār could reach the road to Muḷḷiyavaḷai, the British reconnoiter troop had crossed the road. So, she had discretely followed the British soldiers. It was thus that she was able to join hands with the Mullaittīvu soldiers attacking the British.

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ said, "They had known that we are receiving communication from Pāñcālaṅkuṟicci. They had planned to waylay Cuntaraliṅkam and take the letter from him. You and our soldiers have defeated their plans. Great!"

Kuruvicci Nācciyār's reading of the situation was different. "I don't think that they had come only to snatch the letter away from Cuntaraliṅkam. They would have thought that a small retinue would accompany you when you go to the temple. They would have planned a surprise attack on you."

"I don't believe that the British would dare to enter our region and attack us straight," said Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ.

"Do you say this even after the British had successfully entered our island and are extending their authority?" Kuruvicci was right in expressing surprise at Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's statement.

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ ordered the formal burial of the dead British soldier and turned towards the hall of four pillars. Kuruvicci and the others followed him.

Even before they could reach the hall, Cuntaraliṅkam, apprehensive of what might have happened to Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ, was half way towards the place where the gunshots were heard.

The king gave him the scroll and asked if that was what he had carried. Cuntaraliṅkam looked at the scroll with spots of blood here and there on it and nodded his head in agreement. He gave the scroll back to Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ.

Understanding that the British were intent on spreading their snare of cunning even within the region under the authority of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ, Cuntaraliṅkam asked him to remain very cautious.

"I am obliged to pay my gratitude on behalf of the freedom fighters of Tamiḻnāṭu for having saved the life of the king." When Cuntaraliṅkam said this, Kuruvicci Nācciyār bowed her head and smiled.

"Kuruvi is quite lucky today, you see! Appreciation is heaped on her head from Tamiḻnāṭu," said Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ, looking at her from the corner of his eyes.

When Kuruvicci spoke, she sounded like the music from the strings of the *vīṇā*. "Is it fair to keep on talking to him on the roads? Is it not right to take him to the palace and host him at least one meal?" When she said this, she was looking away from Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ and sounded very soft.

In spite of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's insistence, Cuntaraliṅkam was not ready to yield.

"If not for my sake, at least for the sake of Kuruvicci Nācciyār you should be our guest."

"Forgive me. Veḷḷaiyattēvaṉ will feel helpless in my absence. Kaṭṭapommaṉ will also be anxious to know if I met you; reached my destination safe; what your answer to the information in the letter is. Therefore, it would be better if you permited me to go back."

Even as they kept talking thus, one of the soldiers fetched a bunch of tender coconuts. Cuntaraliṅkam noticed that it was in response to the unuttered command from Kuruvicci Nācciyār. He appreciated her hospitality. When Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ sliced the head off the tender coconut and opened it for him to drink, Cuntaraliṅkam had almost lost himself in their love.

"What information shall I carry to the king of Pāñcālaṅkuṟicci?"

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ held Cuntaraliṅkam by his shoulders and said, "Tell him that this Vairamuttu will always be ready to stop the roots of the British imperialism taking hold on our soil." As he said this, one could see how his shoulders brimmed and broadened in pride and valour.

"I am so happy. Shall I take leave then?"

At that moment, Kuruvicci said something softly in the ear of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. The king's face brightened. He turned to Cuntaraliṅkam and said, "Kuruvi is on and off my good counsellor, you see. I have overlooked it and she has reminded me of it. You will be escorted by our soldiers to the shore." One of the soldiers dismounted his horse and offered it to Cuntaraliṅkam. But Kuruvicci did not like the idea. She thought that it would not befit the status of Cuntaraliṅkam to ride an ordinary soldier's horse. So she offered hers to him.

"You have come through a circuitous route through many villages. Now you can go back by a shortcut." Cuntaraliṅkam was not agreeable to the suggestion from Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ.

"My lord! I don't want to take the shortcut. Do not take me for being discourteous. I want to go back through the villages. Can you guess why?"

Neither Paṇṭārakaṉ nor Kuruvicci said anything as such. But the question was in their eyes.

"I want to meet the grandsire Caṅkili again on my way back. I don't know if I could meet him again or not. I may lie on a bed of flowers in the life or death struggle at Tamiḻnāṭu. So let me talk to the grandfather of this valiant lady once again."

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ looked at Kuruvicci meaningfully. She understood his thoughts. "Shouldn't the granddaughter be there when you meet the grandfather?"

Cuntaraliṅkam was surprised at the bashfulness of the woman in the presence of her lover while she exhibited such valour amidst spears and swords a little while ago.

"Not necessary. I am not going to stay back in his house. I just would like to have the honour of meeting him on my way. That's all." He started all in happiness bidding farewell to both.

He hurried towards the Mullaittīvu sealine along with the soldiers who escorted him. They reached the village of Caṅkili.

Cuntaraliṅkam had instructed the soldiers that they had to stop over there. They thus stopped their horses in front of the house. Cuntaraliṅkam looked at the pyal with a sense of expectation and awe. He was not there. "See if he is in the house." Before he could complete his statement, a few elderly women living thereabout came running to him making a clamour.

"Where is Caṅkili the grandsire?"

"Woe is me! A few foreign soldiers had abducted him."

"Why? Wherefore?"

"It seems Kuruvicci has killed a soldier. They have taken him away to avenge the killing."

"You mindless thugs! How could you abduct a lame person thus?" shouted Cuntaraliṅkam.

8 Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ

The shocked Cuntaraliṅkam looked at the elderly women with sadness writ large on their faces and said, "Do you know where he could have been taken?" One of the womenfolk who appeared to be well informed came forward.

"Since those who carried him away are British soldiers, I guess that they should have taken him to Karikkaṭṭu Mūlai palace."

"Karikkaṭṭu Mūlai palace? Whose is it? Where is it?"

"It is in a corner of this Vaṉṉi region. It is a state by itself. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ rules over the little state."

"That is surprising. Is there a state within the state of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ?"

"Yes. It is like that. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ, the stooge to the British that he is, has declared Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ as his prime rival. The British forces are defending him. Emboldened by the British defence, he is creating quite a few problems to Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. Making him their puppet, the British have made a camp of the Karikkaṭṭu Mūlai palace. They are working out their plans to occupy the Mullaittīvu region."

As the elderly woman spoke thus, Cuntaraliṅkam could appreciate her patriotism and her anxiety that the state should not fall into the hands of foreign imperialism. It made him excited in elation. He hoped to get to know more from her. "Mother, what could be your name?" There was deference in his tone. She said, "*Taṅkacci.*" Since the word meant 'the younger sister', Cuntaraliṅkam could only be amused at the mismatch between her age and her name. She took notice of it and said, "Taṅka

Nācci is my name. It has been shortened to Taṅkacci." Though Cuntaraliṅkam wanted to get more details about the incident, he decided to send a messenger to Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ and Kuruvicci Nācciyār about what had happened to Caṅkili. He sent one of the soldiers who had escorted him back to Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's palace.

"Why should Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ oppose Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ?"

"The first reason is that he has become a slave to the British. Besides, there is another reason."

"What could it be?"

"Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ tried all his best to marry Kuruvicci Nācciyār but could not succeed. Besides refusing to accept his offer of marriage, she had explicitly told him that she loved Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. This made him enraged. Since then he has become a very different person from what he was. He is already a monkey by nature. You know what a monkey would do if it suffered from rashes. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ the betrayer has now become the worst enemy to Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ and Kuruvicci Nācciyār. He is also delighted at declaring his enmity."

"If that be so, do you think that it would be his plan to abduct Caṅkili?"

"I don't know who had arranged it thus. But one thing is certain. The British soldiers who had abducted Caṅkili should have kept him in Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ's palace."

"If I go to Karikkaṭṭu Mūlai palace, I can meet him, then?"

"Perhaps you can. But you cannot retrieve him."

"Why?"

"Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ is the king only by title there. The entire security is in the hands of the British. You cannot bring him back, breaking the security arrangements there."

"Do you think that we are such simpletons?"

"I know that you are unmindful of death. You are firm and resolved. There could be no doubt. But this small band of soldiers cannot tackle a large number of British soldiers wielding guns in security all through the palace."

Taṅka Nācci's words were sedate, experienced and firm.

"You speak so prudently. I asked for your name. I should have asked you what kind of a job you held while young. Perhaps you were attached to the palace?"

"No. My job is not something that is confined to one's youth. It is an intellectual job that becomes brighter as one becomes older. I am a teacher. All the children of this village have learnt their lessons from me. Even now, I teach many. Shall I say something about which I am right proud? Kulacēkaram Vairamuttu known as

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ had been my student. Kuruvicci Nācciyār joining hands with him against the cruel enemies with her sharp sword had also been my student. Along with such pride, I have something to be ashamed of too. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ had also been my student. What could I do? While young, when they were students, every one upheld the honour of this nation. But as times changed, a few like Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ let the white ants build anthills in their hearts and the cobra of betrayal had moved in."

"Mother, I feel like keeping on listening to you. You speak so well. But we don't want to lose time. Don't we have the necessity of moving over to Karikkaṭṭu Mūlai palace?"

"You have sent word to the king about it. Will it not be good if you get a contingency to support you?"

"Let it be on the way. Meanwhile, we will make our attempts. Mother, with your blessings, we go to Karikkaṭṭu Mūlai." He bade one of the soldiers to lead them to Karikkaṭṭu Mūlai.

When he was about to leave, Taṅka Nācci said, "You asked and got to know so much about me. But you did not tell me who you are."

"Don't you know who we are? We are the soldiers from Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's palace."

Taṅka Nācci had a soft smile on her face.

"I can see that you are from the palace. But the Tamiḻ that you speak is slightly different. It shows that you may perhaps be from Tamiḻnāṭu." She looked intently on his face.

"You will see difference only in the accent, mother. But you can find not even a needle-head of a difference in sentiments. You have been so plain. I ought not to hide anything from you. I come from Pāñcālaṅkuṟicci. I am one of the lieutenants in the army of Vīrapāṇṭiya Kaṭṭapommaṉ. My name is Cuntaraliṅkak Kuṭumpaṉ."

"Enough, young man! I don't need any further details. You need not think that you should tell me everything. I won't regret it. There will be so many matters that are confidential pertaining to the battle for freedom both here and there."

As she proceeded further, there was a note of sadness in her voice. "What is to be done? The British had executed their plans right at the time of the Varṟāppaḷai Kaṇṇaki festival. Almost everyone has gone to the temple. Those who wanted to take advantage of the situation had some excuse or the other to abduct Lieutenant Caṅkili."

"OK... let us go now. He spurred his horse on. The soldiers of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ who followed him slackened their pace as they approached a bush at a little distance as if they wanted to tell him something.

"It is not safe to go to Karikkaṭṭu Mūlai in a fit of daredevilry. The British soldiers over there are many times in numbers as we are. It is better to think and act."

When the soldiers felt hesitant, Cuntaraliṅkam felt uncertain.

The soldiers said as if in one voice, "Our messenger should have met the king by this time. Let us wait for the king's word."

Cuntaraliṅkam had no other go but to pay heed to their words.

As guessed by Taṅka Nācci, the British soldiers had taken Caṅkili to Karikkaṭṭu Mūlai palace.

They awaited the arrival of Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ at the council hall with Caṅkili held prisoner. But he was abed with a beauty of the harem beside the hall. He held a liquor glass on hand. His head was on her lap. She had been hired for the night. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ was a person of no values in life. He considered it heavenly to float on the waves of the jingling laughter of sluts.

His name and his colour matched perfectly with each other. His protruding eyes always slanted towards the ground all the time and one could see how vicious they were. He was fat. He had the habit of keeping his mouth wide when he spoke. He was a pervert who needed women on his bed whether it was day or night. A look at him would make one understand that he had sold himself to the enemies and that he was a betrayer of his own nation and people.

The English officer had waited quite long for him. Becoming impatient, he knocked on the door to his chamber with the butt of his gun. That made Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ come into the council hall, still carrying the cup of liquor.

His eyes first fell on Lieutenant Caṅkili.

"O, you have brought this lame old fellow!" he laughed aloud.

His laughter repulsed even the British who were his masters. But they did not reveal their disgust. "What is to be done with this old man, king?" Being addressed the king by the British was more than anything else to a fellow like Ḳākkai. He was not otherwise worried about rights, dignity and freedom. He felt angry at the sight of Caṅkili.

"Hey, you lame fellow! You blabbered claiming that your granddaughter is a paragon of beauty and that she is an angel descended from heaven and that I don't have the dignity to marry her. Do you now want me to make you understand my status, dignity and authority?"

Lieutenant Caṅkili laughed at him with no trace of fear or anxiety on his face.

"Wherefore is the smile of a lame fellow? You are now in my custody. There is just one way to save your life. Write a letter to your granddaughter Kuruvicci. Ask her to come immediately to your succour."

Caṅkili felt like a tiger trodden on.

"What did you say, you fool? My granddaughter's life is greater than my life. Kuruvicci Nācci is Paṇṭārakaṉ's property. I don't lack dignity to make her a puppet on your bed. My granddaughter, again, is not a madcap."

"You will say all this now. You will fall at my feet if you are locked up in the dungeon for two days. You will then plead with me offering her to me. I know all your tricks. Take him to the dungeon right now." shouted Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ.

At a gesture from the British officer, the soldiers took Caṅkili away to the dungeon.

9 Pearl Palace

The people dispersing from the site of the Varṟāppaḷai Kaṇṇaki temple festivities could not have known anything about the trouble a little away from where they were. They were returning to their respective villages talking enthusiastically in appreciation of the significance of Kaṇṇaki temple festival and the love and affection between Kuruvicci and Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ, unaware of the meeting of Cuntaraliṅkam from Tamiḻnāṭu with Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ or of his confrontation with the wild elephant or Kuruvicci Nācciyār's killing of one of the British who had been there to spy on the region or about Caṅkili, her grandfather having been taken prisoner by the remaining British soldiers.

They happened to see Kuruvicci Nācciyār and Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ on their way to his palace escorted by guards and hailed them aloud.

The king earnestly greeted his subjects who hailed him and stood on both the sides of the road and later arrived at his palace with Kuruvicci Nācciyār.

With nothing extravagant to embellish it and with the grandeur of a lion about it, his palace stood not on a large piece of land and yet was four times larger than that of Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ. It did not have halls of luxury but retained a spirit of defiance. Within the ramparts of the palace, one could see a novel casement. It appeared novel and different but did not have anything that made it appear imposing. The imagination of the person who had designed it should have been immense indeed. It looked like the shells of an oyster, half-open. The doors embedded thereon opened into a large hall. Then on, there were a bedroom, a courtroom, a room for casual meeting, dining hall, kitchen and all those rooms that a dwelling place required. That novel pearl palace retained its humbleness, though.

Paṇṭārakaṉ and Kuruvicci entered the dwellings. He used to bolt the doors from within only when he was left alone in the dwellings and when Kuruvicci was with him, the doors would be kept ajar.

They were one at heart but had not indulged in any physical relationship as a logical sequence of their love for each other. Lest people should have even an inkling that they lived as man and wife the doors were kept open when they were together within.

Kuruvicci was delighted at every move of Paṇṭārakaṉ. She had enslaved herself to the delicacy and finesse of his speech, his determined valour and his sense of sacrifice. It was not just a matter of today. Ever since he was sixteen and she was fifteen when they were studying the grammar and literature of Tamiḻ from Taṅka Nācciyammai, they were bound in love. It was more true to say that he was in the hold of her pure love rather than was enticed by her beautiful form and wonderful eyes. The flame of the passion for keeping alive the spirit of freedom of Mullaittīvu was the great force that bound their hearts together. It was because of the strength of the passion that they had decided to remain in loving friendship until their ideal was realized.

They sat together and talked. They went around together. They thought together of strategies to face the British imperialism. They pointed out each other's limitations. They even exchanged impish remarks between them. But it had never occurred to them to come together in physical relationship. They considered that there was a greater pleasure in going about their duties to preserve the nation from the hands of the imperialists than that in twinning together in love.

As Kuruvicci Nācci rushed into the kitchen, she was happy that her five-year-long dream had become true in that she had conducted the grand *Visākā* festival to the deity of Vaṟṟāppaḷai in acknowledgement of the established relationship between them which sprang not from lust but was sanctified in a pledge that was the result of their mutual consensus regarding their obligations to the nation and their heartfelt love for each other.

Kuruvicci knew that Paṇṭārakaṉ could not bear with hunger for long. They had been delayed because of many an incident on their way back from the festival and thus were quite past the lunchtime. So she was in a hurry as she took his meal from the kitchen and rushed towards the dining hall.

He teased her, "Why do you flutter in such a hurry, Kuruvicci?"

"You have given me the wings and that is why..." she said, teasing him back.

"Don't be in a hurry. I am not quite hungry."

"You don't say that you are hungry. But your face reveals how hungry you are."

"Sit along. Let us serve the dishes to each other."

"Oh, no. You finish first, please."

"I will eat away all that is there."

"You mean the leaf plate too?"

Both laughed aloud. There was the music of the waterfall in his laughter; there was the jingling of the anklet in her laughter.

Her rosy cheeks became rosier in contented happiness and shone as she started serving Paṇṭārakaṉ his meal on a plate of plantain leaf. Paṇṭārakaṉ had always a liking for porridge of raw rice cooked in milk. She served it to him in a vessel. He pushed it to her lips saying, "You taste it first." She pushed his hand softly away and made him drink it first. She enjoyed the sight of his drinking the delicacy. Then she served him boiled roots of the *paṉai* and *allai*, drenched in honey. She watched closely if he relished them and felt happy. Thereafter, the taste of the meal and the meat occupied the entire attention of Paṇṭārakaṉ.

Even as she was serving him his food, she noticed a soldier at the doorstep with anxiety writ large on his face. She could understand that he had a message for them. Paṇṭārakaṉ did not notice him since he was facing the other way. She made a gesture of what the matter was and moved gently towards the door without distracting Paṇṭārakaṉ from his food.

The soldier had been sent by Cuntaraliṅkam. "*Amma*! (Madam!) The British soldiers had abducted your grandfather Caṅkili the lieutenant. Cuntaraliṅkam is there, after sending me to inform you."

"Okay... don't let the king know of this. I will take care." She turned back into the dining hall and started serving him.

"What's it, Kuruvi? Who was it? Wherefore did he come here? Anything special?" His remark was casual.

"Nothing. I had asked him to fetch the sea fish. The clever fellow that he is, he comes now and tells me that he could not get any because all the fishermen have left for the festival." She managed the situation.

He completed his meal and asked her to dine. He insisted that he served her meal. She decided not to show her anxiety about the safety of her grandfather though she was terribly anxious on that score.

Since she felt that the king beset with the problems of the nation should not be worried about a domestic problem, she decided to go for herself to know more about what had happened to her grandfather and to save him from danger. She became resolved and pretended that she was immensely happy at her meal served by her lover.

Where could you find a parallel to the heart of a martyr in Kuruvicci who thought that the problem pertaining to Caṅkili should not be one more of so many

problems Paṇṭārakaṉ was beset with and that she could herself attend to the problem?

She readied the bed for him saying, "Please rest awhile. I will take the victuals of the Kaṇṇaki temple to grandfather and seek his blessings."

"Shouldn't I join you in seeking his blessings? We should have gone to him right from Varṟāppaḷai."

"Have you forgotten what I have told him? The next time you and I meet him, it will only be as man and wife. Let me take leave. Please rest awhile."

"Yes, Madam, as you order. Take a few soldiers with you to be on the safer side. Don't go all by yourself."

"Not alone but only with the guards."

"Don't go with just a handful of guards. Let there be at least ten to accompany you. Are you going to arrange it yourself or shall I arrange it for you?"

"I will take ten of them with me as desired by you. You please take a rest. Won't they pay heed to my words?"

"Kuruvi! Kuruvi! I just don't know how to compliment you on your teasing."

"Haven't you given me yourself? Is that not enough?" Kuruvi smiled despite her anxiety, closed the doors and left the place.

As Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ tried to get a nap with pleasant thoughts about Kuruvicci, he heard the noise of a hundred horses rushing away. He stood up, perturbed.

10 Spider's Web or a Little Insect?

Paṇṭārakaṉ went to the entrance to the pearl palace. One of the bodyguards offered an explanation. It was Kuruvicci who had taken a hundred men on horseback with her.

Paṇṭārakaṉ could understand nothing. She had told him that she was on her way to meet her grandfather with the offerings at the Kaṇṇaki temple. She had not told him anything about confronting Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ. So he was confused. Why did she need a hundred soldiers on her way to meet her grandfather?

The guard could not give him any further information. He did not know any further. The king did not want to pester him for more details lest the guard should think that she had not confided her intentions to him. Paṇṭārakaṉ had always been happy that there was no disagreement between them even on trivial matters and that neither of the two took up anything important without the knowledge of the other. So he did not want to enquire about her intentions in taking a hundred soldiers with her without any specific information to him.

She should have gone to meet the foes. Why should she not have told him about it? If it be so, who is the foe? Is it the British who want to hold fast to their imperialism? Or is it the Dutch who had transferred their authority in Lanka to the British and were going about snatching the bits and pieces of the leftovers?

Whatever it was, whoever it might be, Paṇṭārakaṉ was confident about one thing. Kuruvicci could face anything bravely and return victorious.

Paṇṭārakaṉ was lost in thoughts as he returned and lay down on his bed after having been looking at the dust raised by the horses for a little while.

'Where could she have gone? Wherefore? A hundred guards on a trip to her grandfather to give him the temple offerings? No, it cannot be. I told her to take ten guards with her. If her intention had been to give her grandfather the temple offerings, she could have gone to the village straight from over there. What could be the intention of Nācciyār? Whatever it might have been, she could have confided in me. Never before has this happened. This is strange. She said something about the sea fish and then about Kaṇṇaki temple offerings. And finally, she has landed me in confusion. What if something amiss happens to her? Oh, no, nothing will happen. She can defeat the enemies. It is not in the recent past but right from the days that she has been a student of Taṅka Nācciyammai that I have seen her urge for deeds of valour.'

'Once, I remember still, she was sitting on the steps of the waterfront. I was approaching her through the bushes with stealthy steps with the intention of cupping her eyes from behind and playing with her. Meanwhile, she heard a male voice and turned to see who it was. You cannot say that it was a moronic grin. If ever the owl had teeth and it smiled, how could it be? Imagine that and you can understand what I mean. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ stood in front of her with such a smile. He sat on the steps of the waterfront saying, "Kuruvicci. You are lost in thoughts?" I know about her. I know that she has abundant love for me. I was scared as to how harshly she was going to treat Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ. I could have avoided anything untoward between them but it would have been unbecoming of me. And for all this, don't I have the psychology of a man? I was tempted to see what would happen. Perhaps I was jealous? When I recall the incident now, even now, I feel ashamed. What a fellow had I been to have misgivings about her!'

'Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ was our fellow student at the school of Taṅka Nācci. When he dared to talk to her on that score, she smiled at him and said, "Yes, I am thinking about the *Caṅkam* literature."

"Really? How sweet is the *Caṅkam* literature! What passionate pleasure! The love's mother is in the front yard of the house. The lover goes to her and asks for some water to drink. She asks her daughter to fetch water. As she extends her arm with the pitcher towards him, he holds it. She shouts *"Amma!"* in bashfulness and forgetful of herself. The mother hurries to her in anxiety. The lady does not want to betray her lover. "Nothing mother! He had a hiccup." Poor mother, believing her words to be true, tries to ease him by rubbing his back. As the mother stands

behind him, the lover smiles at the lady. The lady describes the scene in her own words. Such is a poem. 'He smiled, the son of a thief.' What a wonderful scene of love! Aha!"

'Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ starts feasting on her beauty with his eyes even as he says this. But Kuruvicci says to him, "You seem to appreciate only such scenes described. My preferences are different. I am thinking of that mother in *Puṟanāṉūṟu* who sends her boy of a son to the battlefield on hearing that her father, brother and husband had died in the war."

"Kuruvicci, what are your thoughts about her like?"

"Had I been that mother, besides sending my son to the battlefield, I would have myself taken the sword and marched to the war. I was thinking about it."

'Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ, who did not expect such an answer, was surprised. In all appreciation of her valour, I stood, hiding behind the bushes. I am proud of how suitable a woman she is to me. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ continues looking at Kuruvicci with his hungry eyes.

"Are the arms that should bear bangles meant to carry the sword? It is because of the supple body of a woman that she is called the creeper. Should the gentle creeper take up such rough jobs?"

'She laughed out and looked at him with mischief in her eyes.

"Kākkai is familiar with the purāṇās, I believe."

"Quite. Why the question? Do you have any question on any part of any of the purāṇās? Tell me and I will explain."

"Oh, no! You say that a woman has to lie gently twisted like a creeper and that she shall not carry the sword. Don't you know about Sakti killing Mahisāsura assuming the form of Kāḷi armed with the spear? Is she not a woman, then?"

'Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ was taken aback. He was particular about his purpose and sat closer to her. Aware of his intentions, she got up. The foolish Kākkai said, "Why do you get up?" and held her hand. She released her hand from his hold and his face betrayed disappointment. And yet he was not ready to give up.

"Kuruvicci, let me ask you something. Please answer. Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ wants time even to consider if he is going to marry someone. He considers you as his good friend. And here I am. Let your lips just move, and I will marry you right today and take you to my bed. Compare us both. Don't you understand that I love you dearer than he?"

"What is the point in your loving me so dearly? Shouldn't I too love you? What shall I call such of those who don't leave me alone knowing that my life is dedicated to that noble and able man whose life is dedicated to the nation?"

"I don't know why, Kuruvicci, my heart is all aflame to have you. My fate compels me to hug you and enjoy the pleasure thereof."

'Kuruvicci showed her displeasure on her face. Unmindful of it, he leapt upon her. I saw the strikinged of a lightning. I don't know what gave her such strength. She pushed him away and into the water. She left the place.

'Looking back at how he struggled for breath caught in the deep muddy water-front, I could not help but laugh.

'I pitied him and wanted to help him out. If I went to him immediately, he would come to know that I had been watching all that had happened. I waited a little while and then ran to the steps of the waterfront. I pretended to be anxious about him and pulled him out of the waterbed.

'I asked him what had happened. He said that he came there to wash his face but had slipped into the water. I pretended to believe his words.

'That incident has not left my eyes even today. Nobility of virtue, steadfast in her decision, a heart that knows no fear – Kuruvicci is an embodiment of all these. I am of the firm belief that she can face any adversary. And yet, I do not know why she left with so many soldiers and where.' These thoughts made Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ roll on the bed.

Kuruvicci who started along with a hundred mounted soldiers intended to meet Cuntaraliṅkam first. If Caṅkili had been abducted, she thought, he should be kept in the palace of Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ. Though she knew that the palace would be guarded by many times the number of soldiers accompanying her, she had nothing to hesitate about because of the fighter that she was and the daring that she had. She reached the place where Cuntaraliṅkam awaited her arrival.

"Why should you take up new hardships here? Please leave for Tamiḻnāṭu. We will take care of the matters here." she said to Cuntaraliṅkam.

"Wherever is the difficulty, it is the difficulty of the Tamiḻs. Why should you distinguish it in terms of here and there? I have decided to be of help to you until grandfather is saved."

Then the small army marched towards the palace of Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ.

Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ came to know that the infuriated soldiers of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ were on their way to his palace. He held consultations with his British officers.

They decided to let them march up to the fort and then surround them.

Kākkai was immensely happy. One can understand his happiness. Kuruvicci is likely to be caught right at his fort. He was obsessed with the desire to enjoy her to his heart's content.

He imagined himself to be a spider that had woven its web and her to be the little insect about to be trapped. He emptied a pot of liquor.

11 The Officer's Counsel

When Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ expected that the troops led by Kuruvicci Nācciyār would attack his fort, he received information that they had stopped about half a stone distance from the fort. Another message followed soon.

"Kuruvicci has stayed back at a distance. She has sent a message through a soldier. He is on his way to the palace. Shall we allow him to get in?"

Kākkai was surprised. He looked at the British officer as if seeking his opinion.

He said, "As long as we are strong, we need not be scared. Let us listen to her message. So there is nothing wrong in allowing him in." Kākkai ordered that Kuruvicci's messenger be sent in.

Kākkai was not only an enemy. He was a betrayer. Who was it that could be so daring as to enter his palace all by himself?

That was Cuntaraliṅkak Kuṭumpaṉ. It was he who had suggested it to Kuruvicci Nācci.

"What is the point in getting ensnared in the name of rescuing Caṅkili Taḷapati? First, we should ascertain if Caṅkili is there in the fort. Then we will ask Kākkai if he would release him or not. Permit me to go. I will negotiate with Kākkai."

Kuruvicci liked the suggestion and agreed to the proposal. When he left to meet Kākkai, the others dismounted their horses and took a rest in a shady haunt. She was all appreciation of the sense of duty, enthusiasm and valour of Cuntaraliṅkam from Tamiḻnāṭu. She sat on the knot of the root of a large tree thinking about his

broadmindedness that had made him volunteer to share the burden of the local business instead of going back to Tamiḻnāṭu once his mission was over.

Kākkai was surprised at finding that the person brought to his court did not appear to be a Tamiḻ of Lanka. He expected the messenger to stand in front of him in due reverence. But Cuntaraliṅkam chose to occupy one of the luxurious seats there.

A mere look at the person in front of him enabled Cuntaraliṅkam to understand the difference between him and Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ had an aura of nobility, valour, affection, love, daring and humbleness about him. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ was nothing but a face of vengefulness and a pair of eyes of treachery. Cuntaraliṅkam could gauge the person right at his first glance. He thought of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ to be the Kaṭṭapommaṉ of Lanka and Kākkai the Eṭṭappaṉ. He was moved at the thought of the pitiable plight of the race of the Tamiḻs. The tears that welled up did not, fortunately, trickle down his cheeks but only screened his eyes for a moment.

'I did not offer him a seat. He did not seek permission to sit. Look at him who has taken his seat. Who could he be? What could be his status in the government of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ?' such were the thoughts that ran through Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ's mind as he started talking to him.

"What's the matter?"

That was the beginning of his conversation with Cuntaraliṅkam.

"Let me first explain who I am. My name is Cuntaraliṅkam. I am the dear friend to Veḷḷaiyattēvaṉ, the chief of Pāñcālaṅkuṟicci Army of Kaṭṭapommaṉ resisting the British imperialism in Tamiḻnāṭu. I am also a lieutenant in the army. You may be surprised that the one who could have only secretly reached Lanka from Tamiḻnāṭu is so outspoken. Those of us who carry the sword to preserve our nation, their dignity and freedom should be ready for death any moment. So are we all. I came secretly to Lanka and would have returned secretly. But I have the chance of meeting you all because of certain unavoidable circumstances."

Cuntaraliṅkam's speech charged with dignity and nobility made Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ and the British officers who protected him almost speechless.

"What is your message from Kuruvicci Nācciyār ?" Kākkai snapped without bothering to put down his arrogance.

"Nācciyār's grandfather Caṅkilit Taḷapati had been abducted by the British soldiers. We surmise that he may be kept here. If you could tell us if our surmise is true, I could deliver the message."

"It is not a surmise. It is true. Those who know how faithful Kākkai is to the British and how trustful they are of him could, of course, easily guess that Caṅkilt Taḷapati abducted by the British soldiers should be here. It is no surprise indeed."

"Thank you for saying the truth. But one thing. Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ has not been informed of this. Kuruvicci Nācciyār has taken up the responsibility entirely on herself and is here to release him. I only suggested that it would be better to talk to you first. If there is confrontation, the whole army of Mullaittīvu will be here. You too may have to struggle hard to retain your fort. I hope that Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ would not impose such an undesirable situation on the British."

"So what?" Kākkai passed his fingers through his moustache and stared menacingly at Cuntaraliṅkam. One could see a whole measure of venom seeping through the glance.

Meanwhile, the British officer on duty managed to lead Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ apart. He told him, "Calm down. We have to take into consideration what this friend tells us. We cannot confront Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ without explicit permission of our higher-ups at Colombo. There are, of course, a few skirmishes here and there. But there will certainly be objections if there is a full-fledged war with him. So it is better to think well and act cleverly."

"If that is so, he need not have been abducted at all." That was Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ's question.

"The policy is to avoid a full-fledged war. Otherwise, Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ shall be teased here and there to make him give up his obstinate attitude. The British administration has not given up that trick. So we had to retaliate immediately for the killing of a British soldier, you see."

"Listening to what you say, I could only feel that you have given me up and are up to establishing diplomatic relationship with Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ."

"Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ has to be persuaded to rule, subject to our authority. If he does not surrender himself to us, we should fight him out and win over him. His present strength has to be brought down little by little. It is like chiselling out a large rock, you see."

Though the British officer was talking in low tone, he had been a little louder despite his caution when he said this. Cuntaraliṅkam could hear every word of his with his sharp ears.

He looked at the British officer from where he was and said, "You proceed assuming that you are chiselling out a large rock. But do not forget that each stroke of the chisel is making a wonderful statue of the rock. If not today, some day the

cunning British may win over such of those of us who are athirst for freedom. Our own brethren with their betrayal may help you. But do not forget. Bodies may fall. What rises from the fallen bodies is going to be passions. Those passions can never be defeated."

Though shocked that Cuntaraliṅkam had heard his words, the British officer tried to manage the situation cursing himself for the extra liquor that he had drunk. "There is no problem, you see, if Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ and Kaṭṭapommaṉ become our friends." He said with a smile on his face.

"Do you know that there is a lot of difference between being a friend and a dependant?" Cuntaraliṅkam said very firmly.

"Why keep on talking? We are ready to release Caṅkilit Taḷapati. Kuruvi Nācciyār herself can come over here. Let her not march in with enmity. We for our part will have no enmity towards her. Let her be a guest and take her grandfather back."

When the British officer said this, Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ was anxious to hear Cuntaraliṅkam's response.

12 Apologise? Who? To Whom?

"Let me talk to Nācciyār. It is all right if she nods her head in agreement. Otherwise, what I have mentioned will happen." Cuntaraliṅkam left the palace with these words. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ had expected Cuntaraliṅkam to retaliate. He thought that he would say whether it was not enough that he had come and spoken to him. Why should he expect Nācciyār herself to come over there? He expected such an irritated response from Cuntaraliṅkam. He even expected him to challenge him. But Cuntaraliṅkam's approach to the situation only surprised Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ. He believed that Cuntaraliṅkam had come there to somehow patch up the affair. He also believed that Kuruvicci would accept his suggestion and would arrive at his palace.

Almost immediately, his drunken eyes shrunk into their sockets like a tortoise into its shell. He who could thus close his eyes could not close his mind and keep hidden his desires.

He imagined as if Kuruvicci had already reached his palace. He lost control of himself and felt as if he were going to receive her. The smile that she bore on her lips felt as if it was a declaration of her love for him. Though not in person, she stood as a damsel in front of his mind's eyes.

'How many days have I been longing to have a place in her heart! It does not seem to happen at all. Aha, what a beauty! She is the only woman like unto the enticing rainbow. I have been dancing attendance on her for so long and had become almost tired. Should she bring an army to win over me? An oblong glance from her eyes is enough to make me surrender myself unto her for life. What a brow! It would be a Himalayan victory to me if her brows sought my face. What curled hair above her brow daunting its beauty! I cannot even imagine what heights of pleasure will it be to pass my fingers through her hair. I have seen her deerlap like smoke descending up to the end of her ears while in the classroom at the school. I had always longed to feel it with my fingers. I just do not know what magic it is that draws men towards her beauty like unto a ripe mango. Will God deny me the privilege of checking if she has a waist behind the dress that conceals her beauties? Though not explicit, the beauty of her thighs like unto the plantain stem had always troubled me. Won't I see the day of touching and enjoying them? Even if I don't get the chance immediately today, let today be the day that leads to that day. I believe that it would definitely happen. I should not be in a hurry. Cuntaraliṅkam will definitely manage to bring her here. That dame, that lobe of the jackfruit, will come here to take her grandfather with her. I should not ask her if we could board the chariot of the God of Love and reach the heaven of silence. If I were to hurry, she would understand my intentions. She should believe that I am extending the same friendship that we had when at school. Such should be my cleverness. I need to be sedate. Kuruvicci should be surprised that Kākkai has become so refined these days. She should be treated with such gentleness that she would not have expected of me. I should say that her grandfather is free. I should entreat her to dine with me. If I could sow the seeds of goodwill in her heart today, I would succeed in winning her heart in the course of time. My God! It is enough if she consents to visit my palace. She is hiding the pangs of having lost her heart unawares to Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. She had fallen in love with him least expecting that he would pledge not to marry her until he succeeds in his mission. After all, she too is a woman, you see. Won't she have desires of her own? Even those who live in *ashrams*, renouncing worldly life, look for a woman to embrace and enter into marital relationship with. How long can Kuruvicci continue languishing in love, idling her passions in talking and looking at him? So, if only I could proceed unhurried, she would become the piece of iron approaching a piece of magnet.'

With these thoughts having had their course through his mind, Kākkai opened his eyes. They were bloodshot. He was drunk like a horse. In addition, he was also wriggling in lust.

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He wanted to make certain arrangements in anticipation of Kuruvicci's arrival at his palace. He chased the servants around to get things ready for a feast. He thought that if Kuruvicci were to see the conditions in which Caṅkilit Taḷapaṭi was kept, she would become shocked and angry. Lest she should hate him thereafter, he wanted to make the place as comfortable as possible. He ordered a cot to be provided with a soft bed and other necessities. He ordered a few books also to be taken there.

He wanted the place to look like the reading room of a literati rather than a cell in the prison. Kuruvicci should be convinced of his goodness which in the course of time would change to love for him. That was his surmise.

He ordered all his intentions to be carried out immediately. Then he sat with his British masters and emptied a few more bottles of liquor.

As soon as he was told that all conveniences had been arranged for Caṅkilit Taḷapati, he left the British officers to personally inspect the arrangements.

Caṅkilit Taḷapati was looking at the pages of one of the books brought in, surprised at the speed in which all convenient arrangements were made. He did not know why so much was done so quickly. Before he had time to guess things out, Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ entered the cell.

"Caṅkili! Are you all right?" he looked around for a moment. He remained silent.

"Please don't be grieved at my rudeness. I had to pretend thus in the presence of the foreign officers. If I were to daunt my patriotism in their presence, they would look at me with suspicion. That is why I pretended to be angry with you. Otherwise, I cannot remain trustworthy to them."

Caṅkili could only suppress his derisive laughter.

"It is not today or yesterday that persons like me are used to win acclaim or to be derided and in both ways stand to benefit. So I am not in any way aggrieved."

There was in his words the firmness of a sword held aloft to attack the enemy. Though Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ was taken aback by this reply, he managed to smile foolishly.

"The officers advised me to torture you in the prison. Though I had to nod my head in assent, I could not do it, you see. That is why I have ordered that you should get a royal treatment here."

Caṅkilit Taḷapati looked deep into the eyes of Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ. He could understand that even if fully intoxicated, he had not given up his foxy nature or talk. He only said, "Thanks."

"Do you know something? Kuruvicci is on her way to have you released." said Kākkai.

"Kuruvicci?" Caṅkili could not believe. "No, it cannot be. It cannot just be."

"She started with a mind to confront us. On the way, she should have changed her mind. She sent a messenger. He requested on her behalf that you be released. She has been informed in not so many terms that if she were to visit the palace and make a request in person, we would consider releasing you. The officers do not want that to happen. It is because of my compulsion that they have come round for the arrangement. In all probability, Kuruvicci may be here any time to act as I have suggested and get you released."

"Never. We belong to a clan that gets back anything abducted at the point of our swords. We are not those who would beg for anything."

"You were abducted by the British soldiers and their officers. I have taken up the responsibility of talking it out with them and getting you released. If Kuruvicci Nācciyār comes to the palace to facilitate it and apologises to the British officer, all will be all right."

"Apologise? What for? Why should she?"

"Is it not a crime to kill a British soldier? That is why you are imprisoned. Isn't there a necessity to apologise?"

Caṅkili's eyes sparkled like embers. He had brought her up like a lass of valour and is she of all going to apologise? Apologising to the enemies? That too in the camp of the betrayer? He could not bear to hear that.

"When is Kuruvicci expected?"

"Anytime. As soon as she comes, I will bring her here. She should be satisfied that her grandfather lacks no convenience in the prison, you see."

"That is good. I need something to while my time away here."

"I am ready to give you anything."

"Not much. I am in the habit of composing verse. Can I have a pen and paper?"

"Right now!" Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ left the prison.

Caṅkilit Taḷapati was beset with confusion. He could not believe that his granddaughter would do such a deed. He heaved a sigh.

Even before Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ could pass the entrance to the prison, a soldier came running to him. He stood in front of him in all reverence and said that Kuruvicci Nācciyār had sent a person to inform him that she would be coming there to meet him.

Kākkai felt immensely pleased and walked off fast.

Caṅkilit, Taḷapati could hear the words of the soldier. He could not contain himself any more and he cried out instinctively.

13 How could One Forget the Dignity of Lineage?

Kuruvicci arrived at the entrance to the palace surrounded by her soldiers on horseback. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ was all out to appear pleasant and take her into the palace. Cuntaraliṅkam had accompanied Kuruvicci and Kākkai smiled at him with gratitude in his eyes. The British officers who were seated in the hall shook their heads by way of welcoming her.

As Kākkai introduced Kuruvicci as his schoolmate, she held her head so high and her glance so noble that she proved that she would bow to none.

Kākkai could not speak coherently, "It is the first time that your feet have trodden into my palace."

"There is a time for everything," said Kuruvicci with a sparkling smile on her face.

"It is the right time, of course. But you should have come here long ago and in a different gait and for a different purpose," Kākkai winked his eyes. Lest she should snap back him and thus humiliate him in the presence of the others, he

hastily continued, giving her no time to speak. "That is all right. Let me show my hospitality now. Let us dine together."

"Dinner can wait. Let us first talk about why I am here."

"We know why you are here. You have come to obtain the release of your grandfather. Is it such a great deed? Having come to my house, will I send you back empty-handed? I have spoken to these lords even before you arrived here. They have also agreed to release your grandfather."

Kuruvicci could not utter the word thanks lest it should appear as if she had begged a favour of the enemy.

Cuntaraliṅkam and Kuruvicci had agreed to visit his palace only with the hope of an honourable settlement for the release of Caṅkilit Taḷapati. So both of them waited to listen to what Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ had to say further. He continued.

"Caṅkilit Taḷapati will be released without too much of a condition. I had a hard time persuading these officers to lay down lesser conditions if Kuruvicci herself were here in person."

"Condition? Lesser conditions?" Kuruvicci's brows knotted.

"Not much. First the officers demanded that one of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's soldiers be detained in the place of Cankilit Taḷapati ..."

Before he could complete, there was fire in the eyes of Kuruvicci.

"A soldier in the place of my grandfather? Good condition indeed I would rather have my grandfather in the prison than that. We know how to secure his release."

The British officers understood that Kuruvicci was angry and looked at Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ meaningfully. He immediately said, "No, no. I have already told them that the condition will not be agreeable to you."

The British officers had already told him of the great adverse effects of not releasing Caṅkilit Taḷapati. More than that, he was particular about earning a place for himself in the heart of Kuruvicci. So he was prepared to come down step by step. Kuruvicci belongs to a clan of dignity that expects to win over the enemy or looks for the enemy to come for an honourable settlement; and if both fail, it would be better to die. It is not a surprise that Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ's conditions laid for the release of Cankilit Taḷapati were like drops of water falling into boiling oil.

He continued to let matters go as far as they could.

"Kuruvicci, do you know what condition I have made the British officers agree to?"

She looked at him with a sense of grandeur. She was bright as gold and at that time her face was almost pink. She listened to his words carefully.

"An apology for having inadvertently killed a British soldier..."

Kākkai could not complete his statement. Kuruvicci burst out. "Apology?" She raised her voice as she stood up.

"The British lords said that you should apologise. I said that it was not necessary. It is enough if you express your regret."

Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ had descended far too long.

"One can of course feel sorry about the pitiable death of a soldier. Something like expressing a sense of condolence." She was pretty firm in her voice.

"I said the same, you see. You say exactly the words that I had uttered to these lords. That is enough, more than enough."

He turned to the officers and said, "See, see for yourself. After all, hadn't we been together at school?"

"Kuruvicci, the negotiations are over. You have achieved what you want. Shall we adjourn for dinner at least now?"

There was lust in his bearing. Cuntaraliṅkam said, "It will give us all happiness if Caṅkilit Taḷapati is brought from the prison for the dinner." He smiled as he said this.

Kākkai immediately said, "What of that? Kuruvicci, let us go. We will bring your grandfather from the prison for the dinner."

Just then, a guard from the prison hurried towards him. "Caṅkilit Taḷapati asked me to hand over this letter to Kuruvicci Nācciyār."

As he offered it to Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ, he said, "Give it over to Kuruvicci straight. The granddaughter needs no permission from me to read a letter from the grandfather."

Kuruvicci opened the letter with a little anxiety. Looking at her expressions change as she read the letter, the others were wondering about the contents of the letter. She started reading it aloud.

"Dear granddaughter Kuruvicci,

This is a land of the valiant moving about. A few cowards might have been born here. Don't you see weeds in the fields? It is like that. I am the one immensely happy about your joining hands with Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ in the struggle against the British. Today is the day when the happiness is dampened. Do you ask me how? I lost my leg in the war against the Dutch when I was the lieutenant in the army of Mullaittīvu. Why did I lose it? How did I lose it? I was surrounded by enemies. I fought back and made them feel exasperated. A heap of corpses fell all around me. The enemies had seen my soldiers arriving fast to support me. They threatened to kill me. They asked me to apologise if I wanted to live any further. I

declared that I didn't belong to a lineage that apologises. One of them shot at me. I fell down bent. Meanwhile, our soldiers had arrived and they ran away. I was ready to die then and there and not to give up the nobility of my lineage. I lost my leg. But we did not lose the honour and nobility of our lineage. I doubt that your intended deed today is a challenge to that honour and nobility.

"The British have abducted and imprisoned me in Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ's palace. You know about Kākkai. He is the one who snatches the morsels of power betraying us. If the granddaughter had decided to have her grandfather released, she should have fought it out bravely. It is not right on her part to make use of the services of the soldiers of Mullaittīvu. This is our personal problem. Should you have sought the services of the forces of the government to settle a personal score? I can make allowance for it, anyhow. Having brought the army with you, you should have fought your way into the palace. Even if you had laid down your life in the attempt, you would have become a heroic martyr. But now you have come into this palace, the enemy's camp, to beg for my life. Aren't you ashamed of yourself? I feel my nobility betrayed. I feel terribly sorry about having brought up a granddaughter who has stooped to walk into the palace of the enemy and stand with a bowed head in front of him.

"Had I not lost my leg but lost my life that day, you would not have had to undergo this humiliation. I am terribly sorry about having caused you this humiliation.

"Should I be released thus?

"No, it cannot be thus. I don't want to be released by her efforts at the expense of the ideal of valour.

Yours,

Caṅkili the grandfather.

Kuruvicci Nācciyār completed her reading of the letter and she had been torn between various emotions as she read it. She looked at Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ and Cuntaraliṅkam with anxiety in her eyes. "Let us go to the prison. Come."

Only one of the British officers followed them.

The doors of the cell where Caṅkili was kept prisoner were opened. Kuruvicci looked into the room with a heart that missed a beat. He was not on the cot. Nor was he on the chair.

"Come in, you!" Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ said and they followed him.

Caṅkilit Taḷapati lay in a bundle at a corner of the cell.

Ḳākkai approached him saying, "In spite of all the comforts provided, see, he is not happy. He is lying on the ground."

Kuruvicci shouted, "Grandpa!" and shook him. It moved because she shook it. It had already become immobile. "Woe is me! Grandpa!" shouted Kuruvicci.

14 Her Path

The people of the village had assembled at the graveyard with eyes damp like the blades of grass damp with the dewdrops. The entire village was taking care of the burial of Caṅkilit Taḷapati brought dead from the palace of Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ. The soldiers of Mullaittīvu were ready to pay official homage. Getting to know of the demise of Taḷapati, people of all age groups from the neighbouring villages were on their way to pay their respects to the departed. Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ was standing there with a grave face looking at the arrangements for the burial of the dead. A little away from him stood Kuruvicci intensely looking at the face of her grandfather about to cover itself with the shroud of dust in a little while. It was not tears that she was shedding; it was blood that she was shedding.

She felt an arm gently touch her shoulders. That was Taṅka Nācciyār. Her fingers trembled as she wiped her tears away. Kuruvicci clung to her as if she was transferring the entire burden of her grief to Taṅka Nācciyār. When she passed her fingers through the hair of her dear student and laid her cheek on hers, Kuruvicci felt a little relieved.

Cuntaraliṅkam, who stood there witnessing how the people of Mullaittīvu hailed those who lay down their life with a sense of honour and for their sake, was moved to forget himself in the grandeur of their valour.

Kuruvicci in the embrace of her teacher Taṅka Nācciyār rolled back in time to her memories of her grandfather.

When she was a little girl, her mother dressed her up and sent her to school with her books. Her father who was then sitting on the pyal called his daughter to his side, hugged, kissed and blessed her on her way to school. Having taken her leave of her parents, Kuruvicci the little girl went to school and by the evening returned home along with her little friends. Even as she turned the corner of the street where her house was, she had an uneasy feeling. The whole street was silent. One or

two houses lay in embers. Looking at the street that was all amiss, she called out to her parents and ran home. Though the house did not lie in ashes, the frontage was a shambles. She ran inside. What did the little girl that Kuruvicci was then see? The mother lay in a pool of blood. The father lay in two pieces. She could see no more. She felt as if she had been lost in dense darkness. Her legs failed her. Her head started spinning. She did not know what happened next. She had been in a fit of faint for a few days. She woke up only to find herself on the lap of her grandfather.

He tried to comfort her. The foreign powers were trying their level best to set foot in Mullaittīvu. They killed all those who tried to stop them. The soldiers sent by those obsessed with the desire to occupy the region used sophisticated weapons and did not hesitate to perpetrate any kind of atrocity. It was the consequence of such atrocities that her father and mother had been killed. When he said this to her, she could feel the flame shooting out of his eyes. She could never forget the scene.

The thought of that day made her open her lips and talk to herself.

"I am the only child to my parents. They saw me off to school in the morning. And by the evening, they had lost their lives. I had none to take care of me but my grandfather. He was one of the lieutenants in the army of Mullaittīvu. He could not stay back to take care of me. He took me to Taṅka Nācciyār and said that she was Kuruvicci's father, mother, deity and everything. He entrusted me to her. He used to visit me on and off. As I grew up, he desired that I be trained in wielding the sword and the spear. I also learnt it with enthusiasm. He offered me my training. One day I received the message that my grandfather had lost his leg in the battlefield. That was a turning point in my life. He was taking care of me till then and I had to take care of him thereafter.

"It was at that time that Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ came to Taṅka Nācciyār for his education in Tamiḻ literature. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ was also there. Though the scenes of love depicted in the *caṅkam* literature made Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ and me look at each other from the corner of our eyes, it was the valour of the Tamiḻs described therein that brought us together. We felt that we were coming together not for the sake of physical love but for the sake of offering our services to our nation in some form or the other. When our relationship stood at that, I told my grandfather about it. He felt a little hesitant at the beginning. 'Dear, I have seen your father and mother die right in my presence. At least you should live long to carry the progeny on. I want you to live peacefully. Vairamuttu Paṇṭārakaṉ, the object of your love, is always after war. He is a great warrior. How can you live a peaceful life with him? Give it up dear, please.' Such was his warning.

"Is a woman meant to live in familial relationship with man only? Does not she have the responsibility of sharing his obligations? So, grandpa, I am in love with him to fight together and chase the foreign invaders away. We will not get married until our mission is completed. He has promised to marry me only after that. When I said this to my grandfather, you should have seen how happy he felt and how much his appreciation of both of us was.

"He blessed me saying that this passionate valour should live long. But I have offended him. He has chosen to die because he considered my visit to Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ's palace to release him such dishonour. Woe is me! I did not want my family matter to lead to a great war. That was why I went all by myself. Is it not diplomatic on my part to have expected the problem to be resolved through negotiations? I thought that despite my adherence to a choice between victory and death, I should at times act prudently. I never thought that such an attitude on my part would lead to his demise. If I had not attempted to rescue him, he would at least have been alive. Perhaps I have spoilt the chances of his survival. I just cannot bear with the thought. I was scared of torture being inflicted on him in the prison. That made me rush to rescue him. Whatever it might be, my grandfather had died unhappy with my sense of valour. Lo! How valourous does he look even when lying dead. Mother earth is going to hug this grandiose being in a little while from now."

Waves of thoughts rose high and fell low in Kuruvicci's heart. "Hail Caṅkilit Taḷapati!" The shout reached the skies. His body was laid in the grave. The people of Mullaittīvu paid their homage to him. Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ went to his body, held his feet and paid floral tribute. Led by Taṅka Nācciyār, Kuruvicci Nācciyār too paid floral tributes and paid her respects at his feet.

After the burial, the people dispersed silently. Cuntaraliṅkam looked at Kuruvicci Nācciyār and Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ who stood immobile with sadness writ large on his face.

"I am sorry I have to leave for my country under these circumstances."

"That is all right Cuntaraliṅkam. Tell Vīrapāṇṭiya Kaṭṭapommaṉ and Veḷḷaiyattēvar that I would get in touch with Kaṇṭi and ensure that their intentions are carried out."

"Respected Nācciyār! I take leave of you expressing once again my heartfelt condolence at the demise of your grandfather."

"Let our soldiers in enough numbers accompany Cuntaraliṅkam up to the shore. Let them see him off."

Cuntaraliṅkam saluted Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyan, Kuruvicci Nācciyār and Taṅka Nācciyār, mounted his horse and left the place. The soldiers of Mullaittīvu accompanied him for a safe passage.

Taṅka Nācciyār walked slowly towards Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ.

"Vairamuttu! I have brought her up like my own daughter. She has suffered a great loss. With her father and mother no more, Caṅkilit Taḷapati was everything to her. And hereafter, you are everything to her. What else shall I say in such a tragic situation? Let me go."

Even after quite some time since she left the place, Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ was looking at the grave of Caṇkilit Taḷapati. Then he mounted his horse and got ready to go. When she saw him ready to go, Kuruvicci went to her horse. Paṇṭārakaṉ shouted at her menacingly.

"No, don't you come with me!"

Kuruvicci was shocked. Paṇṭārakaṉ rode fast and disappeared from sight.

15 The Hearts of the Two

Paṇṭārakaṉ rode fast as he left Kuruvicci but did not maintain his speed for long. The horse slowed down gradually and finally moved sluggishly as if moving in a procession. Since he had met her, never before had such an incident occurred. A man and a woman can understand separation with nothing to complain about each other. Though the pangs of separation gnawed through the heart, one could console oneself in that such separation was inevitable in the interests of the responsibilities assumed. But this sudden separation was caused by Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's anger towards Kuruvicci Nācci.

Kuruvicci also did not need too much of a time to understand why he did so. She came to the conclusion that he was displeased with her as her grandfather had been. She looked for a long time in the direction in which he left. Then she looked at the place where her grandfather was buried a little while ago. Her eyes were filled with tears. Then she started walking on the footpath towards the village, lost in her sadness. Her horse walked behind her.

"He could have scolded me for having gone to the palace of Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ. He could have upbraided me. Or he could have even punished me. He has pushed me into a pit of embers telling me not to accompany him. My intention of avoiding a political problem of my grandfather's abduction and my assuming the responsibility for rescuing him without troubling Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ has led me to all this."

These thoughts pricked her as she walked towards the village.

"I do not know why Kuruvicci who knows me has behaved thus. It is demeaning to get back from the hands of the enemy what has been lost. There is pride in retrieving it by our own efforts. How could Kuruvicci forget such a simple truth? Perhaps the punishment I have meted out to her has made her terribly hurt. Down all the days of having been with her, I have never been so very harsh."

The heart of Paṇṭārakaṉ who was moving at a snail's pace was also melting.

'Instead of denying permission to accompany him, he could have stopped talking to me as we reached the palace. I would then have asked him for the reason. He could then have pointed out where I had erred. I would have fallen at his feet and pleaded for his forgiving. Had he said that this was not a crime to be forgiven but to be punished with death, I would have happily accepted his verdict. When I have surrendered myself to his ideals, how could he have such a harsh heart to make me a subject of his hatred? He had been kind enough to tell me that he would make me his wife. Should such a person say such harsh words?"

The song of sadness pained her as she entered the village.

'Perhaps it had been a little too much? She is a valiant woman indeed. And yet, I have been treating her gently as a soft flower held at the tip of the fingers. And today, I have burst like a volcano. If my face lost colour, she would lose colour on her face too and would be terribly upset. Now her face should have lost all its colour. It is more that a noble ideal has made us a pair of lovers of us than passion for each other. How could she then forget that she has to strictly stick on to a difficult path, which is the demand of the ideal? Had she told me about what had happened the moment she came to know of it, things would have been different. Has she not betrayed her selfishness in taking a contingent of the Mullaittīvu army to rescue her grandfather? Is it not greatly harmful that such selfish thoughts should occur to a crusader dedicated to a holy cause? Is it not a great mistake on her part to have taken a great political problem but as a matter of family feud? Had not the British abducted a retired lieutenant of the Mullaittivu army and kept him in Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ's palace as a retaliatory measure? And yet, the punishment I have meted out to her is a little on the higher side. She cannot bear with this sudden separation. I for my part am not able to bear with it, you see. She may be so hurt as to feel that my harsh words are stronger than separation from me. Look at me! The pain of the hurting is stronger than the pain of the hurt. Such is my lot today.'

There was a struggle between his ideologies and his love for her.

It was the same struggle that Kuruvicci also had to face. But the manner was different. She took up an undertaking to avoid a family feud assuming the form of a larger political issue. He had taken it otherwise and had taken it for an act of

selfishness. But she could not even dream that he would have taken it that way. Love for him outstripping his hatred for her, she had almost reached her house. The torrent of love that she had for him was not something that could be erased and written again. That made it impossible for her to bear with his harsh words.

She looked at the house from the corner of the street and was surprised at what she saw. There were a few mounted soldiers and among them, there were a few Britishers. She could sense something amiss. Perhaps they were there to arrest her. And she was all by herself in such a situation. She collected herself and walked with steady steps towards her house. The soldiers on horseback made way for her to go through. She burnt them with her eyes and entered the house. What she saw made her surprised and also repulsive.

Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ was there. He stood up on seeing her. "Nācciyār! I wanted to attend the funeral of your grandfather. But Paṇṭārakaṉ will be there. It may not be right for us to face each other in such a place. He is a little of a raw fellow. He is not sophisticated like me. That made me visit you in your house." Kuruvicci had fiery eyes. And yet she was refined enough not to show disrespect to the one who had been there to express condolences. She spoke. She remained calm but her hurt was deep. She said, "Thank you for coming."

"I thought perhaps you might go along with Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. It is good that you are back home. Please be seated." He played the host to her in her own house.

She did not sit but kept standing.

"Won't you sit down? That shows how respectful you are always towards me." He occupied a chair with these words.

His words gnawed her heart.

"I thought perhaps you might go along with Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ."

These words kept ringing in her ears. Louder than those words, "You need not come with me," kept resounding like thunder in her ears.

Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ had decided to gradually propose his love for her talking in polite words. He was about to ask her something. Meanwhile, a few of the villagers were at the doorstep to express their sympathies. She took advantage of the situation. "See those coming to express their condolence. Thank you." She brought her hands together to signal that he could leave. He had an ugly smile on his face as he took leave of her, looking at her as if he would devour her. Kuruvicci heaved a sigh of relief. As her breasts rose up and fell down in the sigh, he drank the beauty of it with his eyes, sitting astraddle his horse. What a wicked fellow in a house of sorrow!

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ entered his palace with the sorrowful thought that Kuruvicci had gone of all places to the palace of such a wicked fellow to rescue Caṅkilit Taḷapati.

The message he received almost immediately was that there was a messenger from Kaṇṭi all in a hurry to meet him.

16 Paṇṭārakaṉ's Sisters

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ ordered that the messenger from Kaṇṭi be brought to his presence and went to the hall in the palace. Two young women greeted him with a smile. Paṇṭārakaṉ said affectionately, "Hey! Nalla Nācci and Ūmaicci, when did you arrive?" "Just now," said Nalla Nācci. "I came unaware of sister coming here," said Ūmaicci.

Both of them were Paṇṭārakaṉ's younger sisters. Nalla Nācci was the elder of the two. She was taking care of the administration of the Triṅkōmalai region within his domain. Ūmaicci was a source of support to her brother taking care of the administration of Paṇaṅkāmam region.

Nalla Nācci, as her name implied, was a person of great virtues. Her beauty was equally great. She was slender. Her skin shone with a blend of the colours of sandal and *kumkum*. Though she was so fascinating as to make anyone feel lost in her presence, she was a virtuous woman in tune with her lineage. She was bashful and her thoughts were always clear and deep as betrayed by her gait. Umaicci was, however, a little playful. Her gait was enticing. But she had never deviated from the virtuous path for women, characteristic of the Tamiḻ lineage. She was strong enough in her thinking as to be able to face anything without the least fear. Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ had great affection for both his sisters. He wondered what could have brought them together to his palace. Ūmaicci could guess his curiosity and said, "I came to talk about a marriage."

He snapped in reply, "My marriage? I had earlier postponed it to the day I achieve my ideal. But now I have given up the very thought of marriage."

Ūmaicci made a joke of it and said, "You say that you don't want to marry anyone just because I keep on pestering you to marry someone. Right?"

"It is not like that. When a creeper is intent that it should hold on to the branch of a tree about to be struck by lightning any time, is it not right to prevent the attempt? Pity Kuruvicci. Let her at least have a better life." His voice failed him as he said this.

"It is not to talk about your marriage that I am here. We should talk about it, of course, and do something. But I came here now to talk about Nalla Nācci's marriage. She is here already, to my surprise." She looked at Nalla Nācci with an impish look.

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ said to Nalla Nācci, "Aha! Marriage? Have you decided upon your marriage without any information even to me?" There was a smile of teasing on his face. She felt bashful and hid herself behind a pillar. She was like the bright moon behind a dark cloud then.

Ūmaicci said, "Let me tell you the whole story."

"Oh, is there a story behind it? Love story, perhaps?" he laughed aloud.

Ūmaicci was encouraged to talk further when Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ evinced interest instead of expressing surprise.

"My dear brother! It is, of course, a love story. But I have never met the lover. My sister has also not shown him to me. Perhaps she is scared because I am more beautiful and her lover may prefer me to her."

Ūmaicci, true to her nature, laughed without any reservations.

Knowing her for what she was, Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ said, "All right. Tell me the details now." Even as he said this, the messenger from Kaṇṭi was brought in and was introduced to him.

"You are welcome. When did you arrive here? Is my friend Kaṇṇuccāmy all right?" Offering him a seat, Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ also took his seat.

"He has sent me to you."

"What could be the business?"

"You know what has been happening at Kaṇṭi after the demise of King Rājasiṅghē."

"Of course, I know what the situation there was during his last days. The two contending heirs are both my friends. Who of the two, Kaṇṇuccāmy and Muttuccāmy, stands a better chance?"

"Kaṇṇuccāmy stood a better chance as you might have felt. But then it seems that the prime minister of Kaṇṭi is indulging in foul play in collusion with the British officers."

"If he succeeds...?"

"Muttuccāmy could then become the king."

"How come? The British interference! The Prime Minister Pilimataḷāvai in collusion with the British! Plotting! If my friend Muttuccāmy becomes the king in such a situation, Kaṇṭi will be ready to kneel in front of the British."

"Yes, such is the situation. Contrary to what was expected. Only if you start immediately to Kaṇṭi can Kaṇṇuccāmy be made the king. That is why he has asked me to meet you as quickly as possible."

"That is all right. I will start tomorrow to Kaṇṭi. Tell Kaṇṇuccāmy not to declare anything before he meets me."

When the messenger left, Paṇṭārakaṉ's sisters came back to the hall.

"Nalla Nācci? Who is that lover of yours going to marry you?"

"Why ask her? Ask me!" said Ūmaicci, "Let me tell you. She had been off her palace on a routine administrative errand. It was then that she met him. Something clicked between them. He is a great trader. His name is Birmāṇantaṉ. Young, of course. Though he is not charming like the god of love, he has somehow stolen away the heart of my sister. They have met a few times thereafter. He seems to have been in a hurry, you see!"

"Hey, Ūmaicci. He is likely to become your elder sister's husband. Why don't you talk a little more respectfully of him?"

"That is my way of speaking. Let that be brother. Listen to what happened. When they met for the third time, he was impatient to make love to her. But our sister stopped him and said that those things could wait. First it had to be the marriage. She had been a little firm, you see."

"Um.. What did Birmāṇantaṉ say then?"

"What could he say? He felt that the better follows the good as a matter of fact and declared his readiness for the marriage. He was ready to sacrifice his momentary passion for a lasting relationship."

"He has sacrificed nothing. It is your sister who has made a compromise. The administrator of Triṅkōmalai and the sister of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ stooping down to get married to a trader – that is a great sacrifice indeed."

"Nalla Nācci dear, I have said what is to be said and to whom it should be said. You came running before I could come here to seek his permission. Now that he is here, why don't you tell him yourself?" She dragged Nalla Nācci to face Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ.

"Nalla Nācci! You have fallen in love with an anonymous person and seek my permission for the marriage. What could I say?"

Ūmaicci Nācci interrupted. "He is not an anonymous person. She has a portrait of his. Just a portable portrait. You can see for yourself and decide if he is a suitable groom for her."

He turned to Nalla Nācci and said, "Let me see it please."

Nalla Nācci had her head bowed in bashfulness and her cheeks turned red. She gave him a portrait and hurried to hide herself again behind the pillar.

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ was shocked when he looked at the portrait.

He could not believe his own eyes. The person he saw in the portrait was Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ.

17 The Journey to Kaṇṭi

Whenever beset with shocking information or whenever confusion prevailed, Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ used to scribble something on a piece of paper. Such scribbling more often than not used to shine so surprisingly poetic. On such occasions he used to feel as if he was relieved of pressing problems and confusion.

When his separation from Kuruvicci subsequent to his harsh words was gnawing through his heart, he felt as if struck on head with a thousand hammers together on coming to know that his sister was in love with Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ. The pity of it was further enhanced by the fact that he heard of it from his own sister.

He stood silent with clenched teeth for a little while. Then he left the place for his private chamber. Nalla Nācci and Ūmaicci Nācci looked at each other trembling all along. They thought that they were bringing good news. But it turned out to be something else. They could not even talk to each other. They gestured to each other to indicate that they could talk about it all later on. They moved to the inner rooms of the palace.

Paṇṭārakaṉ stared at the sky through the casement of his chamber and almost dropped himself into a chair.

The notebook in which he had already scribbled his thoughts in the form of a verse lay there attracting his attention.

He retrieved his glance from the sky and started to write. How many problems! Ever so much of a confusion! How many critical situations! How many expectations! How many shocks! To write in the midst of all these? Yes, to write is a veritable

medicine to his distraught mind dispelling his sadness and confusion. So he sought the help of the drug that could relieve him of his fatigue and frustration.

The lines were full of sadness. But insofar as they were the children of his imagination, he looked at them fondly. There was a pleasure in begetting them, a kind of comfort, happiness.

He who has made a struggle of his life
Sees the flash of lightning in the dark sky
And becomes happy.
Twinned with the lightning
Thunder crashes on his head;
Yet he survives
And lives, feeding on embers.
Those who profess to lay their lives for him
And be with him for ever,
Stay together only to dig a pit to bury him.
Those who were born of the same womb
Have turned into a congenital disease.
Who will bestow on me a heart
Strong enough to face all these?
Even if millions of eagles strive,
They cannot make a hole in the sky.
Even if millions of aliens strive
To demean the honour of the Tamiḻs
Fail will they?

Kulacēkaram Vairamuttup Paṇṭārakaṉ read a couple of times the lines he had written. Now he was free of the frustration that had weighed so heavily upon him. He could feel refreshed. He left the new leaf of his writing with the older leaves, shook himself and rose up brisk. He sounded the bell to summon the guards. Two of them ran fast towards him and stood respectfully.

"I am leaving for Kaṇṭi in the morning. I need a hundred soldiers to accompany me. Make arrangements."

There was a certain grandeur in his voice as he gave out the order. The guards left with the speed of wind from there.

The temporary peace of mind he had achieved with the help of the lines of verse he had written did not live long. His thoughts about the relationship between Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ and Nalla Nācci tossed and troubled his mind.

'How was my sister hoodwinked? Had she never even seen Kākkai Vannniyan, the traitor for so long? He had ensnared her professing to be a trader. Did such fellows deserve the love of a woman? Love is such a holy word. The fellow who had blasphemed love had hoodwinked Nalla Nācci. Hiding behind the curtain of love, he should have planned to execute a great political conspiracy. How could I say all this to her? She might commit suicide on hearing it. How could I then rescue her from the net of conspiracy? Let what might happen happen. I am there always. I carry my sword. Even if the sword is snatched away from me, I have a brave heart that no one can snatch away from me.'

He lay sleepless through the night. Early next morning, he was ready to leave for Kanti.

A contingent of a hundred armed soldiers on horseback awaited him at the palace gate. Pantāraka Vannniyan was dressed for the journey and also to face a probable attack on the way. He held a shining sword on hand as he arrived at the palace gate. His sisters followed him with not a word to utter.

Before he could leap on his horse, he turned back to look at his sisters. Nalla Nācci and Ūmaicci Nācci, unable to face his sharp and bright eyes, moved away with bowed heads. Pantāraka Vannniyan adjusted his throat with a mild grunt, which showed how upset he was. It sounded like rolling thunder through rainy clouds. Both the sisters understood that a feeling of uneasiness was dancing with a frenzy on the platform of the brother's mind.

It was then that he gave Nalla Nācci a scroll. She took it from him and looked at his face with tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Didn't you show me a portrait? See, I have a painting for you. Read it. This is the painting of my life. Let me go."

Nalla Nācci started reading it. Ūmaicci Nācci also moved closer to her and started reading what was on the scroll along with her. Those were the lines of verse he had composed.

The sisters looked at each other with pale faces. "I am going to Kanti. Stay back until I return." With these words, he mounted his horse.

The moment the British at Colombo came to know that Pantārakan was on his way to Kanti to resolve the problem of the successor to the Kanti throne between Kannuccāmy and Muttuccāmy, they started scheming to defeat his purpose.

Kannuccāmy was not the one who would fall at the feet of the British. So he should not be allowed to ascend the throne. The British officers who met at Colombo decided that Muttuccāmy should become the king of Kanti because he was used to kneeling in front of the British and because he was the best in betraying the people

of his own clan. So they thought of preventing Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's arrival at Kaṇṭi. A few officers suggested that he should be met on the way and chased back. Others felt that to do so at that particular point of time would lead to a great war and that it would be difficult for the British to withstand the concerted attack of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's Mullaittīvu army and Kaṇṭi army. So they should be taken on separately on the battlefield. First, the friendly relationship between the two states should be spoilt. Finally, they decided to let Paṇṭārakaṉ arrive at Kaṇṭi. They planned to ensnare him in their conspiracy later.

Unmindful of any such contingency, Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ continued his journey towards Kaṇṭi.

18 Friends Meet

Even before Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ could arrive at Kaṇṭi, a messenger from Colombo brought an urgent message to Pilimataḷāvai, the trusted prime minister of the late king Rājā Rajasiṅghē. It had been sent by Frederick North, the British Governor. Pilimataḷāvai was worried on reading the message. Kaṇṇuccāmy was to be arrested immediately and kept in prison and all necessary arrangements for Muttuccāmy's coronation were to be made. Such was the governor's message.

Pilimataḷāvai was not quite a good man. And yet, he did not like to be a puppet in the hands of the British. At the same time, he had the cherished desire of becoming the king of Kaṇṭi himself on the demise of Rājā Rajasiṅghē. He was looking forward to help from the British to realize his desire. So he was shocked when he received a message from the British Governor Frederick North much against what he had expected.

If Kaṇṇuccāmy was arrested before anyone became the king of Kaṇṭi after the death of Rājā Rājasiṅghē, the blame would fall on the head of Pilimataḷāvai. If Muttuccāmy was made the king, he could be manipulated to undo Pilimataḷāvai. Then Muttuccāmy could also be put in his place and Kaṇṭi could be brought under the British rule. Such was the scheme of the Governor, Frederick North.

Pilimataḷāvai understood the intentions of the British. So he was thinking about how he could avoid being trapped in enmity against the British and at the same time how to manipulate the affairs of the Kaṇṭi kingdom.

If he did not arrest Kaṇṇuccāmy,he might incur the wrath of Governor North. If he arrested him, he would earn the enmity of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ.

Pilimataḷāvai was well aware of the disadvantages to himself in making Muttuccāmy the king of Kaṇṭi. Muttuccāmy was a slave to the British. He would carry out the orders of the British with such readiness. If he were to be made the king, his intention of making him an enemy to the British and then becoming the king himself could not be realized. On the other hand, if Kaṇṇuccāmy were made the king, his hatred for the British would naturally lead to war and in the melee he could work his way out to become the king of Kaṇṭi. These were the political calculations of Pilimataḷāvai.

He felt helpless when he saw matters taking a direction totally against his intentions.

Was he to arrest Kaṇṇuccāmy? Was he to make Muttuccāmy the king? Was he to put an end to all his desires for the future? When he was thus feeling frustrated, the news of the arrival of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ at Kaṇṭi reached his ears.

Though Pilimataḷāvai was jealous enough not to acknowledge Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's valour, courage, firm heart, resolve in opposing the British, and the regards he enjoyed from the people, he needed his services right at that point of time.

He knew that Paṇṭārakaṉ had arrived on having been invited by Kaṇṇuccāmy. So he pretended as if he supported his intentions and took Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ to his own palace.

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's eyes were searching for Kaṇṇuccāmy.

Pilimataḷāvai said, "I can understand who Paṇṭārakaṉ's eyes are looking for. Your friend Kaṇṇuccāmy?"

"Yes. I am here on his invitation. What is the problem with succession here?"

"Not much of a problem. Kaṇṇuccāmy should become the king of Kaṇṭi as you and I desire. When I have taken up all the necessary arrangements, the British Governor North has created a complication."

"Let me have the details."

"The governor has sent an order to arrest Kaṇṇuccāmy and to make Muttuccāmy the king."

"Who is he to order us? The right to decide who should rule our state is ours. Having come from somewhere, having won over the weaklings, they are crying out that no one can shake their imperialism. They don't have such rights. There is no need to obey such orders."

"Paṇṭārakaṉ is a leaping tiger. A fuming lion. The undaunted man of valour. I am aware of it. And yet, the British army is many times stronger than the forces of both our states. That is why one has to think over before taking a decision."

"What have you thought over? What decisions have you arrived at?"

"I have thought of a trick to send a message of an emergent situation which makes it impossible to arrest Kaṇṇuccāmy."

"What is the trick?"

"Kaṇṇuccāmy and my daughter have been in love. It has logically led to their marriage. When I am making arrangements for their marriage, how am I to arrest Kaṇṇuccāmy? I am beset with confusion. Such should be the message to be sent to Governor North."

"North should believe it, you see!"

"If you so desire it, he will come to believe it."

"I desiring it? What do you mean?"

"Paṇṭārakaṉ should talk to his friend Kaṇṇuccāmy and convince him to consent to the marriage."

"Me? Making Kaṇṇuccāmy consent to the marriage? I have already advised Kaṇṇuccāmy to marry a Tamiḻ woman. And now, contrary to it, asking him to marry a Sinhalese woman, that too your daughter... how is it possible?"

"That appears to be the only way to escape from danger and to enable him to assume authority as king. The British trust me as the prime minister of Kaṇṭi. If I make Kaṇṇuccāmy my son-in-law, they will extend all concessions to him."

"Even if both of us are agreeable to this plan, you daughter should consent."

"My daughter loves Kaṇṇuccāmy. Kaṇṇuccāmy has not paid heed to her request to marry her. No day passes without my daughter crying that if she married someone, it would be Kaṇṇuccāmy. If not possible to get married to him, she is ready to die."

Listening to the words of Pilimataḷāvai which sounded as if he was himself in love, Paṇṭārakaṉ could hear someone entering the palace. "O, you are also here." He sprang up.

Kaṇṇuccāmy walked into the hall with a certain grandeur about his gait and he ran to Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ, shook his hands and embraced him.

"Hey, what is it that I hear? It seems your marriage has been decided upon. You did not tell me at all." said Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ with a twinkle in his eye.

"Marriage? To whom? To me? O, you had been telling me about it. That princess of Maturai. Is it going to be she? Have you negotiated the marriage?"

"The Maturai princess I had mentioned is a Tamiḻ woman. What I hear about today is a Sinhalese parrot."

Kaṇṇuccāmy was taken aback. He stood motionless staring at Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ.

19 Unwilling Marriage

Piyacīli was a bunch of grapes. A lass begotten of Pilimataḷāvai. Liquor intoxicates only on consumption. Just a look at this maid was enough to make the young faint. The elderly would be struck immobile as they looked at her with a gaping mouth. Her hips were so narrow as to make one feel that they always needed a support. Her breasts were so huge that one doubted if her tender hip would ever hold them. Her eyes were like gnats that stole the hearts of the youth with their fluttering. Thousands would be enslaved when they moved. Her dress code would challenge even those who had renounced everything, defeat them and declare victory. Having begotten such a daughter, Pilimataḷāvai was dreaming of becoming the king of Kaṇṭi making use of her. She did not know the intentions of her father. She made use of the freedom given to move with Kaṇṇuccāmy and was always hovering around him. Many were those who stood around her. She teased them with her subtle movements but remained the lady of Kaṇṇuccāmy's bed. Kaṇṇuccāmy was also a young man and was brought up in the luxury of the palace. No one could tell him what to do and what not. He was not senseless wood to refuse to taste the nectar of heaven that fell into his mouth of its own accord.

She appeared to be such an enticer that he had his own hesitation in maintaining relationship with her at first, of course. But she did not give up. One could never know how she had mastered so many tricks of lovemaking even at such a young age. She taught them all to Kaṇṇuccāmy. When the king was alive, Kaṇṇuccāmy had his pastime in the prime minister's house. That was his station of lust. That

was the altar of his offerings to the god of love. He was everywhere there, the inner rooms of the minister's house, the hall, the corridors, the garden, any time of the day or night. He held her in one of his arms and in the other held a glass of wine. Their mouths became wine glasses. As they drunk of them, they secreted honey. Pilimataḷāvai had a studied ignorance of what had been happening. When what he intended was taking place, why should he object?

Kaṇṇuccāmy drank mouthfuls of all the nectar of her breasts and considered her but a doll of lust. He wanted to nibble around the statue that no sculptor had worked on. Just as everyone longed to feel the curves of a statue of a smooth stone, there were others who were enjoying the feel of her. Kaṇṇuccāmy was aware of it. His especial right was to have a longer duration of enjoying her. Besides, she made herself available to others only off the time that he needed her. And she never allowed others to have their fill. Nor did she keep away from them. She was proud of making Kaṇṇuccāmy see how many men were longing for the pleasures her body could afford them. Kaṇṇuccāmy had taken her for a doll on the tower of a temple. But that doll had plans of becoming the deity in the *sanctum sanctorum* and with such a desire, kept kissing him.

"Darling! Look at me. All my beauty is an offering to you. I have sent back those British officers who came behind me begging for a smile which they considered to be greater than the whole world. Just a soft touch with my silken fingers was all that I gave them. My cousin who has the right to marry me is such a ruffian. I always like rough lovemaking, as you know dear. But I allowed the rough lover of my cousin just a kiss on my lips and left him in the lurch. I did not become a dish unto his lust. Why? Wherefore? Just think of it, my soul. So many are there who want to pull my lips with a kiss. One or two succeed in that, of course. But I have made a bed of your lap just because I want you to constantly taste my lips. I lose myself in your embrace. My father knows, of course, of what is happening between us. He has never asked me what all this is about. He will not. He as well as the people around has felt that we are made for each other. What else is there? It is only the formal marriage. Whatever is to happen after marriage have all happened as if in a rehearsal. Say yes and we will live as man and wife."

Kaṇṇuccāmy recalled all these words of hers uttered a few days ago as she slipped naked on his supine body.

Kaṇṇuccāmy could guess that Pilimataḷāvai should have spoken to his friend Paṇṭārakaṉ about Piyacīli's marriage.

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ had an inkling of what was running through Kaṇṇuccāmy's mind. So he said to Pilimataḷāvai, "Perhaps I can have a word with Kaṇṇuccāmy alone."

Pilimataḷāvai said, "Why not?" and took the others around a little away.

Paṇṭārakaṉ teased Kaṇṇuccāmy,"Ensnared in the net of love?"

"This is not a love of two hearts coming together as in the case of Paṇṭārakaṉ and Kuruvicci. If you want me to tell you the truth, this is not love at all. She is just a dish for my lust."

Kaṇṇuccāmy lowered his head as he said this.

'When even the love of Kuruvicci comes to have a blemish, love in the play of politics could only be a pretension.'

"You are right, my friend. Piyacīli is an angel of beauty. She has somehow managed to enslave me. It is not only me. There are many a royal youth begging for her love at her feet."

"O, you got the boon, then."

"You are wrong. She chooses a few. She grants more of her time to me. Extends more liberties to me."

"Do you know the result of your adolescent behaviour? The plan for your marriage with her is ready."

"I have already told her in so many terms that it is just impossible."

"Did she agree?"

"No. She says that she cannot live without me. She says that she will take poison."

"Why should you refuse to marry her?"

"She is a beautiful bird, of course. But she feeds on worms."

"Now she has to be used as a pigeon of peace."

"What do you say? I don't understand."

"Governor North has ordered Pilimataḷāvai to arrest you and make Muttuccāmy the king. To wriggle out of the critical situation, he has decided to make a son-in-law of you."

"He need not arrest me if I become his son-in-law?"

"The Colombo Governor may think that Kaṇṇuccāmy and his father-in-law are closer to him than Muttuccāmy, you see."

"To marry Piyacīli? She is a dish sniffed at by so many tomcats."

"You are the most important of the tomcats, aren't you? Marry her first. Free yourself from danger. Then keep the other tomcats away."

"You are kidding."

"No. You have to retain the throne of Kaṇṭi facing cleverness with cleverness. You may have to face many other conspiracies. I will be with you in all your struggles. For the time being, consent to the marriage."

"You call it marriage, with Piyacīli?"

"You have smeared the dung for the sandal paste. So you alone should declare that it smells sweet."

"Isn't there any other way out?"

"Any other way? Surrender the Kaṇṭi kingdom to Muttuccāmy and open the doors for the British."

"No, no! To prevent the British imperialism, I am ready to marry anyone worse than even this Piyacīli."

"You laid your hands on her knowing pretty well what kind of a woman she is. Now accept the marriage hoping that she would mend herself."

Kaṇṇuccāmy hugged his friend Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ and nodded his head in assent for the unwilling marriage.

20 The Web of Conspiracy

The marriage of Piyacīli and Kaṇṇuccāmy was held in a grand manner at Kaṇṭi. When Governor North who had ordered the arrest of Kaṇṇuccāmy proposed to attend the marriage in person and bless the couple, Muttuccāmy was greatly disappointed. Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ chose to stay back at Kaṇṭi palace for a few more days to watch the strange interplay of political games. Muttuccāmy tried his best to prevent Kaṇṇuccāmy's coronation on learning that the Governor was not going to object to it. But he could do nothing. He did not like the idea of remaining at Kaṇṭi on the day of the marriage and ran away to Colombo.

When he fell at the feet of the governor, the envoy of imperialism that he was, he consoled him.

"Don't worry, Muttuccāmy. I am also keeping an eye on how things are moving in a direction much against our own intentions. But one thing. Don't underestimate the brains of the British. We do not hasten as the Dutch or the Portuguese do. We become furious, of course. But we never reveal it. The strength of our imperialism lies in approaching the enemy with caution. Only then can we succeed. We have achieved so many such victories before. That is why we pretend ignorance of the political changes at Kaṇṭi. It does not mean that we have washed our hands clean of Kaṇṭi."

These words of North encouraged Muttuccāmy a little and so he stayed back in the palace at Colombo as an errand boy to the British.

The Governor had sent only a message of greeting to Kaṇṇuccāmy on the occasion of his coronation.

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ was happy about it in that there was no need for looking at the disgusting face of the white monkey.

But he did not know anything about the long letter that the Governor had sent to Pilimataḷāvai. That was a mine of conspiracy, a web of intrigues. Knowing nothing of it, he stayed back for a few more days at Kaṇṭi with his friend Kaṇṇuccāmy.

He was worried about what had happened to Kuruvicci Nācci. He was also worried about what his sisters left behind at Mullaittīvu palace would think about what had happened to him.

Despite such anxiety, he had a feeling that it would be better to stay back at Kaṇṭi for a few more days as a support to Kaṇṇuccāmy's new government.

Pilimataḷāvai read and read again the long letter from the governor. He would read it as soon as he woke up for the day. He would read it again after lunch. He would read it over again before going to bed.

'To bring enmity between Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ and Kaṇṇuccāmy? How is it possible? Can I do it? The Governor promises the throne to me if I can. He has also promised the British protection. It is not only the protection of the army but also a lot of money. When he promises money in heap after heap, I have to act even if God stood in the way. Paṇṭārakaṉ and Kaṇṇuccāmy are like nail and flesh. How can I separate them? Doesn't the nail grow off the flesh? Thus is Paṇṭārakaṉ to be kept away from Kaṇṇuccāmy. Just keeping him away is not by itself enough. We should make enemies of them. Then only they will war against each other. If Kaṇṇuccāmy and Paṇṭārakaṉ become enemies, I can take hold of Kaṇṭi with the help of the British. The governor has asked me to make them enemies to each other. He has not said anything about how. There is not even a hint. If I were to seek his advice on that, he might suspect my intelligence. Let me work it out myself. I should find a way to make Paṇṭārakaṉ and Kaṇṇuccāmy great enemies of each other. But one thing. The seeds of enmity shall be sown before Paṇṭārakaṉ leaves Kaṇṭi.'

Many a plan crossed the mind of Pilimataḷāvai. Each vied with the other as the most befitting. He put them all aside and finally chose one as the best. When he thought about it, he felt a little ashamed. Then he shrugged off all such feeling and stood up with a smile.

Unaware of the web of conspiracy Pilimataḷāvai was weaving around the friends, Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ was asleep in one of the most ornate chambers in the palace of Kaṇṭi. Beset for long with anxiety about Mullaittīvu and the attempts of the British to perpetuate imperialism in Lanka, he was unaware of what was happening around as he fell into deep sleep.

A beautiful hand dimmed the wick of the the bright lamp in the chamber. It was a woman's hand, of course. Then it removed the soft curtain around the bed. A

woman sat on Paṇṭārakaṉ's bed. Her eyes fluttered fast in the faint light. Her lips vied with her eyes, quivering equally fast.

It was none other than Piyacīli. She kept on looking at his face. She removed the garment that covered her breasts that enticed men. She touched the sleeping Paṇṭārakaṉ on his shoulder ever so gently.

21 The Eagle and the Sparrow

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ turned around gently on his bed as if a few buds of jasmine fell and rolled over his shoulders. And Piyacīli had a chance to see how impressive his back was. It brought to her mind an episode in the story of *Mahābāratā*. Pārvati desired to have a look at the back of Arccuṉaṉ. She conveyed her desire to Paramacivan. So Paramacivan challenged Arccuṉaṉ for a duel. When the duel was on, he turned such that Pārvati could see Arccuṉaṉ's back. Such a story. Arccuṉaṉ was supposed to have such an attractive back.

"I have not seen Arccuṉaṉ. What if I have seen him even? His back could not have been so charming as Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's back." With this thought in her mind, Piyacīli gently passed her palm along his back.

Paṇṭārakaṉ was in deep sleep. When she tried to wake him up, he only felt pushed into a dream.

He did not know that Piyacīli was sitting beside him on the bed. He saw Kuruvicci in his dream. He was cajoling her.

"Angry with me Kuruvi? I told you not to come along with me. Did I tell you that you should not live with me? What is to be done? As pledged by us, until our goal is achieved, we cannot have physical relationship, of course. But who can stop the two hearts embracing each other, talking endearingly to each other, speaking

sweet nothings to each other, smiling and kissing each other? Neither you nor I can, Kuruvicci. No, it cannot be."

His voice faltered as he said this. He saw in his dream that he had laid his head on Kuruvicci's lap and was looking through her face. She was rubbing his legs gently. With her head slanted towards his, she was swallowing his charm. Paṇṭārakaṉ's eyes were filled with tears. Kuruvicci's eyes were a torrent of tears.

It was a bed on which no flowers were strewn. And the two flowers lay on the bed dampening themselves with tears. Knowing that the pleasure of twinning together is not so great as the pleasure of making a song of separation, they were floating on a sea of tears in dream.

"Kuruvi, I had said something in haste. If it were true that you had given yourself over to me, shouldn't you have come running behind me? If you had said that you had committed a mistake unawares and had pleaded with me to forgive you, I would have felt as if I had received thousands of hammer blows on my heart. How is it you have become more angry than I and have forgotten me wholesale?"

"Besides pushing me into a flood of agony, you are throwing a spear at me, darling. When all my hopes are pinned on you, you have pushed me away from you and started with hatred in your heart. How is it fair, dear?"

As she asked this, she laid her cheek on his and he could find no answer. He thought that he could evade the responsibility of answering her only by holding her in tight embrace. He hugged her so tight that the two bodies were fused into one. Are not dreams more wonderful than those of magic? Dreams are dreams. So the bed became a bunch of clouds. It swam through the blue skies, carrying them. The women of the stars danced around them clapping their hands. Then the women turned into creepers shedding colourful flowers. Paṇṭārakaṉ and Kuruvicci made an umbrella of the moon for the floral showers and walked through snowcapped mountains. They ran together. They danced together. They sang together.

He shouted her name and she shouted his name in the most endearing terms and rushed towards each other. But look! There was a chasm between them. Unmindful of the chasm between them, they sprang towards each other. Holding each other in tight embrace they fell into the deep ravine.

Paṇṭārakaṉ woke up from his dream. He blabbered the name of Kuruvicci and turned once again in bed. He hugged her who lay close to his back till then. Piyacīli did not want to miss the wonderful chance. She got rid of her other clothings.

It was just for a moment. Paṇṭārakaṉ was wide awake. He stood up, perturbed.

"Who's it?" There was anxiety in his voice. It took a little time for him to recollect himself in the dim light.

"Piyacīli? Is it you? What is this?"

"Do you need any explanation? A bed – a charming man – a beautiful dame."

"Don't you think that this is perversion?"

"It does not look like a perversion. Nor is it a problem. Bees fly over to flowers for nectar. You see, now! It is the flower that has come to the bee. To this bee..."

"I have heard enough about you."

"Your friend Kaṇṇuccāmy should have told you enough stories about me."

"Stories? No, they are the blemishes of womanhood."

"We only decide what is a blemish and what is a virtue. God has created mankind only to enjoy all pleasures of life. Aren't there the pigeons, koels, peacocks and peahens, tigers and deer, and all other wild animals and birds? Do they indulge in idle talk about virtue or blemish?"

"Oh, you are the one who has stripped oneself of all norms. To talk to you is like smearing oneself in sandal paste and jumping into the drainage."

"I know you will praise me for a floral shop in a little while from now."

She leapt on him and pinned him to the bed. Before he could push her away and stand up, she put off the dim lamp too, plunging the room into darkness.

Meanwhile, the noise of someone breaking into the chamber was heard. He carried a taper.

22 The Midnight Drama

One could see a clean tonsured head in the light of the taper. The eyes were those of the owl. His face made one feel that perhaps Hanumāṉ who went to Lanka in search of Cītā had become immortal and had stayed over there for ever. His gait lacked all manliness. Such a creature made a hue and cry jumping about all along the room. Yes, it was none but Pilimataḷāvai.

When someone introduced Pilimataḷāvai as the father of such a wonderful beauty that Piyacīli was, one could only surmise that her mother should have been a wonderfully beautiful woman.

A look at the eyes of Pilimataḷāvai spitting poison in a torrential shower in the light of the taper was not a sight to be cherished. Even before he could enter the room, Paṇṭārakaṉ had pushed Piyacīli away from him and stood all afire with the sense of nausea of having touched the caterpillar.

"Come my son-in-law! See this injustice for yourself." Pilimataḷāvai shouted at the top of his voice. He held Kaṇṇuccāmy who was following him by his arm and pulled him into the room. The son-in-law who had accompanied the father-in-law could see the half naked Piyacīli rolling on the floor.

Paṇṭārakaṉ shouted the name of Kaṇṇuccāmy. His voice faltered but he was quite loud.

Pilimataḷāvai revealed his histrionic talents right then.

"Don't belittle my son-in-law calling him by his name. Don't forget that he is the king of Kaṇṭi. He has already been given the name of Vikramarāja Siṅghē with the blessings of the priests. The whole world knows that he is now King Vikramarāja Siṅghē. How is it you are so conceited? Address him by his title Vikramarāja Siṅghē and fall at his feet."

"Mister Minister. He and I are kings. Nevertheless, he is Kaṇṇuccāmy to me and I am Vairamuttu to him. So deep is our friendship."

As soon as Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ said this, Pilimataḷāvai passed his palm through his tonsured head. His egg-like eyes pushed themselves out of their sockets and he started laughing aloud. He also started pouring harsh words.

"Friendship, you say friendship! Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Do you call abducting the friend's wife at night and indulging in what you do friendship?"

"Mister Minister! Don't speak all in haste. I was fast asleep. She came in and misbehaved."

"You sinner the great! I have seen with my own eyes and you say what I say is a lie. She is my daughter, of course. But mind you, I am not angry as her father that you have seduced her. But you have seduced your most dear friend's wife. You have violated her honour."

He was about to spring on Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ but turned towards his daughter. "You fool! I can forgive you as a father your lascivious sojourn with this fellow. But how could you betray your husband just because this traitor called you to his bed? Vikramarāja Siṅghē is now the king of Kaṇṭi. This Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ is but a local chieftain. He is an enemy to the British here like Kaṭṭapommaṉ in Tamiḻnāṭu. Should the queen of this country descend to make love to such an ordinary fellow? You should have said, 'You dog. You fiend. Leave me alone. I am not only the queen but also your friend's wife.' You should have kicked him aside."

Half clad and shamelessly exposing herself, Piyacīli said, "Father, forgive me. Don't you be harsh not knowing what had happened. I did not come here of my own accord. Will I ever do that? Don't you know that my life is that of the most virtuous wife? My husband Vikramarāja Siṅghē left me saying that he was a little busy and that he would come a little late. I could not bear even a short separation from him. I sought the comfort of wine to drown my worries. I was tipsy and loitered about the passage in the palace. My eyes were looking for my husband to return. I felt someone hugging me from behind. I thought that it should be the king and gave myself up. Now only do I understand that it was this traitor who hugged me and dragged me here."

Crying aloud to her father, Piyacīli went to Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ and said, "Hey, you pervert! Speak the truth. Did you molest me when I was drunk? I cannot live even for a moment if you have offended my noble virtue. Speak the truth." She raised a hue and cry.

The drama the father and the daughter had planned was being successfully staged.

Pilimataḷāvai, who had used his own daughter to carry out his plan of isolating the friends from each other and hoped to become the king of Kaṇṭi with the help of the British, rolled his eyes which appeared like a huge drum beating notes of victory.

"King of kings! You are shocked and stuck. The woman cheated and raped is not my daughter Piyacīli. She is now the wife of the king of Kaṇṭi, queen of queens, Piyacīli. Are you still patient? Do you think that he could be forgiven because he is after all your friend? This is not the nation that can be shared between friends. It is woman, the royal woman. Woe is me! Looking at you still standing so silent, I feel like knocking my head against this pillar and killing myself."

Crying aloud, Pilimataḷāvai rushed to the pillar. Even before he could reach the pillar, Piyacīli jumped and stood between him and the pillar. All went on as if well rehearsed. "No father!" she shouted and stopped him.

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ thought, 'My goodness! Each of the veins in his head should be a venomous snake. Haha! How well do you father and daughter act! What an obscene desire is it to make enemies of Kaṇṇuccāmy and me and thus offer the kingdom of Kaṇṭi at the feet of the British and take the water used to wash their feet as offering made to God! How can I describe the most indignant act of making use of his own daughter to be the heroine of this obscene drama?'

Pilimataḷāvai was almost in a frenzy as he shook the shoulders of Kaṇṇuccāmy and shouted. "Are you going to avenge the traitor of a friend who raped his wife? Or, as a father, am I to behead him for having violated the honour of my daughter?"

Pilimataḷāvai drew his sword and held it above his head to strike at Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. Kaṇṇuccāmy took the sword from him and said, "No, I will teach the traitor his lesson." He roared like a lion.

23 The Ideal of Friendship

Pilimataḷāvai shouted in appreciation of the king and shook his head that was like a narrow-necked pot. He stood aside to clear the ground for Kaṇṇuccāmy to attack Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ.

But contrary to his expectation and that of his daughter Piyacīli, Vikramarāja Siṅghē threw the upheld sword at Piyacīli's neck. As if struck by a thousand flashes of lightning, Piyacīli bent fast and fell at his feet. "My lord! Are you mad? Have you decided to make true the saying that the fault is someone's and the punishment is to someone else. How could you suspect me who have built a temple for you in my heart and offer my worship there? Is this your loving gift to the one who considers that a mere touch of your body gives greater pleasure than that of the nectar of heaven?" She cried bitterly.

But the husband did not soften. He laughed aloud. There was fire in the laughter.

"What deception! I have heard enough about the pretentiously virtuous women who store tears in ponds and dams behind the channels of their eyes and whenever they want, they open the sluices. It is not tears that brim off your eyes. It is the fountain of poison."

"You of all talking like this? You enjoy the pleasures I can give as exclusively yours. And you of all talking like this now?"

"I know you. I know pretty well that you are looking for a new object of pleasure everyday. I also know that there are only a few in the palace of Kaṇṭi who had not been enticed by your beauty. What could you do? That is how you have been

brought up or you have grown. You expect every man looking at you to fall into desire for your supple moves. Then you want him to languish in passion for you. You want that crazy fellow to keep going around you languishing in lust. You derive a special pleasure in making men crazy. It is your pastime to choose one for a day and revel in the intoxication."

"Woe is me! You pour molten lead into my ears. Lord, all my make-up, lovely dress and jewels are meant for you to see and enjoy. What if crows and eagles gape at the offerings meant for the deity? Will the offerings carry any blemish? I am created to be the offering to you, my lord, I am the offering to this god of mine."

"I know what people do with offerings. They wave them before the gods and then share them among themselves. You have so many such devotees."

Pilimataḷāvai who kept quiet till then suddenly interrupted. Perhaps his cunning brain had struck upon a new idea.

"My son-in-law! You are our king too. I talk to you forgetting the fact that Piyacīli is my daughter. I am talking to you as a minister talks to his king. Let this Piyacīli be a nymph. Let her be a slut making love to any and every man. I feel ashamed to hear a husband talk about his wife thus. It is all right. I have just one question to you. Piyacīli is a fiend of lust. She is a slut in bed. She dances for the pleasure of the world. Say anything you want to say about her. But whatever a slut she be, how could you forgive your friend who had invited the slut to his bed? As if he had scant regard to the fact that she is the wife of his friend. As if he were calling her for further immoral indulgence. How are you going to forgive him? Can there be a worse offence to a friend? Even if she had sought his bed, what should he have done? He could have sent her away saying that he would not betray the trust of a friend."

Pilimataḷāvai passed his hand through his tonsured head hoping that Kaṇṇuccāmy would fall a prey to his last appeal.

"My minister," said Vikramarāja Siṅghē in an unmistakable manner, "Have you heard of an incident described in the *Mahābhārata*? Turiyōtaṉaṉ and Karṇaṉ were bosom friends. One day when Turiyōtaṉaṉ was away from his house, his wife Pāṉumati and Karṇaṉ were playing dice. She was about to lose the game. Karṇaṉ was playing the game with great confidence. Just then Turiyōtaṉaṉ came back. Pāṉumati saw the approaching husband. She stood up in respect to him. Karṇaṉ had not noticed Turiyōtaṉaṉ. He thought that Pāṉumati was trying to avoid losing the game, leaving half way. He tried to drag her back to her seat. He held the girdle of pearls around her waist. The pearls fell in all directions. Just then Turiyōtaṉaṉ accost them both. Karṇaṉ was terribly upset lest Turiyōtaṉaṉ should misread the situation. Turiyōtaṉaṉ knew that Karṇaṉ had no dot of blemish in his heart.

He collected the pearls and said, "Shall I make a chain of it again?" So pure was his heart. My minister! I am like unto that Turiyōtaṉaṉ in friendship. Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ is my Karṇaṉ. But your daughter cannot be compared with that virtuous lady Pāṉumati."

Kaṇṇuccāmy did not even complete his statement. Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ was so moved that he ran to his friend and embraced him.

Pilimataḷāvai understood that his drama had a different climax from what he had intended. He laid his hands on Piyacīli's shoulder and took her away saying, "Let us go. God is looking at everything that is happening." He left the place.

24 Not a Man, but a Valiant Lady

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ took leave of the king of Kaṇṭi, Vikramarāja Siṅghē, and was bound for Mullaittīvu. Pilimataḷāvai was upset that his plan did not work out. Piyacīli was in a great confusion. She was a rainbow of attraction and she of all had not been able to entice Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. The sense of defeat made her feel heavy on the one hand. On the other, she suffered a sense of guilt that her husband had made a clean breast of his awareness of her nature. Pilimataḷāvai was ashamed to face the British, having failed in his promise to create a rift between the good friends. In such a situation, Vikramarāja Siṅghē stood at the entrance to the palace at Kaṇṭi along with his wife to see Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ off. Pilimataḷāvai also stood beside the king attending to the travel arrangements of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ.

All the four did not show as if what had happened the previous night had happened at all. But each was in a troubled state of mind.

'I had had to marry this woman of all those in the world. Such a creature is she! She considers all acts of sin as the stepping stones to heaven. She has decided once and for all that love, desire, affection are but lip-services to enslave men. My God! I don't know how many such shining snakes of women have you created. She calls me her god but is waiting for the right moment to wring my neck. She says that

she cannot live without me. But she is looking for me to leave her for a moment so that she can have a free go with other men and compare the pleasure she gets from them with that she gets from me. The abject sinner that she is, she appears to be the most blemish-free as she stands beside me. Is it possible to forgive her? But what else could I do? She happens to be my queen.'

The king of Kaṇṭi was wailing thus.

'What if I am so beautiful? My beauty has not succeeded in enticing this Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. The beauty of the art of love is there in my eyes. The beauty of the mountains is there in my breasts. My waist is so delicate. My thighs are so soft. My gait is so supple. All have become futile in his presence. I thought that he would spring upon me like a tiger and I could enjoy heavenly bliss in his lovemaking. I thought that I could give him his heavenly pleasure. The *purāṇās* speak of the renounced who bowed their heads to the beauty of women. But this man has become more renounced than the most renounced. I thought that he would say that my face is like the moon that floats through the skies; that my lips secrete honey; that the whole world will be defeated if the honey of my lips is tasted once. My father planned everything. Why should I have agreed to execute it? My father's desire is for the kingdom. My desire is for lying on the wonderful body of this charming man at least for a moment, forgetting the whole world. That made me prepared to execute my father's plan. I stand defeated. There are ever so many who make a poem of my beauty. How many are there sending me letters describing the beauty of my parts! When I see them and when I read them, I am proud of myself. But that pride has been dented last night.'

That was how Piyacīli was wailing.

'I planned to change the political map of this region with her help. Who else is there who could earn me my victory but she? I know that there are so many young men who would like to touch her feet. They secretly touch her slippers when they could not touch her feet. There are so many men of high status who are ready to throw their honour to the winds and stand in a queue to become her errand boys. But it is my misfortune that this Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ did not surrender himself to her beauty. Though I am sad that my plan did not succeed, I could not help but appreciate this man of perfect valour beyond the reach of lust.'

That was how Pilimataḷāvai was wailing.

'Treachery in the form of a woman. Conspiracy in the form of a minister. Friendship in the form of the king of Kaṇṭi. I expected that she would become the wife deserving his love, a virtuous woman, at least after getting married to him. But she roams as a queen of lascivious nights. She seems to have learnt the art of living a life of wayward lust. The sinner that Pilimataḷāvai is, he tried to

gain political advantage at my expense. It is my good fortune that my friend has abundant faith in me. Our friendship has remained intact. This nation also has survived a misfortune.'

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ heaved a sigh as he thought so.

All the four looked at each other as if nothing had happened between them.

"Let me go!" said Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ and the king of Kaṇṭi hugged him. There were tears in the eyes of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. They shone like diamonds in the light of the sun that morning. The king of Kaṇṭi was none the better.

He took leave of Pilimataḷāvai and Piyacīli too. He could have uttered his words of farewell to the pillars of the palace. They would at least have responded. They stood like stones with not a wink of the eye.

Paṇṭārakaṉ mounted his horse and spurred it on. The other horses were also ready to follow him. When Paṇṭārakaṉ's horse leapt forward, Piyacīli shouted like a fiend and threw a knife at his hip. Before the knife could reach Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ, a soldier on horseback beside him leapt to receive it on his chest.

The headgear of the wounded soldier fell off his head as he slided off his horse to the ground. It was not a man but a valiant lady. Who was it?

25 The Fiend Piyacīli

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ did not need a long time to know that it was Kuruvicci Nācci his dear love who had saved him from Piyacīli's attempt on his life, taking upon herself the knife thrown at him. He ran to her in a flash and lifted her up shouting her name out. The infuriated Vikramarāja Siṅghē slapped across Piyacīli's face and ordered that she be imprisoned in the palace. He did not pay heed to Pilimataḷāvai who was about to say something. When the guards approached Piyacīli to take her into the palace, she started screaming aloud. "Woe is me! They have decided to kill me. You order my imprisonment unmindful of the fact that I am a woman. Are you a king? Father! Tell the king. It is not fair to punish the innocent. God will not stand it. If he so feels, I will leave the palace once and for all. I will never come back. Let me go somewhere and live. I don't want to be imprisoned here."

Though Pilimataḷāvai stood silent on hearing her scream her words, Vikramarāja Siṅghē laughed aloud bursting in anger.

"Oho, what a manipulator you are! I do understand the reason behind your request to let you go away like a free bird. You don't want to be imprisoned here. You have already used many men in the palace to appease your lust. Now you want to go off the palace to sing songs of pleasure with men in the world outside. Enough is enough. Is it not enough that I am the sufferer of your venomous sting? That is more than enough. You need not go out to make the others suffer. You are a smiling spider. You have many willing preys. Why should you be worried? It is all right. Lie there within the palace precincts."

He rushed towards Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. He held the shoulders of his bosom friend who held the fainted Kuruvicci in his arms and said, "Vairamuttu! Let me summon the doctor immediately. I hope we can save her. Let us go in, please." His voice failed him as he said this and Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ entered the palace, carrying Kuruvicci with tearful eyes.

Piyacīli was looking at Paṇṭārakaṉ, Vikramarāja Siṅghē and Kuruvicci with her venomous eyes. With her desire to make love to Paṇṭārakaṉ having been frustrated along with her attempt to kill him in vengeance, she became desperate. She became frenzied and with her hair spread in the air, she appeared like the fiend in the battlefield as described in *Kaliṅkattup Paraṇi* and screamed aloud. Her face turned crimson in frustrated anger. Pilimataḷāvai whose eyes spat venom all the time hugged her and said, "Dear daughter, be patient. It is for a few days that this Vikramarāja Siṅghē can do all that he does. Sooner or later, there will be a situation when North will help us. I am looking for the right moment. Is it wise on your part to propose to leave this palace before that? No, dear, no. That North over there at Colombo needs a new woman every night. I know that he has an eye on you. But I am not ready to send you to his bed for a cheap bargain. I should become the king of Kaṇṭi. I need the support of North for it. I sent you to create a rift between Paṇṭārakaṉ and Kaṇṇuccāmy to easily defeat them with the help of North. That was our first defeat. But that is not the end of everything. Go into the palace as if you are bound by Vikramarāja Siṅghē's order. Is it going to be that difficult there? There is a wine-filled swimming pool. It is only imprisonment in name. The guards there are all Sinhalese. You will get anything you ask for. The king will not come to you. That's the only difference."

Piyacīli also controlled herself and thought, 'What if the king does not come there? Is there going to be a dearth of men?'

"Go girl, go. Nothing is going to be lost because of the imprisonment. We are both afire with vengeance. If not today, in the near future we will have a day when we can wreak our vengeance against this Vikramarāja Siṅghē. We will make Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ a slave to the British." Pilimataḷāvai held his tonsured head tight and shouted. His eyes almost left their sockets.

"Yes father! That is the right thing. For the victory of our patriotism and for the fall of my evil husband and his friend, I am ready to offer my body to the pleasures of not only North but as many like him as needed." Piyacīli said this with one of her arms raised above.

"Aha! What a determination! What a firm resolve! I am fortunate to have you as my daughter. You missed it narrowly dear. Had you thrown the knife well, one of the devils would have been eliminated."

The father was all appreciation of the daughter.

"I came to the palace gate pretending to bid farewell to Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ just to kill him. An anonymous bitch had interceded and saved him. Who is she?"

"She is his love. They are divine lovers, they say. They have come together with a common ideal. Do you know her name? Kuruvicci Nācciyār, they say."

"Kuruvicci Nācci!" Piyacīli said the name as she put her arms around the shoulders of the Sinhalese soldiers near her and said, "Take me to my prison now." She dragged them with her and walked towards the palace. Her heart was gnawed with the name Kuruvicci.

Emergency treatment was given to Kuruvicci at one part of the palace. Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ was sitting beside her with his heart beating fast. Vikramarāja Siṅghē sat beside him. Pilimataḷāvai also came there pretending to be sorry about what had happened. Though the royal doctor had succeeded in pulling back the knife that had stuck deep into the chest of Kuruvicci, it was not easy to stop the blood. The right kind of herbs were used to control the flow of blood. She was breathing slowly but there was no chance of her opening her eyes.

"How did she come here? How did she manage to remain a guard among the guards? Did she come here knowing well of the danger I was in? I can get to know all this only when she recovers." Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ kept looking on at that dame of gold who was ready to lay down her life to save him.

A faint murmur escaped her throat. All looked at her with anxiety writ large on their faces. The eyes that had remained closed so long opened very slowly.

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11 JUL 2010

26 The Venomous Tongue that Explained What had Happened

When she opened her eyes, Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ leant towards Kuruvicci's face and spoke softly. He spoke with welling tears. He spoke kindly. He spoke with a melting heart. He spoke hopeful that the person he loved much more than his own life would survive. She, on her part, did not pay heed to what he was saying but lifted her hands up and felt his cheeks as she asked, "You aren't hurt?"

The concern of the loving hearts of virtuous women has never been about themselves, you see. It is always about the welfare of the man chosen as the object of love. He held the fingers that crawled through his cheeks and said, "Nothing has happened to me. How do you feel now? Say that first." Before he could complete what he was saying, drops of tears fell on her cheeks and rolled down.

"We are going to entrust ourselves in the hands of death sooner or later in the struggle we are involved in. But all my desire is that I should die before you do. And my death should be in an attempt to save you. Even if it becomes true now, I will only be happy."

"Kuruvicci! Don't talk like that. Why should we die? We will never die. No history has spoken of those who die for a noble ideal as the dead. We will live forever. We live forever."

"Anyhow, what I feared had happened. Had I not been to Kaṇṭi, you might have been... you might have been..."

Kuruvicci could speak no further. She cried bitterly.

"Let it be. How did you come here? Why did you come?"

"O, you ask me why I came here even after having been ordered not to follow you. It is only to obey your order that I did not accompany you here but came all by myself. You were not wrong in having been angry with me. When I realize my own folly, how can I become angry with you? It is a great mistake on my part to have gone to the palace of Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ to rescue my grandfather. What could I do? My affection had screened my mind. You have been always with me not goaded by any carnal desire but bound only by love. If, such that you were, you thought of keeping me away from you, it is not your mistake. It was the consequence of my mistake. I have understood that it is a betrayal of our ideal on my part to have gone to the palace of Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ who is a past-master in betrayal and to have spoken to him. I have truly understood it."

Kuruvicci Nācciyār tried to rise up despite the pain and hold on to Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's feet. But Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ was quick to put her back into her bed and console her.

"Kuruvicci! Don't use the word betrayal. You lost your balance of mind in your anxiety to rescue Caṅkilit Taḷapati. I should have settled the matter with a reprimand. I should not have ordered you not to accompany me. It was cruel on my part. Let us forget what has happened, now that you are here.

A smile blossomed on Kuruvicci's face. She looked around and saw the royal doctor, Kaṇṇuccāmy and Pilimataḷāvai. Then she held Paṇṭārakaṉ's hand and said, "Let it be. Why did you stay back in the palace of these traitors for so long?"

Pilimataḷāvai smiled sheepishly. But he did not reveal his thoughts. He passed his hand through his tonsured head, rolled his large eyes and said, "God! O God! Is the palace of Kaṇṭi a fort of traitors?" He cried to the sky.

Vikramarāja Siṅghē was shocked. He looked at his friend Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. Paṇṭārakaṉ immediately said to Kuruvicci, "That is not right. Don't you know that the king of Kaṇṭi, Kaṇṇuccāmy,is my bosom friend? If my friend had conspired to kill me and if it is true, I would choose to die. We are so fast in friendship like Kaṭṭapommaṉ and Veḷḷaiyattēvaṉ in Tamiḻnāṭu." Kuruvicci answered him as if accepting his claim.

"I know about the love that you have for each other. But I also know the conspiracy to alienate you from each other and thus take over the Kaṇṭi kingdom. After getting to know of it only did I disguise myself as one of the Mullaittīvu soldiers and waited to save you from any probable attack. And I have saved you too."

So saying, she dragged Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's head close to her and kissed him on his forehead.

Meanwhile, the venomous veins in Pilimataḷāvai's head devised a quick scheme.

'God! The good are taken for the bad in this world. The worst are considered to be the best. What a great tower of love has been built in the name of the baseless lie of deep friendship between Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ and the king of Kaṇṭi! This is not a temple tower. It is like the palace of wax described in the *Mahābhāratha*. This is how I should speak to them now, whether I instil faith in my words or not. God let me put it in so many words and see what happens.'

He started dissembling. Paṇṭārakaṉ and the king of Kaṇṭi listened intently to the venom that poured through the teeth of the snake. Pilimataḷāvai started talking.

"Kuruvicci Nācciyār ! You have escaped from the jaws of death. Believe my words. If you choose not to believe, I am not bothered. You love Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ much more than your own life. It is true. But you should know what had happened. The king of Kaṇṭi married my dear daughter. She is so virtuous that she will not even look at the face of men. But Paṇṭārakaṉ had an eye on her. He developed intimacy with her unmindful of the fact that she is his friend's wife. My daughter also moved to close quarters with him in all innocence. Meanwhile, my son-in-law and the king of Kaṇṭi did not conduct himself in a way to satisfy my daughter. The longing of youth made her fall a prey to Paṇṭārakaṉ's net of professed love. They were in a compromising situation and the king of Kaṇṭi happened to see it for himself. It was to punish Paṇṭārakaṉ for his betrayal that he

had ordered his death at her hands. It is to carry out his order that my daughter Piyacīli threw the knife at him. You butted in and saved him. Now tell me, who are the conspirators? Paṇṭārakaṉ who betrayed you the beautiful and the virtuous and desired to enjoy the love of Piyacīli? Or the king of Kaṇṭi who ordered the killing of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ at the hands of hers who was seduced by him?"

Before he could complete what he wanted to say, the king of Kaṇṭi, Vikramarāja Siṅghē sprang upon him, held his tonsured head and knocked it against the pillar as strongly as he could. Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ butted in and saved Pilimataḷāvai from further damage. Pilimataḷāvai held his head and cried, "O God! The great sinners who had violated the honour of my virtuous daughter Piyacīli have broken my head too." He fell to the floor.

27 North and his Treachery

Unable to refuse to oblige Vikramarāja Siṅghē's request to stay back at Kaṇṭi until Kuruvicci recovered, Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ postponed his journey and stayed back in his palace with Kuruvicci. He sent word to his sisters at Mullaittīvu that his return would be delayed for some reason and that they need not await his return but could go back to Triṉkōmalai and Paṉaṅkāmam states. Not able to guess the reason behind his delay, they went back and assumed charge of their responsibilities.

Meanwhile, no one knew where Pilimataḷāvai could have gone. It created a lot of furore in the palace at Kaṇṭi. The sudden departure of Pilimataḷāvai surprised both Vikramarāja Siṅghē and Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ.

Where would such conspirators and traitors like Pilimataḷāvai go? Won't they go to the camp of the enemy?

That traitor of a viper ran all the way to Colombo and fell at the feet of North.

He bewailed his failure. He had done the best of all his venomous mischief but had failed. What was to be done when the two friends had become faster friends than they had been before?

North spoke to him and instilled confidence.

"Don't underestimate the diplomacy and military strength of the British. Muttuccāmy who is burning with jealousy at seeing Kaṇṇuccāmy the king of Kaṇṭi is still in our hands. A proclamation is likely to be issued from Colombo that Muttuccāmy is the king of Kaṇṭi even while in Colombo."

"Lord North! If you were to make the proclamation, the people of Kaṇṭi would rise up in violent protest. Their protest will make Vikramarāja Siṅghē all the stronger. Did you consider that?"

North did not expect this question. He appreciated Pilimataḷāvai and said, "Good! You have asked the right question. But it is not something that I had not considered myself. Only after due consideration did I come to this conclusion. First Pilimataḷāvai shall return to Kaṇṭi. If Vikramarāja Siṅghē or Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ ask him of his visit to Colombo, do you know what he should say?" North smiled as he smoked and drank.

"Leave that to me. I will melt the king of Kaṇṭi, Kaṇṇuccāmy, with my tears. Son-in-law! I believed that you would take due care of my daughter and the Kaṇṭi region. You have ignored the words of mine, faithful to the king that I am. You have considered me your foe. That is why I went all the way to Colombo for peace of mind. Even there I had been pleading with Lord North for the good of Kaṇṭi and for the continuation of your authority as king here. I did not do anything against your interests. I will not indulge in any such acts. Do you know why? How can I forget that you are my daughter's husband? Can I ignore that affection?"

Even before Pilimataḷāvai could complete, North tapped on his tonsured head in appreciation and laughed aloud.

"I don't know how, but you should not show your enmity towards Kaṇṇuccāmy and at the same time remain the snake around his leg. I am not going to declare that Muttuccāmy is the king of Kaṇṭi. The people of Kaṇṭi will be enraged against me only if I make the announcement. Muttuccāmy will proclaim himself to be the king of Kaṇṭi. When he declares that, confusion will prevail in the kingdom of Kaṇṭi, you see."

"Yes. There will be confusion. At the same time the people of Kaṇṭi will look at it from a different angle too."

"How?"

"Muttuccāmy has proclaimed himself the king of Kaṇṭi only with the indirect support of North. Whatever may it be, we will not allow him to enter Kaṇṭi as the king. They will still be enraged. That is what I think."

"Confusion for some time at Kaṇṭi. Then Muttuccāmy will march into Kaṇṭi with the support of the army sent by North. The confusion will be confounded.

There is bound to be a war. Muttuccāmy wins the war. That is to say that North wins. Then the British rule at Kaṇṭi. Pilimataḷāvai is the British agent there."

"The scheme sounds sweet. But I doubt very much if it will work itself out as long as Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ is there with Vikramarāja Siṅghē."

"When Pilimataḷāvai has failed in his attempt to separate them from each other, what else is there to be done? Don't think that my plan will work out overnight. Don't indulge in idle dreams of becoming the agent of the British day after tomorrow. If our attempts to put down Kaṭṭapommaṉ in Tamiḻnāṭu succeed, our forces can come down to Lanka in huge numbers. It may take six months or even a year. We may have to move our coins very patiently till then. If Kaṭṭapommaṉ is put down and our forces reach here, it will be easy to defeat Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ and Vikramarāja Siṅghē. We have to work out our plans without any undue hurry."

"I am prepared for anything."

"Why will you not be? Aren't you going to be the British agent in future?"

"Aren't I even now, my lord?"

"All right. You can return to Kaṇṭi as fast as you can. As soon as you reach Kaṇṭi, in a couple of days, Muttuccāmy's proclamation will be made. You should pretend as if you are highly indignant of the proclamation. You should feign to be the most sincere person to Kaṇṇuccāmy."

When North and Pilimataḷāvai were thus in conversation, a British officer walked in fast, saluted the governor and said, "There is a very important message from Tamiḻnāṭu. Tāṉāpati Piḷḷai, a very close associate of Kaṭṭapommaṉ had been arrested at Kōvilpaṭṭi. He had been executed at Nākalāpuram. His severed head was perched on a pole planted in front of the Pāñcālaṅkuṟicci fort."

On hearing this, North gulped half the liquor he had in his cup and poured the rest on the tonsured head of Pilimataḷāvai to celebrate his happiness.

28 Sympathy and Separation

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ was telling the king of Kaṇṭi in faltering voice and with fiery eyes, "It is not only to hang Tāṉāpati Piḷḷai and hack his dead body. On coming to know that Kaṭṭapommaṉ was on his way to meet Bannerman as advised by Taṉāpati Piḷḷai, Eṭṭappaṉ ran to Bannerman and told him that it was the right time to attack the Pāñcālaṅkuṟicci fort. Do you know what Kaṭṭapommaṉ came to know on his way at Kōlārpaṭṭi? The army sent by Bannerman have captured Pāñcālaṅkuṟicci. In the next four days, Tāṉāpati Piḷḷai fell into the hands of the British and was killed."

The king of Kaṇṭi was taken aback. "Is it all true? Could this have happened? It should not have been that way."

"I am telling you of what I heard from Tamiḻnāṭu. When Kaṭṭapommaṉ could not return to Pāñcālaṅkuṟicci, he was surrounded at Kōlārpaṭṭi by the British. He fought bravely against the British and escaped. The soldiers of the British Company are sent in all directions to nab him. Eṭṭappaṉ is assisting them."

When Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ said this in a disturbed tone, Vikramarāja Siṅghē moved restlessly about the room and roared like a tiger as if he had incurred the fate himself. Listening to the conversation between them, Kuruvicci said, "Isn't there any way to save the king of Pāñcālaṅkuṟicci? Shouldn't we consider that?"

"How can we in the present circumstances? They had been sending messages that we should be wary of the British. But they had themselves not been so very wary. I still have confidence that Kaṭṭapommaṉ will not get caught. He will gather a great force and confront the British. I expect that he will reclaim Pāñcālaṅkuṟicci."

Looking at Paṇṭārakaṉ who spoke with such confidence, Kuruvicci said, "Your belief appears to be too good. When there is such a setback at Pāñcālaṅkuṟicci, North and his officers here will dance with renewed confidence. They will calculate that it will be an easy victory against the king of Kaṇṭi and you. Like Eṭṭappaṉ to Kaṭṭapommaṉ in Tamiḻnāṭu, we have the king's father-in-law. Besides, Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ is also biding his time. So we have to think fast and act."

"What do you have to say, Kuruvicci. It is not enough to talk about the dangerous situation. You should also suggest means to overcome it."

"It is long since you left Mullaittīvu. When we are away from there, the British may plan to attack Mullaittīvu."

Immediately, the king of Kaṇṭi interrupted and said, "If ever such a thing were to happen, wouldn't the Kaṇṭi palace afford a place of permanent residence to my friend Paṇṭārakaṉ?"

He had of course been a little hasty. He spoke with the privilege that friendship gave him. Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's face indicated that he did not relish the statement.

"What is this, Kaṇṇuccāmy? You have said this so suddenly. Though your remark reflects the deep friendship that you have for me, there is neither the valour of a king nor diplomacy in your statement."

"I am sorry if I have said anything to hurt you, dear friend."

"It is all right. Don't worry about it. We cannot ignore what Kuruvicci has said. I have to go to Mullaittīvu right today and enhance the strength of my army. You should also enhance the strength of your army. North and his officers will have Mullaittīvu as their first target. They know that if I am defeated, you will be the only person left in Lanka as a challenge to the British imperialism. So both of us have to get our army and our forts ready for a great war ahead of us."

"Vairamuttu! Have I ever spoken against your words? You do what you consider to be right. I will double the forces of Kaṇṭi as desired by you."

"It is not enough if you increase the strength of your forces. You should tactfully cut the web of conspiracy that Pilimataḷāvai and his daughter weave around you. The imposter who has disappeared from Kaṇṭi is bound to return. Who knows with what plans he is going to return? Similarly, Piyacīli you have imprisoned in the palace is looking for an opportune moment."

"Besides leaving me, you also intimidate me mentioning the names of those horrible creatures."

"I am not trying to intimidate you, Kaṇṇuccāmy. I am just reminding you. That's all. My friend! What I am about to tell you may be a surprise and at the same time sound bitter."

"What is it going to be?"

"I agreed that you should marry Piyacīli considering it a matter of political advantage. I even goaded you. But I never expected all these developments. Anyhow, I have succeeded in making you the king of Kaṇṭi defeating Pilimataḷāvai's schemes. The daughter of the chieftain of Maturai is waiting for you. She is not only a princess but her very name is *Iḷavaraci* (princess). You will not only have a good wife in her. You will also enjoy the support of the Maturai chieftain. You can use the large wealth at his disposal and make Kaṇṭi rich. With your treasury, you can increase the forces of Kaṇṭi."

"What do you say? Another marriage so quickly?"

"What is going to happen is really a marriage. What has happened is not a marriage but a strategy against conspiracy."

"Is it not proper that you conduct that marriage yourself and then leave this place?"

"Aha! Marriage with a beautiful woman is very much the nectar of heaven to you. Will you miss it? I have already informed the chieftain of Maturai of everything. He sent word that the marriage be solemnized only at Maturai. But I did not agree to it. Soon the chieftain will be here with your future wife. You can go ahead with the marriage assuming that I am there in person to greet you."

"Sure? You will not come down?"

"I will come. Making the British run away with the intention of never showing their faces again at Mullaittīvu. After hearing that they had run away unable to enter Kaṇṭi, I will come to laugh and be happy with you, dear friend. Kaṇṇuccāmy,you are used to a kind of life. Your friend though I am, this Vairamuttu, has learned to live a different life. But the ideal of both of us is to defeat the British imperialism on our land."

The king of Kaṇṭi embraced Paṇṭārakaṉ and vowed, "We will definitely succeed in achieving our ambition."

"Dear Kuruvi, do you think that my talk to my friend appears but an idle talk to you?"

Kuruvicci had a soft smile on her face. She heaved a sigh of happiness thinking about the relationship between her and Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. It was not one in

anticipation of fulfilment of lust but one of noble ideal to be achieved that they had come together as lovers.

That very day, Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ left Kaṇṭi with his soldiers accompanied by Kuruvicci.

When they were just crossing the borders of Kaṇṭi on one side, Pilimataḷāvai was entering Kaṇṭi from the other side.

29 Piyacīli's Birthday

On his return from Colombo, Pilimataḷāvai went straight to his office even without meeting the king and went about his work. Even the Sinhalese in higher official positions and working with him were not only shaken by his recent activities but were also disillusioned with him. This was very clear on their faces. And yet, they went about carrying out his instructions. They did not relish his meeting with North at Colombo and his negotiations with him, whatever be its nature, because they thought that whatever be his enmity towards Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ, they did not relish his attempts to betray him to the British and to become the king of Kaṇṭi, undoing Vikramarāja Siṅghē, thus paving way for British imperialism in Kaṇṭi. Vijayatuṅkā was one of the important Sinhalese officers working with Pilimataḷāvai and he was Pilimataḷāvai's personal secretary. He decided to express his disillusionment with Pilimalatalavai. He was biding his time for the opportune moment.

The office of Pilimataḷāvai was working unusually busy for a couple of days. Pilimataḷāvai read a number of petitions but was not able to take any decision on any of them. He pushed them into a bin as fast as he could.

"It seems you have resolved all the problems in the petitions so fast." Vijayatuṅkā entered his office with a smile on his face.

Pilimataḷāvai was surprised at someone making fun of him and that too none but his personal secretary. He stared at him with his large eyes as his hands went to his tonsured head. He sat like a statue.

"Forgive me. You should not think that my talk is strange today. It is not proper to hide what crosses one's mind. I have to confide in you certain thoughts of mine for the sake of your good as well as the good of Kaṇṭi."

Vijayatuṅkā now held his shoulders with his arms and stood as if ready to face any consequence. He stood erect and imposing. There were two lines of moustache above his lips. His forehead was broad. His eyes were piercing. He had an impressive physique. He was fit enough to be not only Pilimataḷāvai's personal secretary but also his bodyguard.

Pilimataḷāvai's fingers played on his tonsured head like a drummer's fingers on the drum and stood up with an aggressive gait.

"What Vijayatuṅkā? You seem to have been suddenly inspired to be loyal to the king!"

"I should have been disloyal to the king to become loyal, you see. Why do you cherish idle fancies? I have always remained loyal to the king. Not only loyal to the king. I am loyal to Kaṇṭi too. You only indulge in disloyal activities against the king and the nation!"

"What? What did you say? You should have become presumptuous to talk to me of all persons thus!"

"Let me spill out all that I have in my heart. Take it if you like it. Or punish me for overstretching myself. But be assured of one thing. I have been your confidant for so long. Don't ever think that I will make public of all that I know if you punish me. I promise that as long as you are faithful to Kaṇṭi, I will not speak about your confidential matters."

Pilimataḷāvai wriggled uneasily and moved his palm pretty fast through his tonsured head.

"Vijayatuṅkā! Do you retain your sensitivity even to a small extent? A Tamiḻ by name Vikramarāja Siṅghē rules over Kaṇṭi. Should Sinhalese like you and I keep watching it?"

"Since when do you have this new strain of thought? It is of course a Tamiḻ who is the king of Kaṇṭi. But how did you forget that he is the son-in-law of the lion of the Sinhalese?

"You fool, fool! Don't you know why I made my daughter Vikramarāja Siṅghē's wife?"

"I know. If Muttuccāmy becomes the king of Kaṇṭi he will become the foster child of the British and will rule over Kaṇṭi. You have to prevent such a possibility for the time being. Your plan is to make use of Kaṇṇuccāmy for it. So you have made him your son-in-law and also the king of Kaṇṭi. You would like to have the crown on his head now and on your head as early as possible."

"That is good. You know my intentions and yet you are critical of me."

"As your personal secretary, I can bury matters personal in my heart for ever. But if your actions are likely to create a rift between the Sinhalese and the Tamiḻs in Kaṇṭi and if they pave the way for British imperialism, those Sinhalese like me with our patriotism and loyalty to the throne cannot remain dumb."

"Vijayatuṅkā, you say that your master should not become the master of the state. Aha! What a wonderful loyalty you have!"

"What is the point in buying a wonderful painting at the expense of one's eyes? If you were to succeed with your schemes and intentions, you will have the crown on your head but the state will be in the hands of the British."

"Is it easy to maintain the government of Kaṇṭi without their help? It is not only their money but their army that will protect me for ever. Vijayatuṅkā! You don't have much of a truck with the British. They are respectful. They have a lot of love and regards for us."

"You know turmeric water is sprinkled and the goat is garlanded only to be offered at the altar. If you understand this, this nation will thrive. Your honour will also be intact. Please listen to me. Don't spread a red carpet to devastation."

Pilimataḷāvai was at a loss knowing that it was useless to talk to Vijayatuṅkā any the further. He thought of giving him a long rope before bringing him round. So he deviated.

"Vijayā! My faith in you is as large as the seas. Your attachment to me and affection for me are as large as the skies. There can be no two opinions of these. You should approach the problems as a Sinhalese. You need a little time to think over. We will talk about it in detail sometime later."

"We have to. Not for my sake. It is for your good too. And also for the good of the land. But one thing. Don't try to pull me towards your discriminating the Tamiḻs from the Sinhalese. Piyacīli is a Sinhala woman. But she married the Tamiḻ Kaṇṇuccāmy and you performed the marriage. How can one forget it? The Sinhalese sentiment did not express itself at that time. Wherefore does it express itself in torrents of stars falling off the skies now?"

"I understand Vijayā, I understand now. You were dying to marry Piyacīli. You have made a permanent record of our refusal. Please make it a writing on the water. Where has Piyacīli gone now? She is just somewhere in this palace. She is guarded by soldiers under your supervision. Don't you know how to meet her if at all you desire to meet her?"

Vijayatuṅkā had his own doubts if the person in front of him was Pilimataḷāvai or an abject creature that had lost all its sense of shame. He wanted to spit on his face. Unmindful of how Vijayatuṅkā might feel, Pilimataḷāvai continued.

"Angry with me, Vijayā? Let me tell you something. Today is Piyacīli's birthday. The king seems to have granted her freedom to go anywhere around the palace for just the day. There is going to be a party tonight. You should necessarily attend the party."

"Why should I? No, I will not." He turned to go away. Just then a soft and cool arm held his forearm.

"Why? Shouldn't you attend my birthday party?"

This question fell like a fountain of honey from her lips and Piyacīli stood there swallowing him with her eyes.

30 Smile of Success

Vijayatuṅkā felt a shiver of pleasure not only on where her hand touched him but all through him where her eyes ran. He made a blanket of her body around himself and felt helpless to shift his eyes off her.

Pilimataḷāvai knew that his daughter would prove her mettle and left the place taking it for the opportune moment to leave.

Vijayatuṅkā was perfectly aware of the fact that Pilimataḷāvai was ready to give anything for the sake of a position of authority. He was in the forefront of those who had such an attitude. But then the form that stood in front of him that moment was the form he had always dreamt of holding in his embrace. So Pilimataḷāvai left his mind and thought for a little while. It was only Piyacīli who had filled his heart to the full.

"What Vijayā, you look at me as if you would swallow me and belch."

"Um...Futile had been my waiting for you. Now I am looking at what I have missed."

"Don't you know that the fruit you think you have missed has all along been waiting for you to taste it?"

"Why then did you refuse to marry me? You refused even to turn to my side."

"What you said first is right. Let it be. Difference in status prevented me from becoming your wife. Does it mean that I have ever refused to be your doll on the bed? I have all along been longing for you. You only said that you would touch me only after marriage. Frustration made me not even look in your direction. Vijayā, I

know that even when I walked away from you, you were looking at the beauty of my back."

"No, definitely no."

"Don't lie. When looked face to face, the beauty of a woman wins over a man. When he looks at her from behind, he is killed."

Piyacīli kept talking as she moved to the table to take the cup of wine and thus showed him her back. He looked at her. She was right indeed. He was literally dying.

She held a cup for herself and offered him another. He hesitated. Meanwhile, the cup was taken to his lips. She made him drink. He was happy. The valiant Vijayatuṅkā had a smile of lust looming large on his face. That slut slanted her waist.

He was dying a little while ago. And now the body of the dead started burning. He was roasted in the fire she ignited.

"Enough of wine, dear. I need the wine of your lips."

"No bar! But look, the door is ajar."

He locked the door. She embraced him.

The floor of Pilimataḷāvai's office room became their bed of lust.

"My gold! Had you given you to me as a whole...!"

"I understand now, Vijayatuṅkā, what a great mistake it was. What is to be done? I have my fate written on my skull, you see. I had to marry Kaṇṇuccāmy and spend the rest of my life in tears."

"tsu.. tsu.. I am sorry that your youth is languishing thus."

"You are dispelling the languish, you see. Let me be the wife of an anonymous fool. My principle is to have my lust often appeased thus. Don't I stick on to that line of life now?"

Vijayatuṅkā should have murmured, "Perverted principle! Obscene explanation! Is she a woman at all? She is a gamester of lust."

But he did not murmur. As she kept on talking, he kept on kissing her, right from head to toe.

"Can I attend your birthday party?"

"You should, of course. But you cannot give me a better gift than you are giving me now."

"Why so?"

"Even if I am a prisoner in the palace, when standing beside him, am I not the queen?"

"So what?"

"If you are a daredevil of a lover, you should kiss me on my cheek then."

"Will that not be foolish?"

"Do you think what is happening now to be a wise thing?"

Asking him thus, she held him tight.

He forgot himself again.

"Darling! I will make a cup of the sky for you and pour the wine of the sea in it."

"When two bodies got fused into one, men used to blabber like this."

"This is not blabbering. This is a promise."

Piyacīli was happy that he was now under her total control. She wetted the whole of his face with her kisses. He lay in a faint. He thought that even the pleasures of heaven were too little to be compared to the pleasure he was enjoying then.

"You need not make a cup of the sky. You need not make wine of the waters of the seas. I am not as large as a mountain to drink such a huge dose. My desire is very simple. Fulfil it. Then I am your guava for ever. You are the squirrel. Man, what do you say? All right?"

When she called him 'man' it struck his heart like magic and his heart started dancing in a frenzy.

'You my golden lass! What is your desire? Let me fulfil it right now, my gold."

He embraced her. She brushed his hair with her fingers and said, "It is nothing. It is what I asked for first."

"What?"

"How sweet is your 'what' to hear, my king!"

She pressed his mustache with her lips. Now he was ready to accept any order from her.

"Tonight, during the party, this queen stands beside that fool of a king. Then this god of love comes there. He carries a bouquet of flowers as his birthday present. I thank him. Then... then..."

"I offer my respects to the king."

"No."

"What then?"

"As soon as I thank you, you embrace me and kiss me on my cheek."

"I have kissed you so many times now. Let me kiss you more."

"Not here, but there."

"What will the king think of me then?"

"So many are there. He is but another. That is what he would think. But one thing. If only you fulfil my desire today, I am the queen to the king but a perennial well of pleasure to you."

She embraced him again. That was an unexpected feast to Vijayatuṅkā. And there was such variety in the feast. So he was caught in a variety of ways.

"Yes, your wish will be fulfilled."

You should have seen the gifts he received for his acceptance. In such a young age how could she have mastered the art of love in the variety of lovemaking? He shook all over.

The guarded door was opened. A kiss. Both had their part in it, their share of it. Vijayatuṅkā left the place still looking at her. She collected the pieces of her dress that lay orphaned on the floor, as if to give them their asylum.

31 My Daughter the Shrewd

Arrangements for the celebration of her birthday were in full swing. The queen kept prisoner in the palace was to go around free that day. It made her admirers throng to have a look at her with watering mouths. They awaited the scheduled time for the celebration.

Within no time, one could see colourful festoons all through the palace. The line of lamps on the plinth of the walls reminded one of the glowworms on tree-tops during the night. The tall and thick pillars in the palace held lines of flowers strung together. There were young Sinhalese men and women singing songs on the palace corridors. There were young Tamil men and women intoning songs in Tamil in the other parts of the same corridors.

In the midst of all the throng, Vikramarāja Siṅghē walked towards the hall of celebration surrounded by lines of guards on both sides. He was so surprised to see Pilimataḷāvai as to widen his eyes to their end and said shaking his hands, "It looks like ages since I met the minister."

Pilimataḷāvai walked close to the king and walked up to his seat and started answering in a soft voice.

"My heart broke when you imprisoned my daughter in the palace, your Highness. I felt bad to look at you face to face. That is why I went around many places in our kingdom for peace of mind."

"Oh, really? Does it mean that Colombo is part of our kingdom?"

Pilimataḷāvai felt wordless for a moment. And yet as soon as he passed his palm through his tonsured head, his mind signalled means of managing the king.

"No, your Highness. I came to know that Lord North was planning to attack our kingdom."

"That is an old item of information."

"If you were to listen to the new item of information, you would be surprised. I went to Colombo because I was surprised myself."

"New item?"

"Yes, an entirely new item of information. Lord North had decided to bring amity between Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ and Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ at Mullaittīvu and to extend all support and help to Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ and thus befriend him. He had started making necessary arrangements."

"Even if God takes up an incarnation, he cannot make Paṇṭārakaṉ subject himself to anyone's authority. He would prefer to become a burden to the earth in his grave to fan the English. I cannot even think of my friend on the lines you have mentioned."

"You think that all that is white is milk. And yet, I should not fail in my duties as minister. I have to inform you of what is likely to happen. That is why I went to Colombo on a diplomatic mission. I have done all that I could to prevent Lord North from befriending Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ."

Though the king had no faith in the words of Pilimataḷāvai, he was listening to him because the courtesy between the king and the minister demanded it.

"What is it that you have done to prevent Lord North from befriending my friend Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ, my minister?"

"Ask of it thus. This question tastes like honey to me. You should not, instead, welcome all the troubles of your relationship with Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ out of your boundless love for him as a friend."

"Reserve your counselling. Tell me what you have done at Colombo. Be brief."

"I will tell you. I will be brief. Even *Rāmāyaṇā* is said in two or three sentences you see. Rāvaṇaṉ abducted Rāmaṉ's wife. Hanumāṉ found her out. There was a war. She was brought back. That is how *Rāmāyaṇā* is briefed in the villages of Tamiḻnāṭu. Let me be brief like that."

"Your brevity is so long."

"Forgive me your Highness. It is not anything. What I said to Lord North at Colombo was just this. The government of Kaṇṭi is ready to accept the English

authority and the consequent cordial relationship. So you can put down Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ with our assistance..."

Pilimataḷāvai could not complete his statement. The infuriated Vikramarāja Siṅghē shouted, "What? What? Bowing to the authority of the British? Is its name cordial relationship? Mr Minister, on whose leave did you say this to Lord North?"

"Your Highness should not hasten to conclude. Will the mouth be burnt if you say 'fire'? You should understand that I lied so just to avoid the possibility of any cordial relationship between Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ and Lord North."

Mr. Pilimataḷāvai! I respect you. But your actions have hurt me very badly. Don't do anything more that would hurt me. It is a disgrace to say that we have relationship with the British even for fun. It is a shame. That brings disgrace to this soil."

"Your Highness, even if you do not appreciate the expediency of my trick at Colombo, a day will come for you to say that I had done a good turn then."

"One has only one life. It is going to leave one only once. I want that life to leave one in grace. So I will never be party to be a slave to the British. It is better to die right today than to save this throne and become their slaves."

As their conversation heated up, Piyacīli made her entry into the hall of celebration accompanied by lines of women on both her sides. She walked on silk carpet with her silken feet. The way she had donned herself for the celebration of her birthday made even the king who hated her feel enticed.

Her shoulders were bare. Her breasts were held high and were emphatic. Her dress was transparent. One could never say if her waist glided or broke as she walked. She had bejewelled herself from head to foot with precious stones. She made arrows of her eyes as she approached Vikramarāja Siṅghē and offered her hand for him to hold. He held her by her hand and greeted her on her birthday.

She did not allow him to take back his hand. She pulled both his hands towards her lips, kissed them and took them to her eyes.

Many an event followed. There were songs and dances.

Her eyes were looking for someone. Like the daughter's eyes, the father's eyes were also looking for someone through the assembly.

As Piyacīli expected, Vijayatuṅkā entered the hall with a bouquet. There had been many before him heaping gifts on her. The king stood a little way away sharply looking at her. On the one hand, he was confused about Pilimataḷāvai's journey to Colombo. On the other hand stood the bewitching Piyacīli with her enslaving beauty pushing his confusion aside and off his consideration.

On seeing Vijayatuṅkā, her face brightened. She looked at her father. He was also looking at his daughter.

Vijayatuṅkā gave the bouquet to her. But he was not prepared to kiss her there as he had promised her. He was scared. But she was not prepared to leave him. Even as she accepted the bouquet, she softly passed her fingers on his hand. He felt intoxicated. He forgot himself. He embraced Piyacīli and kissed her.

Piyacīli shouted out as loud as she could as if it was outrageous.

Vijayatuṅkā's head was severed and it fell on the ground. The sword that severed his head was in the hand of Vikramarāja Siṅghē. There was blood dripping. Piyacīli looked at her father and smiled. Pilimataḷāvai was satisfied that he had his enemy killed by the king. He winked at Piyacīli as if appreciating her shrewdness.

32 Steady Signature

"Woeful it is that on my birthday, your golden hands should get stained with blood, your Highness." Piyacīli took the king's arm and held it against her breast. She whimpered as if in unbearable regret. Pilimataḷāvai was extremely happy. An enemy rose against him. He had snared him using his daughter and had him killed by the king. He appreciated his own intelligence in having things done to his advantage. Pilimataḷāvai's plan was to avenge the king for having spoken ill of his daughter right in his presence and to have treated him in a very unbecoming manner. He wanted to execute his plan smiling all the way. One stage in the plan had been executed. There were many stages to be crossed further. Though great enmity wriggled within him like a snake, he wielded his smile as his armour and spoke to the king in a melting tone.

"Your Highness! I am extremely happy that this ignoble creature received his due punishment at the hands of the king. I have understood something today. Whatever is your displeasure with my daughter's ways, you will not brook even a minor affront to her virtue. I have understood that very clearly today. The scene of the fury with which you severed the head of this faithless dog to save the honour of my daughter is a great sight indeed. It is a veritable testimony to the valour and honour of Kaṇṭi. Leave the duty of disposing this lustful fellow's body to me. Please go to the palace with Piyacīli. Her heart must be yearning in desire on her birthday after such a long separation from you. Please forget all that had happened and give her a birthday gift."

Even as her father was talking to the king, Piyacīli took his hand and had it on her shoulder. She started walking away. As she moved away, her venomous eyes had a secret message to the venomous eyes of Pilimataḷāvai. He kept on looking at them as they moved away. He was concerned with the execution of the next stage of his plan.

Having lost his head in the sudden fury with which he had hacked Vijayatuṅkā to death, Vikramarāja Siṅghē gave himself up to Piyacīli and reached the bedchamber in the palace.

"See, pearls of sweat on your forehead! Hasn't your anger with that brutish Vijayatuṅkā cooled down yet?" She wiped his forehead and kissed him softly on his forehead.

Her arms twinned around his neck and felt his skin.

"What is this? You sweat heavily all along. Please remove these thick garments." She started removing his dress without waiting for his words. The pressure from her passionate parts everywhere on him made him forget the horror of the murder he had committed and brought him back to the present pleasures.

"What are you doing, Piyacīli?"

"Is it not my birthday?" She winked.

"Does it mean that I should be in my birthday suit?" he smiled as he said this.

"Oh, it is my birthday, darling!" The slut spoke.

"You seem to have forgotten it in your lust."

"You are kidding. You point out that I am yet to serve you your drink."

The king kept on looking at her. She brought down the wick of the lighted lamp.

"For that matter, I should be as you are now on my birthday." She sang the tune of lust and wriggled out of all her dress.

The beauty of Mēṉakai, the mythical dancing damozel, had shaken the resolve of Sage Visvāmitrā who had renounced his crown, palace, retinue, a thousand servants and kings paying taxes, and was in penance with an idealistic fervour.

What could this man of all men do when a similar beauty, taking the form of a woman, rose up and down like a wave, having mastered all the tricks of lovemaking, and made a feast of herself to his eyes, holding a cup of wine at his lips, even as she lay on his lap and thus was robbing him entirely? Moreover, he for himself was a man subject to the weakness for feminine appeal. So he held her tight and lay with his body burning in passion. Taking her cue from his state of mind, she took the cup of wine away from his lips. She sipped wine and gave

it to him through her kiss. The king of Kaṇṭi was doubly intoxicated and spoke incoherently, surrendering himself totally to her.

"King of kings! You had suspected me. Was that fair?"

"Wrong dear, wrong. You are the unblemished gold. I might have said something in a fit of anger. Forget it all. Come near."

Knowing that he was ready to enslave himself to her beauty, she stood a little away from him to tease him into further longing for her.

Her beauty in the dim light was a class by itself.

It is said that the beauty of a painting is enhanced by the shade through which the light is projected. Thus the light that fell on her, part by part, also caused shades through her curvatures and made him wriggle like a worm caught in embers.

He jumped off the bed and sprang upon her, all intoxicated. She pretended to move away. He fell on the floor. She fell beside him. The marble floor was smooth enough for them to easily roll along. Even as she lay down thus, she took another sip of wine. It was not meant for gulping. She fed him with the wine through a kiss. He was waiting for it, you see. In a world where everything is forgotten, they made love on the floor through his endearments and her endearments.

"Umm. We can do that on the bed." She sounded a little firm.

He lifted her up and threw her on the bed. He lay beside her. But she rolled and stood up. She went to the light, took a pen and started writing something.

"What are you doing?" he said and moved to her. He embraced her and looked on what she was writing.

'Darling! I am drunk you see. I wanted to see if I can affix my signature." She scribbled her signature a few times.

"Ha, is it such a big game? I can affix my signature well, you see!"

"No, you can't. You just cannot. You have taken more wine than I." She hung on his back and made him more passionate.

He took it as a challenge. "Give me that pen. I will put my signature a million times."

"You cannot, dear. In the state in which you are, you can only scribble and cannot affix your signature." Piyacīli said.

"Let us see!" he snatched the pen from her.

"Wait a little, dear," she opened a box and took a few empty sheets of paper. She offered them to him. He was not steady as he took it from her. He kept the sheets on a stand near the lamp and said, "See yourself! My signature." He held the pen in his hand.

Piyacīli smiled in success. "See, here! And here!" He put his signature wherever she pointed out and asked her if he had been steady enough to affix his signature. His words were lost in his kisses.

"You are great indeed!" She said endearingly and hid the sheets with his signature on them. At the top of his intoxication and lust, the king took her in his arms and said, "Come, my happiness! Let us wander through the heaven." She also needed all that he had to give and gave in. She was happy that she had her purpose fulfilled. He was tired in having had his pleasure. Now he needed another lady – the lady of sleep.

33 An Agreement

It is poetically said that the sun who had been asleep woke up and started on his duty making the whole world golden. Does the sun sleep? He had been lighting the other half of the world so long and then he added beauty to the beautiful palace of Kaṇṭi with his rays of dawn and was moving up the sky.

Even quite some time after the sunrise, Vikramarāja Siṅghē's eyes had remained closed in sleep. He was a little on the other side of obesity and therefore was snoring heavily. His snoring moved objects in the room that could move. He was drunk to the full and therefore slept blissfully. He had gone beyond the bounds of lovemaking and therefore his body felt as if it was not with him. So weary was he.

His chamber door was knocked at aloud. Even the loud noise did not wake him up immediately. The knocking continued. He rolled gently on his bed and sat up with a murmur on his lips. The door was opened even without his opening the door.

Pilimataḷāvai rushed into the room shouting the name of his daughter Piyacīli. The naked king snatched a silken piece of cloth and wound it around himself.

"Piyacīli, where are you?"

Pilimataḷāvai went around the room in terror and the king said, "What? What is it?"

"I smell smoke in the chamber. Woe is me! What happened to my Piyacīli?"

Vikramarāja Siṅghē collected himself a little and said, "Nothing has happened to her. She is somewhere here. She was with me all through the night. We spent the night happily forgetting all that had happened. She might have gone to the bathroom."

He went to the bathroom. He pushed the door gently. The door opened immediately.

"Piyacīli, the little girl! See your father has come in search of his little girl. Would I have swallowed you?" Vikramarāja Siṅghē entered the room laughing aloud but shouted in horror as if he had stepped on fire.

"What, what happened to my daughter?" Pilimataḷāvai peeped into the room.

There was the body of a woman burnt so badly that no identification would be possible.

"You sinner! You have burnt my daughter alive." Pilimataḷāvai shook the shoulders of the king as if in a frenzy. The king could make nothing of the situation.

They had been together in the room through the night. If she was found burnt in the morning, anyone could surmise that he should have done it. He was scared of the charge against him. Though Pilimataḷāvai was a subordinate to the king, he was then in a position to subject himself to the power of Pilimataḷāvai.

"Father-in-law! God be my witness, I did nothing. The pleasure that we enjoyed the night had made me push all her blemishes to the back. I should not hide one thing from you. We were drunk beyond drinking. Perhaps her dress caught fire and she was burnt to death accidentally when she went to the bathroom."

"Let me ask you forgetting the shame in the asking. How could a naked woman be burnt that way?"

"What a thing to ask? She had perhaps dressed herself up before she went to the bathroom. See for yourself, none of her dress is on the bed."

"Possible. I believe you. She went to the bathroom dressed up. You followed her and burnt her to death. Now you are trying to hoodwink me. I believe in it too. "

The king knelt near the burnt body and said, "Piyacili! What a thing have you done! When your mango-hued body was burnt by the flames, you could have called me. Have you forgotten that during the night I promised my life to you?" His eyes welled with tears.

"Hahaha! The king of the nation plays his role well in the drama. If the world comes to know that the king had hoodwinked my daughter into believing that he loved her and that he had burnt her to death, will there be a greater disgrace than that to him?"

Pilimataḷāvai jumped sky-high.

"Father-in-law! I promise in the name of God. I did not kill Piyacīli at all. It should have been an accident. But the servants in the palace may cook up the story that I had burnt her to death. They may play upon the recent disagreement between us. You now have the responsibility of saving me from disgrace as my father-in-law and also as my minister."

"I am here having lost my daughter who was my diamond, my carbuncle. It is none but her husband who had killed her. He is the king of the nation. I should save him from disgrace. Well said man, well said!"

Pilimataḷāvai laughed like a fiend with his tonsured head shaking wild. He cried through his laughter.

"Father-in-law, now it is only you and I here. Before anyone else comes in, let us come to a decision. I will give you anything you ask for. You need not tell a lie for my sake. It is enough if you say the truth that Piyacīli was killed in an accident. Save me from disgrace. My people love me very much. They should not come to have even the inkling of wrong thoughts about me. That is what I pray for."

"I pity you. All right. I forgive you my daughter's murder. Do you know why? It is for the sake of this nation. If people come to know of what you have done, there will be confusion. They will lose their faith in you. It will give room for our enemies to exploit the situation. So I forgive you. I will utter the lie that my daughter was caught accidentally in fire. Do you know what in turn you have to do?"

"What is it? I will do anything."

"Don't be scared! I will not ask you to make me the king of Kaṇṭi. I don't need it. I am not that very greedy. What I have to ask is something that will be for the good of you and this nation of ours."

"Ask for it, please! Let there be no hesitation."

"You shall be the king of Kaṇṭi on record. The pleasures of the palace are yours for ever. But I will take over the administration of the nation reducing you to a puppet. You are the king by title. Otherwise I am everything. Why? Not for my sake. It is for the good of the nation. For the sake of the freedom of this country."

"Let it be as you please."

"You cannot cheat me later saying yes now. I want you to execute a document to that effect."

"What should I state?"

"You should write out in your hand that Pilimataḷāvai will be in charge of all the administrative responsibilities of the king besides being the minister; that he shall work out solutions for problems with the British; that he shall decide if our

relationship with Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ is to continue or not. You should affix your signature on the document."

"Will you proclaim it?"

"I am not a fool to proclaim it. That is why I told you first. I will work behind the screen all the time."

"All right. I agree. I will write it out for you. But one thing... let not my friendship and relationship with Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ wither away."

"I did not say that you should give up your friendship with him. I only say that I will attend to the business myself."

Vikramarāja Siṅghē stood silent. His silence was taken for his consent.

With deep condolences from every quarter of the capital of Kaṇṭi, the funeral of Piyacīli was conducted with a royal procession.

At the same time, two horses were crossing the boundary of Kaṇṭi. Mounted on one of them was a charming young man. He had sported a beard. He wore a headgear. On the back of the other horse was a young lady. She was attractive. That young lady addressed the young man and said, "Piyacīli. Is this the right road?"

The young man said almost immediately, "You fool! I am no more Piyacīli. I am Jeyacīlaṉ. Your dumb husband. Don't forget this and don't blabber."

Both of them laughed aloud. The horses kept going their way.

34 On Whose Side is God?

Looking at Piyacīli donned as Jeyacīlaṉ, that woman said, "How long are we to go further?" She spurred her horse on. "Marttaṉi, where we are going to is more important than how long we are to go. Still more important than that is why we are going there. So just keep coming along with me without giving place to fatigue."

"I am coming, you see. And I am going to come along."

"It is not enough if you just come along with me. We should live as husband and wife. Don't forget."

"I haven't forgotten, Piyacīli. But what scares me is what if one day our disguise is revealed."

"Why do you say, our disguise? Say, the disguise of Jeyacīlaṉ. Don't be scared. Your friend is not the one to give up so easily. If she be such, could I have fooled the king of Kaṇṭi as I have?"

"Your part in it is only a quarter. The other three fourths is that of your father Pilimataḷāvai. I pity that Pāmiṉi."

"Marttaṉi. Do you know something? When the plan was being hatched between me and my father, if you had been there instead of that Pāmiṉi, you would have been burnt to death. It is your good fortune, you have escaped the fate."

"I have heard people say that people in the palaces do not have a heart. Only after meeting you and your father was I convinced of it. Hm. I don't know when you have decided to end my life."

"Don't be crazy. What we wanted to happen at Kaṇṭi has already happened. You have no danger hereafter. I stand guarantee for it."

"Piyacīli, our family has been in the service of the palace at Kaṇṭi right from the days of my grandmother. Let me tell you, if you so desire, I am ready to give up my life out of our loyalty to the royalty."

"Don't keep blabbering about loyalty. We are now working against the king. I may be his queen. But besides butting into my independence, he is likely to stake the freedom of the country for the sake of his friendship with Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. That has made me and my father plan so much to save our motherland."

"Piyacīli, what is the advantage of the king of Kaṇṭi believing that you are dead?"

"Had I woken up in his bed that morning, he would have imprisoned me again. He gave me a day's freedom for my birthday. That too the freedom of being with him."

"But meanwhile you had your go with Vijayatuṅkā."

"Recalling it, I feel a pleasant shiver through my spine, dear girl. We decided to do away with him because he was against my father. Scared that the whole retinue in the palace would turn against my father if he killed Vijayatuṅkā, we had the king kill him."

"He is also a fool. Had he been in his sense, would he have kissed you in the presence of so many?"

"Did he kiss by himself? My eyes bade him kiss me. He was also young, you see. So he did not anticipate the sword that would come flying above his head. He embraced me in such a hurry. For all that, Marttaṉi, when he was beheaded I shivered through and through, you know. Do you know why? It was such a special pleasure that he had given me. I regret that I did not have one more day to be with him before he was to be killed. When I think about the pleasure he could give me, I feel tickled everywhere, you know."

Even as she spoke, Piyacīli could notice a mischievous smile on the face of Marttaṉi.

"What girl? You smile strange."

"Nothing, Piyacīli. I thought about the secrets of the palace. I could not help but laugh in spite of myself. I hid the laughter in a smile. That's all."

"It is not out of selfishness that my father and I plan anything. It is all for the future of our country. Just think a little for yourself. The British have occupied many parts of Lanka with their strong army. What remains is the kingdom of Kaṇṭi. The other is the Mullaittīvu region. Mullaittīvu is not such a big kingdom.

But the ruler Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ is strong. It is because we maintain friendly relationship with him that the British consider us to be their enemy. I asked my husband to give up his friendship with Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. My father has also told him many a time. Vikramarāja Siṅghē considers Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ as great a support as a mountain. The diplomatic activities on our part to dispel that faith of Vikramarāja Siṅghē in Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ have become futile. And yet we do not want to give up. That is why all these efforts, you see."

"If Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ and our king become enemies, won't the British defeat both easily?

"Why should we be worried about Mullaittīvu or Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ? Our concern is only about saving the people of Kaṇṭi."

"How is it possible, Piyacīli?"

"Should I keep on repeating what I had said so many times? Subsequent to our present mission, Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ and the king of Kaṇṭi will become enemies to each other. The British will defeat Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ with the support of Kaṇṭi. Mullaittīvu will be entrusted to the hands of the king of Kaṇṭi. Considered to be dead that I am, I will suddenly appear and become the queen of Mullaittīvu."

"Is it all possible?"

"Why not as long as Lord North is there in Colombo? Is it not enough if I meet him for just a night? I will become the queen of Mullaittīvu in the absence of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ."

"Do you think that the king of Kaṇṭi will keep quiet the moment he comes to know that you are alive?"

"You fool! He will not be there to know that. For the sake of the good of the people of Kaṇṭi, for the sake of the country, my father Pilimataḷāvai will take over the kingdom of Kaṇṭi."

"Wow! So many plans..." Marttaṉi took her hand to her chin in astonishment when the sky rattled aloud. It became dark. Lightning flashed. Eyes became blind. Rain drops started falling like tamarind fruits from the shook tree. Heavy rains. Strong winds. Deafening thunder.

The horses of both Piyacīli and Marttaṉi could not proceed further. Both of them saw an abandoned building as if together. They sped their horses towards it.

It was a tattered building. There was a corner where they could seek shelter. They tethered the horses to a pillar. Unable to stand the biting cold, they shivered as they sat huddled together in that corner.

The rains and the winds continued unabated. The thunder shook the building and they were scared to death.

Marttaṉi said, "Careful! Let not your disguise as Jeyacīlan be washed away in the rain."

Adjusting the headgear, the pasted beard and moustache, Piyacīli shivered saying, "Oh, I just cannot stand this."

"You a man, shivering all along..." Marttaṉi teased her and yet she too could not stand it any more. She brought her knees together as she tried to manage.

Nature's wrath went beyond bounds. The building was flooded. But for the corner where they were, the other parts of the building became pools of water. They were at an elevated platform at the corner.

Marttaṉi said, "If this building falls down on our heads unable to stand anymore, what will happen to the plans of you and your father?". She shivered uncontrollably.

"Don't kill me mentioning all that now."

When Marttaṉi saw that Piyacīli was not able to stand the cold any more, she hugged her tight and said, "Do you feel a little comfortable now?"

"You are as warm as men, you girl. Hug me tight." said Piyacīli.

The warmth of the bodies held together warded off the cold a little.

The rains continued till dawn. The winds continued too. As it dawned, it became peaceful.

They had fallen asleep despite themselves and woke up at the neighing of the horses. They realized that it had dawned by then.

Both of them sighed deeply. They did not look at each other straight. They looked at each other only through the corner of their eyes and smiled.

"This thunder and lightning did not harm us in any way. We need nothing more than this to witness that God is on our side." said Piyacīli as she mounted the horse.

"I have heard that more often than not, God is on the side of the evil." said Marttaṉi with a smile.

The horses that trotted soon started galloping.

Piyacīli, oh, no, Jeyacīlaṉ stopped the horse at a signpost indicating the direction to Mullaittīvu and then turned her horse in that direction. Marttaṉi's horse followed hers.

35 They Arrived There

Kuruvicci was rushing towards him when Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ was strolling on the terrace of his palace enjoying the beauty of the rising sun like a dot of *kumkum* on the forehead of the east. There was a note of ridicule in his voice as he greeted her, "Hello there! Seems you woke up just now."

'Oh, no! I didn't sleep well through the night. I just lay with my eyes closed." she said.

"So you fell into deep sleep at dawn?"

"No, not at dawn or even after the dawn."

"That's a lie! You tell me a lie after having slept snoring all the time."

"You up here could hear my snoring downstairs there! Perhaps you had sent your ears down to investigate."

Paṇṭārakaṉ laughed aloud. Kuruvicci Nācci smiled.

"Kuruvicci! I forgot. A few of our informers should have returned at dawn. Have they?"

"I came running all the way only carrying their message, you see!"

"What did they say? Is there anything else important at Kaṇṭi after the death of Piyacīli?"

"Muttuccāmy had proclaimed himself the king of Kaṇṭi even as he is at Colombo. He has arranged for the news to be spread through Kaṇṭi."

"Should be really crazy..."

"You make light of it. He should have declared so only on the strength of the support at the background."

"What great support do you say it is? He depends on the military strength of Lord North, the British imperialistic fanatic. Do you think that he can rule over Kaṇṭi from Colombo with that support? Kuruvi! Do you know how it looks like? It is like a madcap on earth declaring that he rules over the cosmos. A state cannot be won over by military strength alone. It is impossible to defeat the people of a nation when they join together and line up at the battle front with their heads held high to fight for their freedom. No just ideal has ever been done away with once and for all. The people of Kaṇṭi should have laughed aloud at the proclamation of Muttuccāmy, that slave to Lord North."

"Yes, our informers said the same. As soon as they heard about Muttuccāmy's proclamation, they did laugh. They protested in anger. They had written on the walls calling Muttuccāmy deranged. Even Pilimataḷāvai the minister addressed an assembly of the public condemning the proclamation."

"Really? That is a surprise!"

"The moving speech of Pilimataḷāvai in the meeting at the palace gate and the oath of allegiance to king by the public were quite impassioned. That is what our informers have to say."

"I can understand the information about the public. But my surprise is about Pilimataḷāvai of all condemning the proclamation of Muttuccāmy."

"Our informers have yet another to report. There is confusion in certain quarters about Muttuccāmy's proclamation."

"What confusion?"

"Muttuccāmy should have made the proclamation only after certain considerations. A section of the people are under the impression that he may perhaps march against Kaṇṭi with British military assistance."

"Is there anything else our informers have to report?"

"The parents of the princess of Maturai are already at Kaṇṭi. Your friend Vikramarāja Siṅghē married her in a simple function."

"Let at least that golden Tamiḻ lass bring peace to my friend's life. Hey, I could see your face changing colours. You seem to feel that I pray for the good of my friend and yet seem not to be concerned with our own life."

Within a moment, Kuruvicci steadied herself. She was anxious that Paṇṭārakaṉ should have no misgivings about her.

'O, no. My face belies nothing. You should be imagining. When have I worried about my own life? Your life is my life. Your life is the goal of my life. I am aware that the Tamiḻ race in Lanka has a life only if you live."

"Do you think that I am not concerned with your life? We are sure to succeed in our mission. The British are going to run away with their dreams of occupying Kaṇṭi and defeating Mullaittīvu frustrated. Thereafter there is going to be nothing to hold back the next stage of our love."

"I have absolutely no doubt about the success of our mission. And I am afraid that our success may be adversely affected just because of these betrayers among ourselves."

"It is not either today or yesterday that such betrayal has appeared. They are there for ever so many years, right from the days of the *purāṇās*. We should keep to the path of our mission unmindful of these traitors and betrayers. Even if the seed of passion for freedom that we sow does not sprout and grow full straight into a tree in our own times, we should proceed with the hope that it will happen at least after our times."

"We hear about the vile nature of Eṭṭappaṉ in Tamiḻnāṭu. It is the baseness of his betrayal that enables the British to become strong every day over there. Pāñcālaṅkuṟicci is becoming weaker every day. We pity Tamiḻnāṭu when we hear about it. At the same time we are worried that Iḻam is no exception."

"Kuruvi! Let me tell you with conviction. It is wrong to expect that he who sows the seed shall necessarily eat the fruits of the tree that it grows into. We are labouring for the future. We are labouring for freedom in future. We should never desire for personal fulfilment before death. If all our sacrifices and services of today were to bear fruit only in future, we would live in the hearts of future even if we do not live physically at that time. Man lives to a maximum of a hundred years. If he wants to live thereafter, he should create the base for such existence when he is alive. Billions have lived and died since the beginning of humankind. But only a few live in the lines of history. That is why Kuruvicci, I have to tell you, that even if we have to sacrifice our life without consummating our love in a physical fulfilment, we are going to live for hundreds of years."

"It is certainly a matter of pride to me if it has to be that Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ and Kuruvicci lived and died for the sake of the nation and the freedom of the nation, keeping personal pleasure at bay."

When Kuruvicci said this, her eyes moistened. Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ wiped the tears away and brushed her hair fondly.

When they were thus lost in conversation about their ideals, someone was heard approaching. Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ turned and said, "Who is it?" There stood a man dressed like a kuṭukuṭuppaikkāraṉ. Kuruvicci laughed gently and said, "Don't you recognize him? He is one of our informers."

"Oh, it is Taṇikai. Your disguise is good indeed. I have learnt of all that you have informed Kuruvicci."

The informer paid his respects to Paṇṭārakaṉ and said, "A man and a woman are here. Husband and wife. They say that they are from Kaṇṭi and would like to meet you."

"Really? Let us go Kuruvicci."

They left the terrace of the palace.

36 The Letter Received

Kuruvicci and Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ appeared like the sun and the moon paired as they descended the stairs in the palace and looked with eyes full of kindness at Jeyacīlaṉ and Marttaṉi as they bowed respectfully. Kuruvicci passed her palm gently on Marttaṉi's head and greeted Marttaṉi in the kindest voice. Marttaṉi said, "This is my husband, Jeyacīlaṉ. Congenitally dumb." Jeyacīlaṉ greeted Kuruvicci, fell at the feet of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ, and held fast to those feet. Paṇṭārakaṉ said, "Hey, what is all this? Get up brother!" He helped him up to his feet holding him by the shoulders.

Piyacīli who was there as Jeyacīlaṉ felt as if stuck by a lightning of warmth all through her body. She cherished the feel of Paṇṭārakaṉ's hands on her with such a relish. It was she who laid a net for him. It was she who dared to kill him. It was she who lost herself in his touch.

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ said, "Woe is me! Such a charming youth! God has made him dumb."

Marttaṉi interrupted in a hurry. "O, please don't blame God. Before God could bestow upon him the wealth of voice, he had hurried himself into birth. How can God be responsible for it?" She sounded so simplistic that Kuruvicci could not help but laugh aloud. Piyacīli became jealous of the brightness of her teeth that pierced through her lips as she laughed. She had reason to become angry with Kuruvicci since she stood there disguised as Jeyacīlaṉ concealing with considerable difficulty her physical charm that enticed the youth.

Brave-hearted Kuruvicci had a face like a lamp. Look at her straight, there was a beauty. Look at her profile. That was a greater beauty. Such a graceful face she had. Piyacīli felt furious about his lack of interest in her since he had given his heart to Kuruvicci because of such a beautiful face.

Her slanted glance would bind the hearts of the youth. The swinging of her hip would make an army lie at her feet. Was there any account of the number of hearts that were broken to pieces at the sight of her shapely breasts? Her crimson lips would trouble lions of youth even from a distance with their natural hue. Her brows were the bows of the God of Love that made many a lieutenant long to surrender to her on the bed. Her smile sent shivers through the spines of the brave. Her touch had made them fall at her lap in admiration. There is the legendary vessel that keeps yielding food forever. She considered her cheeks to be such a legendary vessel yielding pleasure.

And now, she stood in front of the one who had refused to accept the pleasure she had offered him and she had to hide her art of love and even her physical charm as the dumb husband of another woman.

She forgot the purpose for which she had gone there. She had once tried even to kill him in cold blood. She had forgotten it altogether.

Piyacīli had to struggle hard to hide herself. She heaved a sigh. At the same time, she was careful lest Kuruvicci and Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ should take notice of it. She was afraid that they might notice her breasts swelling out through her disguise. Therefore, she turned a little away from them. Jeyacīlaṉ by disguise but Piyacīli in lust. An elephant in must attacks anything and everything, a tree on its way or a dry frond lying somewhere. There are a few such women like Piyacīli in the must of lust.

"You say you are from Kaṇṭi?"

He stood impressive but his words were kind. Marttaṉi answered Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ almost immediately. "Yes, my lord!"

"I am not a lord."

"Forgive me. I should have addressed you as Your Highness."

"Let Your Highness and My Lord be. He who stands in front of you is a person. A person who is struggling for the freedom of this land of ours. Wherefore are you from Kaṇṭi? How can I help you?"

"We have come here to help you."

"Help me? What help can a congenitally dumb and a woman together render to me?"

"We don't know what service we can render to you. But our king Vikramarāja Siṅghē considers that we could help you. He believes so."

"Who? The king of Kaṇṭi?"

"Yes, your friend Kaṇṇuccāmy."

"Look here, lady."

"Marttaṉi is my name."

"Ok, Marttaṉi, you foolish woman. I alone can utter the personal name of my friend Kaṇṇuccāmy. If anyone utters his personal name, I will sever the tongue then and there."

"My God! Let my husband alone remain dumb. Do not make me dumb too. You can slap across my face for uttering the personal name of the king of Kaṇṭi."

The dumb Jeyacīlaṉ intervened and made signs as if to plead with him not to punish her but to punish him instead. Her thirst for the feel of Paṇṭārakaṉ's touch was unquenchable. Her lust was inexhaustible.

"It is good that you have such love for your wife." Paṇṭārakaṉ gently patted him on his back. Piyacīli longed for the patting to prolong forever.

"That is all right. Is it the king of Kaṇṭi who has sent you here?"

Pantārakan was anxious to hear their answer.

Marttaṉi stood bashfully and said, "The king of Kaṇṭi has given a letter to you signed personally lest you should disbelieve our words."

"Letter? From the king of Kaṇṭi? Why didn't you mention it for so long? Let me have it."

"It is there on the horseback. Let me fetch it." Marttaṉi ran through the passage leading out.

Meanwhile, Paṇṭārakaṉ sat on a long seat there and dragged Jeyacīlaṉ to sit by his side. The nymph that Piyacīli was, she felt warmth running through her from tip to toe. She appreciated her disguise that caused the windfall and forgot the whole world as she sat by his side.

"Kuruvicci! Why don't you order something to be brought to these to eat?"

"Let me fetch something myself." As she left, she signalled Taṇikai to stay back. Taṇikai stood there not only as an informer but also as Paṇṭārakaṉ's watchful bodyguard.

Marttaṉi rushed back to Paṇṭārakaṉ with a letter in her hand.

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ looked carefully at the letter. Yes, it had the royal seal of Kaṇṭi. He gently tore open the seal and spread the letter to read. It was a long letter. At the end of the letter, there was the signature of Vikramarāja Siṅghē. Paṇṭārakaṉ

looked at it carefully and was convinced of its authenticity. Meanwhile, Kuruvicci brought eatables for both Jeyacīlaṉ and Marttaṉi in two plates.

Marttaṉi took both the plates and offered one to Jeyacīlaṉ.

Meanwhile, Paṇṭārakaṉ started reading the letter.

37 Unequalled Pair

"Greetings from loving friend Kaṇṇuccāmy to dear friend Vairamuttu. I feel like thinking that it is four decades since we are away from each other. My royal responsibilities and your duties on the warfront have created this trench of separation. Pilimataḷāvai is still circling round with his usual treachery. He is beset with worry and anxiety after the death of his dear daughter Piyacīli forced on me as wife. He is like a house struck by lightning haunted by the mice everywhere. There is, however, no dearth of perverse plans in that dark heart of his. It is clear that the haughty British Governor Lord North has given him hopes. He thinks that I am not aware of the fact that informers from Lord North are roaming the streets of Kaṇṭi and indulging in hoodwinking people and that they also meet Pilimataḷāvai. They are like the ostrich, deluded into believing that its whole body is on the sand when it has sunk just its head into the sands.

Since our informers are efficient, they are able to recognize them and remove them like removing pieces of stone from the rice. They keep track of those informers always. The shadow at noon falls not on the ground but spreads only on ourselves. It is like unto such shadow that our informers are following them. You know of course that a set of my own informers are camped at Colombo. I am to introduce two of that set of informers through this letter of mine. These two have rendered excellent service while at Colombo. Jeyacīlaṉ and Marttaṉi are man and wife, as you might have understood by this time. The husband is dumb. The wife is so vociferous that she speaks for both together. Both are adept in collecting information. I have sent such a pair to Mullaittīvu to be at your service.

These two have surprised me with information from the very palace of Lord North at Colombo. They had entered the palace like the wind. The documents they have given me are very important. They are about the secret plans of the British. Now it seems to me that it is going to be easy to arrest Lord North right at his palace like facing the tiger in its cave. Jeyacīlaṉ and Marttaṉi have given me all necessary information for it. I am planning my strategies like a hovering eagle. Just a leap - the fat goat, Lord North ruling from Colombo, will die at my hands. The details that Jeyacīlaṉ and Marttaṉi have handed me give such confidence.

Do not take too lightly of Jeyacīlaṉ because he is dumb. Do not underestimate Marttaṉi because she is a woman.

I should necessarily tell you of their brave deed at Colombo.

Lord North needs a woman a day. To drink with him and to lie with him. He keeps looking for the night through the day. He does not like the white women as indigenous to him. So his errand boys had tried to ensnare the Colombo dames. A high price being offered, many a girl had sold her body for a night and took gold and precious stones back. Even certain women from the rich and influential families rushed to his bed of pleasures to enhance their status. One particular day, there was no woman to obtain. The errand boys had roamed the streets of Colombo like dogs. No commodity available. Many women came forward. But they had already been tasted. This British Lord needs a new woman every day, you see.

The errand boys finally saw Marttaṉi. That is to say, Marttaṉi made herself available for them to see. They tried to tempt her. She pretended as if she succumbed to their temptation. Wasn't she waiting for a chance to intrude? She laid only one condition. Her dumb husband should accompany her. They were agreeable. Both of them were taken to the palace at Colombo.

Since no woman was available until midnight, Lord North had drunk bellyful and was walking restless through his chamber.

"My Lord! We could not get anyone today. Finally, we have brought this family lady. Her husband is there with her. But he is dumb. He will lie outside the chamber. Let us leave now." They left.

Already inebriated to the full, Lord North was further intoxicated by the beauty of Marttaṉi. He became a monkey in a garden of flowers. She is a tempest, you see. Yet, she moved like breeze and made him surrender himself to her. She has learnt the tricks of making a man dance to her tunes even without being touched by him. She made him lie on his bed like a python that had swallowed a cow.

Meanwhile, Jeyacīlaṉ had opened the secret cabinets everywhere around and had collected confidential documents. They left the palace as it dawned. They left

Colombo to escape the possible arrest. They came back to Kaṇṭi and had given me all the documents.

I would like that this efficient couple are with you at least for a few days. They were particular about rendering their service only to Kaṇṭi. But finally they accepted my request. They are there to be of service to you.

They are not only efficient but also good at heart. When none was ready to marry a congenitally dumb, this noble lady came forward to get married to him out of love. She insisted that she be married and succeeded in her resolve. There were many who stood against her love. Marttaṉi managed to marry the dumb son of her aunt despite their opposition.

I have sent such a pair to you. I do hope that they would serve you in finetuning your strategies and bringing all success to you.

Let God put an end to the long separation between us and bring us together quickly.

Your dear friend, Kaṇṇuccāmy."

There were tears of happiness in the eyes of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ as he completed reading the letter.

"Kuruvi, please read this. This is a testimony not only to the affection of my friend but also to how unequalled these two inseparable are."

He gave her the letter. She heaved a long sigh after reading the letter.

Kuruvicci ordered Taṇikai to make arrangements for their stay.

Paṇṭārakaṉ took leave of them saying that he had certain important duties to attend to.

Kuruvicci Nācciyār did not fail to notice the smile of success and the wink of the eye at Marttaṉi with which Jeyacīlaṉ followed Taṇikai.

"Your name is Taṇikai?" there was the softness of breeze in Marttaṉi's voice.

"Yes. My name is Taṇikaimalai. Taṇikai in short', he said as he led them.

"Do you know how important the letter we have brought is?"

Taṇikai said, "I have never desired to know of something that he had not told me about."

Jeyacīlaṉ had a smile of appreciation on his face as he shrugged his shoulders.

Taṇikai touched Jeyacīlaṉ's palm softly and ran his fingers through saying, "How soft is your palm, I say, like the petals of a flower!"

Piyacīli who had always longed for the touch of men, felt the fire of lust through and through.

38 Fox Tail

"O, yes! His body is as soft as the softest flower. His parents were also like that. Right son for the parents." Marttaṉi said and smiled to ease the situation.

"Oho! The lineage is that of a garden of bowers! So flower-like parents, flower-like son." There was irony in Taṇikai's words.

Jeyacīlaṉ fisted Taṇikai on his cheek gently as if relishing the irony in the remark.

Taṇikai winked his eyes and said, "A bouquet indeed!" Lest Taṇikai should understand the situation, Marttaṉi looked at Jeyacīlaṉ with upbraiding in her eyes.

Taṇikai had brought them to his house saying that they could be accommodated there. As soon as they reached the house, Jeyacīlaṉ and Marttaṉi looked at each other and showed surprise.

"What is the surprise? You just don't worry. I am a bachelor. I will lie somewhere there downstairs. You two can occupy the lodgings upstairs. Just let me know whenever you want something. Even if it is the rarest of flowers, it will reach you."

Marttaṉi looked at Jeyacīlaṉ as if seeking his consent. Jeyacīlaṉ smiled and nodded.

Marttaṉi knew full well the thirst and taste of Piyacīli.

She turned to Taṇikai and said, "You say you are not married?"

"Had that happened, by this time there would have been several imps to welcome you right at the doorstep, you see."

"How come you speak thus? You call children imps. We are worried that we don't have one, you see."

Marttaṉi was perfect in acting the anxiety of a childless woman.

"Hey! You are not that very old. Even if you begin after four or five years, you can beget ten or fifteen." Taṇikai laughed aloud.

"That is not going to be."

"Why?"

"It is true that one of us is barren. So we cannot have a child in this birth."

Marttaṉi pretended to be further anxious and sad.

"That is good in a way. In future, when you make love in old age, there will be no monkeys with their pranks around you."

"Look at him. He speaks as if it is joke. I only know my anxiety of not being able to conceive." Marttaṉi sighed as she sunk her face in Jeyacīlaṉ's shoulder.

"There is a yogi known to me. I will bring him here one of these days. Or I will take you to him. He will give you certain tablets. If you take them, you can have a child immediately." There was assurance in Taṇikai's tone.

Jeyacīlaṉ's eyes widened like the wings of a bird about to fly off as he looked at Marttaṉi as if he were asking if such a thing was possible. Marttaṉi for her part sprang up in the air and shook Taṇikai by his shoulders. There was surprise as she said, "Really? Tablet giving children?"

"Marttaṉi, haven't you heard the story of the *Mahābhārata*? How did Kunti beget her children? Just as your husband is dumb, Kunti's husband was under a curse. She had taken a tablet that came her way even when she was a virgin, with a prayer to the Sun God. And Karṇaṇ was born through her cheek. Then, after her marriage, she took another tablet with the God of Death in her mind. Dharmaṉ was born. With the God of the Winds in her mind, she begot Bhīmaṉ. The thought of Indra gave her Aruccuṉaṉ. That is what the *Mahābhārata* says."

"Aha. You totally misinterpret legends. Eating a tablet and begetting a child... pooh.. pooh." Marttaṉi brushed against Taṇikai fondly.

So, Piyacīli was gauging Taṇikai, using Marttaṉi. He pretended to be moving a little away but did not evade her brushing. Piyacīli had sharp eyes to take notice of it and concluded that Taṇikai could be manipulated with certain efforts on their part.

Had it been only to have her plans executed that she wanted to trap him, her concern would not have been that very intense.

He was well built and that was enough to inflame lust in her. She kept looking at his lips on and off with relish. They were huge indeed. They appeared like the trunks of elephants. She longed for the pleasure of those lips licking her all over.

However, she controlled herself with difficulty and went ahead with her pretence of a dumb youth.

Taṇikai took them upstairs. The lodgings up there were humble indeed.

Marttaṉi said, "What is this? Looks like the tail of a fox hung as a festoon." She felt the soft fur of it as she asked this.

"To be a spy is to be a fox, you see. That is why the fox tail is hanging in a spy's house. There are occasions when I do not know how to go about my job. Then I used to come here and lie on the cot looking intently at this fox tail as I utter incantations. Suddenly I will get ideas, you see. I will immediately get up to attend to my duties."

"What is the incantation like? Why don't you teach us? Aren't we also spies?" said Marttaṉi.

"Are you also spies?"

"You pretend ignorance. Isn't there a proverb that says only a snake knows the legs of another snake?"

"Whatever may it be, I cannot teach you the incantation immediately. Let us get to know each other well and then perhaps I may teach you. And now, you can take a rest here. Over there is the kitchen. You can cook whatever you two relish."

"How about you?"

"Let me also see how good a cook you are. Throw a little downstairs, please."

"Why should it be thrown? I will bring it myself."

"Thanks. Let me go downstairs. I don't want to keep standing here between you."

Taṇikaimalai looked at them both with an impish look and took to the stairs. Piyacīli was staring at his back. Once she knew that he had gone downstairs, Marttaṉi bolted the doors and walked towards Jeyacīlaṉ. Meanwhile, Jeyacīlaṉ was getting rid of all his dress and was throwing them to the corner of the room.

"My goodness! This dress. Suffocating. How suffocating!"

As she saw the exasperation, Marttaṉi said, "You are used to remaining scantily dressed. This dress of a man is too much for you, I understand."

"But one thing, Marttaṉi! Though it is difficult to carry the dress of a man, it gives me the feeling of being hugged by a man. The pleasure of being hugged around by a man."

Marttaṉi could only feel surprised at the measureless lust of hers for man. She took a few items of dress and offered them to Piyacīli who stood naked. "Wear this!" Piyacīli took them casually and threw them back at the floor and embraced Marttaṉi.

"That is all right now. Let me go and cook something." Marttaṉi moved towards the kitchen releasing herself from her embrace. Piyacīli picked up the dress from the floor and threw them across her shoulders as she followed her to the kitchen. They stood beside each other as they talked and cooked. Piyacīli had never attended to such chores. But she had to talk to Marttaṉi about her important plans and their implementation.

Taṇikaimalai laid himself on a simple cot downstairs. His thoughts were entirely upon Jeyacīlaṉ and Marttaṉi. He heard someone tapping at the door gently with a finger. He sat up on his cot with his attention on the door.

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39 The Hero and the Heroine

Kuruvicci Nācciyār opened the door and walked in. Taṇikaimalai had never expected her visit and therefore stood up stuck with awe. "O, it is you!"

"Yes, Taṇikai, it is me. Do you understand why I am here?"

"No, Madam. I could not have even dreamt that you would be visiting my house. Had you sent word, I would have come running to you."

"Why? Do you think that it does not befit me visiting your house? Am I to be found only in the palace of Mullaittīvu? We are in the battlefield and the thorny fields look like a beautiful park to us. What do you think this house of a good man lacks? In what way is it ignoble?"

"You keep standing. Please take your seat."

He dusted a chair and spread a piece of cloth over it. Kuruvicci Nācciyār removed the cloth and sat on the chair. He kept looking at her in anticipation of what she had to say.

"Do you know those who had arrived?"

"Who are you referring to, please?"

"That dumb fellow and his wife. I am talking about them."

"The king of Kaṇṭi has sent them, hasn't he? That is fairly obvious."

"You are a spy, aren't you? I wanted to know if you had any suspicion."

"I suspected them to begin with. Then when it was known that the king of Kaṇṭi himself had sent them with a letter, I wriggled out of my suspicion. And yet, I have a little drop of that misgiving left behind like the drizzle after the rains."

"It should not be a little drop, Taṇikai. They say that little drops gather to a flood. Only when numerous drops gather, do we have a flood. So, it is not enough if your suspicion remains the size of a little drop. It should be a little embers. Only embers grow into a huge fire burning a town. Similarly, your suspicion shall not dry up as a drop does. It should gather to greatness like embers."

"If you make yourself more explicit, I will be able to act accordingly."

"Didn't I too read the letter from the king of Kaṇṭi? The letter was not written by him. He has only affixed his signature at the end."

"Madam! The king of Kaṇṭi had sent such letters even during the past. We have seen his signature. The text of the letter would have been written by someone else as he had dictated."

"You are right, of course. But everything shall be placed in its context before one makes a final assessment."

"Does our king also suspect as you do?"

"Taṇikaimalai, don't you know our king? He is an embodiment of sacrifice. He has a brave heart that forever yearns to fight it out in the battlefield. He is resolved to live for the sake of the Tamiḻ race and to die for their sake. But, if the enemies addressed him with soft words, he would become quite sympathetic. By nature he is pliant enough to believe words at their face value."

"So you say that he trusts the letter from the king of Kaṇṭi as genuine and has reposed his trust in these persons too."

"I for my part do not want to disbelieve. I am not asking you to disbelieve. While wading through bushes, even if it is a creeper that the leg contacts, what is wrong if one pauses to ascertain that it is not a green snake? But he for his part refuses to pay heed to my words. He has become so sympathetic towards the dumb fellow. He has deference towards that woman. He is awed by their exploits at Colombo under quite risky conditions."

"When our king reposes faith in anyone, he is all out to do anything for one. I for one know how many of such had betrayed him. That vile fellow Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ for that matter – he had once thought of making a friend of him. I prevailed upon him and prevented such an untoward incident from happening. He takes people into trust very easily in his anxiety that our valiant struggle should meet with success."

"He hates Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ more bitterly than the bitterest fruit. I have understood that in the business of my own life. It is good that you have forewarned him about Kākkai."

"O my! Is he a human being at all? It is not blood that runs through him. They talk about the mythical venomous snake Kārkkōṭakaṉ. It is such venom that runs through and through his body."

"Taṇikai! I wanted to talk to you about him too. I came of my own accord to talk about these two from the king of Kaṇṭi. But the king had sent me to talk to you about Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ."

"Really? Did the king send you?"

"Yes, he feels a bit delicate to talk about it to you in person. That is why he has sent me to talk to you."

Taṇikai was a little confused. He was anxious as if confronted with a strange riddle. She awaited Kuruvicci to proceed further with his eyes intent on her lips.

"You know, of course, Nalla Nācci, Paṇṭārakaṉ's sister."

"O, yes. Nalla Nācci is taking care of the security of the Triṅkōmalai region. So also is Ūmaicci Nācciyār taking care of the security of Paṉaṅkāmam."

"Both are, of course, attending to their duties with diligence. Nalla Nācci is, of course, taking proper care of Triṅkōmalai. But our king regrets that she is not taking care of herself with equal diligence."

"What do I hear? I feel uneasy."

"You feel uneasy. But our king is grieved as if tamarind had been added to milk."

"We are all here to ensure that he is not grieved on any score. Let me have the details, please."

"I don't know how but that Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ has seduced Nalla Nācci into a love affair with him."

"What, what? Has the snake swallowed the volcano? It can't be. I say, it cannot be."

"I am telling you the truth. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ has cheated Nalla Nācci claiming to be the son of a family of a rich merchant and that his name was Birmānantaṉ. Someone should have done a good turn and the affair is so far confined to exchange of words. Unaware of the fact that the fellow is the treacherous Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ, Nalla Nācci is in a hurry to get married to him."

"Shouldn't our king tell her who he is?"

"He knows that his sister's heart is quite soft. He is worried about how she would take such a piece of information. He is worried about what she may decide upon."

"Leave that to me. I will take care of it. Tell the king not to worry. Persons like us feel relieved because you are always with him."

"So one of the two matters I came to confide in you is this. The other is..."

"You have already mentioned it. Suspicion shall not remain a drop; it should be like embers. I will take care of this dumb fellow and Marttaṉi."

Kuruvicci expressed her trust in Taṇikaimalai's efficiency and faithfulness with a soft smile. She started to leave the place. Taṇikaimalai accosted her up to the door to see her off. With a nod of her head, Kuruvicci left the place.

Just then, Marttaṉi had come downstairs with a plate full of eatables. She hid herself away from the sight of the two, squeezing herself behind a bamboo curtain.

40 Green Flag

"Shall I come in?" Marttaṉi did not wait for permission but walked in straight with a plate of dishes in her hand. Taṉikai could not relish her dancing steps. He made the question mark within his heart still larger and said, "O, it is you, Marttaṉi!" He looked intently at her.

She kept the plate in front of him. "I am new to this town as well as to this house. I have done a little that I could. Please taste it and tell me if it is good." She had a romantic smile on her lips.

The words of Kuruvicci Nācciyār that had further strengthened his suspicion kept ringing in his ears.

He looked at the door with the corner of his eyes and said, "You have come in without closing the doors."

"Why should the doors be closed while dining?"

"If it is going to be only to dine, the doors need not be closed, of course." There was a glint of mischief not only in his words but also in his eyes.

"You seem to have jumped to some conclusion about me. I am not that sort."

"What have I said now? You have stretched it too far. We are not going only to dine. We are going to discuss certain political matters too. That is why I thought that it would be better to keep the doors closed."

"Oh, you meant that? I was scared otherwise. The husband is dumb. She has no children too. What pleasure is she going to have derived from him? With thoughts like that, you might have thought of making an attempt. That was the kind of thinking I had."

"Hey! You should be crazy. Am I the one to forget the values of our tradition? Whatever may he be, the husband is the husband. We know of Naḷāyiṉi who

carried the leper of a husband to the house of a prostitute. You should also be in the line of such women of chastity."

"Sure. In faith, it is so. I mingle with everyone without any blemish at heart. There are a few who take me otherwise when I do so."

"Don't ever think that I would take you otherwise. If ever you have any such thoughts, forget them right now." Taṇikai tasted the dishes on the plate and appreciated the taste.

'I tried to see if she has come here to entice me. But she does not look that sort. She is quite unambiguous. She speaks as if she is one of the most virtuous of women. I could make nothing of her.' Such were the thoughts that kept Taṇikai in a confused state of mind.

Marttaṉi was also a little disappointed. She did not want to yield as soon as he touched her. She wanted to pretend lack of interest to make him have trust in her. She had planned to ensnare him thereafter.

She felt a little uncertain of the situation taking Taṇikai to have taken her for a chaste woman like Kaṇṇaki, led by her words and bearing.

She did not betray her disappointment and thanked him for his appreciation of the dishes she had cooked. He was busy with the dishes.

There was a note of endearing in her words when she said, "Hope you are not angry with me."

Taṇikai said, "Why should I become angry? Have I asked anything of you and have you denied it? Then I should have become angry. Don't imagine things." There was firmness in his tone.

"I feel sorry that I could not offer you what you desire of me."

Taṇikai said within himself, 'Look at her! She has again started going roundabout.'

"Marttaṉi, I did not expect anything from you. I should have become angry only if I have asked something of you and you had denied me the same."

"Be true to yourself. Did you want me to close the doors just because you wanted to discuss political matters with me?"

"What else do you think it was for?"

"Please say it yourself. Why did you want the doors to be closed?"

"A woman of virtue should leave it at that."

"So you admit that there is something."

"Marttaṉi, you Marttaṉi! What the hell do you want to say now?"

Taṇikai lifted his hand to knock his head in despair. Marttaṉi leapt to take it in her own hands.

Taṇikaimalai was shocked. And yet, he made no efforts to have his hand released from her grip.

"I am also talking of matters political." She said and started feeding him the dishes from the plate.

"Taṇikaimalai shook his head as if to refuse any more.

"You don't like me offering it by hand. Let me put it in your mouth." She held a piece of the dish at her fingertips and pushed it through his rough lips. Though they were trying to cheat each other, the very attempt made them hot with lust. Fall into the fire, and you will feel burnt. Fall into water, and you will feel drenched. The net of lust that one spreads for the other is also similar. Though there is the desire to reach the shore, as long as one is in the grip of it, one has to subject oneself to its climate.

Taṇikaimalai tasted her fingers along with the piece of dish proffered.

"Now we can discuss political matters. Shall I close the doors?" said Marttaṉi.

Taṇikaimalai was convinced of her artfulness. He wanted to go her own way and break the plans of Marttaṉi and her dumb husband.

"As you please!" he said and smiled at her. She ran to the door like a spotted deer and bolted it from within. But she did not immediately return to him. She stood with her head lowered, looking at her toes in the bashfulness of a newly-wed, pushed into her nuptial room even as the bridegroom waited for her.

Taṇikaimalai stood up slowly and walked towards her. His rough hand touched her chin as he said, "Do you feel shy?" Her eyes betrayed her desire. She stood looking at him. He too looked at her with wide eyes. The next moment he forgot himself in her embrace. He managed not to forget that he was Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's bodyguard and a spy. She who had embraced him did not look like she would leave him that very easily. She slided into the bed over there. She started eating his lips. He closed his eyes as he embraced her tight.

She said in the softest tone possible that resembled the vibrant music of a stringed instrument, "Shall we discuss matters political?" He, for his part, hugged her further tight.

She immediately released herself from his grip as if she had committed a great crime with the speed of one moving one's leg on stepping on fire.

"Woe is me! What if my husband comes to know of it?" she pretended as if she was greatly agitated.

Taṇikai said patiently, "Nothing will happen. We are only discussing matters political."

"Okay! I need a piece of green cloth urgently along with a stick."

"Green cloth and a stick? What for?" He showed surprise.

"To make a flag."

"Flag? What for?"

"To display at the doorstep of the house."

"A green flag at my doorstep? I don't understand."

"It is only for identification. It should be right at the frontage of this house."

"What identification?"

"Let me tell you."

41 Taṇikaimalai's Fury

Taṇikai pulled her towards himself as she moved a little away from him and said, "Sweety to desire! What for is the greeny? Why do you keep quiet? You offered to explain, didn't you? Move your lips that can defeat the sweetness of candy." He became romantic in language. Hasn't he already decided to go her own way to deceive her?

"You should be a great poet. Words flow like raindrops from you." Marttaṇi held her head against his shoulder.

"I am neither a poet nor a songster. Imagination runs wild at the sight of you. That's all. Let that be. Tell me why you want the green flag."

"My husband has a sister. Kalā is her name. She came along with us from Kaṇṭi. We have sent her on another errand. She is to come to Mullaittivu after finishing her job. We have told her that the place where we reside can be identified with a green flag at the portal. She will come here on spotting it."

"May I know what errand she is supposed to attend to?"

"Why should I keep things away from you? It is all for the good of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ as ordered by the king of Kaṇṭi. We have sent Kalā to the palace of Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ."

"Of all, a woman, that too all by herself, to the palace of Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ of all places..."

"You feel so sympathetic right now. When you set your eyes on her, you are going to say if such a wonderfully beautiful woman should ever have to be sent to that traitor's palace."

"Is she such a beauty?"

"She is a thousandfold more beautiful than I. Your two eyes are not enough to appreciate her beauty. You should borrow a thousand eyes."

"That is not a big deal. I can borrow from Intirā."

"Is Intiraṉ a trader in eyes? How can you get a thousand eyes from him?"

"Haven't you heard the story of intirā having eyes all over his body? There was the wife of a sage called Akalyā. She was such a beauty. Intirā had a desire for her. So he tricked the sage to leave his *ashram*. He then entered the ashram changing his form to that of the sage."

"What did Akalyā do?"

"What do you think she would do? She was so happy that her husband had unusually grown so desirous of her."

"So?"

"It was delight all through."

"Didn't she know what was happening until everything was over?"

"She could sense it within a short time."

"After sensing it?"

"She even started uttering endearments to him."

"What do you mean? It was Intirā in the form of her husband..."

"He was not just Intirā. He was the lord of the gods."

"Let him be the lord of whosoever may it be. You say that Akalyā did not rise in rage when she knew that it was not her husband."

"You can take it that the situation was like the situation between us right now. You are apprehensive about your husband coming to know of what is happening here. At the same time, you have desire for me. Akalyā was just like this. Even after coming to know that it was Intirā, she lay in embrace with him."

"Didn't the sage return?"

"He returned, of course. Like a bear in the course of a pooja to Civā."

"What did he do?"

"What a question to ask! What will your husband do if he comes here now? That sage did the same. Hey, you sinner! Even after knowing that it was Intirā, you have been making love to him. You did not regret that you had been cheated. I curse you. Turn into a stone. Such was his curse. Poor lady, she became a piece of stone. She was redeemed only when Rāmā stepped on the stone."

"What did he do to Intirā?"

"You, the Lord of gods! There is none virtuous as you are. How adeptly have you cheated me! I bless you for having appeased my wife Akalyā's lust. Do you think he would have appreciated Intirā and would have been so hospitable towards him? Hey, you of ignoble ways of life! Let there be eyes all over your body for the misconduct on your part. He cursed him thus. Immediately there were a thousand eyes all over the body of Intirā. I said that I may perhaps have to borrow a few of those eyes to appreciate the beauty of Kalā."

"Stop with appreciation. Kalā is quite volatile a person. She may become arrogant in her remarks."

"You also became angry to begin with. Marttaṉi, I am blessed in a way. Whoever the woman is, she has to fall a prey to me."

"Kuruvicci Nācci too?

Before she could have completed her remark, she was slapped squarely across her face. One could only wonder how he became so ferocious.

"I leave you with this since you are a guest here. You have escaped. Otherwise, I would have seen to it that you were no more in this world." He shouted.

"I am sorry. I should not have said that. Please forgive me." She knelt in front of him and held him by his knees.

Taṇikai upbraided himself for having become so emotional, forgetting that he had to maintain pretences to defeat her treacherous intentions. "It is all right. Get up. I lost control over myself since you said that about the one who to me is like a sister though not of the same womb." He tried to console her.

"See how swollen is my cheek. You should take care of it." She moved her cheek close to his lips. He gave her what she had asked for to be even with her. What had he to lose?

"I asked for a flag."

Marttaṉi wound herself around him like a creeper around a prop.

"You should free me to take it for you." Taṇikai released himself from her embrace and looked for a piece of green cloth in a bunch of clothes. Finally, he took a green piece of cloth and fastened it to a stick. It was then a green flag in her hand.

"Let me hoist it in the front yard. And then, I will go to my husband."

Taṇikaimalai shook his head in assent. She kissed him again, opened the doors and went out.

Taṇikaimalai scratched his head, wiped his brow with the palm of his hand and laid himself on the bed.

"She says that one Kalā is coming over. She is supposed to be a paragon of beauty. Jeyacīlaṉ's sister. They have sent her to the palace of Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ. Nothing is clear. I should be quite cautious." Such were the thoughts within him.

He heard someone making a hue and cry upstairs.

"O God! I am betrayed."

That was Marttaṉi. Taṇikaimalai got up in a hurry and ran out. His feet leapt through the stairs.

42 The Mystery of the Vanished

Marttaṉi stood in front of Taṇikai who ran from one floor to the other, crying bitterly and with dishevelled hair. "My husband has gone off somewhere. He has become angry with me and has deserted me. Here is the letter he has left behind."

Taṇikaimalai took the letter from her and read.

"Dear Marttaṉi! No, no. You make a commodity of love. To use an endearment to address you is sheer folly. I loved you wholeheartedly. I believed that you loved me as your life. A dumb fellow. Somehow he is handicapped. And yet, Marttaṉi has such a holy love for me. She lives making a deity of her husband. Such were the thoughts that had always made me feel extremely happy. I had been thanking God for so long in that you were my wife and a veritable fortress protecting me in the service of the king of Kaṇṭi as his spy. I shed tears during the nuptial night looking at your face. Then you wiped my tears away with your soft fingers. I did not know then that they were not just soft fingers but were the fangs of the viper. I scribbled on a piece of paper asking you if you loved me the dumb that I was. You held on to my legs and wetted them with your tears. I wrote another foolish question too. It appeared foolish to me at that time. But now I understand what an intelligent question it had been. Never will you betray me, will you? That was the question. I

remember how hurt you felt then. Aha, such a dissembling! You said: I will remain pure of body and at heart. I have been created by God only for your sake. What an ignoble question have you asked of me? Look at my eyes! Do you see any sign of blemish there? Do you think that my brows arch at the sight of the charming youth? Do you think that my eyes are arrows? If my face is a lotus, it blooms for this sun in front of me now. Even if I were to run the risk of being drowned in a river or a pond, I would kill myself if ever the arms of any man were to lift me off the waters. My darling, this is my word. You said all these and cried so bitterly that your eyes were swollen. Were all those the dance of a slut? I considered you greater than the world. I was proud that I lacked nothing when I had had you for me. How holy is the man-wife relationship between us! We can even put it aside. What have we pledged for the sake of the king of Kaṇṭi and his friend Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ? We came to Mullaittīvu only to stand by the pledge. But what have you done? Just think for yourself. Will ever God fogive you? You would not spare the roadside stone. You used to prostrate in a frenzy of prayer and devotion. You offered your worship to each and every deity around. Of all, what have you done? You hang on the shoulder of every man around. How could you have betrayed this dumb fellow? What wrong have I done to you? Have I ever looked at any woman other than you? When I live with the resolve that you are everything to me, how could you betray me thus? I have seen it with my own eyes today. How many were such occasions of indulgence that had escaped my eyes? You should have been the heroine of those scenes of lust. You are the prey of dogs in heat. You are their dish. You could have had your address in the streets of the prostitutes to live like that. The bees that haunt the flowers sit on the night soil too. If such a woman like you could pretend to make a supreme sacrifice in getting married to a dumb fellow like me and thus earn the appreciation of people during the day only to make a bed of the lap of any and sundry during the night, what else could I do but stamp on the sense of deference I had for women? Taṉikaimalai – that sinner, that betrayer, pretended to be a bar of gold. It is the same fellow who had thrown embers into my heart. What is the point in blaming him? When a slut like you, with the wonderful body that you have, seeks him, what else could he do? She sprang upon you. When you cooked the dishes in such a hurry and rushed towards the groundfloor, unmindful of the hungry husband waiting for you, I suspected foul play. I followed you. I hid myself behind a pillar. The doors were bolted in a little while. O, woe is me! The doors of heaven were thrown open inside the room. That was why the doors of the room were closed. I saw that wonderful scene through the slit between the doors. You had embraced me and praised me as Intirā and Cantirā before. You arched the same lips to suck his lips. I saw that unseemly sight. How did you dare to do it? My God! How many tricks have you played to cheat

me! Now only do I understand your schemes. You needed a husband to hoodwink the world and then you could live as you pleased; you could indulge in a life of pleasures; you could wallow in the mud of sins; you could then go ahead with your treachery. Such were your plans. Marttaṉi, you are a veritable demon. It is dangerous even to my life to live with you any the more. Even if there is no danger, it is repulsive. It does not become a man of honour. I can carry out the orders of my king of Kaṇṭi without any assistance from you. I will dedicate my services to Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ as ordered by him. I will give even my life in the mission. You the virtuous, the dedicated wife, enough is my association with you! Forget me. Satisfy your lust with Taṇikaimalai. If you are not to be satisfied with him, there are muscular men in the army of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. Take them all into your fold. I don't want to set my eyes on your face again. Let me leave you. Yes, leave you for good. – Jeyacīlaṉ."

"Have you read the letter? What am I to do now? Ever since I got married to him, I had never set my eyes on any man. Some magnet in you should have enticed me. That has made me falter. How many were the men who had been circling around me! How many rich men had been waiting to pour all their riches at my feet! Why all that? Even Vikramarāja Siṅghē, the king of Kaṇṭi had an eye on me. He sent emissaries. One day he personally expressed his desire for me. It was just a little short of kneeling in front of me. I made a stone of my heart. Knowing that I was as fierce as fire, he kept himself away. Marttaṉi, you are like a sister to me. My resolve made him say that you know? You have broken to pieces all my resolve like breaking the diamond to pieces with the hammer. What am I to do hereafter? The dumb that he is, where could he have gone? What would have happened to him? Perhaps he has killed himself in shame."

She cried bitterly. She cried herself out. Taṇikaimalai held her against his bosom to console her. "Don't cry. Be patient!" He gently patted her on her back.

"Even when I have lost my husband, this embrace of yours is so blissful. How I wish I knew where you have learnt this trick of mesmerizing me!" Her arms tightened as she embraced him.

"Marttaṉi. Anyhow what has happened has happened. Your husband could not have gone too far."

"If that be so, you should leave right now and fetch him back." Marttaṉi held her cheek against his and pleaded.

"You wait here. I will search through the whole of Wavunia forest and bring him back."

Taṇikaimalai prepared to leave. The dame dragged him to herself and kissed him hard.

Taṇikaimalai stared at her.

"This is the last kiss. When my husband comes back, I will never approach you. That does not mean that you are not going to find him out."

Taṇikaimalai smiled as he left the house and reached the street. The green flag was fluttering there in the façade of the house. He leapt on his horse and spurred it on.

The horse literally flew through the whole region. He was everywhere through the day. He could not find the dumb Jeyacīlaṉ. He could not answer the question where he could have gone. Everything appeared strange to him. This only confounded his confusion. The words of Kuruvicci Nācciyār kept ringing in his heart like the heavy drops of the summer rains.

Unable to find Jeyacīlaṉ anywhere, he returned home. As he dismounted his horse, he was surprised to see that the green flag was missing.

He entered the house. He expected that Marttaṉi would come running to him, having been waiting for him anxiously. He looked at the first floor of the house.

The doors were closed. He thought of taking a little rest and entered his own apartment.

He found a woman there. She stood up in haste as he entered and greeted him. She looked like a gypsy.

"You?"

"A gypsy and an augurer."

"Your name?"

"Kalā."

"Kalā? You are the Kalā that Marttaṉi mentioned?" There was surprise in his tone. When she nodded in assent, it was like a heap of diamonds glittering against a lamp.

43 The Scheming Dames

"Dumb Jeyacīlaṉ's sister?

"Yes, you seem to know everything about me."

"Mind your language. Show deference."

"I am used only to this kind of language. Don't you know how a gypsy talks?"

"Are you a gypsy by birth?"

"You don't know about my origins. There is no need too. It is enough if you know that I am Jeyacīlaṉ's sister. I will let you know something more. I am disguised as a gypsy because I am on a royal mission."

"For how many days?"

"Ever since the order of the king of Kaṇṭi."

"If that be so, you should tell me that you are from the palace of Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ."

"Has my brother Jeyacīlaṉ told you that too?"

"You know his wife Marttaṉi, don't you? She told me everything."

"Marttaṉi? Aha! She is a jewel of a woman. She is chastity *per se*. Her husband is her deity."

As Kalā sang the praise of Marttaṉi, Taṇikaimalai could only laugh within. He was the one who had made a bed of her lap. He had been in her embrace. He had embraced that lamp of a woman. She had deified him. So he could not help but laugh within.

"Did you get any information in the palace of Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ?"

"He took me for a gypsy and an augurer. I held him by his hand and told him about the future."

"You held him by his hand? He would not have contained himself."

"His whole body became hot in lust as soon he felt my fingers. Do you think that I am the one to lie down for anyone to ride? When he saw how fierce my eyes turned, he became a snake in the box."

"O, you should be a daredevil. What happened then?"

"I started reeling a story. He would become the king of Mullaittīvu soon. Then the kingdom of Kaṇṭi would lie at his feet."

"That fool believed your words?"

"You know when you predict the future as an augurer, you should eulogise the person who is listening to you. You should sound convincing when you say that the fellow is going to become the lord of the whole world. Even those who do not have much of a faith in augury and astrology would start watering in the mouth thinking of a projected future."

"Does that mean that Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ would be dribbling even now?"

"You should see to believe! His mouth is constantly watering."

"What was the purpose of your visit? What secrets did you come to know?"

"There is information that Lord North and Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ are not in good terms. I went there to find out if that was true."

"Did you find out?"

"Would I not have?"

"How?"

"When I reeled out that he would become the future lord of Mullaittīvu and that he would become the king of Kaṇṭi too, he asked me how it could become possible. He said that he did not have enough military strength for it. I spoke reassuringly. I said that Lord North would never betray the one who reposed faith in him."

"He believed those words?"

"No. Then only did he come out with the truth."

"What is the truth?"

"Lord North these days does not even turn to where Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ is. He had been to Colombo seven times and waited for an audience with Lord North. He could not meet him at all. You know what kind of a person Lord North is. As long as one is of any service to him, he is all appreciation for one. If of no use, he will get rid of him at the first chance. That is the fate of Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ now."

"Such fate is inevitable to those who demean themselves seeking selfish ends even at the expense of the interests of their roots, their race and clan."

Okay. You have started philosophizing. Listen to how smart I had been there."

"The very look of you makes me feel that you cannot go about the business of espionage."

"Why are you so suddenly suspicious of my credentials?"

"A spy shall not be explicit about his accomplishments. Everything should be confidential."

"As if I don't know! Since my brother Jeyacīlaṉ, his wife Marttaṉi, you and I are engaged in the same mission, I became a little explicit. If you think that you cannot be taken into confidence, make a clean breast of it. I will hide such of those which ought to be confidential."

"Don't be angry with me. I just tried to delve into your depths. That's all."

"I have suggested a means to Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ who was worried that his relationship with Lord North could not be straightened at all. I told him that he should sit in earnest prayer at the temple of Kaṇṇaki for three days from midnight through the dawn all by himself. Then he would derive the grace of Kaṇṇaki the goddess. Then Lord North would seek him out. That is the way out I have suggested to him."

"Okay. Let us say that he sits in penance for three days at the temple of Kaṇṇaki but does not earn the friendship of Lord North. Do you think he will retain his faith in you?"

"You should be a madcap. Why did I suggest that he went to the temple of Kaṇṇaki? That too all alone?"

"Why?"

"Ask me that! He is a known adversary to the people of Mullaittīvu. If he goes to the Kaṇṇaki temple guarded by his army, he would make good his escape. If he comes all by himself, you can behead him, can't you?"

"What?"

"That's it. That is how an adversary's end is to be worked out. Then betrayal will not cross us on our path. Don't waste time in thoughts. This is the order of the

king of Kaṇṭi. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ is to be killed first. Then the armies of Kaṇṭi and Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ can march ahead with none to stop them."

Taṇikaimalai closed his eyes in contemplation for a little while. He felt as if a few soft buds of flowers fell on his shoulders. He did not open his eyes as he tried to feel them with his fingers. The buds were but the fingers of the gypsy Kalā. There was a smile on his face. "So you are also a paragon of virtues like Marttaṉi?" he embraced her.

It is clear that they were adversaries. But then, they offer pleasure seeking him out. Why should he say no to it? Why should he not enjoy it and at the same time attend to his business? Taṇikaimalai's thoughts ran on those lines. He resolved to offer them their pleasure as they came to offer him his pleasure. That would be like removing a thorn in the flesh with another thorn. He was of course a faithful lieutenant of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ, his bodyguard and one of his spies. And yet, in this resolve, he was but an ordinary person.

"Why should you have such a great desire for a mere lieutenant in an army and wriggle out of Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ, the lord of such a great palace?"

She did not answer. Wasn't she Piyacīli? She wound herself around him. Her feminine urges needed the rough embrace of strong men like Taṇikaimalai.

Holding her in a tight embrace and held by her in a tight embrace, Taṇikaimalai said, "Kalā! What will you have?"

"I want all the pleasures of the art of love."

There was a great furore and then calmness prevailed. Kalā pretended as if she had been taken aback and said all in anxiety, "I need to meet my brother and Marttaṉi."

He sent her upstairs. He was so worked up that he needed to lie down in his own room.

Kalā and Marttaṉi embraced each other. "So, you have succeeded?" said Marttaṉi.

"Yes, Taṇikaimalai has consented to go to Kaṇṇaki temple and kill Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ." said Piyacīli in the guise of Kalā.

"Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ will be ready to kill him?" asked Marttaṉi.

"I am satisfied with all the arrangements." said Kalā.

44 Today? Or Tomorrow? Why?

Marttaṉi evinced interest and kept looking at Piyacīli. "Let me have the details. How did you make such arrangements?"

"Marttaṉi! Am I going to hold back the information? First you tell me how you made Taṉikaimalai believe the story of the dumb Jeyacīlaṉ having run away."

"Haven't we both learnt the art of enticing men? Nature has endowed our bodies with the right kind of curvatures. Over and above it, there is a constant flow of pretended love in our hearts. It bubbles forth like froth in a cup of wine. Won't it make the whole race of men fall at our feet? You are more adept than I in the art of enticing men, I say."

Piyacīli felt proud of the words of appreciation. And yet, she heaved a sigh thinking about how she had failed to entice Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ.

"I have not been able to win Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ with my beauty, my grace, my words of endearment, my lustful glances. Have I been able to kill him at least? Until either of these happens, Marttaṉi, I cannot rest in peace."

"I know you. Even if you were to kill him, you would first hold him in an embrace and have your lust appeased. Otherwise, your soul will not rest in peace even if you die as a grand old lady."

"When God has given me the privilege of the boon of enjoying a man a day, why is it Marttaṉi, that this Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ refuses to bow down?"

"What is to be done? There are such fools too. But one has to acknowledge. This Taṇikai is like a tiger that leaps across sixteen feet. If we spring eight feet, he springs the double."

"Marttaṉi, was it only sixteen feet with you? It was thirty two feet with me, I say. Should have been high and dry."

"Yes. He had been always sniffing for the enemies. He has drowned himself in lust. That was why the fool believed every word of mine when I made such a hue and cry about you having been lost. Oh my dear husband Jeyacīlaṉ! He started almost immediately to find him out. Even then I did not leave him. I whined a little and then embraced him. Just a kiss thereafter. That was all, the fellow had almost fainted."

"Let that be. He didn't tell you that he was not to be found. He did not tell me too that my brother Jeyacīlaṉ had disappeared. Why?"

"Before he could say anything, he had seen the enticing beauty of the whole world sitting in your form in his room. So he would have forgotten everything."

"Perhaps he knows who we are and is cheating us."

"You are such a treasure of experience, Piyacīli. And yet, you haven't understood the weakness of these menfolk. That is a surprise. Just fair skin is enough to make a bee in the spider's web of a man. Are we just as pink as the rose? When I see the grace of the gliding of your hip like that of the neck of the peacock, I lose my heart. Should we talk about Taṇikaimalai then? She tasted me as if he was tasting a sweet fruit. He should have tasted you like the veritable juice of the best of fruits. Be sure! Taṇikaimalai is a tamed snake now. Let that be. You said that all the arrangements are made to satisfaction. You didn't tell me how."

"I wrote that letter and went straight to Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ's palace. The palace guards did not permit me to get in. Then I sent in my father Pilimataḷāvai's ring of seal along with the letter he had written to Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ had ordered that I should meet him immediately. I went in. He was emptying a pot of liquor."

"You should have become extremely happy."

"When he saw me in the gait of a man, he was surprised. I did not want him to become suspicious. I immediately stood as Piyacīli in front of him. He shouted my name. What a voice is his! Like a bear grunting. I was also hungry, you see!"

"That is elephantine..." Marttaṉi smiled.

"Can I leave it just because it is too little?" That was her reply.

"Okay. Tell me what happened next."

"What happens usually in my life, you see. I moved closer to him and was about to sit by his side. He held me tight. I said, 'Don't leave me, lord.' One after the other, all the pots of liquor there became empty. I thought that I could attend to the business on hand later and took care of my personal business. It was not so satisfying. I felt that it was all right. I thought of what I could get from Taṇikaimalai later."

"Piyacīli, did you explain the purpose of our visit? Did he agree to comply with it?"

"He appreciated the plans of Pilimataḷāvai. He told me that he maintained secret contacts with the British Company at Colombo and that he was often dispatching information about what was happening at Mullaittīvu. There is something about Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ that I like, lassie."

"Hey, you are going back to the bedroom. Come on..."

"I am talking seriously, you see. No one is yet born to defeat him in the art of betrayal. He said that the mission of his life was to subject Mullaittīvu to the British imperialism; to help the British to imprison Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. He wants to become the trustworthy friend to Lord North. He said that it would fulfil the very purpose of his life. I just hugged him as he said this and kissed him twenty times."

"Didn't he say anything about the State of Kaṇṭi?"

"He had twenty of my kisses, didn't he? Could he keep quiet? This Kākkai is for Mullaittīvu and that vulture is for Kaṇṭi. The crow and the vulture will be the kings hereafter. He said, you know!"

"Vulture? Who is that?"

"He referred to my father Pilimataḷāvai in such a wonderful language."

"Good to hear. Proceed."

"Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ should be weakened gradually. The first target is Taṇikai. He should be eliminated. Taṇikai should be made to believe that Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ would be all alone at Kaṇṇaki temple. He should be pushed into going there. To eliminate Taṇikai at Kaṇṇaki temple. Kākkai welcomed this plan and has agreed to carry it out."

"Next?"

"You know Nalla Nācciyār, Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's sister, don't you? She has fallen in love with Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ without knowing who he really is."

"Really?"

"Yes. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ has assumed the guise of a rich merchant. He is enacting the role of Nalla Nācciyār's lover."

"That means that we can bring about enmity between Nalla Nācciyār and Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ on that score."

"Yes, we have plans for that too. If there is enmity between Nalla Nācciyār and Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ, he will lose his authority over Triṅkōmalai. We can reduce Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ to half with Nalla Nācciyār on our side. Next, we may have to eliminate Umaicci Nācciyār, Paṇṭārakaṉ's other sister at Paṉaṅkāman. Or we should make her an enemy of his. Thus we can clip the two powerful wings of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. Making him unable to fly, we can lock him up in the prisons of the British."

"Great, Piyacīli. If Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ is to reach Kaṇṇaki temple at Vaṟṟāppaḷai right today with due arrangements made, we can send Taṇikaimalai right tonight and have the business successfully clinched."

"No, we will send Taṇikai tomorrow."

"Why a day's delay?"

"I feel like spending the night with him."

"What is this Piyacīli? Is that important now? Shouldn't we attend to the business at hand?"

"Marttaṉi! We will share tonight with Taṇikai. Fifty, fifty! Right?"

Marttaṉi pretended as if she did not like the idea. But finally she gave in.

45 A Hundred Soldiers

When he woke up the next morning, Taṇikaimalai was quite exhausted. He had been intoxicated through the night with what Piyacīli and Marttaṉi had to offer him. He slept during the small hours of the night and suddenly woke up. He twisted his body and tried to chase away the pleasant laziness that had wrapped him. He tried to suppress the yawn that surged despite himself. He hurried through his bath and got ready to leave his house.

He was physically exhausted because of the night's sojourn with the women but felt a tickling of pleasure within.

If Marttaṉi offered a drink, Piyacīli offered him her lips. If this woman were to offer her lips that woman twisted her hips to entice him. When both of them ploughed each of his cheeks with their kisses, he was at the peak of his pleasure.

Marttaṉi made such a hue and cry about her dumb husband deserting her. Kalā should be wondering where he could have gone. But neither of them showed any anxiety on that score while they were tasting his manliness atom by atom. He could understand them.

They were there intent on harm, as Kuruvicci Nācciyār suspected. He did not have second thoughts on that score. Why should he be the fool to deny himself the drops of the honey of pleasure volunteered in such abundance? So he enjoyed himself down to the last drop of it. The two women were adept in every aspect of lovemaking. Thinking that he had given himself up to being cheated, they exercised their art to its best. Taṇikai pretended to be asleep and was quite awake. That night was a night of great pleasure to him indeed.

"We should thank the king of Kaṇṭi a million times. Had he not sent us here, would we ever have had such a luck as this?" Piyacīli said this as she nibbled at his neck.

"I was of course sad that my dumb husband Jeyacīlaṉ had left me. When Taṇikaimalai quenches my lust down to its last moment, I feel as if I shall spend the rest of my life with him." Marttaṉi said as she made a garland of his arms around her.

He enjoyed the sight of two demons in the form of the most beautiful of women staging their play. He enjoyed their beauty, their bodies and their art.

As he was about to leave, he wanted to see what was happening upstairs. The women upstairs heard the steps of Taṇikai on the stairs. They were awake, of course. They immediately lay down on the mats there and pretended to be fast asleep. Taṇikai stood looking at them.

They were blabbering in sleep. A dream? Perhaps even the dream was about their loyalty to the king of Kaṇṭi and Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. That was clear in their blabbering.

"No, no. I will not allow. I will not allow anything untoward happening to Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ."

"Hail the king of Kaṇṭi! Hail Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ!"

"You see for yourself! That betrayer Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ is sure to die at the temple of Kaṇṇaki"

Whether he understood that they were trying to show off their loyalty or not, Taṇikai grunted aloud. The sluts pretended as if they were waking up from deep sleep; as if unaware of their semi-nudity in rumpled dress, they spoke together expressing surprise at Taṇikai's presence and his early departure.

"Yes. I have to look for Jeyacīlaṉ. Then I have to proceed to the Kaṇṇaki temple at Varṟāppaḷai."

Marttaṉi pretended ignorance and said, "Kaṇṇaki temple? What for?"

"I told you, didn't I? You seem to have forgotten so soon. That betrayer Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ should be there for his three day penance, all by himself. We have decided to kill him there..."

Marttaṉi did not wait for Piyacīli to conclude her remark and said, "Kalā! Kalā! I remember now. Enough." She moved to Taṇikai and said, "To find out my husband can be deferred for the time being. First you should get rid of that betrayer." She sounded very harsh.

'I will come back tonight with his head. What will be my gift then?" Taṇikai prepared to leave.

Piyacīli said, "What more is to be given to you? We have given all of ourselves to you already, haven't we?"

He left. She continued. "He says that he would bring his head. This fellow will lose his own head and perhaps come back in his trunk."

They laughed at Taṇikai taking him for a fool. He for his part mounted his horse and left with the intention of making fools of those women.

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ was at his breakfast. Kuruvicci Nācciyār said to him, "Taṇikai wants to meet you. He says that it is very urgent." Meanwhile, Taṇikai entered the room.

"What is happening? You seem to have said that it is very urgent."

"Yes, I need a favour very urgently."

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ and Kuruvicci looked at each other unaware of what Taṇikai was going to ask for.

"I am not only in your espionage service. I am also your bodyguard."

"What of that now?"

"I should lead a contingent of our army for a short time."

"I don't understand..."

"It is only for a short time. Please permit me to have a hundred of our soldiers with me."

"A hundred? With you?"

"Yes."

"To confront whom? To capture which palace?"

"I have never contradicted you. But I am sorry, I am not in a position to give you any details right now. Please permit me to take a hundred soldiers with me."

"Kuruvicci! Do you hear his words? He needs soldiers. But he will not give me the details."

Perhaps Kuruvicci Nācciyār had guessed the reason behind Taṇikai's request without too much of a strain.

She could guess that he was asking for a contingent of soldiers to go about a business related to those from the king of Kaṇṭi about whom she had already warned him.

"Should we consult an astrologer to have faith in Taṇikaimalai? I feel that perhaps we can grant him his request and then ask for the reason. It should be for an important mission."

"Taṇikaimalai! Do you expect any officer of the Company to come this way? Do you want to liquidate them?"

Paṇṭārakaṉ expected an answer from Taṇikaimalai but he did not give an answer.

"Forgive me. I will not indulge in anything foolish." He was firm when he said this.

'Hey, Taṇikai! Do you of all people say that you will not indulge in anything foolish? You had been floating on the waters of lust through the night with two sluts. Was it in any way an intelligent business?'

No one said this to him. It was his own conscience that pricked him thus.

He had something to tell his conscience. "The saying is 'remove the thorn in the flesh with another thorn'. Why not say 'conquer lust with lust'?"

"I hope Nācciyār can appreciate the importance of my mission."

"You mean to say that I need not know what Nācciyār should know?"

Paṇṭārakaṉ was not angry. He looked at Kuruvicci with ridicule in his voice.

Kuruvicci Nācciyār said in a soft voice, "You also become adamant at times." She looked at Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ from the corner of her eyes and started moving away.

"That is all right. Whatever be the reason, arrange for what Taṇikaimalai has asked."

Kuruvicci Nācciyār moved away from the place summoning Taṇikaimalai with a gesture.

Though they were out of Paṇṭārakaṉ's earshot, she asked Taṇikai in a hushed voice why he needed a hundred soldiers. She was cautious lest Paṇṭārakaṉ should hear her words. With due reverence, Taṇikai said something in whispers to Kuruvicci.

46 All for the Good

As Taṇikaimalai desired, a hundred soldiers were sent with him. He took them with him and reached a dense grove. He told them what was to be done. They hid their swords beneath their dress. Within no time they became pilgrims on the way to Kaṇṇaki temple. Taṇikaimalai did not disguise himself. The soldiers were ordered to form several groups of pilgrims at random numbers. They should reach the Kaṇṇaki temple. Once all the groups had reached the temple, Taṇikaimalai was to go there. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ would be found there in penance. But he would not have come there all by himself all the way to Vaṟṟāppaḷai Kaṇṇaki temple. He would have made his soldiers hide themselves somewhere around. They would try to kill Taṇikaimalai. They are to be misled and then arresting Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ and taking him to Mullaittīvu would be such a simple job. That was the reason behind sending the soldiers of Mullaittīvu disguised as pilgrims.

Taṇikaimalai thus explained his strategy. The soldiers were sent in groups one after the other.

"Pāvai Kaṇṇaki!
Virtuous wife wreaking vengeance!
The deity of the clan of Kōvalaṉ!
Save our families!"
Such was the song from one group as they moved towards the temple.

Another group sang,

"Dear Deity!
Our divine Māri!
None like you on the earth
And even in the heaven above!
Deity of wrath!
Our Kaṇṇaki Kāḷi!
We seek your blessings!
Bestow them on us!"

The group that sang thus danced all the way and carried pots of offerings called *karakam*. Their songs were steeped in devotional fervour.

Taṇikaimalai became immensely pleased at the way his men dissembled. He waited for all the groups to leave the place. He was looking at them sitting on horseback in the shade of a huge banyan tree in the grove.

Meanwhile, Piyacīli arrived at the palace of Nalla Nācciyār at Triṅkōmalai to carry out the plan she had devised with Marttaṉi. She then appeared to be a real gypsy. Such was her disguise. She wriggled like a snake and stood in front of the palace gate. She pretended to be in a great hurry to meet Nalla Nācciyār and warn her of a certain danger. The palace guards informed Nalla Nācciyār of her anxiety and urgency. Nalla Nācciyār ordered that she be brought to her. Kalā entered the palace and stood in front of Nalla Nācciyār with more than the due respect.

"Who may you be?"

"A gypsy and an augurer."

"Wherefore did you come to meet me?"

Kalā looked around with her gnat-like eyes. Then she spoke softly, "I need to talk to you in private."

Nalla Nācciyār gestured to the soldiers and maids to move a little away.

"Gypsy! What did you say your name was?"

"Kalā. The full name is Kalāvati."

"Did anyone invite you for augury?"

"I did not come here to deliver an augury. I came here to prevent something horrible."

"Be explicit!"

"That is why I am here, ain't I?"

Kalā wiped her eyes with the hem of her saree and cried bitterly. When she cried, her breasts heaved so wildly that it was a sight that attracted the attention of even women.

"Stop crying! You said it was urgent. You also said dangerous. Then why all this hesitation?"

"It is all because I went to your lover Birmāṇantaṉ with the message of my augury."

When she heard the name of Birmāṇantaṉ, Nalla Nācciyār was shocked. She became anxious as to what might have happened to him. She was perturbed as she said, "What happened? What happened?"

"What is to happen hereafter? Something that should not happen is about to happen. I came here running all the way to prevent it by any means."

Nalla Nācciyār felt a shiver all through her. She shook her with apprehension as to what message of danger to her lover Birmāṇantaṉ the augurer had to say.

"Tell me! Is he all right?"

"He is all right right up to this moment. But what may happen in another few moments is known only to the deity Kaṇṇaki at Varṟāppaḷai."

"Woe is me! You are breaking my heart. Tell me everything."

"Madam! Do you really love Birmāṇantaṉ?"

"Don't you see how perturbed I am?"

"I can see, of course. But what is the use? Who knows how long your lover is going to be alive?"

"Don't torture me. Tell me the details."

"He had summoned me for an augury. I went there."

"Then?"

"Wait, my lady! He offered all riches and asked me to read his palm. He wanted to know if his desire would be fulfilled. I said that his very charm was enough for me. That itself would be a gift to me. I did not need any other riches as gifts. When I said this, he became furious. Hey, you gypsy! Even if Rambā and Urvaci were to descend from the heaven above, I would not touch any woman other than my Nalla Nācci. He literally shouted at me, you know."

This fanciful remark on the part of Kalā literally gave wings to Nalla Nācciyār. Her heart was all afear as to what danger might have befallen such a deity of hers.

"When Birmāṇantaṉ asked me if he could marry the lady she loved, I could only give a negative answer."

"Why? But why?"

"The lines on his palm said only that. I told him of my reading. He immediately fell on the floor unable to bear the woeful prediction. He cried saying that there could be no point in living on the earth if he could not marry his Nalla Nācciyār."

"What happened then?"

She was a lady of courage looking after the administration of Triṅkōmalai. But she could not bear with the agony of her lover. Kalā had decided to exploit her sentiments to the full.

"Marriage with Nalla Nācci is not possible in this birth. If perhaps he wanted to offset the effect of fate, he should take up a penance at Kaṇṇaki temple at Vaṟṟāppaḷai. That was what I told him. I told him that perhaps with the grace of Kaṇṇaki his love might succeed."

"Did my lover go there to take up the penance as soon as you said that?"

"It is not an ordinary penance. It is a fiery penance. Do you know what he had sworn?"

"Tell me. What was his swearing?"

"He would take up a three day penance at Kaṇṇaki temple. If you do not meet him and marry him within the three days, he will kill himself there and then."

Nalla Nācciyār shouted out uncontrollably. She shouted an order for her horse to be brought to her.

As she rushed on horseback, Kalā stood there smiling at the madness of Nalla Nācciyār.

Those in the palace surrounded Kalā. "Hey, you gypsy! What did you tell her? Where is Nalla Nācciyār going?"

"It is all for the good, I say." Kalā resumed her snake-like wriggling and left the palace.

47 Token of Marriage

Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ was seated in the hall in front of the sanctum sanctorum of Vaṟṟāppaḷai Kaṇṇaki temple with his eyes closed and hands folded in prayer. Through the slit of the closed eyes he was looking for someone entering the temple precincts. He was thus staging a drama of treachery. A party of pilgrims entered the temple and assembled in the hall singing aloud and carrying their offerings in the traditional *kāvaṭi* and *karakam*. Unaware that they were soldiers in disguise, Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ continued with his artfully deep penance. The pilgrims made their offerings to the deity through the temple priest and prostrated in front of the deity with due devotion. They looked at Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ and observed that he should be a great saint. They offered their respects to him with appropriate veneration. They went off the temple in a group. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ could not see that they were winking their eyes at each other as if acknowledging that he was their target and that he was under the impression that he was dissembling successfully but was actually deceiving himself with his dissembling. He had his eyes closed in pretended penance and was chanting.

Those pilgrims who left the hall in the temple dispersed into random groups and started eating off the food packets they had with them. Even then they continued with their devotional songs.

Hundreds of eyes were looking curiously at the groups of the pilgrims from the bushes a little way away from the temple as they ate and enjoyed themselves as typical pilgrims did. Those who were thus looking at them were the soldiers of Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ. Their lieutenant sat on a rock hidden behind a bush with a spear

on hand. He said to his soldiers, "These are idlers. They have come to offer their prayers to the deity. They will leave as soon as they have completed eating their food. We will however be wary." The soldiers listened to them and shook their faces like sheep.

Even as they were keeping watch, a horse was heard walking towards the temple. It was not only the soldiers but also the pilgrims around that looked curiously at Taṇikaimalai who dismounted the horse. The temple priest had just then came off the temple precincts and was surprised to see him. Taṇikai said to him, "There will be a storm here in a little while. It is better that you go away." No sooner did he say that than the temple priest left the place in a great hurry.

Taṇikaimalai looked at his soldiers disguised as pilgrims with fiery eyes. "Why are you crowding round here? Go away, I say!" As he shouted, the pilgrims pretended to have become frightened and moved close to the bushes behind which Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ's soldiers had hid themselves.

"Who is this fellow? He chases us away as if we are pests. Why should he make such a furore when we have come all the way here to worship our deity?"

The soldiers of Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ heard the remarks of the simpleton pilgrims. The pilgrims were intentionally loud enough to make them hear what they were saying.

Taṇikai removed his footwear in front of the temple and entered the temple precincts. The hall was empty and therefore silent. So Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ opened his eyes a little to see who was coming. He had heard the footfall of Taṇikai. He ensured to himself that it was Taṇikai.

"Hey, what is this? Has Kākkai taken up ardent penance in the presence of the deity of Kaṇṇaki?" Taṇikai ridiculed Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ.

There was no answer from Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ.

"Don't you hear me? Why is there no answer from you?" Taṇikai patted Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ gently on his shoulder.

Suddenly six soldiers jumped off the rooftop. Taṇikai's soldiers as pilgrims had not noticed them who lay stuck to the rooftop.

The soldiers who jumped into the hall threw an iron chain around Taṇikai and bound him fast.

"Hey, Taṇikaimalai! How is the answer to your question? How is your master, that arrogant Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ? Tell him that his tricks cannot pass any more. O, you can carry my message only if you can go back to him. How is my trick now? I had decided to defeat your daredevilry with my connivance. You are going to see the first phase of it." He slapped softly on his cheeks. He laughed aloud and shouted orders at his soldiers.

"Take him to the flag post of the temple. Bind him there to it. Not only his body but also his mouth should be bound fast. Nalla Nācciyār will be here in a little while. We will get married and then standing as man and wife in front of this fellow, I will take his head as my wedding gift."

The soldiers dragged Taṇikai along and left the temple. The pilgrims were shocked. Taṇikaimalai gestured to them to keep quiet. So they remained aloof. The soldiers behind them in the bushes shouted out their happiness at the success of the first phase of their plan. Their lieutenant ordered them to keep order.

There was the sound of a horse's hooves again. Unlike the other horse, it arrived at the temple yard in full gallop. Nalla Nācciyār jumped off the horseback and did not bother to look around. She ran into the temple with the only thought of meeting her lover Birmāṉantaṉ. She was anxious that he should be alive when she laid her eyes on him. She staggered into the temple shouting aloud and found Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ sitting in deep meditation.

"Oh my dear! What is this? What are you doing? Please look at me. It is your Nalla Nācciyār. I have come, I say." She shook him by his thigh as he sat cross-legged and cried bitterly.

"Who do I see here? Nalla Nācci! My dear parrot! My nectar! My life! My gold! Is it you? Is it really you? Have you come to me?"

Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ was at his best in dissembling.

"Yes. Your Nalla Nācciyār. It is good that the gypsy came to me. Otherwise, I would have lost my deity."

"Darling! I have to decide upon this because you have not sent any definite information about our marriage in spite of the fact that you are well aware that there is no place for anyone other than you in this heart of Birmāṉantaṉ which you know full well."

"Don't you know about my brother? He has his own problems. His own difficulties. So I could not talk to him firmly. My sister also advised me that I should lie low for a little time. She hoped to obtain our brother's consent. That was why I did not send you any definite message. Should you take such a decision as this just because of that?"

"Nalla Nācci! Even now I am not going to give up my decision. We should get married in private right in front of the deity of this temple of Kaṇṇaki. You and I should prostrate as man and wife in front of this deity. If you were to talk about your brother and make me anxious again, I am ready to lay down my life right here and now."

His declaration was emotional and then he stared at the deity as he shouted, "Mother! Kaṇṇaki! Birmāṉantaṉ who loved Nalla Nācci will lie a corpse at your feet. Accept me!"

He held a knife aloft. Unaware that he was pretending, Nalla Nācci sprang on him and snatched the knife away from him.

"Let me die! Do I deserve a life in a world without you?" He cried. The tears that rolled down his cheeks supported his wonderful dissembling.

Nalla Nācciyār wiped away the tears with her beautiful fingers and said, "Don't you understand that I too feel so? I am ready right now. Let us exchange our wedding rings."

No sooner did she say this than he sprang up to the ceiling of the temple and held her aloft.

"Hush! It is the temple of the deity." She warned him in an endearing voice. He freed her from his hug.

They exchanged wedding rings then and there.

They offered their worship to the deity of Kaṇṇaki. They came out happily, arm in arm. Taṇikaimalai who was bound to the flag post looked at them with fire in his eyes.

"Look over there! A fool came here to confront me. Lies he there, beaten to the bones." Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ pointed at the flag post in his guise as Birmāṉantaṉ, Nalla Nācciyār's lover.

48 Unmasked

Before he could complete his statement, the pilgrims by the side of the bushes became soldiers as they sprang in action and stood around it. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ was taken aback at the momentary change of scene. He understood that it would be dangerous if the soldiers of Mullaittīvu started the action first. He shouted aloud making gestures to his soldiers behind the bushes. The next moment they came out of hiding and surrounded the soldiers of Mullaittīvu. There was the noise of swords against swords. There was the flash of flying spears. Heads rolled on the ground. Struck bodies drenched the soil with blood. Nalla Nācciyār could not make out anything of the furore. She was wondering at what was happening. She had come there to save Birmāṇantaṉ's life. And she saw two groups of soldiers pitted against each other. One of the groups consisted of soldiers from Mullaittīvu. She could not understand who could be the other soldiers. Before she could find an answer to the question, Birmāṇantaṉ said, "Don't you understand? They are Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's soldiers. The others are the soldiers of Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ."

Meanwhile, Nalla Nācciyār suspected foul play. She ran towards Taṇikaimalai bound to the flag post. But Ḳākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ held her back.

"Taṇikaimalai is in the services of Mullaittīvu. Why is he bound and retained here? What is happening here? I don't understand anything." She said this in a loud voice. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ prepared himself to delude her further. "Aha! Is he one of Mullaittīvu? I did not know. When I was in penance in front of the deity of Kaṇṇaki in the temple, this fellow came and disturbed me with his pranks. I ordered that he be bound to the flag post."

"You are a trader. How are you related to this skirmish?" that was her question to him in the midst of the noises of the skirmish around.

"I too don't understand anything. I came here to give up my life in penance for the sake of our love. But everything is strange here. Why should he disturb me?

Why should I ask him to be bound? Why should the soldiers of Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ and Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ clash against each other here?"

"We will look into it later. But do tell me. You made a gesture and immediately Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ's soldiers came rushing from behind the bushes. I don't understand why it should be so."

"Oh! You don't understand? Two rival factions are clashing with each other. Why should we get caught in the melee? It was this thought that made me beckon my horse from behind the bushes. I wanted to leave this place with you. Meanwhile, this place has become a battleground. How can my horse reach me? Look there, that is your horse. Let us leave this place." He dragged Nalla Nācciyār with him as he ran towards her horse.

Meanwhile, the clash around the flag post and at the front yard of the temple had reached its climax. Many of Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ's soldiers fell on the ground unable to face the brave attack of the soldiers of Mullaittīvu. A few of them made good their escape. Taṇikaimalai had also been freed meanwhile and he was also fighting fiercely. He hacked the arms and legs of the enemies like shaking trees and making ripe fruits fall off the branches.

He had one eye on the battlefield and another eye on Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ. He watched Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ moving away from the scene with Nalla Nācciyār. He killed the rival lieutenant and kicked his lifeless body away. Then he leapt on his horse with the blood smeared sword of his.

Meanwhile, Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ and Nalla Nācciyār had started moving. Only Nalla Nācci could ride her horse, you see. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ sat behind her as she steered her horse. He was still Birmāṇantaṉ to her.

And yet she had a lingering suspicion. Her lover Birmāṇantaṉ was a trader. Why should he get caught in the melee? Why should he order Taṇikaimalai be bound to the flag post? She rode fast with no answer to her questions.

"My darling, where are you going?"

"Tell me where to go, dear."

"Let us go to my palace."

"How far is it?"

"I will show you the way. You just keep to it." He directed her to turn right and left as they rode pretty fast.

Having gone a long way, they could hear a horse following them. Nalla Nācciyār carefully steered her horse and turned back to see who was following her. She was shocked and stopped her horse immediately.

"That is Taṇikaimalai following us. I know him."

"Whoever it is, let us not stop. Let your horse gallop." He shouted in his impatience.

"Let us wait and ask him why he is following us. Taṇikaimalai will not offend you in any way unmindful of my presence. I can even make you two reconcile to each other."

"Whatever you intend to do, let it not be on the road. Let us first reach my palace. If he follows us to my palace, we can talk to him there." Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ was afraid that he would be unmasked as Birmāṇantaṉ. He wanted to take Nalla Nācciyār into his palace and violate her honour. He wanted to have his desire for her appeased. Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ should writhe in agony coming to know that his sister had gone to Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ and had become his wife. He should bow his head in disgrace. With this thought in his mind, he asked Nalla Nācciyār to ride the horse faster still.

Nalla Nācciyār could not deny him his place in her heart despite all her surmises and confusion at the prevalent situation. Her only question was what animosity could he as a great trader have with Taṇikaimalai. Even as the horse was galloping like an arrow, she asked him, "Do you think that the battle in front of Kaṇṇaki temple would have ended? Would Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ's soldiers have been defeated?"

"Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ or Kaḻuku Vaṉṉiyaṉ... who is bothered? No army can face Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. Let us go fast with nothing to fear." He stuck on to her with his face on her back.

Both the horses continued galloping fast raising dust into the air.

Suddenly a noise was heard. Taṇikaimalai's horse slipped off a rock and fell headlong. Nalla Nācciyār stopped her horse immediately. Taṇikai's horse could not get up. He tried to steady himself as he stood up and staggered.

"Woe is he! Let us turn back and see how we can help him." said Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ. Nalla Nācciyār appreciated her lover in that despite his animosity, he was filled with sympathy and humanism. She turned back to the place where Taṇikaimalai had fallen. Before she could jump off her horse, Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ was on the ground. Not only had he jumped off the horse but also had stabbed Tanikaimalai with a knife.

Nalla Nācciyār rushed to stop him but failed. She supported Taṇikai and said, "Taṇikai! What is all this?"

"This is valour, Madam! But I do not understand wherefore had you joined hands with Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ." Taṇikaimalai said this trying to stop the blood from the wound on his chest.

"Did you say Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ? Where is he?" She was shocked.

"Lo! It is this traitor." He could only point out Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ before he died.

Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ tried to console Nalla Nācciyār who cried bitterly at Taṇikai who had died right under her nose.

"That fellow is blabbering. He says that I am Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ. What a thing to say! Perhaps death has deluded him. Don't trust his words."

"The one who pretended to help but killed the other person should be a person without any humanism. That beast should be only Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ."

"It is loving Birmāṉantaṉ standing in front of you. Your husband with the deity Kaṇṇaki for witness."

"Husband or a hooligan?"

"The lover who wants to take care of you like the eyelid the eye."

"Enough of it. It is enough that I have been deluded so far." She removed the wedding ring and threw it at his face.

"I am Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ of course. But I am your husband. I will not allow you to get rid of me without tasting you to the full." He seized her by her arm and pulled her towards himself.

Nalla Nācciyār became furious as she pushed him away.

49 Surrounded by Foes

Nalla Nācciyār could recall the lines of verse that her brother had written that day for her. He had crumbled like a temple tower struck by lightning, having realized that it was not the trader Birmāṉantaṉ but only Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ that his sister had fallen in love with. She had only been undoing herself. Woe is me, I could still recall how my loving brother was broken at heart and left the place when I showed him the portrait of my lover. I understand only now how I had hurt him. It is the pangs of my brother at how his sister has rushed into supporting the hands of a traitor to the race and the nation that expressed itself in the lines of verse that he wrote that day.

He said then, "Didn't you show me a portrait? See, I have a painting for you. Read it. This is the painting of my life. Let me go." He gave her that verse and left for Kaṇṭi. Of course, it hurt her like a drop of melting wax falling on her heart. But her blind love for Birmāṉantaṉ had kept her eyes closed and sealed.

She could now hear from her heart those lines of verse:
He who has made a struggle of his life
Sees the flash of lightning in the dark sky
And becomes happy.
Twinned with the lightning
A thunder crashes on his head;
Yet he survives
And lives, feeding on embers.

Those who profess to lay their lives for him
And be with him for ever,
Stay together only to dig a pit to bury him.
Those who were born of the same womb
Have turned into a congenital disease.
Who will bestow on me a heart
Strong enough to face all these?
Even if millions of eagles strive,
They cannot make a hole in the sky.
Even if millions of aliens strive
To demean the honour of the Tamiḻs
Fail will they?

She felt as if Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ had been uttering these words aloud and unmistakably from within her heart.

"Woe is me! How have I betrayed him! No woman can sin as I have sinned. Am I a Tamiḻ woman of Iḻam? Oh, no, no, no! I have lost my dignity and claim for the name. You are vile enough to sell yourself with the least sense of shame for money and wealth. I should pluck my eyes and make a feast of them to the eagles for having loved you. Let the hammers keep blowing on my heart. It is not only my brother that I have betrayed. It is not only the honour of my nation that I have violated. I have brought the greatest ignominy to the holy land of Lanka and the race of Tamiḻs of Iḻam."

She shook herself free from Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ's hold and stood confronting him with the lava of anger flowing through her.

"Hey you! What is so big about your claims in the name of Tamiḻ race and all that? Am I not also a Tamiḻ? Am I a Sinhalese? Or am I British?" Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ had a smile of derision as he said this.

"Yes, you are a Tamiḻ, of course. By race, by language and by blood, you are, of course, a Tamiḻ. But you are a Tamiḻ with no sense of honour. You are a Tamiḻ who worship the feet of others for the sake of money. You are a Tamiḻ who pledge your honour for the sake of office." Nalla Nācci burst out in anger. But he was thick-skinned enough not to be provoked. He could not be provoked, of course. Those ignoble who consider their only objectives in life are comforts, chances, a life of ease and an unending pleasure, take the night soil for fragrant flowers. They are pigs. Are they going to feel ashamed when the others keep away from their ugliness? So did Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ pay no heed to her harsh words and he tried to accost her.

"You speak in terms of Tamiḻ, the race of Tamiḻs, and a Tamiḻ woman. Now answer me. After having become my wife with the deity of Kaṇṇaki as a witness, you call your husband a shameless traitor, a fellow of treachery. Is this vilifying a reflection of the culture of the Tamiḻs?"

"You have been quoting Tamiḻ culture only to make the womenfolk feel helpless. A wife is bound to reform her husband if he is wallowing in immorality. I am least bothered about your personal morality. But you are vitiating everybody around. You are vitiating the very sentiment of the Tamiḻs. You are a traitor to the race. You are a cunning fox. You are a python opening your jaws wide in desire for position of power. Worse than the worst of slaves, you are making a pleasant sojourn of your life prostituting your dignity with the ignoble. You say I am your wife. How I wish I could die rather than hear those words! But this life is not to be wasted. This soul of mine will sit enthroned in heaven when I die after killing a fellow like you with your betrayal of the race to the foes."

"Why do you blabber, Nalla Nācci? Have you forgotten those romantic moments we had spent beside the waterfall, in the shade of the banyan tree, in the stream of glassy water, atop the rocks? Have you decided to forget the vows of love we have uttered to each other? Do you think that those pleasant moments of holding hands and swearing are but figments of fancy?"

"They are not idle dreams, nor are they fanciful. It is the story of a woman who in a hurry had stepped into flaming fire taking it for a pool of pure water. Her story will not end without an achievement. Should not end thus. Now, take your sword!"

She drew her sword and lifted it above his head. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ understood that she could not be stopped with words and drew his sword. There was a fierce fight between them. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ could not withstand the onslaught of Nalla Nācciyār. He fell down several times but managed to stand up. He staggered. He struggled in vain. The two swords flashed like lightning. At one point of time, they held each other's swords and stared at each other. Four eyes stared into each other. Kākkai 's eyes were pleading. Her eyes outshone his.

"Nalla Nācci! If a wife were to kill her husband, she would be condemned to hell."

"It is not my husband. It is not even the hooded snake around the neck of Lord Civā. I am going to kill a venomous snake intent on betraying the nation."

"Will you not reconsider?"

"If I have another birth, I will reconsider then. I will reconsider the ways and means of not being deluded by such a treacherous fellow. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ! It is too late now. I cannot let you live."

The swords that held each other for a little while tore the air once again like streaks of lightning. Having resolved to kill him and not to let him live any the more, she sprang upon him like a lioness springing on a bison. She was more than a storm, a whirlwind and a tempest. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ could no more stand her attack and started running away. Nalla Nācci did not leave him. She chased him.

Before they could have run longer, they heard the hooves of a few horses approaching them. They saw soldiers on horseback. Taking them for Mullaittīvu soldiers, Nalla Nācci greeted them with her sword held up.

Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ was scared terribly. He concluded that he could not escape and stood still. Nalla Nācci ran towards him with her sword poised to kill him. She was more confident in that she had the support of the Mullaittīvu soldiers.

Finding no means of escape, Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ fell at her feet and appealed for mercy. Nalla Nācciyār had no sympathy for him. But she did not like the idea of stabbing him on his back.

"You the scoundrel! Get up. You have to die. Let me make a concession for you at the time of your death. Hold my sword on your chest and die. Let that be a redemption to your otherwise treacherous life. Get up, I say, get up!"

She shouted in all her anger. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ just lifted his head even as he lay on the ground. He felt a surge of hope immediately. He could see that the approaching soldiers were not of Mullaittīvu but his own soldiers. They were running for their life from the soldiers of Mullaittīvu at the Kaṇṇaki temple.

He bided his time as he lay at her feet hoping that Nalla Nācci would not kill him.

The soldiers reached them as he expected. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ sprang to his feet, took his sword and attacked Nalla Nācciyār.

Nalla Nācciyār was shocked to see that she was surrounded by foes.

50 Paṇṭārakaṉ in Āgony

"You have arrived at the right time, my soldiers. Though you have to run for your life from the soldiers of Mullaittīvu, you have now a chance to show your valour. Don't lose the chance. Look at her. She is a deerling with the toenails of the tiger. She is a bunny with the teeth of the lion. I could not stop her all by myself. Now she is a dove surrounded by the eagles. She is a sparrow surrounded by the falcons. But one thing. It is very important. Don't kill her. Just close her in as you close in a hen with a basket. Bring her to the palace. A grand wedding awaits there. Her brother Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ should wriggle in agony as he comes to know of it. She has to die ultimately and that is for sure. But before that I would enjoy her to the core."

Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ was hilarious. He was like a snake that had managed to survive an attack. His soldiers surrounded Nalla Nācci with drawn swords. Nalla Nācciyār was ready to face them. She wielded her sword to teach those wolves the lesson of their life. She fought making one feel that the flashing of her sword outdid the flashing of lightning streaks across the sky. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ stood away, tired as he was. A few of the soldiers who tried to approach her were killed. The arm of one of them fell severed even as the sword was held. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ urged his soldiers to overpower her. He shouted at them. "If you are to be defeated by a woman of all, I will behead you. You can as well die at her hands." The soldiers persisted, encouraged by their numerical strength. As she found her way through the soldiers like a tigress among wolves, concerted attack rendered her lose her sword. It fell down in two broken pieces. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ took those pieces and

laughed in all arrogance and anger. Meanwhile, Nalla Nācciyār was caught in a ring of soldiers around her.

"None should lay his hand on her. She is my love. My property. She is a pot of nectar created by God for my sake. Bring that golden parrot with all due royal respect to my palace. Ensure that she does not make good her escape. The palace of Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ would become festive today, for sure."

The soldiers stood in a ring around Nalla Nācciyār and led her to the palace.

There had been only flame in her eyes so far and now there were tears too. Yet she walked with the grandeur of a heroine. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ had two soldiers ahead and two soldiers behind him with drawn swords as he walked with a smile on his face and in a steady gait.

The dove was locked in the palace of Ḳākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ. All the doors had been barred. The security was tight. Nalla Nācci was in a marble paved bedroom. Her arms were bound behind. No one else was there in the room. There was just a taper to chase the darkness away. It appeared to be crying in a flame. She was looking around for something or the other to be wielded as a weapon.

What if she could even find one? With her bound hands, how could she wield anything? She bided her time, prepared for any eventuality. She was determined that she would not allow the hands of any man to touch her as long as she was alive. She was walking up and down the room.

At the same time, Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ was walking restlessly across a hall in his palace at Mullaittīvu. He looked at Marttaṉi who stood in front of him and asked her if what she had told him was true.

'Yes, my lord! God knows that I am telling the truth. Nalla Nācciyār vowed that she would marry Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ if at all she got married to anyone. Ūmaicci Nācciyār who heard her words said that there was no need for any anxiety. She could go and meet Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ right away. When Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ, their brother, received information about their marriage, he could do nothing thereafter. It was Ūmaicci Nācciyār at Paṉaṅkāmam who thus encouraged Nalla Nācciyār. I hesitated to inform you of it when I came to know of it. I asked Taṇikai to keep you informed since he is your trusted spy. But that scoundrel took me to Varṟāppaḷai Kaṇṇaki temple and tried to rape me. He fought with Jeyacīlaṉ, my virtuous husband who interceded. Jeyacīlaṉ had killed Taṇikai and ran away, afraid of your wrath. The king of Kaṇṭi sent us to be of service to you. I for myself have lost my husband. I am not worried about it now. My husband will definitely come back to me any day. God will bring him back to me. But what I am worried about is how your sisters have turned against you, much against what I have expected of them."

When Marttaṉi had deposed in such clear terms, Paṇṭārakaṉ could wait no more.

"Nalla Nācciyār has been cheated. The other sister has helped her. There is a traitor who has challenged my honour. My sisters are on their side. Kuruvicci! What will your counsel be? What am I supposed to do?"

"First, we have to think patiently." said Kuruvicci, "Marttaṉi! Stay away for a little while."

Marttaṉi bowed to them both and left the hall. Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ was all ears to listen to Kuruvicci Nācciyār.

"It is an old saying, of course. But please listen."

"What is that?"

"What the eyes see is false. What the ears hear is also false. Truth is what is known after due enquiry."

"Be more specific."

"Do you believe that Taṇikaimalai would have coerced her?"

"I know about him. He is a little weak when it comes to women."

"Maybe. But you should not refute what I have to tell you. It is untrue to say that this Marttaṉi can be had only on coercion. She is a dissembler. Virtue is a commodity for her. She is a vulgar woman who distributes her beauty to any and sundry."

"Would the king of Kaṇṭi have sent such a slut to me?"

"I don't believe that she has come here as ordered by the king of Kaṇṭi. I don't believe that the dumb fellow who professed to be her husband is a man at all."

"Why do you say so? How can you be so sure?"

"I thought that you might not believe if I told you of all these at the beginning. I confided in Taṇikaimalai and asked him to be wary. I came to know from Taṇikaimalai that your sister was to go to Kaṇṇaki temple taking Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ for Birmāṉantaṉ. I also came to know that they had a plan to send Taṇikaimalai all by himself to the temple and have him killed there. Knowing that you would become furious towards Nalla Nācciyār if you were to come to know of this, I recommended that a hundred soldiers be sent with Taṇikaimalai. It is this Marttaṉi and Piyacīli in the guise of the dumb fellow that had devised all these plots."

"What? Piyacīli? She is dead, you know! Didn't you read the letter from the king of Kaṇṭi?"

"It has not been written by the king of Kaṇṭi. It is a letter that these traitors have devised. It is Pilimataḷāvai the minister at Kaṇṭi who had sent these women here."

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ was shocked. He turned to Kuruvicci Nācciyār and looked like the one who had stepped on fire.

"Why didn't you tell me of all these?"

"Because I did not like the idea of the relationship between you and your sisters be vitiated in any way. I tried to manage affairs at my own level. But now it is beyond my limits."

When Kuruvicci was saying this, someone was heard running away from the palace. Both of them rushed to see who it was. Marttaṉi was running away in haste and fear. Kuruvicci Nācciyār was not the one to allow that. She took a knife from her hip and threw it at the ankle of Marttaṉi. The next moment Marttaṉi fell on the ground and rolled several times.

51 Where is that Gypsy?

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ went on with his questions. "You said that my friend King Kaṇṇuccāmy sent you. Is it not a fabrication? Why don't you speak? Speak it out. If you were honest, why did you overhear what we were talking? Did you run away in fear that the truth was out?"

Marttaṉi might perhaps have thought that she could remain silent and have her way. So she lay on the bed with her bandaged ankle. She had a blank look on her face.

Kuruvicci Nācciyār could not contain her anger. She shook her shoulders and said, "Hey you! What drama is this? If you don't come out with the truth right now, the knife aimed at your ankle will tear through your neck. Speak out. Who are you and your dumb husband Jeyacīlaṉ? Can you swear that you have been sent by the king of Kaṇṭi?"

Marttaṉi was scared at the knife pointed at her neck and said, "Woe is me! Don't kill me please."

"Then tell the truth. Are you in truth the spies sent by the king of Kaṇṭi to be of service to the king of Mullaittivu?"

Kuruvicci took her knife close to her neck.

"That is the truth. I swear. We were sent from Kaṇṭi."

Kuruvicci laughed in anger at her answer.

"You were sent from Kaṇṭi, I agree. But who sent you? Was it the king of Kaṇṭi?"

"Yes." Marttaṉi shook her head.

"Don't lie!" Kuruvicci had her knife poised to stab her.

Meanwhile, Paṇṭārakaṉ held Kuruvicci's arm.

"It is Pilimataḷāvai who had sent us." Marttaṉi came out with the truth when she found no other way to keep herself alive. But Kuruvicci was not to give up so easily.

"If so, where is that Jeyacīlaṉ who came with you? Is he really dumb?"

"Yes, he is dumb. I don't know where he has gone."

"Don't tell lies again. He is not your husband at all. For that matter, Jeyacīlaṉ is the name you have invented for the treacherous plot you have devised."

"No, no, no! Believe me. It is true that Pilimataḷāvai has sent me and my husband here. My husband's name is Jeyacīlaṉ. In the name of God, this is the truth."

"Do you know Pilimataḷāvai's daughter, Piyacīli?"

"I know her. She is dead."

"Is it the soul of the dead that has transmigrated to the body of Jeyacīlaṉ?"

"Madam! I don't understand what you say."

"You cannot understand, of course. Aren't you the sluts who had wrongly calculated that the cats that you are, you can destroy this cave of the tiger? You will not understand. Pilimataḷāvai who has sent you also will not understand. You will not understand that you are stepping on the tail of the tiger wide awake. Let me tell you. The soul of the dead Piyacīli has entered the body of Jeyacīlaṉ. Then the soul entered a gypsy and an augurer. What do you say? Is it correct?"

"I don't understand anything. Soul entering the body? A gypsy? All is quite strange, I say."

Marttaṉi pretended as if she was at the height of surprise.

"Hey, you slut! Didn't you tempt Taṇikaimalai with your charms knowing his weakness for what it is? Then didn't you complain that your honourable husband had deserted you because of your indulgence with him? The Jeyacīlaṉ who is said to have run away then changed into a gypsy and embraced Taṇikaimalai, didn't she?"

Marttaṉi was shocked and could not speak. Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ in his surprise said, "You have held back all these details from me. How did you come to know that treachery had arrived in their form? You say Piyacīli and then you say Jeyacīlaṉ. You also say a gypsy. I could believe nothing. Who gave you all the information?"

"I came to know of everything from that gypsy."

"Really?"

"Yes. I could not recognize her when she was in the masculine attire. When she came as an augurer, I could recognize her. I felt for sure that it should be Piyacīli."

"I can't believe, Kuruvicci."

"I know that you will not believe. That is why I have put her in the cage."

"My goodness! What is this? You go on adding one after the other."

Kuruvicci smiled and said, "Men are valiant. But women are not only valiant but also wise."

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ looked at her with a sense of amused appreciation.

"Okay, okay! Where is that gypsy?"

"Why do you say gypsy? Say, Piyacīli. Come along with me. I have imprisoned her in a room in our palace. I had to treat her a little rough to bring out the truth."

Kuruvicci who had thus given the details to Paṇṭārakaṉ said, "Don't you have faith in my words yet? Shall I tell you all that the gypsy had told me? Piyacīli prepared the letter on a blank sheet on which she had obtained his signature. It was that letter that was given to us. Everything had happened as arranged by Pilimataḷāvai. Piyacīli became Jeyacīlaṉ. She made this Marttaṉi pretend to be the wife. Their first success was to make a prey of Taṇikaimalai to their charms. Since I had warned Taṇikaimalai, he was a little careful. We were able to defeat them in their own game. Come along with me. I will make that gypsy Piyacīli tell you everything."

She called the guards and ordered them to ensure that Marttaṉi did not escape from there. She left the place as Paṇṭārakaṉ accompanied her.

There were four guards on duty with spears on hand in a room at the rear of the palace. Paṇṭārakaṉ and Kuruvicci reached the place. Kuruvicci ordered the doors to be opened. They entered the room. The guards followed them. Kuruvicci was shocked. The gypsy she had imprisoned, Piyacīli, was not there. There was just a taper alight.

"Where is she?" she shouted. The guards had no answer.

"O, you have been cheated." She was terribly anxious. Just then a soldier came running to Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ.

Before Paṇṭārakaṉ could ask what the matter was, he said, "Your majesty! Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ has killed Taṇikaimalai. Besides, it is said that he has taken Nalla

Nācciyār to his palace. Arrangements for marriage are on over there." Paṇṭārakaṉ shouted in anger and drew his sword. It was like the roar of a lion that tore through the forest.

52 The Passion of a Lady

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's army with hundreds of soldiers started moving. Mounted on their horses with their drawn swords held up, Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ and Kuruvicci who was a wave touching the shoreline of his loving heart, led the army with fiery eyes that shone like embers. Kuruvicci spoke and her voice was charged with emotion. "Straight to Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ's palace?"

"No. We will first go to Varṟāppaḷai Kaṇṇaki temple. We will see what has happened to Taṇikaimalai there. Then we will attack Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ's palace." Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ roared.

Nalla Nācci was pacing up and down the marble-studded bedroom in the palace of Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ. Her arms were bound. The bedroom had the décor of a stage set for the dance of the god and goddess of love. She heard the door creak. She stopped and turned to look at the door. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ entered the room clad in glittering silk. He had worn jewels of precious stones. He had sprayed perfumes of all kinds lavishly.

"Hello dear! Do you feel comfortable? Did you have fruits to eat? Did you have your milk to drink?"

There was no answer from that parrot to the question from the crow, Kākkai.

"Oh, you are waiting for me to join you? That is also right in a way. You should offer me lobes of fruits. Aha! It will be wonderful indeed to feel your fingers on my lips. You would not have enjoyed such pleasures. This bedroom should have been blessed indeed. Having become the bedroom of Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ, this bedroom

has the fortune of witnessing the artistry of sex, the beauty of nakedness, the moaning of pleasure in lust. It is used to all these. Do you know the sugar candy of Kaṇṭi, Piyacīli? Pilimataḷāvai's wonderful daughter! The throne queen of the king of Kaṇṭi. How that body of hers wriggled in my embrace! Wow! I cannot describe in words the pleasure I had with her. I can only demonstrate it with this dear parrot. One can take three hundred births to appreciate the beauty of Piyacīli's face. She had two lobes of the sweet jackfruit for lips. Aha, the beauty of her neck! Just a look at it will inspire the desire to role with her on the bed. One has to wonder if she has for breasts two heaps of salt in the salt fields. Her hip is like the middle of the snake in its wriggling. But she will not hiss in provocation as you do. She is a youthful sparrow who will drink the juice of romance to the lees from any and sundry. I spoke only about her body so far. But on the stage of lust, she is an eagle in swallowing throatful of the pieces of prey that men feed her with. She refused to leave me claiming that I had been the first to satisfy her to the full. It was quite a struggle to get rid of her. Do you know why? Do you know for what? You may be irritated by all that I say describing the beauty of someone from head to toe in your presence. She deserves all my appreciation of her beauty. When comparing her beauty with yours, you look like a distant moon. She was the star on my lap. Your beauty is that of the expanse of the sky. She is the lotus in the pond. This bedroom has witnessed with delight all the lovemaking between us. Do you know how frenzied in delight this room will become when I make love to you?"

Nalla Nācciyār thought that Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ had learnt a special language exclusively for the bedroom. She said in anger, "Don't you feel ashamed to talk like this?"

"If you were to enter this room, you should leave your sense of shame back at the corridor. You have to get rid of bashfulness. Only when completing the mission in the room should they come back to any woman who spends her time with me here. Her bashfulness could return only then like a stone thrown up into the sky. There is a man and there is a woman. Wherefore should bashfulness come into a place where there is no one else? See! The sky has a misty light before dawn. Then the light appears like a cloud of smoke. Then light. Thereafter bright light. Then the scorching sun. You are going to feel all those stages now. You can see that for yourself." He pulled the dress on her breasts softly with his rough arm.

Nalla Nācci did not like the idea of going naked in her bound condition. There are women waiting for men to remove their dress. Since Nalla Nācciyār was not one of them, she decided upon something on the spur of the moment. One could not guess where she had dumped all her anguish. One could not know how she was able to make soft flowers of her eyes that were flaming forth. Her lips appeared

like the embers in the smithy till then. One could not know how she drew them aside like the curtain on the stage to reveal her pearly eyes.

The ball of fire became a heap of flowers floating on the water. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ hailed himself within, congratulating himself on his success with her.

She spoke then. There was no harshness. Instead there was sweetness.

"If you really desire to make me yours, why should you have deceived me in the name of a trader? You could have met my brother and asked my hand in marriage. You could have married me. You could have become my brother's brother-in-law. After that, do you think the whole world, leave alone the British, can ever win over you? Why did you nurture animosity when there was a way for nurturing relationship?"

"What do you mean Nalla Nācci?"

"How else could I tell you that I was longing for you as you were longing for me?"

"Oh, is it you talking like this? I saw the fierceness of the mother bird trying to save its youngling from the eagle. You were the hen that did not want to lose your chastity. That made you rumble like the thunder of the summer rains. Now it is as if a koel has come to sit in your throat and sing its songs. What a change is this?"

"There is no change as such. I did not like the means you adapted to marry me. That made me hate you. I looked at you as my foe."

"But now...?"

"There is no other way. I have decided to live with the one that my heart has sought."

"You mean it?"

"Yes, my lord! It is not a great thing to marry someone else giving you up. But then, I would have lost my chastity, you see!"

"So what?"

"Instead of forgoing my chastity without consent, it would be better that you and I live as man and wife to save my chastity, you see!"

"That means that you may have to incur the enmity of your brother Paṇṭārakaṉ."

"Affectionate brother that he is, he would show enmity for a few days. Then he would forgive us of his own accord. It is all right even if he does not forgive us. I don't need any political authority for myself. It is enough if I have my little space in the kingdom of your heart."

"I am the one who had rented out my heart to ever so many women, you see!"

"I will not be one among them. I will not vacate my place in the heart. You can dance with as many Ūrvasis or Rambās or sing with them. I will be the Rātā who loved Kriṣṇā who was the darling of thousands of Gopis."

"That is my golden lass! I did not know that there was such a huge pile of pearls of pleasure in your heart." Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ tried to embrace her. She sulked, smiling.

"Um... your arms embrace me. Should my arms keep longing for embracing you, bound as they are?"

"Oh, I forgot that. Let me remove not only your binding but also all your clothes that screen your beauty. Let me carry you to the stone-studded cot and fall with you on it."

Inebriated as he was, he became more inebriated with lust and removed the rope that had bound her arms. The moment he unbound her, the romancing deer that she pretended to be, she changed into a leaping tiger. She seized the burning taper. She knocked at Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ's face with sureness and accuracy. He could not face the unexpected attack. He fell on the doors of the bedroom. The doors opened up. The guards rushed into the room and surrounded Nalla Nācci with the taper in her hand like a flame of fire herself.

She evaded all the swords, spears and knives wielded to attack her with the taper. How long could she sustain?

53 Another Maturai

Paṇṭāraka Vaṇṇiyaṉ's soldiers who went round and round Vaṟṟāppaḷai Kaṇṇaki temple could not find Taṇikai anywhere there. They looked at the face of their leader, shocked as they were. Paṇṭārakaṉ and Kuruvicci took notice of the bloodstains and the corpses of fallen soldiers around. The bodies of both the sides of the skirmish were to be seen there.

"Kuruvicci! Follow that footpath to Kākkai Vaṇṇiyaṉ's palace. I will take the other path. Let one of our troops accompany you while the other accompanies me. We will take up the responsibility of saving Taṇikaimalai if we found him in danger anywhere." He spurred his horse on.

Kuruvicci's heart sang like a woeful koel. "Paṇṭārakaṉ does not want to believe that Taṇikai has been killed because he does not want him to be dead. So affectionate is he. Whether he has survived or is dead, that faithful and courageous soldier has to be found somewhere."

She spurred her horse on through the path that Paṇṭārakaṉ had shown her. She was accompanied by a contingent of soldiers.

Paṇṭārakaṉ could see the dead body of Taṇikai in a little distance on his way from Vaṟṟāppaḷai. He was greatly agitated. He jumped off his horse and ran towards the body. He held the body and cried bitterly, spurred on by his sadness and passion. He had shown himself the most unselfish lion of a man in that he had assigned priority to track Taṇikaimalai, a trusted soldier in his army instead of attending to the business of saving his own sister from danger. He kissed him

on his forehead. He removed an ornament of gold from his chest and put it on Taṇikai's body.

"The valiant! My faithful friend! It is not just a little that you have offered me for getting rid of the pest of colonial imperialism and make Mullaittīvu a nation full of the fragrance of freedom. But you have closed your eyes forever before your dream has become a reality. Before the advent of a state wherein no alien could step on our soil. Is it fair on your part to leave us thus?"

His voice failed him when he said this. His eyes were flooded with tears. He handed over the body of Taṇikai to the soldiers by his side. "Take this trusted soldier to our palace and lay him at rest within the premises." A few soldiers turned back to Mullaittīvu with the body. Paṇṭārakaṉ stood looking at the soldiers leaving the place with Taṇikai's body until they were out of sight. The brave tiger that he was, he had taken up arms for the sake of the freedom of his state and its honour. He was prepared to lay down his life for the cause. He became violently angry when he thought how his beloved friend had been killed by connivance. The valiant is not the one who has squeezed all sympathy off his heart. It was that sense of sympathy that surpassed his valour at that moment.

"Here is the real leader! He has the eyes that cry at the fall of every soldier of his. There is no pretension. It is the flood surging forth from a heart that is caught in a storm." A soldier at a distance said this to the one standing by his side.

"You are right. Is it not because of that we stand behind him despite all the trials and tribulations? Who else would start in search of Taṇikaimalai ignoring the danger his sister might be facing?" The other soldier said with obvious pride in his voice.

His gait belied his sorrow as Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ walked to his horse. Now he was reminded of Nalla Nācciyār.

The horses walked for a little while and then started galloping.

Meanwhile, Kuruvicci Nācciyār was on her way to the palace of Ḳākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ. Her entire thoughts were riveted on how to save Nalla Nācciyār from Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ since she was sure of Taṇikai having been killed. She was intent on saving the alive rather than mourn over the dead.

When the guards surrounded Nalla Nācci and fought fiercely, she did not give up. She fought with courage. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ was surprised at the valour of that lady. He managed to stand up as he started bleeding from his head. He staggered. But Nalla Nācciyār was not to leave him. She managed to evade the guards surrounding her and attack Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ with the taper. She stuck him on his legs. He cried in pain but directed his ears to hear an unexpected noise from a distance.

It was the noise of approaching horses. In lightning speed, his vicious mind struck upon a treacherous plan.

"Aha! Good indeed! Lo, the cavalry I have asked for has arrived. Hey, you Nalla Nācci! Give up! Or else, you will lose your life and honour in public right in front of all the soldiers." Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ shouted.

Nalla Nācci could not understand that it was Kuruvicci that was leading a cavalry. She rose up in unrestrained anger. She did not know of any way to escape from that pack of foxes. She decided to set fire to the palace of Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ. She did not wait even for a moment to put her resolve into action.

She ran into the room from the corridor. Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ followed her though fatally wounded. He thought that it would be his last chance to kill her. She stuck him heavily on his head with the taper. It was like a huge rock falling on his head. His body wriggled like the tail and body of a lizard beheaded. Meanwhile, the guards entered the room and surrounded her. The noise of the approaching horses was heard louder and louder.

"Woe is me! If that cavalry were to arrive, I will lose my honour." This thought made Nalla Nācciyār set fire to the silk curtains in the room. The fire spread pretty fast. The flames of fire were everywhere in the room. A few of the guards ran away. Another few fell in the fire and writhed in pain.

The flames danced through and through the palace of Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ. Nails on the wooden planks and pillars burst noisily. The pillars fell down. As if the silk curtains, clothes and other precious things were not enough, the flames reached the clouds in the sky to burn them down too.

Kuruvicci saw the palace on fire and became anxious. She was worried about what might have happened to Nalla Nācciyār. She spurred her horse on pretty fast. Nalla Nācciyār came out from the burning palace with the taper in her hand. She was also afire. As she saw Kuruvicci, she shouted, "I have destroyed that scoundrel Ḳākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ. The traitor is no more. His palace has become his burning ghat." She laughed in a frenzy.

Wondering if she was the Kaṇṇaki who had once burnt the city of Maturai, Kuruvicci ran towards her to save her from fire. Like a python twisting itself over a deer, the flames of fire twisted around Nalla Nācciyār. Kuruvicci dared to push her down and roll her on the soil to put off the fire.

There were no flames around Nalla Nācciyār. But she had been burnt very badly and had given over half her face to the fire. Even then she managed to stand up but staggered very badly.

Kuruvicci decided to take her away from that place. She guarded herself from the enemies wielding her sword with one arm and held Nalla Nācci with the other.

Nalla Nācciyār wriggled out of her grip and shouted. "Kuruvicci. Don't touch me!"

54 The Heaven She Found

Kuruvicci Nācciyār felt dumb for a moment unable to decide upon what to say to Nalla Nācci whose heart and body were both afire as she was fuming like the storm on the day of the deluge.

"I have betrayed our nation. I have betrayed our race. I have betrayed my brother. Why, for that matter, I have betrayed myself." Her heart burst into pieces and her shouting sounded like a dirge.

"Nalla Nācci! You have betrayed none. You cannot betray too. Will ever mother's milk kill the child? So also the fang of treason will not sprout in your pure heart."

Kuruvicci tried to approach Nalla Nācciyār, all the time speaking to her. But Nalla Nācci warded her off and said, "Please don't come anywhere near me. I am a shame to our race. I did not know the difference between a creeper and a viper. If you wanted to help me in any way, it would be such that I would recall it in my next birth if at all I have a birth again and that too if I were born a woman again. Will you do me that favour?" Her whole body was in embers as she said this.

"I will do you any favour. First let me reach you. I will put off the fire. Then ask me anything you want." Kuruvicci took a few steps towards her.

She for her part moved a few steps away from her.

"The favour I need is to be killed at your sword's end. Give me that sweet death. I should not live any the further. I cannot. I don't want to live."

"What? To die at my hand? Did I come running all the way for that sinful deed?"

"Yes, I should die at your hand. There can be no other remorse to me than to die at your hand. My brother has dedicated himself to the nation and to our race. He is walking on embers of fire. You have taken him as your leader. You have surrendered all your pleasures at his feet. You live absolutely for his sake. Yours is the single-minded devotion of a sage on a staunch vow. I should die at the hands of such a holy person that you are."

"Listen to me, Nalla Nācci. Don't forget that our leader Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ who is beset with numerous problems arising like the eye of the storm in the ocean, assigns priority to them. Nevertheless, he has assigned a place of privilege in his heart to the sisters of his."

"That is why I am perturbed. I beg of you to take my life immediately. With what much of trust did he make me responsible for the security of Triṅkōmalai! Did I take care of the responsibility? No. Haven't I betrayed our race in the name of love? I don't want to be alive when my brother looks at me. A single drop of tear from his eyes will burn the heart of this betrayer. Woe is me! I cannot bear it. I should find my peace in death before that happens. Please bless me with the alms of death with that sword of yours."

"No, I can't. I just cannot. We should all live to protect our leader. Only if he is protected will our race, our soil, our honour be preserved." Kuruvicci Nācciyār stopped moving.

"What did you say? Did you say you cannot? Did you say that you and I should protect Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ? What for? Why? Kuruvicci! Don't I know you? Can't I understand why you are going round and round Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ? He believes that you consider him as dear as life. I only know who you really are."

Unexpected words flew like arrows from Nalla Nācci and Kuruvicci stood still like a tree. Nalla Nācci continued.

"My brother is the chief of the nation. The people of the nation are dependent on him. He has his fort and other property. His flag flutters over there. When a great man with a lot of wealth and influence lies there enticed by you, will you leave him that easily? Won't you make a slave of him unto you?"

Kuruvicci shouted in spite of herself. "Nalla Nācci! What do you say?" Her heart heaved a sigh as hot as the fire in the smithy.

"I say what is true about you. Be truthful and say that you really love my brother. You cannot say that. You pretend to be full of affection for him. He is a simpleton. All your talk about protecting him is in vain. You are full of pretensions. I know that full well."

"Nalla Nācci!"

Kuruvicci shouted out her name. But that one word said many things. 'You vile woman! Do you talk about me thus? My body, belongings, life and all are but Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's. Do you talk about me thus?'

Nalla Nācci seemed to have understood the unsaid. She continued to provoke her.

"You are a moving demoness. My brother does not know that this beauty of a woman is a slut. Since he does not know about the numerous men who had swum across your lusty bed, he considers you to be the most blameless and seasoned gold of a virtuous lady. He fondly believes that you live all for him. His trust in you is his undoing."

Before Nalla Nācci could complete her words, Kuruvicci became furious and sprang upon her, sword in hand.

Nalla Nācciyār was expecting that. All her harsh words were meant to provoke her. Kuruvicci fell a prey to her tricks and sprang upon her with her sword drawn. Nalla Nācci faced her with a sword. The swords struck against each other. When Nalla Nācci lifted her sword above Kuruvicci's head, she struck at it with force and it flew to fall somewhere. It did not fly as such. Nalla Nācci pretended to have lost her grip on it. When she was thus disarmed, Kuruvicci held her sword straight against Nalla Nācci. Nalla Nācci was waiting for that moment. She ran into her sword. Blood sprang out of the half burnt body of hers. Nalla Nācci's face betrayed happiness. Kuruvicci could not understand what was happening. She took Nalla Nācci in her arms.

"Forgive me. I knew that you would not kill me. That made me provoke you with such sinful words. Forgive me for that. This traitor is dying at the hand of a pure woman. This is my heaven."

Nalla Nācci shed tears. Her glance pleaded for Kuruvicci's forgiving. Kuruvicci was worried at the haste that had made her commit a mistake.

Paṇṭārakaṉ reached the place with his army. He could only see the dead Nalla Nācci whom Kuruvicci held in her arms.

His voice faltered as he addressed her. "Kuruvicci!" He was quite unperturbed as he looked at his sister.

"Your sister has sought her redemption at my hands." Kuruvicci shed tears. Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ was shaken very badly. He took his sister in his arms and stood as he looked at the palace of Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ burning itself out.

55 The Valiant Never Die

On the day Kākkai Vaṉṉiyaṉ's palace was burning itself out, on the day that Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ was shedding tears over the death of his affectionate sister Nalla Nācci, Major Bannerman was holding an emergency trial at Kayattāṟu in Tamiḻnāṭu. A number of local chieftains called Pāḷaiyakkārars had assembled there. The officers of the East India Company who wanted to show off that they meted out punishment to the guilty only after due trial had brought Virapāṇṭiya Kaṭṭapommaṉ to the stand of the accused. Major Bannerman was arrogant when he spoke. "Do you know why you have been brought here?"

Kaṭṭapommaṉ roared like a lion:

"Don't I know even that? My friend the king of Putukkōṭṭai competed with the king of Eṭṭayāpuram, Eṭṭappar and won the prize for betrayal. That is why I stand here."

"That is not the reason." said Bannerman thumping on the table.

"There are other reasons too. If there is a race that had undone itself because of lack of understanding, that race can be only the Tamiḻ race in the whole world. There is no necessity for any enemy to keep them asunder. They stand asunder all by themselves because of bitterness, jealousy and rivalry. The Tamiḻ race is at the summit of all these. That is the reason for Virapāṇṭiyaṉ to stand on the stand of the accused in front of you and the Tamiḻ chieftains having assembled to witness the proceedings."

"Oho! Do you mean to say that it is our responsibility to bring you all together and make a super power of you? If you are scattered like the raspberries thrown

out of a sack, are we responsible for it? Our job becomes all the more easy because we have understood that there are thousands among you ignorant enough not to be clear about who shall lead you."

"Bannerman! Say it aloud. I am immensely pleased. Lo! Here are persons clad in silk and bejewelled with the most precious stones in the world. They have traded themselves for power and position and lie prostrate in front of you as slaves to slaves. Let them understand what you mean. The classical Tamiḻ literature speaks of valour, honour, love, fame and benevolence. Are they just pieces of literature? Oh, no! They are symbols of a culture. They are pearls of history. They are precious jewels of tradition. These have prostituted their valour. They have saved themselves from death, killing their honour. They are benevolent enough to give up racial pride and love money and power, unmindful of losing their fame. Had they understood right in time the implications of what you say now, could you and your hooligans have ever stood on the soil of Kayattāṟu and brought Kaṭṭapommaṉ to the stand of the accused? What is to be done? Is it possible for everyone to be a Veḷḷaiyattēvaṉ, an Ūmaitturai, a Cuntaraliṅkam and a Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ, my good friend ruling over Mullaittīvu at Lanka? There are less of crops in the fields of Tamiḻnāṭu. There are more of weeds. Lo, I am made to stand in the midst of such weeds!"

"Enough of it," shouted Bannerman, "All these dignitaries are dear to us. They are faithful friends. They are the stones at the basement of the sovereignty of the British Company about to rise."

Kaṭṭapommaṉ only laughed aloud and said, "Why so many words to appreciate them? You could have used a single expression – they are the handle of the axe. That would be more poetic."

"There is no need for any arguments hereafter. Let us go to the trial. Let me read the charges against Kaṭṭapommaṉ." Bannerman showed an angry face as he took the charge sheet and read out.

That the chief of Pāñcālaṅkuṟicci, Virapāṇṭiya Kaṭṭapommaṉ refused to pay the taxes due to the Company is an offence. That he insulted the Collector Lord Lousington when he summoned Kaṭṭapommaṉ for a meeting with him is another offence. That he killed many of the soldiers of the Company is yet another offence. Bannerman went on reading out a number of charges against Kaṭṭapommaṉ.

Kaṭṭapommaṉ intervened. "To pay taxes to the Company means that Pāñcālaṅkuṟicci has submitted itself to the authority of the British. So we refused to pay the taxes. We are hospitable enough to be kind to those who come to us. We are not cowards to run to the foes and submit ourselves of our own accord. You laid a siege of the fort of Pāḷaiyaṅkōṭṭai. Are we only a heap of flesh to consider

life to be sweet even after the feet of our foes had stepped on our soil? Are we but idle diners? The Tamiḻ race has always lived with its head held high. Will that race bend in abjectness when beset with treachery? Will that race be tempted by your tricks? Will that race have any truck with you? What is surprising in rising up in revolt ready to give up life in the battle? How can that become an offence? You pile a heap of charges against me just because you have overpowered us with the support of the betrayers when we left our fort. When the verdict has already been written, wherefore is this vain trial? Shall I tell you what verdict you are going to pass?"

Bannerman laughed aloud and said, "That saves me a job. You can say it out yourself."

Kaṭṭapommaṉ retorted. "Why should I say it out? You can declare it yourself. Let these chieftains appreciate the wonderful music of your verdict shaking their heads and clapping in appreciation."

The smile on Kaṭṭapommaṉ's face persisted. He became all the brighter. Bannerman looked around cautiously. He assured himself that the guards were watchful. Then he read out the verdict. The lion of a man, the man of grandeur, the one who swims upstream with a heart that cannot be intimidated by anything, the one with a heart that can face any eventuality was to be hanged to death on the branch of a wayside tamarind tree. Even those who betrayed him, those traitors, those who won their political power at his expense shed tears. Perhaps they knew that they would be named persons of baseness in the annals of history and that made them pity themselves.

"I am not bothered about the verdict. I have only one regret. My history would have been more honourable if I had died in the battlefield at the portals of my palace. Bereft of such a fortunate death, I am going to die at the end of a rope. Hey, you who wash the feet of foes and make a victual of the same! You should be happy now. I wish you all the best. Have a nice life! Let me take leave."

Kaṭṭapommaṉ waved his hands, walked gracefully, pulled the rope to his neck and kissed it. He hanged himself to death. Thus the orders of the British were executed by Kaṭṭapommaṉ with a smile on his face.

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ who returned to his palace after having lost his sister and Taṇikaimalai was agonized to hear about the end of Vīrapāṇṭiya Kaṭṭapommaṉ.

Kuruvicci Nācciyār held him by his shoulders lest he should break at the news received from Tamiḻnāṭu and said, "The valiant do not die. We are not going to die too." Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ held on to her hand fast.

56 Festivities at Colombo

Colourful tapers were lighted in front of the palace of Lord North at Colombo and the whole place saw daylight at night. The British soldiers held a cup each and danced holding on to each other. When they could manage, they did dance with a few white women there. They were celebrating their happiness with liquor. Cannons were burst every now and then to mingle with the noise of festivities. What was the reason behind such festivities, dance, songs, wine and women?

The British gang was celebrating the fall of Kaṭṭapommaṉ, the lion of a man, the lord of Pāñcālaṅkuṟicci, who had been roaring against the British imperialism in Tamiḻnāṭu. Those imperialists thought that if the people of Lanka, in close proximity to Tamiḻnāṭu and in some way affected by anything that might happen in Tamiḻnāṭu, came to know of the defeat and death of Kaṭṭapommaṉ, would slacken their resistance against the British. They thought that the Lankan Tamiḻs would be scared and move away. That made them celebrate the fall of the one who opposed their authority in Tamiḻnāṭu. They believed that Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's ferocity could not sustain at the same rate as before and that he would be pushed into seeking the friendship of the British because of the fall of Kaṭṭapommaṉ. That made the festivities at the palace of Lord North grand indeed.

Lord North was in his silk bed up at the top floor. He had a lady on his lap. He brushed her hair with one of his hands and emptied the drink held in the other.

She had her face sunk between his thighs and lay facedown revealing her beauty from behind. Besides brushing her hair fondly, Lord North was also passing his

fingers through her back. He brushed his feet against hers and was becoming warmer.

"Go on! It is sweet to hear what you have to say. Do you know how wonderful it is that you are between my thighs and I am listening to what you say?"

"Do you know how I feel? You should keep quiet for a little while. I should forget myself as I lie on your lap all in silence."

"Would you like to drink a little more?"

"Oh, no! I have crossed my limit. You appear double to me."

"Do you have such a desire too?"

"Hey, you are teasing. You can take it this way. You are strong as two together. That is what I meant."

"However, I am quite angry with you."

"Angry? Wherefore?"

"It is such a grand feast. I have tasted many women. But the pleasure of today… Oh, you enjoy me inch by inch. You have been keeping this feast away from me for so long. Won't I become angry at the delay?"

That beauty of a woman who lay facedown between his thighs laughed impishly. Her supple body shook altogether. It was like a *vīṇā* moving up and down off its bag. When she shook thus, the cup in the hands of Lord North also shook. A few drops of the drink spilled on the slut's back.

"Oh!" before she could turn around and get up, he wiped it off her back. She lifted her face up and smiled at him.

"How bright are these eyes! How sweet are these lips!" He passed his fingers through her brows. He kissed her on her lips.

"Dear North! Thank you!" she made a garland of her arms around his neck.

"There is so much more that I have to give you. There is so much more that you have to give me. Why do you hurry with your thanks?" Lord North took her in his arms smiling through his intoxication.

"North!" she moaned in pleasure. He also faltered as he said, "Piyacīli!"

The lamp nearby had its brightness reduced and kept away from them. The cup fell off the bed to the ground and rolled to a corner of the room, spilling the remains of the drink through the floor.

The light became bright again. She stood up in all the beauty of her nakedness. She poured drinks in two cups. North felt pleasantly weary as he embraced her. She offered the drink in his cup to her. She pushed her cup through his lips.

They fell back again on the bed.

"Piyacīli! How did you manage to escape from Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's palace with its tight security?"

Piyacīli pulled North to her with her leg and laughed as if to say that it was such a simple thing.

"Why do you laugh?" He also wound his leg around her.

"Nothing! I just thought of how I managed to escape. It makes me laugh."

"What is the humour in it? Should I not have a share of it?"

North held her in tight embrace.

"Do you know how I managed to escape?"

"Go on. Tell me. Take this as a gift for it."

He kissed her on her lips. The kiss was so strong that it appeared as if he was plucking her lips away. Her lips had swollen with the kiss. For the one like her who could not be appeased in lust, even a thousand such kisses would not be enough. She was not going to stop them.

"Tell me. How did you escape?"

"Let me tell you."

Piyacīli stared at the wall of the bedroom. She recalled how she had escaped from the palace of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ.

57 The Way She Escaped

Kuruvicci Nācciyār left the place leaving Piyacīli in a room at the palace of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ in the custody of four guards. The gypsy Piyacīli looked around the room.

"What are you looking for? Are you looking for a way to escape from this room?" a guard with thick moustache asked her. His tone was intimidating.

"Why should I try to escape? I am Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's guest. Will I have any desire to run away from this place?"

"Then what are you looking for?"

"I am all by myself in such a beautiful room. You are four over there. That makes me think of the situation."

"We are Rāmaṉ, Lakṣmaṉ, Parataṉ and Ṣatrukṇaṉ not only by name. Do you see how we are teamed together?"

"I don't like the *Rāmāyaṇā*. I love only the *Mahābhāratā*."

"What do you mean?"

"If the four of you happen to be five and that happen to be Dharmā, Bīma, Aruccuṉā, Nakulā and Sakātēvā, how happy this Pāñcāli could be! It is all right. What if you happen to be fewer by one? Let it be. In such a broad room, there is only one small cot. Shouldn't there be a larger cot wide enough for the five of us to roll along?"

"What do you say? Don't forget that you have been charged with treachery against this soil. You are now a prisoner."

"Be frank! Am I not there in the heart of each of you over there? Be true to yourself!"

When Piyacīli said this, exercising all her charm, one of them expressed a sense of uneasiness of longing. The guard with the thick moustache slapped him on his back and put him in his place.

Piyacīli did not fail to notice that. She looked at the guard with the thick moustache and said, "What is this? You may not be masculine enough. Is it fair to deny him his freedom of longing for pleasure?" She tapped lightly on his shoulder.

Many are the men who had drowned like a ball of iron fallen into the seas when they felt the touch of those soft fingers. But the guard with thick moustache and the other two guards with him looked at her as if they were looking at a venomous pest. The other guard could not contain himself but pretended to have become angry lest he should lose his teeth if he displeased their leader. Piyacīli did not, however, fail to notice that his mouth was watering. She smiled with pride at one of the four having fallen a prey to her beauty.

"Okay! Pull down that curtain across the cot and go to sleep. We will remain within the room on guard." said the guard with thick moustache.

"Don't you have any sense of decency? How can a woman go to sleep when there are four men staring at her? Let us say my dress moves a little when I am asleep. Do you want me to make a show of seminudity to you?"

"That is why I asked you to draw that curtain around the cot."

"Does any one of you know how to massage my feet?"

"We know how to strangle you."

"Woe is me! Are you murderers?"

"Don't talk. Be good to go to sleep."

"How can I sleep. Kuruvicci, your queen, has beaten me so badly that I am aching throughout. She rolled me on the ground and there is swelling everywhere in my body. Let me go for a bath in hot water."

Piyacīli started removing her dress one after the other even as the four were looking at her. They closed their eyes. Though they had closed their eyes, the three guards other than the one with thick moustache were looking at her beauty through the slit of their eyes. As she hurried through her undressing, a long key fell off her hip.

"What is this? Why do you carry such a long key?"

"Oh, this? This is not meant for opening any treasure chest."

"What else is it for?"

"I am an epileptic. On and off I will have a seizure. If someone gives me this key on such occasions, I will feel better gradually. That is why I have it with me."

Wow! Such a beauty and so young! Should she suffer from such a disease? The streak of thought across the heart of the guard with thick moustache was quick to appear and equally quick to disappear. Yet Piyacīli did not fail to notice it. When he tried to turn the other way to hide his feelings, she could only smile within.

She had removed most of her dress and was scantily dressed when she declared that she would go to the bathroom. She hurried into the bathroom but fell down screaming. The four guards were shocked. They looked at her. She had fallen on the floor and was writhing in agony. Her mouth slanted dangerously to one side.

The guard with thick moustache concluded that it should be a seizure. The guard who could not help but stare at her a little while ago could not close his mouth as he looked at her. The guard with thick moustache asked the other three to leave the room. They left halfheartedly. The guard looked the other way from her as he pushed the key into Piyacīli's palm. He then left the room and waited with the other guards. He was fastidious in not looking into the room. But the other three were peeping into the room despite themselves. Their leader did not like it. He closed the door shut and stayed outside along with the other guards. They were, of course, very watchful.

Piyacīli who was rolling on the floor in her nakedness, looked at the door from the corner of her eyes. She heaved a sigh. She remained calm and poised on the floor. She still remained naked. The guard with thick moustache opened the door and looked in.

"The seizure is over. She is unconscious." He murmured to himself. They were guarding the room from the outside with the impression that Piyacīli was lying there in an unseemly manner. But she managed to open the backdoor and made good her escape.

When Piyacīli narrated how she managed to escape, North appreciated her cleverness. He lifted her up and jumped like a demon across the room. She held on tight to his shoulders lest she should fall down and laughed aloud.

58 This is but One of Those

Piyacīli's laughter sounded like sweet music. It was resonant like the drum beat. It was soft as the violin. Lord North, lost in the furore of the music, started dancing even as he held her up in his arms. She, for her part, clung to his neck and kept on showering kisses on him. The mischief of the liquor they had drunk took them to the heights of lust.

He continued dancing and hugged her close as he offered another bottle. She was lilting in her intoxication. "Darling! Feed me with your saliva. It makes me more intoxicated. You have drunk so much. My lord, feed me with your saliva. My deity! That is the best wine right now. That gives me the utmost."

When he heard Piyacīli say this, Lord North felt as if he had gulped another ten cups together and granted her what she had asked for.

"What do you want in return for this, my king!"

She wanted to embrace him. Instead, she used her legs to hug him and wound herself round his body. He laid her on the floor and said, "I want to suck your blood. The liquor in the blood of this beauty! How wonderful!" He laughed. It was not the usual laughter. It was one of frenzy. Piyacīli was scared. She rolled a little away from him. He rolled behind her and pinned her down to the floor. Piyacīli at the top of her intoxication said, "My lord! How can you suck my blood?" She spoke in a broken voice. Even then she held on to him fast. Both of them did not know what they were doing. It was the final frenzied dance of lust.

"You ask me how I can suck your blood? You madcap! Your Krishna sucked the blood of Pūtaki, didn't he? I am going to suck your blood like that."

He laughed wildly and kissed her on her breast. Piyacīli took it for a kiss and even enjoyed it. Though she could feel that his hug was different from the other hugs of the night, she maintained unison with his lovemaking. Was she just cooperating with him? Oh, no! It was the liquor that was playing havoc. There was no spot on her body where the teeth of North had not bitten her. The marks of biting and pinching were not those that could be relished the next morning in the bathroom. On the other hand, they looked like rubies studded in gold. She was bleeding all through her body. Like the drops of snow on the blade of grass at dawn, there were drops of blood throughout her body. Though she did not feel their pain, lost in lust that she was, she should, of course, have felt the pain because she shouted herself out on and off as she rolled on the floor with him.

She too bit him here and there in unrestrained passion. But he was more brutal.

"My delight! How is it that I get such a great pleasure? I enjoy the pleasure that I have never before tasted. Oh, your glassy cheek! Woe, woe is me! I can see my face on your cheek."

He bit her at her cheek and brought out blood. She moaned in the pleasure of the pain and hugged him all the more tight for it.

"I want to suck you out as I suck a mango. I want to have all my desire fulfilled." He started kissing her on her breasts. She enjoyed it first. But then she started screaming. He did not give up. The louder she screamed the more furious he became.

"Let me go! Leave me! I will die. It pains too much." She tried to plead. He was full of desire as he tasted her. He was not in any way angry with her. Does the squirrel bite the guava to pieces because of anger? He was also biting her to pieces in all desire. Piyacīli screamed, pleaded, shouted, struggled to push him away. He addressed her with endearments in their superlative and tried to push her whole body into his mouth. He was in a fit of the frenzy of lust.

The battle of lust lasted for quite some time. She struggled like a goat in the jaws of a tiger. He showed no sign of sympathy. He was lost in his passion for her. Such a passion it was! The desire that knew no bounds. It was like putting a spotted deer in the presence of a hungry tiger. She had always relished such rough lovemaking. But she would have it ascending to a crescendo in slow degrees. But this rough lovemaking was not like a bull mounting a cow. It suddenly became rough as the attack of a rhino.

She understood that Lord North was beyond a point of recovery in his frenzy. She felt a little sedate because of the wounds all along. She pleaded with him to leave her.

"Please hug me." "Please don't leave me." "Hold on, please!" Such had been her words to lusty men who made love to her. For the first time in her life, she was scared of lovemaking. She cried bitterly as she pleaded with North to leave her.

He was not in this world at all. He was beyond the boundaries of the ocean of lust.

There was a loud cry from Piyacīli. Thereafter there was no sound from her at all. But he did not stop kissing her. He was pushing her into his mouth right up to dawn. Then he became quite tired and turned aside to sleep it out. He was not aware of that too. Only after the sunrise did he understand that what lay beside him was the dead body of Piyacīli.

She had taken the pleasure of lovemaking to be the highest of worldly pleasures. She had considered that the very purpose and goal of life was to enjoy the pleasure of love. She considered it to be the most feminine virtue. The crazy woman that she had been seeking pleasure with men, ended in the bed chamber of a fellow in frenzied lust.

The games of lust, the races of lust, the songs of lust, the men she had sought – all these got fused into pain and pleasure, bliss and blight at her end.

Lord North regretted what he had done as he woke up the next morning. He felt helpless. The officers summoned by him said that there was no point in worrying about what had happened. The next business had to be attended to.

A coffin was brought as planned. She was laid inside. She looked like a chain of gold studded with rubies with drops of blood on her fair skin.

Many have read a beautiful epic and have closed the pages. There are many instances of such unsavoury end of sluts in the history of mankind. This was but another of those.

59 I am your Enemy henceforth

One of the officers summoned for counselling said, "It is Pilimataḷāvai that is everything in Kaṇṭi now. Let us send word to him that there is an urgent state business to be discussed with him."

North said, "What is the reason behind summoning him here?" His brows were knitted and the officer did not hesitate to answer.

"Pilimataḷāvai should become furious with the king of Kaṇṭi, Vikramarāja Siṅghē. We shall devise appropriate means now."

"Vikramarāja Siṅghē is the king only by title. Pilimataḷāvai has all the authority at Kaṇṭi. How can he become furious with the king in such a context? What could be the reason?"

"If we spin a yarn to the effect that it is the king of Kaṇṭi who had bitten Piyacīli all through in a lusty frenzy and had killed her, Pilimataḷāvai will pounce on him. We will use him to undo the king first. When the king is finished, we will finish Pilimataḷāvai subsequently. Thirdly, we will become everything to Kaṇṭi. How do you like my scheme?"

"Nice to hear. But you forget one thing when you say all these. Piyacīli had been given a royal funeral at Kaṇṭi. Pilimataḷāvai and Piyacīli cheated the king with such a false story. Piyacīli herself told me of it."

"What if she has told you that? The king of Kaṇṭi came to know that Piyacīli had left Kaṇṭi alive. So he sent his spies in confidence to find her out. She was caught. Vikramarāja Siṅghē wanted to wreak vengeance. She had hoodwinked him earlier in indulgence. He decided to put an end to her by the same token. She was brought to the summer palace near Kaṇṭi. Vikramarāja Siṅghē also arrived at the place. He spoke sweetly to her and won her confidence. He fed her with too much of liquor. He also drank. When Piyacīli lay flat, he staged the cruel drama of lovemaking. Piyacīli managed to escape, all hurt and almost dead. She happened to meet two of very sympathetic British spies. They saved her and brought her to the palace of Lord North. She gave an account of all that had happened and subsequently died. Let us weave a tragic story. Then you will see how furious Pilimataḷāvai becomes. He would let the British to march into Kaṇṭi and stand aside."

"Good! You have counselled well. Any father who sees his daughter in this condition will feel the agony of it. He would be intent on wreaking vengeance. A wonderful counsel! But there is something else. Why did the British spies take her to Colombo instead of taking her to Kaṇṭi? Pilimataḷāvai will become suspicious on that score, you see!"

"I have anticipated that too, my lord. In a situation when lust and vengeance were playing havoc in the life of Piyacīli, they did not want to take her to Kaṇṭi where you have that fellow in frenzy. So she was brought to Colombo for immediate medical attention."

"Good! Good indeed! Nine lies to hide one lie, as the saying goes. You are the master of liars." North appreciated his officer with a pat on his back and laughed spontaneously.

Even as he laughed, his eyes fell on the coffin. He became remorseful. His laughter ended abruptly.

Perhaps his conscience pricked him for his beastly conduct towards a woman. So he stood still, looking at the coffin of the beautiful lady. He could recall the furore of frenzied lust of the night. The hazy recollection made him immobile for a little while. He spoke to the officer and his voice failed him.

"I should not have been so brutish towards Piyacīli."

"If you keep on regretting what has happened, our desire to conquer will not be fulfilled. This woman would have died one day you see. By then, she would have become old, wrinkled all along, bent at the back, coughing her life out. Instead of such a sorry death, she has crumbled as the wonderful beauty that she has been. That is a blessing to her, you see. Not all women get the chance of dying through a long fit of pleasure and lust, my lord. You have done her a good turn. We should not fail to capitalize on her death."

"So you want me to send someone to Pilimataḷāvai right now?"

"Yes, my lord. An urgent state business to be discussed..."

When Lord North nodded his head in assent, a messenger from Colombo stood in front of Pilimataḷāvai.

"What urgent state business is it?" Pilimataḷāvai said. The messenger did not have any reply. He said that he did not have any further details. Pilimataḷāvai walked to the private quarters of Vikramarāja Siṅghē. He was spending all his time with his wife, the princess of Maturai and considered it his sole business. Indulgence had become the way of life for him. When he came to know that Pilimataḷāvai was on his way to meet him, he ran to the doorstep to receive him.

"I have something to inform the king. There seems to be some urgent state business to be attended to at Colombo. Lord North has summoned me."

"O, you need my permission to go?"

"I did not come to seek your permission. There is no need for it. I came to inform you that I am on my way to Colombo. That's all."

"It's all right. That much is enough for me. Thanks for your regards. For the kind of authority you have here, you could have gone without even informing me."

"Be watchful! Everything should be proper here. Let me leave for Colombo."

Pilimataḷāvai arrived at Colombo as expected by Lord North. The story that was fabricated with the help of the officer was told. He did not seem to believe it. When he was shown the body of Piyacīli in the coffin, he was terribly taken aback.

Whoever be it, no father could bear to see his daughter in the condition in which she was. Pilimataḷāvai burst out like a volcano.

"All your lies are brilliant indeed. I could not believe your words because Vikramarāja Siṅghē is totally under my control. He is in his palace as he will be in a prison. How could he have gone to the summer palace without my permission? All this is fabricated."

All the efforts that the officer and Lord North took to convince Pilimataḷāvai failed.

"I know that my daughter is a sort of a woman. I don't deny that. It is true that I have used her as a pawn in my state business. For all that I cannot be friends with those who had killed her brutally thus. I will have my revenge."

Pilimataḷāvai flared out. He was literally storming out his anger.

Lord North expected something to happen. What happened was totally unexpected. He was shocked. He shouted at Pilimataḷāvai to believe him. It was more a pleading than anything else.

"It is enough that I have believed you. It is enough I have done all that I have done with such belief. You have killed the daughter of the one who had faith in you and you killed her and pretended to be his friends."

He was at the height of his anger. He came out to summon the guards who had accompanied him. He left the place as fast as he could and mounted his horse.

When the horses were about to leave the place, he pointed his finger at Lord North and said, "I am your enemy henceforth. My only business is to oppose you." He roared. Lord North and the officer stood looking at each other helplessly.

60 Animosity and Goodness

Moment by moment, Pilimataḷāvai was fuming and fretting with thoughts of vengeance within. Time rolled through days, months and even years. Pilimataḷāvai was constantly telling himself that he would see his end soon and before that he had to wreak his vengeance on Lord North for his perversion. He believed that the soul of Piyacīli would rest in peace only if he was able to avenge her cruel death.

Pilimataḷāvai was very careful in that he could declare his resistance to the British officers only after getting ready strong contingents of army and weaponry. Vikramarāja Siṅghē was not bothered about anything that was happening. Since he considered indulgence to be the very purpose of life, he had left the affairs of the kingdom in the hands of Pilimataḷāvai and drank the pleasures of life to the lees. So whenever Pilimataḷāvai sent a note, the treasury was opened. The money that Pilimataḷāvai wanted was sent with due respect. Pilimataḷāvai did not have any thought about making Kaṇṭi rich or about any welfare measures for the people of Kaṇṭi. All the departments of the government were directed towards avenging the cruelty meted out to Piyacīli. But none in any department knew why all their activities were directed towards something other than their own business.

Pilimataḷāvai was making all necessary arrangements towards a big war. He was always thinking about an opportune moment to launch an attack. The lieutenants were moved when they heard his fierce words about why the British should not be allowed to plant their feet on their soil. But they were not aware of the fact that he was so furious because of the cruelty that his daughter had suffered. They were of the opinion that the forces of Kaṇṭi by themselves were not enough to face the British. They thought that it would be expeditious to have the support of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's army at Mullaittīvu. They believed that they could surely hoist the flag of victory then. They had made their thoughts clear to Pilimataḷāvai. "We have incurred his animosity. Do you think that he would join us in our march?" said Pilimataḷāvai.

They told him that Paṇṭārakaṉ's principle was to submerge private bitterness and rivalry for the sake of facing the common enemy. His only worry was that the kings in various parts of Lanka were not able to come together on this score.

Pilimataḷāvai started thinking with his hands wiping his tonsured head. A guard who arrived compelled his attention. He went to him and asked him what the matter was. He said something for Pilimataḷāvai's ears only to hear. "Really?" Pilimataḷāvai opened his egg-like eyes wide and addressed the lieutenants. "We will continue tomorrow." They took leave of him. As soon as they left the place, Pilimataḷāvai said to the guard, "Where is she now?" He appeared to be a little anxious.

"In your private chamber, my lord." He bowed as he said this. "Okay. You can go now. I will meet her." He walked towards his private chamber.

The doors were kept closed. He opened them to enter the room. He could see her face in the faint light of the lamp. Yes, Marttaṉi was seated in a luxurious chair there.

"Marttaṉi! When did you come here?"

"Right in the morning. I came here at this time of the day because I did not want the king to know that I was here."

"Why? What if he comes to know? What can he do? He is a puppet at the end of my fingers. Let that be. How did you leave Piyacīli?"

"That Kuruvicci Nācciyār put a full stop to the drama that Piyacīli and I were staging as advised by you. So we happened to move away from each other. How is Piyacīli now? Is she here?"

Pilimataḷāvai could not answer Marttaṉi. He became dumb in his agony.

"Tell me what happened to Piyacīli." She became perturbed.

"I will tell you. That British beast Lord North made her a dish for his lust. He made a grave of his bedroom for her. He bit my dear daughter to her death."

Marttaṉi sat still. Tears rolled down her cheeks. Pilimataḷāvai strolled along the room for a little while to ease himself. He then suspected something strange.

Marttani would shrink like a tortoise into its shell in the presence of Pilimataḷāvai, all in due respect. But then, she was seated in grand arrogance when he was standing all the while and talking to her. He sensed something strange.

"You shed tears for Piyacīli. I can understand. I have been noticing something ever since I entered this room. You have forgotten etiquette since you came back from Mullaittīvu. You have become arrogant. What is the reason for the change?"

His words were steeped in anger. Marttaṉi replied with a sad smile.

"What is this? You only smile when I am questioning you."

Marttaṉi revealed one of her legs hidden by a piece of cloth till then. She had lost one of her feet.

"Marttaṉi! What does it mean?" Pilimataḷāvai comforted her with a hug.

"I should have died. It was Kuruvicci who paved the way for my death. And it is the same Kuruvicci who closed the road to my death and made me live."

"I don't understand, Marttaṉi. Let me have the details."

Meanwhile, Marttaṉi had her hands on the tonsured head of Pilimataḷāvai and also kissed him on his egg-like eyes. She was afraid that he would be angry with her for not successfully completing the mission assigned to her and therefore started trying her abilities in seduction.

"At one point, both Piyacīli and myself were caught by Kuruvicci. The knife she threw at my heel knocked me down. Since it was a poison-smeared knife, my wound did not heal at all. She who attacked me with her knife arranged medical treatment and took care of me as if I were her sister. Days and months passed by. The pain became unbearable. The doctor had said that the wound had become gangrenous and that I needed amputation. So it was between life and lameness. Kuruvicci and Paṇṭārakaṉ asked me what was to be done."

"You preferred amputation?"

"But on a condition. If they did not intend to send me back to Kaṇṭi, I preferred to die there. If they assured me that they would send me back to Kaṇṭi, I was ready to live with an amputated leg. Kuruvicci spoke to Paṇṭārakaṉ in private. Then both came back to me and agreed to honour my condition."

"Amputation? It should have been so painful."

"I have to bear with anything for the sake of the uncrowned monarch of Kaṇṭi, Pilimataḷāvai. But one thing. Do you know about the kindness with which both

Kuruvicci and Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ took care of me when I was undergoing the treatment? When I recall their kindness despite the knowledge that I was their sworn enemy…"

"Stop it. Enough of it. Don't think too much of them. You may grow affectionate towards them, perhaps. You may forget your hatred."

"Whatever it is, as far as I am concerned, I can only say that my animosity has been blunted by their kindness."

Marttaṉi! When our animosity is blunted, our schemes become unfocussed. Our success will be delayed. However good our enemies be, whatever good they do to us, there should never arise any sense of gratitude in our hearts. That would be madness."

Marttaṉi was in Pilimataḷāvai's embrace and remained silent.

"I saw with my own eyes the body of my daughter that the pervert bit and tore to pieces. Tell me how I can avenge him."

"You of all seeking my counsel? Are there means that this brain cannot suggest?"

"I am organizing the military forces to avenge him. But we need some means to provoke the British. I am thinking only of that."

"I will tell you something that will be apt."

"You will have something to say. I know it."Pilimataḷāvai held her in a tight hug.

It was like a pink lion hugging a green parrot. Looking at the scene, the lamps in the room laughed and danced in the soft breeze.

61 Provocation

The suggestions that Marttaṉi made as she lay on the lap of Pilimataḷāvai were enforced one after the other. Pilimataḷāvai had earlier planned to undo Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ and Vikramarāja Siṅghē with the help of the British and become the king of Kaṇṭi. But since the cruel death of his daughter Piyacīli, he had vowed to avenge her death, to provoke the British to attack Kaṇṭi and to defeat them. He was issuing orders to implement the suggestions made by Marttaṉi. He followed her counsel to letter and spirit.

It was an evening. The scene was Puttaḷam, a small town under the British authority. A number of cartloads of commodities were carried by the British through the market streets in the town. The people of the town vied with each other to buy them at a price they quoted. The commodities in a few carts were alone meant for retailing. The British said proudly that the other carts were meant for the Colombo wholesale market. Groups of persons who had covered completely themselves with shawls but for their faces were moving along with the carts that were selling goods on the way. There were a considerable number of such groups. The British steering the carts were not aware that the groups were moving along with them. People surrounded a retail cart and were buying goods of various kinds paying for them. There was a boy in the crowd. His hair was dry. He should have been about eight or nine years old. His bones protruded through his body which appeared to have no flesh at all. They looked like the teeth of a comb. His stomach was concave. He had a pair of legs that looked like sticks. The arms were equally weak and slim. One could say that he was an embodiment of poverty.

He kept looking at the people who were buying things and putting them in their baskets. Perhaps he felt his hunger sharply when he saw the eatables that people bought. He was such a tiny little creature. Perhaps the flame of hunger was burning him down. Perhaps he thought he could take something away from the

cart when the attention of the British was on selling. He laid his hands on some vegetable roots. He was so hungry that he hurried to taste one of them and tried to run away. One could never know how one of the British traders took notice of him. He jumped off his cart, chased him and held him by his dry hair. He boxed him on his face with all possible strength of his fist.

The boy cried aloud. Hunger left him for good. The pain was more than enough to make him forget his hunger. His face was drenched in blood. The British soldier snatched what he had in his hands and returned to the cart. Meanwhile, one of the groups in shawls surrounded him. He was beaten black and blue. He shouted, "My God!" The persons in the crowd discarded the shawls and identified themselves as the soldiers of Kaṇṭi.

Those in the other groups stopped the carts. One of them lifted the child up and showed it to the people of Puttaḷam around. He said, "Lo! A child heartlessly knocked down!" A widow broke through the crowd running towards him. She was not strong enough to run all the way. And yet her affection made her run to her child. "Woe is me! He is my son." She shouted as she took him in her arms. Then that poor child had no hunger, no pain. He had gone to a place where there was no hunger and no pain.

"Scoundrels! You have killed my child." Even before she could complete her wailing, the soldiers of Kaṇṭi surrounded the carts laden with goods. They snatched away everything. The British who became scared of the sudden attack jumped off their carts and ran away from Puttaḷam for their lives. The soldiers of Kaṇṭi had learnt the lesson of provoking the British. Pity the boy! No one bothered about either the child or the mother. The people of Puttaḷam and the soldiers of Kaṇṭi were intent upon looting the carts.

When information about looting the carts reached Lord North, he became furious. He was further provoked when he came to know that the looted goods were brought to Colombo for sale. He sent a message immediately to the king of Kaṇṭi. "Besides waylaying the British carts, your soldiers have put us to shame bringing the looted goods for sale to Colombo. It is inevitable that action has to be taken on this score. Yet, this is the first warning. So the king of Kaṇṭi is directed to pay adequate compensation forthwith."

Pilimataḷāvai received the message. He took his lips off Marttaṉi's breasts and laughed aloud. It was an awkward laughter. And yet Marttaṉi appreciated it in the name of divine laughter and hugged him closely. "What reply is to be given?" he asked her. She took a piece of paper. She kept it on Pilimataḷāvai's back and scribbled the reply. She gave it to him and asked him to affix his signature. He affixed his signature on behalf of the king of Kaṇṭi.

"The state of Kaṇṭi shall not be taken for being subject to British rule. Compensation is asking for the impossible. Signed by Pilimataḷāvai on behalf of the king of Kaṇṭi."

Lord North was shattered to pieces on reading the reply. He called for the counsel meeting of his officers. Major General McDowel supported Lord North in the meeting. And yet he expressed the opinion that they should not hurry with a military march against Kaṇṭi. Lord North could not overlook the opinion of the Major General.

Pilimataḷāvai expected the British to march against Kaṇṭi but was disappointed. He felt bad that he could not wreak his vengeance on Lord North for his daughter's cruel death.

He started speaking vehemently among the people of Kaṇṭi againt the British insurgence. He shouted out his brave message that the state of Kaṇṭi would not stoop to bow to anyone. The people of Kaṇṭi did not know that he was trying to settle a personal score. Though Vikramarāja Siṅghē was surprised at his sudden change, he was happy that his prime minister had turned against the British.

Yet another day. It was in the city of Kaṇṭi. It was night time. There was a hue and cry in the British quarters.

The soldiers of Kaṇṭi were let loose as Pilimataḷāvai had ordered. The doors of the British were knocked. The doors that were not opened were broken down. The soldiers of Kaṇṭi feasted on the British women. There was no woman left. The British who saw their wives and other women raped right under their nose tried to resist. Unable to stop them, they made good their escape through the dark. The British quarters became a stage for unrestrained lust that night. One could hear the women wailing and weeping.

The information reached Colombo. The British residents of Kaṇṭi also sought asylum in the palace of Lord North.

Lord North asked McDowel if they should be patient even after that incident. McDowel drew his sword, held it above his head and said that he was prepared to march against Kaṇṭi. Two contingents of British army with three thousand soldiers were assigned the task of attacking Kaṇṭi.

Pilimataḷāvai felt happy when he came to know that the British army was marching against Kaṇṭi. He embraced Marttaṉi tightly, saying that time had come for him to avenge the death of his daughter. As counselled by her, he made Vikramarāja Siṅghē write a letter to Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ seeking assistance. It was Marttaṉi who started to meet Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ with that letter.

62 Not Manly Enough

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ completed reading the letter as Marttaṉi and Kuruvicci sat beside each other. "Good! It is time now. It is time now for me and my friend to join hands to chase the British gang away from Lanka." He felt the sword on his hip fondly.

Marttaṉi said, "Not only is it important that the king of Kaṇṭi and you join hands to resist the British. It is also important that Pilimataḷāvai who has been indirectly supporting the British come forward determined to undo the British. In fact, I consider it more important."

Paṇṭārakaṉ seemed to recall something suddenly and said to her, "Yes. What happened to that Muttuccāmy who proclaimed himself the king of Kaṇṭi? Where is he?"

Marttaṉi smiled sarcastically as she said, "Hasn't our king stated that a contingent led by McDowell and another led by Colonel Barbut are supposed to be marching towards Kaṇṭi? It is understood that Muttuccāmy is supposed to join the army of Colonel Barbut. Pilimataḷāvai himself told me."

"That sounds good. Pilimataḷāvai seems to have decided to go about his business of administration with the help of women. He has given you such confidential information."

"I do not keep anything away from him, you see."

When Marttaṉi implied obscene relationship between them, Paṇṭārakaṉ's face turned sour. Kuruvicci Nācciyār avoided the unpleasant situation pretending to be looking at the sky as she moved towards the window.

"What is this, Kuruvicci? Why do you keep yourself away?" Paṇṭārakaṉ steadied himself and moved towards her.

Marttaṉi winked her eyes and said, "I may be intruding on your privacy. Shall I keep myself away?" Kuruvicci became angry.

"Marttaṉi! You will speak this and much more just because we have permitted you to go back to your place alive. The relationship between us is one of hearts and not physical in any way. People like you, who have come to play your roles on the political arena with physical charms as your capital, cannot understand our pure love and affection."

"Nācciyār should not become angry. I have forgotten for a moment that you are young ascetics who consider family life to be bitter like the neem fruit."

Paṇṭārakaṉ intervened. "Don't make ascetics of us so hastily. We also have the desire to live as man and wife. We are not against domestic bliss. We have vowed not to have any physical relationship but continue to be in deep love with each other until the British imperialism is defeated totally; until the bugle call declares that the British can never enter Mullaittīvu; until there is no British presence anywhere in Lanka."

Marttaṉi smiled. She was the royal messenger from Kaṇṭi. She took advantage of her new role.

"My goodness! It is one of the wonders of the world. Such a valiant person! More charming than even the god of love! A man of broad shoulders! A man of majesty enticing the eyes of women! Nācciyār for her part is a woman of winning loveliness. She is adored all around the country. The beauty of the whole of womankind cannot be equal to her beauty. Such a pair! Woe is it that they ignore an urge because of needless vow. It is a wonder indeed that they are wasting away physical pleasure."

Kuruvicci Nācciyār wanted to put down Marttaṉi. She overdid herself.

"Marttaṉi! Don't think that all women in the world would be like you and Piyacīli! A few such women like you make a commodity of their chastity. They push virtue aside as if it is a mist to be waded through. They have prepared their minds to go behind a new fellow every day. They lie on different beds through the same day. Such base women have a say in matters political too. Don't take all women to be such."

"You are also attending to matters political, standing beside the king of Mullaittīvu, the leader of the Tamiḻs in this part of the island and this leaping tiger. Don't you remain chaste then?"

Meanwhile, Paṇṭārakaṉ raised his voice and said, "Marttaṉi. Try to understand that pebble and diamond are not comparable."

Marttaṉi immediately touched his feet in reverence.

"Forgive me. I could not forget that you had sent me alive back to Kaṇṭi though you knew that I had come here as your enemy. It is out of gratitude that I persuaded Pilimataḷāvai to give up his hatred for you. I won his consent to my advice that the army of Mullaittīvu should support that of Kaṇṭi."

Paṇṭārakaṉ smiled as he said, "You made him agree with you. Right. But how is it that before you make anyone agree with you, you give yourself up to one?"

"That is because… that is because of my association with Piyacīli. It is infectious. But I have to say this. This affliction will win over anyone, howsoever valiant one may be, howsoever inspired by the chosen mission. Excepting one person and that one person is you."

Kuruvicci lost her patience and slapped her across her face.

"What words do you utter and to whom? I have remained patient with you just because you carried the letter from the king of Kaṇṭi."

She turned to Paṇṭārakaṉ with the same anger burning within and said, "Please look closely at the letter. See if it is actually written by the king of Kaṇṭi."

"I had the same doubt, Kuruvicci. This letter has been written in Vikramarāja Siṅghē's hand for sure. So it is authentic."

Marttaṉi tried to address them with due respect. "I am sorry. I have been talking all and sundry with scant regard for etiquette. It is a mistake by habit. I have been under the impression that there was nothing wrong with such flippant talk. I came here on a mission of goodwill. I should not have spoken about matters immoral. What could I do? That has become my second nature. Both of you should pardon me my flippant tongue."

She fell at their feet.

Paṇṭārakaṉ and Kuruvicci looked at each other as if saying that there were such ignoble persons too in the world.

"That is all right. Get up. Return to Kaṇṭi immediately and tell Vikramarāja Siṅghē and Pilimataḷāvai that I have told you that my army is ready to help Kaṇṭi. Tell them I will lead the army myself."

Marttaṉi felt with her fingers the slapped cheek as she started leaving. Paṇṭārakaṉ and Kuruvicci sent a few maids to accompany her. Then they started discussing the issue of sending their army to help the king of Kaṇṭi.

"You said that you would lead our troops yourself. What will happen if the British forces intercept you?"

"When it is war, one should be prepared for all eventualities."

"I have a hunch that Pilimataḷāvai should have hatched a plot in the whole affair."

"It is quite clear that the letter is from the king of Kaṇṭi."

"Perhaps Pilimataḷāvai has imprisoned the king and has coerced this letter from him?"

"If we nurse such doubts and refrain from sending our troops, the British would have entered Kaṇṭi before we have our doubts cleared."

"So?"

"Listen! You lead our troops and you camp a little away from Kaṇṭi on the way. Meanwhile, I will go to Kaṇṭi by another path and meet Vikramarāja Siṅghē without Pilimataḷāvai's knowledge. Then I will send suitable message to your camp site."

"That is a good arrangement indeed."

"Kuruvicci, stay back. I will talk to a few of our lieutenants and get back."

When Paṇṭārakaṉ left the place, Kuruvicci was lost in deep thoughts. It was sweet to hear that she had to lead the troops. It took long for Paṇṭārakaṉ to return. A guard came in. He greeted Kuruvicci with respect. She looked at him as if asking what the matter was. He said that a doctor had come over there to meet Paṇṭārakaṉ. It seemed as if he had been invited.

He was followed by an old man in a white beard. That was the doctor the guard had mentioned.

"Why did he invite you?"

"What is a doctor called for? Should be for some medical assistance."

"What has happened to him? Why should he have called you?"

"What is to be done at times? He is well-built. He is like a lion. He leads the nation. And yet, it seems he is not masculine enough. I have come to attend to this malady."

Kuruvicci looked at the doctor with wide eyes.

"That is why he does not accost you. He has called me to attend on him. Don't you know anything about this till now?

Kuruvicci Nācciyār stared at the doctor. The doctor could understand that she was disturbed. "It is all right. Don't be scared. I will cure him and make him regain his libido."

63 Doctor in Disguise

Kuruvicci expressed surprise when she said, "He hasn't even obliquely referred to this weakness of his."

"Is it something that can be told a woman? Besides, there would have been no necessity to mention it to you because of the vow of celibacy that you have taken. Am I right?"

The doctor brushed his beard with his fingers and looked at Kuruvicci up and down.

"Doctor! From what you say, I understand that this is not something that has happened recently. It should have been congenital. I can understand that he has taken up the vow of celibacy and had made me also take up the vow only to conceal his inability."

"You have said it very correctly. But there is something I should mention. It is sinful on the part of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. No one can forgive him for having made you waste your life away just to make a secret of his weakness. You are so youthful I say."

"Doctor! I have lost all my affection, love and passion for him once you told me about his weakness."

"Really?"

"Not only have they left me. I have come to hate him."

"Woe is me! Hatred? Am I responsible for it?"

"Yes, you should own the responsibility for it hereafter."

"What do you mean? I don't understand anything."

"Aren't you that wonderful doctor who can make men get their libido?"

"Of course, I am."

"So you should be full of libido. You should be a treasure trove of libido."

"So what?"

"I have come to have a great respect for you since you have brought out the great secret of a person who has been cheating me for such a long time."

"Respect?"

"Not only respect but also tremendous love."

"Love? Do you love me, of all in the world?"

"Not only love but also huge affection."

"Affection? Towards this old man much beyond his youth?"

"Not only tremendous love and huge affection but also intense passion."

"What? What? What do you say?"

"What then? You are a thousand times better than Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ who had planned to undo my life with scant regard for the surging passions of my youth. You are greater than him by a thousand times. I have lost my heart to you at first sight."

"This is so strange! If Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ comes to know of this, his sword will kill me."

"Have I bequeathed my life to him?"

"Whatever may it be - you shall not change your heart so hastily."

"My dear doctor! You too should not have so hurriedly pasted the beard on your face. Feel for yourself. It has not been pasted properly by the side of your ear."

She pressed his beard to his face with her fingers and started laughing spontaneously. Lest her laughter should be heard outside the room, he closed her mouth.

"You tried to deceive me. Who stands deceived now? You or I?"

"We cannot deceive each other. We will not be deceived too."

"You have planned to go to the palace at Kaṇṭi in this disguise?"

"Yes, Kuruvicci. I have decided to meet the king of Kaṇṭi in disguise. Otherwise, Pilimataḷāvai will devise some scheme or other to prevent our meeting in person. So you can start leading our troops as I have told you. I will send word to your camp from Kaṇṭi. Then our troops can act."

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ took leave of Kuruvicci. Looking at the majesty of his gait from behind, Kuruvicci said loud enough to make him hear.

"Your disguise will not betray you. But this majesty will."

There was delight in her voice as she said this. Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ who heard her words turned back and smiled full of love for her. Then he bent like an old man and showed her how he would walk as an old man. She was made to laugh.

He mounted the horse waiting for him at the palace gate. He waved to Kuruvicci and spurred it on. That lass was delighted at the sight of her dear charming lover majestic like a hillock, the valiant idealist, the hero of faith, the great man who will not hesitate to lay down his life to preserve the honour of his country, riding away as an old man sitting bent on horseback in the guise of a doctor.

She cherished every moment of their encounter – how he came disguised; how he spoke mischievously; how she was at first taken aback; then how she tried to upset him after coming to know of what was happening. The waterfall of love made music like a lady with an anklet and made her heart reel in delight.

She had such a passion for him. He was no less in his passion for her.

That passion spread into a huge expanse like the sky because it had kept in abeyance the natural urges of youth and had bound fast the two hearts together with the rope of their ideal.

She kept looking at the horse until it disappeared from sight and then regained her senses to walk back into the palace. The lieutenants got ready as she had ordered. She left behind enough troops for the security of the palace at Mullaittīvu and the borders. She ordered that all the other soldiers should assemble to march with her.

Meanwhile, besides the troops led by McDowel, another troop led by Barbit also started towards Kaṇṭi. Their troops reached a place called Mahāvillā Gangā, about three miles from Kaṇṭi. When Pilimataḷāvai was told that the British army was so close, he was shocked. He was perturbed that the troops of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ had not yet arrived at Kaṇṭi. He ran to meet the king of Kaṇṭi. He knocked at the door violently.

"This fellow has no sense of time for his indulgence in lust. The enemies are so close. He is rolling on his bed with his wife." He murmured within.

The doors were thrown open. Pilimataḷāvai took notice of the fact that the queen came in person to open the door. He said, "Where is the king?" He sounded very harsh.

"He is not doing well. The doctor is examining him," she pointed at the king on his cot.

Pilimataḷāvai said, "Is it so?" and looked at the bed.

The king lay supine. Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ in the guise of a doctor was examining him with his palm on his stomach.

64 Drums of War

Pilimataḷāvai came along saying, "What happened to you at this time of the day?"". Irritated as he was, he could not identify Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ in disguise. It was Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ who answered his question as the doctor. His faltering gait and voice well suited his disguise of an elderly person.

"The king is suffering from stomach pain. I have given him medicine. He will be all right soon."

"That is all right. If you have finished your job, why don't you get out? I have something confidential to discuss with the king."

"Forgive me! Forgive me! I am leaving. Your Highness! Please give him the medicine I have given you for two more times. The king will become all right."

The doctor pretended to be leaving the palace. He walked with the utmost humility taking his leave of Pilimataḷāvai and the queen. He hid himself behind the door. Pilimataḷāvai did not bother to pay attention to the doctor in his hurry to talk to the king of Kaṇṭi and sat beside him.

"Do you know that the British army has reached Mahāvillā Gangā and camped there?"

"Yes. I received information a little while ago."

"You know and yet you are abed having a stomach pain?"

"I was about to send someone to fetch you. Meanwhile, you are here."

"What is to be done now? I expected that Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ to come here. That fellow has cheated us."

"Yes. I am also surprised. I never expected that my friend would leave me in the lurch."

"Let friendship go to hell. I was preparing for the war with the British only with the fond hope of his support. And now I don't know what to do."

"I have thought at length and have decided upon something. If you were to accept what I have to suggest, I could inform you of it."

"This is like leading the cow into water and then negotiating a deal for it. What have you thought? What is your decision? I can tell you if it is acceptable or not only if you put it in so many words."

"I have informed my queen of it and she has consented."

"How long are you going to close your fist and keep asking me what is there? It is absolute foolishness to forget that the enemies have camped at Mahāvillā Gangā and indulge in idle talk."

"Why should we consider them our enemies?"

"What else? Shall we welcome the British and the Dutch in support of them as our friends?"

"It is not wrong to welcome them."

"What? I say that they are our enemies. I want to avenge them. It is absolute cowardice to think of welcoming them."

"You are greater than I in your wisdom, skills and experience. I have the least doubt about it. You will not be so impatient if you come to know of what I have decided upon."

"Decision, decision! What is that grand decision of yours? A decision that did not strike me of all!"

"This decision will strike only those who are prepared for any sacrifice for the country."

"Do you mean to say that I don't have a heart that would not sacrifice anything for the sake of the country?"

"Please don't be in a hurry. If you listen to what I say patiently, it will be good for me. It will be good for you. It will be good for the people of Kaṇṭi too."

"Go ahead!"

"Somehow the British have marched towards Kaṇṭi with a large army. Our trust in Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ has also been betrayed. In such a situation, if there is a war, chances are that we may lose heavily and meet our defeat. It is not only the soldiers but the general public that will be killed in large numbers."

"Have you decided to surrender to the British?"

"I can understand that you want to fight it out with the British and avenge them. But there is something else. If you come to know of what all I have decided, you will be happy."

"Oho! You haven't told me everything? Let me listen to you. What is your decision?"

"We allow the British army to enter Kaṇṭi without any resistance. Not even a single soldier is to hold his sword against them. They enter the palace. I assure them that I abdicate my throne and that Kaṇṭi will be subject to the British rule. I make a request to the effect that the authority to rule Kaṇṭi shall be entrusted to Pilimataḷāvai. They are agreeable to it. I make you sit on the throne. I leave with my family immediately on our way to Tamiḻnāṭu. This is my decision."

Pilimataḷāvai could not believe his own ears when he heard what Vikramarāja Siṅghē had said.

He had been the uncrowned monarch of Kaṇṭi till then. The prospect of becoming the king of Kaṇṭi without spilling a drop of blood for it appealed to him so strongly that the fire of anger he had nursed in his heart for the British over the death of his daughter started cooling down. Looking at the lines of happiness that ran through the face of Pilimataḷāvai, Vikramarāja Siṅghē could only be surprised at the effect of desire for power.

Pilimataḷāvai reviewed the situation within himself. 'Vikramarāja Siṅghē does not want to sit on the throne of Kaṇṭi as a subject to the British. So he has cleverly decided on abdication. And the fool that he is, he has decided to make me the king of Kaṇṭi. Anyhow, the kingdom of Kaṇṭi will be in my hands without any effort on my part. I should owe my gratitude to my daughter Piyacīli who had never bothered about chastity.' Such were the thoughts that ran through his mind. The King of Kaṇṭi looked at his queen with a meaningful smile on his face. She showed no emotion on her face. She was only watchful that Pilimataḷāvai should not notice Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ beside the door.

"So let me order the security forces at our borders to withdraw. Our soldiers are not to be found even on the streets."

"That is good. Let our soldiers drink themselves to sleep in their camps. Let the army of the British march up to the palace without any resistance. Let me welcome them and surrender the kingdom to you through them before I take leave of you."

The delight of Pilimataḷāvai was the confluence of many seas of happiness. Is it such a simple matter to become the king of Kaṇṭi without shedding a drop of blood? He patted the king of Kaṇṭi on his back and left the place.

His thoughts danced in delight again. 'It is in a way good that Piyacīli had been killed so cruelly. Otherwise, he could not have become angry with the British. The British march against Kaṇṭi would not have happened. Everything was happening in such an unexpected manner. Even if Kaṇṭi was subject to the British rule, he was going to become the king of Kaṇṭi.' As he left with such thoughts dancing in his mind, Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ who was till then beside the door walked in, after bolting the door behind. He brushed his beard with his fingers and smiled at Vikramarāja Siṅghē.

"Have I played my role properly as you have directed? Was everything all right?"

"Great! It was wonderful. Did you notice how far Pilimataḷāvai's desire for power could go? It is enough for him to be the king of Kaṇṭi even if it were subject to British rule."

Paṇṭārakaṉ bit his teeth and expressed his anger at Pilimataḷāvai.

"He has made people believe that he was opposing the British rule. Now he is going to throw the blame of betraying the country to the British on me. He is going to be the errand boy of the British as the king of Kaṇṭi."

"That is what he thinks is going to happen. He believes in the words you have spoken as counselled by me. What is going to happen is going to be different, you see."

Paṇṭārakaṉ laughed aloud.

"Let us see how your plan works out."

Vikramarāja Siṅghē left the bed and started walking across the room.

"Let me take leave. I should send message to Kuruvicci. Don't worry. Everything will happen as we have planned. Let me go now."

He shook the king of Kaṇṭi by his shoulders and left the place in the guise of the doctor.

General McDowel at the camp of Mahāvillā Gangā laughed aloud as he threw a bottle of wine and broke it to pieces. He had understood that there was not even a single soldier to resist the British.

"My soldiers! Empty as many bottles as you can. Take arms! There is none to stop us at Kaṇṭi. Start immediately."

The soldiers sprang to action as soon as they heard his order. Empty bottles rolled on the ground. The drums of war were beaten. The army marched.

65 The Field at Kaṇṭi

When the British army started from Mahāvillā Gangā, Muttuccāmy arrived at the place with a small army and joined them. General McDowell patted him on the back and said, "You should guide us to enter the city of Kaṇṭi easily and to surround the palace."

Muttuccāmy was the person who had already proclaimed himself to be the king of Kaṇṭi. He was an errand boy in the camp of the British. So he took McDowell's order in all earnestness and became delighted as if he were entering the city of Kaṇṭi as its king. Muttuccāmy's army marched ahead of the British army, leading the way. McDowell was surprised that there was no resistance of any kind through the way. He looked at Muttuccāmy with a quizzical expression on his face.

"You are surprised that there is absolutely no resistance? That is what this Muttuccāmy has accomplished. I have already sent word to Kaṇṇuccāmy and Pilimataḷāvai. I have told them that they should not confront the British and see their end."

"Who is that Kaṇṇuccāmy?"

"Don't you know? He is my rival. The original name of Vikramarāja Siṅghē who is now the king of Kaṇṭi is Kaṇṇuccāmy. He is back to being Kaṇṇuccāmy again from today."

"Do you think that he and Pilimataḷāvai would have made good their escape from the city?

"I don't think so. They will be getting ready to welcome us and surrender themselves to us. You should grant them their life and put them in the prison at Colombo. You should declare that Muttuccāmy is the king of Kaṇṭi."

"We do not have any two opinions that we need only such faithful vassals like you. Let them first surrender themselves. Lord North will take care of the formalities of what is to follow."

General McDowell and Muttuccāmy reached the borders of the city talking between themselves in this vain. There was no sign any movement there. It is usual to have at least a hundred armed guards at the gates of the city. But when McDowell's troops reached the gates, there was no guard even for a semblance of defence. McDowell turned back to look at his soldiers. There was an expression of pride and delight on his face. He waved his arm to his troops to follow him and march ahead.

Not only were there no soldiers through the streets of Kaṇṭi but even the movement of the general public was missing.

The British army marched majestically without any obstruction like water flowing from an elevation towards the lower ground.

A little way after crossing the border, a soldier from Kaṇṭi rode a horse and greeted McDowell. The British soldiers became wary and held their weapons up. Nothing of what they expected happened. He bowed to McDowell and offered a scroll to him. When Muttuccāmy tried to snatch it, that soldier ignored him and gave it to General McDowell. The General read the letter and laughed aloud. "Great!" Muttuccāmy waited for what he had to say next and kept looking at his face anxiously.

"The king of Kaṇṭi Vikramarāja Siṅghē has decided to abdicate." The General declared majestically.

"That means that this Muttuccāmy will be the king of Kaṇṭi as already declared has been confirmed."

"Muttuccāmy, don't be in a hurry. Vikramarāja Siṅghē has abdicated but has requested us to entrust the throne to Pilimataḷāvai who has been ordered to be a faithful vassal to us."

"So what is going to be my fate?" Muttuccāmy almost shouted in disappointment.

"Your fate is already decided." A voice was heard just then. It was the voice of a woman. All turned to the direction from where it was heard. Kuruvicci Nācciyār came off her hiding behind a pillar with a drawn sword. She was dressed for the battlefield. General McDowell was shocked for a moment. But the next moment he

warned his soldiers. Kuruvicci was not scared. She stood with her head held high and with the sword in her arm. Her eyes turned to Muttuccāmy.

"Respected Muttuccāmy! Thank you very much. You have brought the British army as we have planned. The troops of Kaṇṭi and those of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ are ready to surround the British army and reduce them to pieces. Respected Muttuccāmy! We should build a temple for you for the cunning with which you have led the British army into the trap at Kaṇṭi."

When Kuruvicci said this, Muttuccāmy started trembling all through.

"Me? Did I act as planned by you? What blabbering is this? Who are you, lady?"

"Don't you know me? I am Kuruvicci Nācciyār. General McDowell! The letter you read was not written by the king of Kaṇṭi Vikramarāja Siṅghē. I wrote it. Our plan is to make you enter the city of Kaṇṭi and trap you. This Muttuccāmy had been of great service towards that end. That made me thank him first."

Kuruvicci persisted with her lie quite adroitly to have a betrayer undone at the hands of the enemies. Even when Muttuccāmy was denying it, the doors of the houses around opened up to bring out the troops of Kaṇṭi and Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ in large numbers. They surrounded the British army on all four sides and fast approached them.

McDowell became furious at having been deceived. He burst like a volcano.

"You pretended to be a friend but had been cunning like a fox." He shouted at Muttuccāmy.

Before Muttuccāmy could say anything, McDowell's sword severed his head from his body. The trunk and head of Muttuccāmy fell on each side of his horse. Kuruvicci was happy at what had happened to the betrayer at the hands of the enemy. The soldiers who had followed Muttuccāmy were disturbed at the loss of their leader and sprang upon McDowell. Taking advantage of the scuffle between the British and the soldiers of Muttuccāmy, the troops of Kaṇṭi and Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ started their concerted attack on the British.

Pilimataḷāvai was surprised at how the soldiers of Kaṇṭi started their attack on the British. He was wondering as to whose orders they were following. He ran to Vikramarāja Siṅghē.

Vikramarāja Siṅghē was patient enough to offer his explanation to Pilimataḷāvai.

"The army of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ had suddenly arrived to support us. I took the decision myself." He was firm in his remark. Pilimataḷāvai managed to pretend to be unperturbed.

"That is a good decision. I was worried about the possibility of taking over the responsibility of the kingdom all on my poor shoulders. It is good that there is a sudden turn of events. I am free now. Hail Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ." Though he spoke thus, he was venomous right up to the roots of his hair.

The British forces were destroyed totally, caught in the strategy of least resistance until arriving into the city and then having been attacked suddenly. General McDowell and Colonel Barbut could not withstand the attack. They still fought fiercely to bring Kaṇṭi under their control. The bodies of dead soldiers fell in heaps through the city. At one point of time, Kuruvicci was well within the range of McDowell's revolver. Within a wink of the eye, she would have been struck down. But something happened that made McDowell fall off his horse and run for his life. Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ sprang upon him.

Thereafter there was such a fierce battle with arrows shot, spears thrown, swords wielded that the British could not stand it any the more. They started running away from the battlefield. Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ dragged one Major Davey through the streets of Kaṇṭi and ordered his imprisonment. The others ran for their lives and hid themselves at the ford at Vaṭṭapēlikā. Thus Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ and Kuruvicci Nācciyār defeated the British onslaught of Kaṇṭi with courage at heart.

The king of Kaṇṭi proposed to celebrate his victory in the presence of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ and Kuruvicci Nācciyār. Pilimataḷāvai seconded the proposition. And yet the thought of how to get rid of these 'sinners' took the form of the air he was breathing.

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's soldiers surrounded the fort wherein McDowell had hid himself. Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ came to know that his soldiers would kill McDowell. He rushed to save McDowell.

66 The Flag of Peace and the Celebration of Victory

McDowell had entered Kaṇṭi like a valiant tiger but had to leave it like a belittled goat. He hid in a fort on the way to Triṅkōmalai and was held in siege by the soldiers of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ and Kaṇṭi. Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ was informed of another British contingent led by Lieutenant Madge sent through Triṅkōmalai to help McDowell. Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ was rushing to save McDowell from his own soldiers. He had, however, to address the problem of meeting Lieutenant Madge's army on the way.

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ confronted Lieutenant Madge's army in a little while since they left Triṅkōmalai. Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's soldiers had known the tricks of evading the bullets from the guns of the British. They also knew how to throw spears at the British and bring them down. The soldiers of Lieutenant Madge could

not sustain for long against the attack from Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's army. So he declared ceasefire. His soldiers were awaiting his orders.

"There is only one way left for us now to win the armies of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ and Kaṇṭi."

The British soldiers shouted at him to name it. "We should return to Triṅkōmalai right now. Otherwise, all our souls will reach the blessed heaven. What shall we do of the two?"

Lieutenant Madge had a sense of humour. He did not like the foolish idea of losing his life in the battlefield. He knew pretty well about the strength of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. He knew that Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ could fight singlehandedly against an army. So to the surprise of Paṇṭārakaṉ and his soldiers, he backed away to Triṅkōmalai with his soldiers.

Proud at heart at his success in the battlefields at Kaṇṭi and near Triṅkōmalai, Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ hurried on his way to save McDowell. The soldiers who had laid the fort at siege made way for Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ to pass though. He smiled at them and ordered them to stand still. The soldiers were terribly impressed at the grandeur with which their leader dismounted his horse. They stood around him and said in one voice, "It is not good for you to walk in. We don't like the idea of your entering the fort all alone."

"Fear? Me? When you are there? When I am at your hearts?" He shrugged his broad shoulders and entered the fort all by himself.

The entrance was like a cave and he crossed it. The British soldiers surrounded him and moved towards him with their guns aimed at his chest. Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ, who had entered the fort without any security, did not bother. He stood with a smile in their midst. Just then the furious McDowell came running to the place with a pistol aimed at him.

"You have entered the lion's den." He laughed proudly. Paṇṭārakaṉ looked at him with the least hatred. On the other hand, that valiant Vaṉṉiyaṉ laughed at him aloud.

"You foolish General! I have come here to save you from my own soldiers. I have come here to give you your life in alms."

The British General did not understand the magnanimity of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. "You of all? Making alms of my life?" He roared.

"Have you forgotten how you were trapped at the city of Kaṇṭi? Have you forgotten how you ran to save your life and hid yourself in this fort? Don't forget that I have come here guided by the magnanimity of not killing the one who is running for life and I am here to save you."

"Oh, you want me to learn the lesson of the morality of the battlefield? You are trapped here and you cannot run away and you cannot hide anywhere here. I need your life right now."

McDowell kept his pistol at close range at the centre of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's forehead and was about to trigger. The next moment, Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ held his arm strongly and turned it away from him. "You can kill me now. But do you know how many soldiers are waiting outside to make a sieve of your body?" He said this in a calm, collected and deliberate voice. McDowell was surprised at how calm and collected the valiant Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ stood beside him even when he was surrounded by numerous soldiers with their guns pointing at him.

"Paṇṭāraka! I know that the moment your body falls dead here, your soldiers will run helter-skelter."

"McDowell! That is where you are miscalculating. The soldiers will run helter-skelter at the fall of their leader. The enemy camp will be in disarry. There will be none to lead. Such things may happen elsewhere. But my soldiers are not of that sort. Even if they happen to see their leader dead, they would never leave the battlefield until they breathe their last breath. Do you think that you can leave this fort alive after killing me? That is how a brainless idiot would calculate. Let us see. Shoot me down. Let your people understand that the next moment you will become holed like a sieve. I pitied you because you had to run away from the battlefield. I came rushing when I came to know that you were in danger. I am not prepared to offer any more explanation. That does not become of the valiant. I have come to you all by myself. Kill me and escape from my soldiers if you have the courage."

General McDowell was shocked at the speech of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. He dropped his pistol down and shook hands with Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ.

Meanwhile, the soldiers outside the fort became restless as to what might have happened to their leader. It was too long since Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ went into the fort and they had become suspicious. They were so perturbed that they started moving into the fort in trickles. The guards at the gate resisted them and fell dead. So also a few of them were killed by the guards.

When the situation boiled down to a stage when all the soldiers were about to enter the fort, General McDowell came out holding a white flag on hand. Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ followed him like a leaping tiger.

"My soldiers! I am about to send General McDowell back to Colombo as a warning to the British and to declare that they have no place on our soil. I expect the British to leave our island in appreciation of our magnanimity in sending back safe a general who ran away from the battlefield after a defeat. General McDowell

is now permitted to go back to Colombo with the flag of peace. I request you to make way for him to go."

"Thanks." said McDowell as he left with his men. The soldiers of Kaṇṭi and Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ clapped in appreciation of the noble gesture and praised their leader for his magnanimity.

When General McDowell reached Colombo holding the white flag, Lord North became furious. When explanation was offered, he called for a counsel presided by Lord North.

The strategies of Lord North were subject to criticism in the counsel.

Pilimataḷāvai has deceived them professing to be of support to the establishment of the British empire. So the first mistake was to have taken him into trust. A greater mistake was to have given asylum to Muttuccāmy at Colombo under the impression that he had a huge army behind him. It was because of him that they had to meet with the final defeat. Criticism went on on these lines. The counsel was of the considered opinion that the most important reason behind their defeat was the fact that Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ entered the battlefield in support of the king of Kaṇṭi and performed such heroic exploits. The criticism reached an end with that. The counsel adjourned.

When the British imperialists were holding their counsel at Colombo, Vikramarāja Siṅghē was busy arranging in all earnestness the celebration of victory. Pilimataḷāvai on his part was thinking of how to vitiate the celebration.

67 Blood-stained Sword

My beauty! My darling! The castles I built in my mind have crumbled to pieces, thunderstruck. I am now a broken wall. I was looking forward to being crowned by the British. Right under my nose that Vikramarāja Siṅghē and Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ along with that baby Kuruvicci Nācciyār hold a celebration of their victory. Marttaṉi! Tell me how I can vitiate that auspicious occasion."

Pilimataḷāvai hung on Marttaṉi's lips with his pale face for an answer.

"I am a Sinhalese woman. You are a mine of experience. Everyone hails you as a great administrator. I have been going along with all Piyacīli's tantrums just as a friend of hers. Not only did I go along with her but also I committed a number of mistakes. I regret my past now. When I accompanied Piyacīli to Mullaittīvu, I had been looking down upon the Tamiḻs. But only when I moved in close quarters with Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ, Kuruvicci Nācciyār and the Tamiḻs over there, did I understand how cultured they were and how resolved they were that the British sovereignty should never sustain on the island of Lanka. We should recall how anxious Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ should have been in that he brought his entire force to Kaṇṭi to prevent the British aggression. So my heart will not dare to offend Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ or the flame of his heart, Kuruvicci Nācciyār, in the least."

Pilimataḷāvai's eyes widened in an ugly twist. There was great disappointment in his eyes.

"Marttaṉi! You are proud about being a Sinhalese woman. What is the use? I dreamed of wearing the crown of Kaṇṭi and lie with you on bed with my head on

your heals to touch your feet with the crown. When I see that you don't take part in my sadness of not having the dream becoming true, I have become doubtful if you are a Sinhalese woman at all."

"What you say sounds funny. If one happens to be a Sinhalese woman, should one necessarily be a smiling spider? Can't you too think for yourself and take a decision like mine?"

"Oh, you have already decided upon something? You have decided to betray the Sinhalese to the Tamiḻs?"

"The Sinhalese and the Tamiḻs are the sons of the soil. My desire is that these two races should live in amity getting their share of equal rights here. Where is the question of betraying one to the other? Please permit me to atone for all the sins I have committed."

"I have been observing you right from the moment I came here. You stand away from me. I could not see that slant of the eye that entices me. The breasts that draw me to them are beneath your saree like the sun during the monsoon hidden behind the clouds. What is the reason? Perhaps you are going to become a Buddhist mendicant?"

"I don't need to become a mendicant to throw away the heaps of filth within and pursue the path of virtue. My desire is that I should have the purity and truth of a Buddhist mendicant. I don't believe in guises."

"How changed you are, Marttaṉi! There should be a few immediate reasons for this surprising change."

"I have already told you. The pure friendship that Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ has for the king of Kaṇṭi has made me respect him greatly. Paṇṭārakaṉ and Kuruvicci do not consider it the ideal of their life to appease the basic physical urges. They live a life of an ideal. Their ideal is that the British authority over Lanka shall be done away with. It is not that I am impressed by their thoughts and actions. My own past misdeeds make me feel as if I am standing barefeet on hot sands and being whipped sharply."

"Great! Marttaṉi who wriggled on my lap has suddenly become faithful to the king of Kaṇṭi. She has become a devotee of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ."

"No. I have become woman enough to have pasted the neglected femininity onto my flesh and soul."

"Does that mean you will not suggest means to vitiate the celebration of victory at Kaṇṭi, much to my heartache?"

"I say that the celebrations should not be disrupted in any way. How can I then suggest means to vitiate it?"

Even as they were talking to each other, the face of the city of Kaṇṭi started showing a bright face with scenes of celebration.

There were festoons through all the streets. There were rows of lamps in all houses. Men and women were clad in new dresses dancing in praise of the king of Kaṇṭi. The soldiers who had so far held swords now held flags up in the air as they went on a procession through the streets. Among them was the king of Kaṇṭi along with his wife riding a chariot in a royal procession. Close to his chariot was another in which Paṇṭārakaṉ and Kuruvicci sat with bright faces. The court hall in the palace of Kaṇṭi was grandly decorated for them to sit in royal grandeur to acknowledge the appreciation of the people of Kaṇṭi. The people looked at the king of Kaṇṭi and Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ for the valiant that they were and showered flowers on them and danced. There was a sword in a gold sheath shining beautifully, kept on a silver plate in the court hall.

It was meant for the gift of the king of Kaṇṭi to Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. The royal procession through the enthusiastic people ended as Paṇṭārakaṉ and Vikramarāja Siṅghē entered the court hall. Kuruvicci and the queen of Kaṇṭi followed them. The wise and the scholarly in the court hall stood up with due reverence and greeted them.

Pilimatalāvai was nowhere to be seen till then. But then he came to stand close to the king's seat in the court hall. The king was surprised to see him and looked at Paṇṭārakaṉ meaningfully. Paṇṭārakaṉ just smiled as he proceeded further through the hall.

The king of Kaṇṭi reached his seat and waited for his queen to be seated. He showed Paṇṭārakaṉ and Kuruvicci their seats. Everyone sat on his or her respective seat with a heart filled with happiness. The king of Kaṇṭi stood up to address the court.

"The foremost cause behind the chance we have to address this auspicious assembly of celebration is Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ." The whole hall reverberated with the hands that clapped and the voices that hailed him. Paṇṭārakaṉ bowed to the assembly in acknowledgement of their appreciation and straightened himself.

Pilimataḷāvai murmured within, "Auspicious, you say? No! No! If I do not make it a funeral of it, my vow will remain unfulfilled."

"Minister Pilimataḷāvai! I intend to offer a royal gift of a sword to Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ, the valiant of the valiant, for having stalled the British aggression and made them run head over heels. That sword is to be offered on the occasion of these auspicious festivities. Take the sword and give it over to me. Let me offer it to him as our gift."

Even before the king of Kaṇṭi could complete his speech, Pilimataḷāvai went to him, offered his respects and said, "As you desire, your highness!"

He did not stop there. He drew the sword from its sheath in his hip and extended it to the king with due respects.

All the eyes were riveted on the sword. The sword was not only stained with blood but was also dripping blood.

"Minister! What is this?" the shocked Vikramarāja Siṅghē shouted.

"King of Kaṇṭi! A woman planned to make a funeral of this auspicious celebrations. She had planned to kill the king and the queen together. I have come straight to this hall with the sword with which I have killed her."

"Who is she?"

"Marttaṉi!"

When Pilimataḷāvai mentioned the name of Marttaṉi, Kuruvicci stood up to shout, "No, I won't believe."

68 The Atonement of a Lady

The celebration of victory became a celebration of mourning as Pilimataḷāvai had planned to make it. Just as Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ was aware of the viciousness which Pilimataḷāvai's egg-like eyes spewed, the king of Kaṇṭi was also aware of it. So they were not surprised at the shock Kuruvicci expressed. They had themselves been taken aback by the turn of events. The celebrations were cancelled. Paṇṭārakaṉ did not fail to notice Vikramarāja Siṅghē was looking at him with appealing eyes full of sadness.

"It is all right. We can celebrate any time. But we have to hurry to find the truth." said Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ with a reassuring hand on the shoulder of the king of Kaṇṭi. The king of Kaṇṭi said, "Forgive me!" and started walking fast towards the inner parts of the palace. Paṇṭārakaṉ, Kuruvicci and the queen followed him. Pilimataḷāvai was happy that he had brought the auspicious celebrations to an end with the death of Marttaṉi. He widened his owlish eyes and passed his palm through his tonsured head as he followed them.

Unaware of where Marttaṉi's body should be, the king of Kaṇṭi had been rushing through the corridors of the palace. He stopped abruptly and looked at Pilimataḷāvai.

"Where is Marttaṉi?" he shouted at Pilimataḷāvai. The note of authority was unmistakable in his voice as Pilimataḷāvai noticed.

"This courage is not his own. He is so audacious just because his friend Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ is there by his side." said Pilimataḷāvai within himself.

"That treacherous woman is there in my chamber as a corpse."

As soon as Pilimataḷāvai said that, Vikramarāja Siṅghē asked even as he started walking, "Your chamber? Why did she go there? How did she reach the place?"

"She has a sort of relationship with me. She came to my chamber on the strength of such relationship to confide her plan to me. As soon as I came to know the plan of the cunning woman, I could not contain myself and killed her in my loyalty to the royalty."

Kuruvicci confronted Pilimataḷāvai with a harsh voice, "You can go to those who don't know you and declare that you always speak the truth. They may believe in your words. We cannot believe the fabricated story of Marttaṉi having planned to kill the king and the queen."

"Why do you waste your words in haste? Why should I tell you a lie? What is the necessity for me to kill a lady who was desirous of me? Walk a little and you can reach my chamber. Once we are there all the truth will be out."

He rolled his egg-like eyes and swept his tonsured head with his palm as he laughed obscenely. That was a horrible way to laugh indeed.

They reached his chamber even as they kept talking to each other.

Kuruvicci said, "Where is Marttaṉi?"

Kuruvicci was wild because she recalled the affection that Marttaṉi had shown to her during those few days after she had reformed herself though she had visited Mullaittīvu with the intention of harming them. Her beautiful eyes rolled around the chamber. There was no body of Marttaṉi anywhere there. But they were able to see patches of blood throughout the chamber. Pilimataḷāvai was also shocked when the body of Marttaṉi was not to be found there.

"How strange everything is! Where is her body?" Vikramarāja Siṅghē's tone was intimidating and Pilimataḷāvai felt irritated. "Wherefore is this audacity and courage for this fellow?" he stared at him with this thought in his mind. For all that he was himself shocked. He had stabbed Marttaṉi a little while ago in the same chamber. Where could her body have gone?

"It is here, right here that I stabbed her to death with this sword."

"Everything that happens in the palace of Kaṇṭi is mysterious. Someone is said to have plotted to kill the king and the queen. She has desire for this man. So he killed her. The dead had gone to heaven in her embodied self. Mr Pilimataḷāvai!

Do you want us to believe all these stories?" Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ said this not only ridiculing Pilimataḷāvai but also with anger bubbling out like lava from a volcano.

Pilimataḷāvai had plans to go about his last and final conspiracy in the palace of Kaṇṭi only after biding his time till Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ was sent back to Mullaittīvu and so answered him without being perturbed.

"Believe my loyalty to the royalty. Otherwise, I would not have killed a woman despite the blight of killing a woman falling on me. Look here. There is milk in these golden cups. Marttaṉi had arranged for this poisonous milk to be served to the king and the queen. I tried to prevent her. She insisted on going about with her plans. She told me that she has negotiated with the British. They had promised her that I would be made the king of Kaṇṭi and she could become the queen. She wanted to go about the conspiracy for it. I told her that I did not need the kingdom of Kaṇṭi and that I would remain loyal to Vikramarāja Siṅghē till my last. She was particular about serving the poisonous milk to the king and the queen. Even if I did stop her then, she vowed that she would kill them some other time with the same poison. I became so furious that I did not know what I was doing. I took my sword and stabbed her at her breast."

Kuruvicci refused to believe and said, "Utter lies! Skilful drama! Wonderful action!"

"Won't you believe? See for yourself what kind of a poison is added to the milk here." He took the golden bowls and poured the milk on the floor. There was cat in a corner of the chamber. It ran to the milk and licked it. Even as it was licking the milk, it fell down dead.

"Won't you believe me even now? It is a poison that could kill even if taken to the lips. How can I permit someone to kill the king with such poison? How can I leave such an unworthy woman alive?"

The expression on the face of the king of Kaṇṭi showed that he thought that perhaps Pilimataḷāvai was speaking the truth. But Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ did not want him to continue with such a strain of thought. He looked at Pilimataḷāvai and said, "If that be so, where is the body of Marttaṉi you killed? Where have you hidden it? What is the necessity to hide it?"

"I did not hide the body of that vile woman."

"Where did it disappear then? Who had hidden it?" There was a certain majesty in Paṇṭārakaṉ's voice.

"No one has hidden. I hid myself." The voice of a woman was heard in the chamber. That was the voice of Marttaṉi indeed. Before they could turn to the

place from where they heard the voice, Marttaṉi came out of her hiding behind a curtain, bloody all through.

"I haven't yet died. I want to live for a few moments more. All of you are here as I expected. I was holding on to my last breath only with that expectation and with this knife on hand behind the curtain. I have already asked you to forgive me my misdeeds. I request you once again to forgive me. Forgive me, please. This fellow wanted to make a funeral of this auspicious celebration of victory in the battle. Pilimataḷāvai cannot punish me any more for being disrespectful towards him. He has already punished me. It is a lie to say that I planned to kill the king of Kaṇṭi and his queen. It was he who sought my counsel to make a funeral of this auspicious occasion. I opposed him. So he killed me and thus has fulfilled his desire. See my desire will be fulfilled right now. A Sinhalese woman becomes a lioness now."

Even as she was talking, Marttaṉi snatched the king's sword from its sheath on his hip and with the speed of lightning stabbed Pilimataḷāvai on his chest. It was not once that she stabbed. She went on stabbing till her last breath. She fell down.

Kuruvicci ran to hold her. "Sister, forgive me. This is how a lady has atoned." Those were the last words of Marttaṉi. She lay dead on Kuruvicci's lap.

Pilimataḷāvai lay there as if an embodiment of cunning, treachery and the vile nature of bartering self-respect for a life of pleasure was lying in a heap.

69 The Letter That Changed the Heart

Though the celebration of victory turned sour and sad, Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ and Kuruvicci were at ease at heart in that the kingdom of Kaṇṭi had not become subject to the British. They stayed back at Kaṇṭi for a long time. They were wary, anticipating aṉ attack from Lord North at Colombo. Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ had asked his sister Ūmaicci Nācciyār to take care of the administration at Mullaittīvu along with that of Paṇaṅkāmam. He along with Kuruvicci and his soldiers were fed sumptuously every day. It prolonged for years.

The king of Kaṇṭi and Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ were under the impression that the British would not march against Mullaittīvu. They thought that they would like to conquer Kaṇṭi first and then try to step on Mullaittīvu. So Kuruvicci and Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ were particular about the security of Kaṇṭi.

It was at that point of time that a letter from Ūmaicci Nācciyār reached the hands of Kuruvicci from Paṇaṅkāmam. The superscript marked the letter to the private eyes of Kuruvicci Nācciyār. So Kuruvicci took the letter to her room in the palace of Kaṇṭi, bolted the doors and opened the letter.

Dear Kuruvicci Nācciyār,

How I wish to address you as my sister-in-law! Neither of you seem to fulfil that wish that very soon. After their defeat at Kaṇṭi the British lie low. It is said that they do not indulge in their usual pranks at Colombo. The British officers are reported

to have decided not to march not only towards Iḻam but also to any other part of Lanka. So we can believe that the British camped at Colombo will not move even their little finger to extend their authority anywhere in Lanka. So you can take back your vow. We can say without any doubt that the purpose of your brave vow has been accomplished. Why don't you arrange your marriage soon? Can I come over to Mullaittīvu at least for your wedding? Or have you decided to have it conducted at the capital of your friend at Kaṇṭi? Don't chide me in bashfulness. You need not become angry with me too. How can you ever hate my brother? Please let me know the good decision that you are going to make. Fix a date and let me know.

Affectionately,

Ūmaicci Nācciyār.

Kuruvicci Nācciyār was staring at the sky with the letter in her hand. Every line in the letter made her think but also made her confusion confounded.

Was it not right that Ūmaicci Nācciyār had written thus? The British defeated at Kaṇṭi were concentrating on their trade and it did not appear that they would venture again to conquer the soil. So should it not be taken that the purpose of their vow had been fulfilled? The images of two deities in the temple of the heart! Paṇṭārakaṉ in Kuruvicci's heart; Kuruvicci in his heart. Like the images of the god and goddess. Such was the love, affection, respect and beyond all these, a sense of devotion. Does love reach its climax in the pleasure of rubbing against each other physically? Haven't they bound each other with their pure love? Was that not the pinnacle of love?

Kuruvicci felt that the moon moving through the sky was murmuring such utterances with full stops and question marks for her only to hear.

Drops of sweat appeared on her forehead. The golden lotus that her face was, it was undecided as to whether to bloom or to close its petals.

She concluded that Ūmaicci Nācciyaar was right in what she had written in the letter and stood up. She heaved a sigh. Her breasts suddenly swelled and rose so high as to betray how deep her sigh should have been.

What if she gave the letter to Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ? Her heart said that she could, as if it spoke from the heavens above.

She rose up pretty fast but walked very slow. Vikramarāja Siṅghē and Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ should be strolling in the palace garden at that time of the day. Should she give the letter in the presence of the king? Oh, no! She decided to go there. When he came to her asking if anything was the matter, she would take him a little away from the king and then show him the letter from his sister.

It was as she thought. They were talking to each other and laughing every now and then as they were strolling through the palace garden. Paṇṭārakaṉ noticed

Kuruvicci. "What is it, Kuruvicci?" he showed curiosity. The king of Kaṇṭi walked along Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ and approached her.

"You are a bachelor. It is all right for you. Is the king like you? Do you know for how long the queen is waiting for him?" She laughed in a flash. The brightness of her laughing won over the brightness of the moon and Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ was enchanted by it. But he managed himself quickly.

"Oh, the queen is waiting? Let me go." said Vikramarāja Siṅghē and moved away from the palace garden fast.

But his heart did not allow him to go away. He thought that Kuruvicci should have been bluffing her way through with the lie that the queen was waiting for him. 'Perhaps she wanted to exchange endearments with Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. Let me see. Let me find out what kind of a game they are up to. I will make them feel bashful and run away from the garden.' He listened to his heart and hid himself behind a thick bush.

"What Kuruvicci? What brought you here so suddenly?"

"Should I not have come here?"

"Who said so? We are in this palace for so long. You have never come to meet me during the night. Nor have I met you during the night."

"I did not intend to meet you tonight too. But there is a letter that has made me come to you."

"Letter? Did I write any letter to you?"

"Why are you perturbed? Haven't you written any letter to me ever before? The letter I am talking about is not a letter you have written."

"Who has written it then?"

"Ūmaicci Nācciyār, your sister, has written the letter."

"What happened? Any problem at Mullaittīvu?"

"The problem is not a common problem. It is horrible indeed."

"Really? I thought so much. I thought that it would be difficult for Umaicci Nācciyār to take care of both Paṉaṅkāmam and Mullaittīvu. You only refused to go away from here."

"Even Nantaṉ was given the privilege of worshipping his god from a distance. Can't I have the privilege?"

"What is this? Your speech seems to deviate."

"It is not my mistake. That is the mistake of this letter. Here is the letter from your sister."

"It is marked exclusively to you."

"Aren't there your eyes in my eyes?"

Paṇṭārakaṉ looked at Kuruvicci quizzically and opened the letter. He murmured, "Appears to have been written a few days hence." He passed his eyes through the letter and she said, "I received it only today." She felt bashful and directed her eyes to her toes. She felt that the change of heart that she felt should happen to Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ also on reading the letter. Since there was no one in the garden, he might run to her and hug her. Woe is me! The moon shines like daylight. Kuruvicci's heart was beating loud enough for her ears to hear with such thoughts. She could not look at his eyes. She felt increasingly bashful.

They have faced each other and discussed ever so many battlefields. They have devised ever so many battle strategies. But then? Kuruvicci had her eyes fixed on her toes.

The letter was thrown at her feet so violently as to hurt the toes. The thick stick of the scroll brought out blood from her toe. Unmindful of it, Kuruvicci lifted her face up to look at Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ with surprise.

70 The Shouting at the Garden

"How wonderful is your arrangement! You have used my sister Umaicci Nācciyār and have begun your drama with this letter."

Kuruvicci started trembling all through in that Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's face flared out while it should have been softened by the moon beams. Paṇṭārakaṉ noticed her bleeding toe and quickly tore a strip of cloth from his upper garment to bandage it. Kuruvicci understood that the flare of anger was only at the face while at heart he was as cool as sandalpaste. She said, "Forgive me." She knew, of course, that he was as kind as he was courageous at heart.

"Don't keep standing. Sit there." He made her sit on a wonderfully carved stone bench.

"You are on your feet."

"Why? Do you want me to sit beside you? Perhaps you are ready with the *tāli*?"

"Why should you flare out? It is the letter from your sister. Won't you become angry if I don't show it to you?"

"I do believe that my sister should have written the letter of her own accord. What should you have done as soon as reading the letter? You should have torn it to pieces and burnt it."

"How can I rush through such an act unless I know what you have in your heart?"

"It is a wonder of wonders that you say that you don't know what is there in my heart after having been with me for so long a time."

"That we have almost achieved our mission...."

"So believes my sister. That is why she writes such a letter. Do you believe that we have achieved our mission? My simpleton sister believes that the flattened British at Colombo would not even turn their eyes in our direction; that they would not confront us; that they would not wag their tails in our land; that they would be content with their trade. In such a large Tamiḻnāṭu, they order the kings to pay them taxes, having come there by a ship. The British are spreading their tentacles throughout Tamiḻnāṭu. This island is but a mustard seed compared to Tamiḻnāṭu. But however tiny, the mustard seed remains hot. So do we keep opposing the British. It is wrong to believe that the British are scared. They are just lying low. Their troops may spring on us anytime. Do you understand what I am telling you?"

"Your assessment may be correct. Or it may be a trick to keep me at bay."

"That is bad. You have said your farewell to patriotism. Physical urge is burning you like forest fire. Kuruvicci, I did not expect this change in you."

"I for my part did not think that you would consider me so low. How hastily have you said that I am urged by lust when I am living with the thought that thoughts about you strengthen me in my mission?"

"What then? Should not a faithful wife conduct herself in accordance with the wishes of her husband who has taken up a responsibility and work with him for his success without placing the least obstacle on the way?"

"You say husband. You say wife. I am asking you to take up the title. But you refuse me that title. Wherefrom does the husband-wife relationship come then?"

Paṇṭārakaṉ lost words when Kuruvicci confronted him with her question.

"That is the right question to ask. It is like whipping my friend hard. I appreciate you Kuruvicci." Vikramarāja Siṅghē rushed towards them laughing aloud.

"Were you somewhere here?" said Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ blushing pink.

"You are already angry. Don't become angrier." said the king of Kaṇṭi and hugged him as he came closer. Though Kuruvicci is known for her valour, she stood with her head lowered since the matter under discussion pertained to love.

"My friend! I have been listening to everything. When Kuruvicci told me that the queen was looking for me, I did not believe her words. I thought that I might get a chance to understand the riddle that you both have been for so long. I hid myself behind the bushes."

"The king of a nation shall not have a mind to do this!"

"You will say that he should not have a mind to think at all. Go ahead. I am not bothered. But I have to tell you something. If I say that I have the right to become anxious about the domestic life of a sweet friend who is toiling day and night for the sake of my pleasures and pains, you cannot deny me that privilege."

"Vikramā! Don't you know that Kuruvicci and I are in two different bodies but otherwise we are one in our spirit and in the pursuit of our noble ideal?"

"What if you merge at the physical level too? Do you think that you become two in spirit if you become one at the physical level? You come together at the physical level only on and off."

Kuruvicci could not suppress her bashfulness. She turned away from them and stood staring at the moon.

"Oh! You have all joined together and have been planning for long. You have made my sister write a letter. Holding on to the letter you try to harass me with a knife at my throat."

"Your neck is not in any way involved you see. The problem is with regard to Kuruvicci's neck. It pertains to the *tāli* you have to put around her neck."

"Vikramarāja Siṅghē makes a game of everything. You are carried away by the temporary advantage we enjoy. Whose astrology predicts that the British would not try to subjugate our land? Don't forget that there are a thousand foxes in a single brain of the British. None of your words would be clear until we write the finale stating that the vile British have given up their desire for land and have made good their escape from this island nation. My passion for Kuruvicci is in no way less than the sympathy that my friend has for her; than the affection that my sister has for her. I don't understand how my Kuruvicci could forget our vow that until the freedom of this nation is assured beyond any doubt, we are not going to have domestic bliss."

Panṭārakaṉ's voice failed him when he said this. Kuruvicci ran to him and fell at his feet. "Please forgive me. Forgive me please." She shed tears. Panṭārakaṉ held her by her arms and tried to console her.

"Get up, please. There is nothing to be forgiven. This is nothing but the vibes of youth."

"You take yourself for an old man then? Are you a piece of wood with no passion whatsoever?" said Vikramarāja Siṅghē.

"Vikramā! What do you want me to do now?"

"Come round thus, my friend. I don't need anything for myself. I have a desire. I want to see you both in bridal attire."

"Then?"

"Then you can do as you please. It is enough if I could see you in your bridal attire."

"Yes, I will fulfil my friend's desire. But I have something to tell you. Until our mission is accomplished, we will remain celibate even if married to each other."

"That is more than enough for me." Vikramarāja Siṅghē almost jumped up in delight. "Let me begin to make the arrangements right tomorrow."

"First send word to my sister." Paṇṭārakaṉ said as he smiled at Kuruvicci.

All the three were drenched in happiness. Vikramarāja Siṅghē heaved a sigh of relief. Just then the drum at the palace of the king of Kaṇṭi was beaten aloud. That drum was meant to announce an emergency and a danger.

71 Momentary Marital Bliss

The three of them left the beautiful garden and walked towards the palace anxious about what information the drum-beat would bring. Even before they could reach the corridors, they could see the armed soldiers of Kaṇṭi and Mullaittīvu rush to assemble. When he saw the numerous soldiers assemble so fast and the king approaching them, the drummer from the façade came running and greeted the three of them.

"What happened?" Vikramarāja Siṅghē roared like a lion at him.

"Huge British armies have started from Colombo. Their plan is to surround Kaṇṭi and at the same time surround Mullaittīvu. The army has been accordingly sent."

When he said this, Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ became furious. He ordered the soldiers of Mullaittīvu to fall in to protect Kaṇṭi. Vikramarāja Siṅghē did not approve of it.

"My friend! If any of our two lands falls into their hands, the other will follow suit and will be destroyed and reduced to slavery. So I will fight out the Kaṇṭi battle with my soldiers. Please start for Mullaittīvu with your troops. Before the British could go anywhere near Mullaittīvu your troops should reach Mullaittīvu and stand guard against them at the borders."

Though Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ understood that Vikramarāja Siṅghē was right, he did not like to leave Kaṇṭi for some reason.

"Vikramā, we have somehow slackened our activities. We thought that the defeated British would some day surround us. But we did not pay due attention

to our defence. It is a great mistake on our part not to have made adequate security arrangements."

"This is the first time that I see Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ worried."

"I am not worried. I hesitate because you ask me to move away from my duty to protect Kaṇṭi."

"No hesitation whatsoever. Listen to me. You and Kuruvicci shall depart right at dawn tomorrow along with your troops."

"Why the dawn? We can start immediately."

"Nothing will be lost before dawn. I told you that you and Kuruvicci should appear in your bridal attire. Shouldn't that desire of mine be fulfilled?"

"What is this, Vikramā? We have information that the enemies are on their way to lay us in siege. What fun is it that you are talking about?"

"Come along. I have to tell you something in private." Vikramarāja Siṅghē took Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ behind a silk screen waving in the wind.

"What is the secret, Vikramā?"

"Nothing. When it comes to war either we or the enemeis have to die. The British should have accurate information about our strength. So they will not confront us this time taking things easy. I have a feeling that either one of us is sure to die in the battle. In such a situation, you should necessarily fulfil a desire of mine that had been nagging me for long."

"Give me the details. You want to see us in our bridal attire. Is that it?"

"It is not only to see you in your bridal attire. My queen has told me what much of desires that Kuruvicci has cherished within."

"So what?"

"Nothing. You should not feel that I am saying something inauspicious. This night should be your nuptial night with that virtuous lady who has taken you for her deity. Before you start for the battlefield right at dawn, let there be a dawn in her life. That is just one day that Kuruvicci would get. Yes, even if it is one day of marital bliss, that is enough. If she feels gratified at heart then death in the battlefield will be my blessing. My friend! Please be graceful enough to fulfil Kuruvicci's long cherished desire for my sake, for the sake of the request of a good friend."

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ stood still, having forgotten himself.

'However idealistic she has been, the passions of youth have charged her. That has made her pour her heart out to the queen of Kaṇṭi. If ever Kuruvicci or I were to be killed in the battle, my goodness, what much of unfulfilled passion might

Kuruvicci have to carry with her!' Paṇṭārakaṉ's conscience spoke these words. He straightened himself up and looked at the king of Kaṇṭi. When he saw the smile on Paṇṭārakaṉ's face, Vikramarāja Siṅghē felt happy at heart.

Holding the king by his shoulder, Paṇṭārakaṉ said, "Let everything happen as ordered by the king."

The next moment Vikramarāja Siṅghē hugged him and walked towards his private quarters floating in a flood of delight.

"My queen! You would have heard that the British forces are marching towards Kaṇṭi and Mullaittīvu. Our troops are ready to defend Kaṇṭi. Paṇṭārakaṉ and Kuruvicci are to leave right at dawn to defend Mullaittīvu. But before that, we have to implement in a hurry the plan we have worked out."

"I am waiting for your orders, my lord."

"We wanted Paṇṭārakaṉ and Kuruvicci to exchange not just floral garlands. We wanted them to exchange garlands of pearls. Do you remember?"

"Do you think that I would have got those garlands ready long time ago and kept ready, without remembering what you have told me?"

The queen ran to fetch a silver box and gave it to him. He opened the box to give one of the garlands to Paṇṭārakaṉ and the other to Kuruvicci. "Now with our dearest and best wishes, please exchange your bridal garlands." There was delight in his words.

Kuruvicci waited with her head lowered and like a statue, curious about what was going to happen. In the golden light from the royal bedchamber, the smile peeping through her lips looked like a flame of happiness arising between two summits.

"Let go!" the king of Kaṇṭi ordered.

Paṇṭārakaṉ garlanded Kuruvicci. The queen who stood beside Kuruvicci hugged Kuruvicci and made her garland Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ.

"All the fruits and savouries meant for us are for you now. My queen! Let us go away."

The king of Kaṇṭi was about to close the doors and leave the chamber. Paṇṭārakaṉ pulled him by his arm and said, "What is this?"

Kuruvicci also tried to sneak away behind the queen.

But the two of them did not give way. As Vikramaṉ pushed Paṇṭārakaṉ into the chamber, the queen pushed Kuruvicci in. Through the slit of the door the king of Kaṇṭi said, "Will wake you up in the morning." He bolted the door from outside the chamber and left the place for good.

Gone were the occasions when they had discussed without any inhibition many a battle strategy and the ways and means of meeting the enemy in the battlefield. Paṇṭārakaṉ and Kuruvicci sat each in a corner of the room like dumb statues with lowered faces.

What was it? Why so? Who was to talk about it first? Such was the struggle within each of the two.

If the king of Kaṇṭi had left them in his own bedchamber for their nuptial night and the stage for their marital bliss, what deep affection he should have had for him! What kind of a pure affection he should have had for Kuruvicci!

They sat there thinking about the graceful nature of the king of Kaṇṭi.

Now one of them should speak out and break the silence, you see! Kuruvicci dared to speak first.

"Enemies are marching towards Mullaittīvu. We are sitting here with lowered faces. What fun is all this?"

"It is the fun that you have brought about. You have told the queen that your heart will burst to pieces in passion like the earth bursting in a quake. You spoke of it straight to my face. This is the consequence. This is the time for working out strategies to defeat the enemy. We are sitting here blinking about how to resolve our lustful longing."

"I have fallen at your feet seeking your forgiving. It is true that I was moved by the letter from Umaicci Nācciyār. But I steadied myself within a second on hearing your words. Let me tell you even now. We have taken up the bridal attire as desired by the king of Kaṇṭi. That is enough for me. I am ready to face action in the field at dawn."

Though she said with a firmness of purpose, her eyes were filled with tears.

Paṇṭārakaṉ noticed it and rushed towards her.

"Kuruvi! It is true that you are going to see the battlefield at dawn. You are going to see the battlefield in the morning. Let us go to the field of pleasure right now. Come on!"

He held her in a tight embrace. They fell on the cot together. The pleasure that Paṇṭārakaṉ's embrace for which Kuruvicci had been longing for while standing afar and at close quarters made a fragrant garden of her heart and burned her body with passion.

But the pleasure did not last even for a moment. The moment they fell on the cot in an embrace, there was a knock at the door. They got up in a hurry. They could hear the bolt of the door opened.

The king of Kaṇṭi entered the room opening the door. Paṇṭārakaṉ was agitated when he looked at him. "Vikramā! What is this? Why are you so sad?" The king stood speechless. The guard who accompanied the king said, "The British have killed your sister at Paṉaṅkāmam. The British who have captured Paṉaṅkāmam are going to lay a siege of Mullaittīvu."

72 Paṇaṅkāmam in Enemy Occupation

When he heard that his sister had been killed, Paṇṭārakaṉ felt as if he had been stung by millions of wasps. Kuruvicci supported herself holding on to a pillar even as her eyes became a fountain of tears. Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ tried to control the surging sorrow like trying to stop the lava from a volcano with bare hands. He said to the messenger from Paṇaṅkāmam, "How was Paṇaṅkāmam attacked? Who was it?"

The guard said, "The British forces are marching from three different directions. One contingent from Maṉṉār. The other from Triṅkōmalai. The troops from Yāḻppāṇam had laid a siege of Paṇaṅkāmam. The British had planned to capture Paṇaṅkāmam knowing that you were not there at Mullaittīvu. They have succeeded."

After listening to his words, Paṇṭārakaṉ said, "Who is leading the troops to Mullaittīvu?" There was anger in his voice.

"One led by Van Dreburg marching from Maṉṉār. The other led by Edward Madge from Triṅkōmalai."

"O! Van Dreburg? He who ridiculed me saying what could Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ do with his primitive weapons of spears and swords against the guns and cannons of the British. He could not resist my sword and fell flat on the ground. That brave

tiger? I chased him away from Mullaittīvu out of sympathy. Is it the same fellow marching against Mullaittīvu again?"

Paṇṭārakaṉ squeezed his whiskers and looked intently at Kuruvicci. She could not stop the flow of tears from her eyes. He went near her. He took the end of his upper garment and wiped away her tears as he said, "The battlefield calls us. There is no time to keep crying. Get ready to depart."

"First let us go to Paṉaṅkāmam and see Umaicci Nācciyār's..."

Kuruvicci cried bitterly even as she could not continue.

"If we keep on wailing over the dead sister, we may have to lose Mullaittīvu to the British. Kuruvicci, listen to me. You go to Paṉaṅkāmam from here. Attend to my sister's funeral and join me at Mullaittīvu. I will move straight to Mullaittīvu with our troops."

"Shouldn't you come along with me to have a last look at your sister's face?"

"I am leading an army now. Each of my words until the end of the battle is a command to be carried out. Kuruvicci! You are going to Paṉaṅkāmam now with troops. You take care of Umaicci Nācciyār's funeral. If the British pose any problem, you break them. You march victorious to Mullaittīvu."

When Paṇṭārakaṉ's words flew like commands, Kuruvicci wiped away her tears. She chased the sorrow that had covered her heart away in a moment and held her head high with the firmness of steel.

"Here! Take this sword of mine with you. It will give you the feeling of my being with you."

He gave her his sword. Kuruvicci kissed the sword and held it aloft.

Vikramarāja Siṅghē stood as one of the pillars there till then. He hugged Paṇṭārakaṉ affectionately and said, "The troops of Kaṇṭi will be sent to Mullaittīvu."

"No. Certainly no. If the British have sent forces from three different directions to capture Mullaittīvu, they will not leave Kaṇṭi alone. If not immediately, there is danger to Kaṇṭi one day or the other. If I am alive then, I will come back to save Kanti."

Vikramarāja Siṅghē hugged Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. They were overwhelmed by passion.

Before the dawn streaked across the sky, Paṇṭārakaṉ and Kuruvicci took leave of the royal pair of Kaṇṭi and started with their troops.

When Kuruvicci approached the borders of Paṉaṅkāmam, she saw the British flag in the fort. She became furious. Contrary to what she expected, the British troops gave way to her and her troops without any resistance.

However imperialistic they might be, they were giving way to her to perform the funeral of Ūmaicci Nācciyār. Kuruvicci took it that way and was proud enough even to appreciate the nobility of the British within herself.

The British soldiers stood on both sides of the road as if they were honouring her. They were mounted on their horses and held their guns up at the same time bowing to her in greeting.

As soon as Kuruvicci entered the palace at Paṉaṅkāmam, a British officer said, "May I request you to stop here?" Kuruvicci complied. She stopped and looked around. There were a few British soldiers holding silver plates full of flowers. They approached Kuruvicci.

Kuruvicci looked at them without saying anything as if to ask what they were meant for. Meanwhile, the British officer who had respectfully accosted her said, "It is to pay floral tributes to the queen of Paṉaṅkāmam who is no more."

Kuruvicci took the flowers in her hands in a heap. "Which way to go to see Ūmaicci Nācciyār?"

She walked along the way he pointed out. It was through a long corridor that Kuruvicci Nācciyār walked.

She could not see Ūmaicci Nācciyār's body anywhere within the palace. She passed through several narrow corridors and cavelike passages and suddenly became aware that she had reached almost the backyard of the palace.

She was shown the grave of Ūmaicci Nācciyār. It was a plastered swelling on the ground. Tears started flowing through her eyes despite herself.

A lamp was kept burning at the grave even during the day. Kuruvicci stood in front of the grave trying to see the face of Ūmaicci in the flame of the lamp. When she stood with her eyes closed, the drops of tears anxious to flow forth broke the dam of her lids and jumped out as they passed through her beautiful, soft and crimson cheeks. She scattered the flowers on the grave and offered her respects.

Then she entered the palace following the British officer through the back entrance.

There was a small but beautiful hall. Kuruvicci was told that Ūmaicci Nācciyār fought against the British in the very same hall until she died. She could see patches of blood on the walls.

"That is Ūmaicci Nācciyār's blood sprinkled on the wall when she was hacked to death."

The officer said this with no emotion in his voice.

Kuruvicci went to the wall and removed the solidified blood with her nails. She made a mark on her forehead with the blood.

"Please be seated here. Your dinner will be ready soon." The officer showed her a chair.

"That is all right. Let me go. Thanks for your hospitality."

"Perhaps by dinner you meant a feast. You are our permanent guest, you see!"

When the officer spoke audaciously, Kuruvicci understood something. They had trapped her cunningly.

"What did you say? Do you mean that I have been arrested? Is that what you mean when you say that I am your permanent guest?"

She did not even complete her words. She drew her sword and looked at him.

It was not only that officer but all those in the hall that laughed so loud as to make the hall reverberate with their laughter.

Through their laughter she could hear the cannons and the swords in a scuffle.

Kuruvicci turned her face to the direction from where she heard the noise.

The British officer barked. "There is nothing to fear. The soldiers who came with Kuruvicci Nācciyār are trapped and surrounded all around. They are not able to withstand our attack. They will struggle for a little while. Pity them their short life."

Though Kuruvicci Nācciyār stood with her sword drawn, the soldiers did not seem to mind it as they surrounded her.

"What do you say now? You are now our prisoner."

On hearing his words, she brought her sword down and kissed its handle. The next moment there was a storm in the hall. She flew through the space wielding her sword. The British soldiers could not stand in front of her. They were held at abeyance for quite some time.

But she was all alone. There were thousands of British soldiers around her. The battle reached its climax once again at Paṇaṅkāmam.

73 The Smarter Winning over the Smart

Right at the time of the fierce battle at Paṇaṅkāmam, Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ came to know that the British forces were approaching Mullaittīvu. It was difficult for him to move fast enough to reach Mullaittīvu before the British army from Maṉṉār led by Van Dreburg and the other army from Triṅkōmalai led by Madge. Since he was aware that it was too late to launch an attack from Mullaittīvu, he devised an excellent strategy.

The British forces could reach Mullaittīvu only after crossing the forests. So he decided to meet the armies in the forest region. He did not take much time to implement the strategy he had so quickly devised. He lifted his sword to the sky and said to his troops in a roaring voice, "Follow me you all! It is not only with our valour but also with our wisdom that we are going to win." The whole region reverberated with his voice.

A little while since the British army entered the forest region, the soldiers of Paṇṭ āraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ travelled through a shortcut and hid themselves behind rocks and bushes. Their eyes were all intent on listening to the next command of their leader. Their eyes had become their ears. The great and valiant Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ jumped off his horse to declare his next command. The eyes of his soldiers at a distance moved along with him.

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ approached a bamboo bush. He looked up to the top of the bushes. He raised his hands and kicked against the ground to jump to the top of the tall bamboo near him. He held the top of the bamboo and swerved back to the ground with it. He bound stones of considerable sizes towards the tip of the bamboo with thin ropes. He fastened another stronger rope to the tip of the bamboo arching it towards him and stood holding it in his hands.

The soldiers were looking intently at him anticipating the next move. Paṇṭārakaṉ happened to see a bison passing by the way. He gestured to the soldiers to keep looking at him and suddenly released the rope he had held. The next moment the bamboo flung to its former straight position. The force of the bamboo straightening up made the stone tied to it with the thin rope release itself and flew towards the bison. The weight of the stone and its velocity were enough to kill the bison.

His smile at his accomplishment added a greater glow to the glow of valour already on his face. The next moment the soldiers swung to action. They arched all the bamboos in the forest. They fastened stones to each of them. They looked like bunches of coconuts. The soldiers of Mullaittīvu hid themselves behind rocks and bushes holding the ropes fastened to the tip of the arched bamboos.

As expected by Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ, the British army marched through the way beating their drums. Paṇṭārakaṉ believed that the stones to be released from the bamboos were stronger than the cannon balls of the British.

That hope was not in vain. Lieutenant Johnston came leading the pilot contingent ahead of the armies of Van Dreburg and Edward Madge.

The purpose of the pilot contingent was to assess the strength of the enemy. The soldiers who were ready for the attack against the British did not know whether the approaching army was that of Van Dreburg or Edward Madge.

They were waiting in their hiding for a signal from their leader. Paṇṭārakaṉ's eyes as well as those of his soldiers were on the approaching army of the enemy. Van Dreburg and Edward Madge had cleverly planned their strategy in having sent the pilot contingent led by Johnston ahead of their own troops.

As the soldiers led by Johnston crossed the place where the soldiers of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ had hidden themselves, they acted fast. The arched bamboos straightened

up in a speed defeating that of lightning. At the same instant, the stones fastened on to them fell on the British soldiers like cannon balls. Johnston who was struck first fell down in a swoon and became blind in the shock of it. When the leader of the pilot contingent fell to the ground, the remaining bamboos also straightened up. There was a hail of stones on the British.

The soliders of the British army ran helter-kelter unable to withstand the attack. When Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ saw many of them falling down to the ground dead and the others spurring their horses on shouting frantically, he laughed to his heartful. His soldiers also shouted out their happiness at the success of their strategy. They were curious to know if any other army of the British was coming through the way.

When Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's soldiers were busy preparing their bamboo cannons, the British army moved behind them without making any noise and surrounded them when they were least expected. Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ who was able to defeat the pilot contingent with his brilliant strategy was caught along with his soldiers in a ring of the British soldiers.

He was shocked to see that the British had defeated his smart plan with a smarter plan. However, he did not lose his daring and hope. He stood majestically straight, held his sword up and uttered a few words.

"You the valiant! The Tamiḻ hearts of honour! Anyone born is to die one day or the other. Who will hail the life that departs, if that is one among the millions that everyday leaves the body? Who do you think will remember them? So if the life leaving us leaves for the sake of Tamiḻ, the Tamiḻ race, the rights of the Tamiḻs, the freedom of this land, it will keep burning as a bright lamp of the honour of our race."

Paṇṭārakaṉ's speech sounded like battle drums to his soldiers. He was not the one who inspired his followers to valour and moved aside. He ran towards the British soldiers who had surrounded them.

The forest became a battlefield. Van Dreburg ordered the cannons to be shot. Quite a number of the soldiers of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ fell at the cannon shots. The whole place was filled with smoke. The smoke was dense and did not disperse easily. No one knew what happened to Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ in the melee.

When the smoke cleared, the British soldiers turned the bodies of the dead soldiers around with their boots. Van Dreburg and Edward Madge became angry and shouted almost together.

"Hey, you fools! How audacious you are! You kick the bodies of soldiers who had laid down their lives for their land. What if one of them happens to be Paṇṭārakaṉ?

Do you know what a great blame will fall on us for having belittled such a great saint of a man?"

When they saw how angry they were, the soldiers moved the corpses with their hands to see if Paṇṭārakaṉ's body was anywhere in the battlefield.

74 The Crow and the Sparrow

"It is a golden leaf in the book of the history of my life that proclaims the defeat at my hands of the valiant Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ alias Kulacēkaram Vairamuttu with shoulders strong enough to lift a hillock and his flight from the battlefield. My friend! Edward! If the body of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ had been found in the midst of the corpses here, I would have regretted it very much. That leaping tiger has escaped for the time being only to crouch for some time. When I see how many of our soldiers lie dead here despite the modern weapons, cannons and cannon balls we have, I understand that it is quite difficult for the mercenaries to win over an army that fights out of zest. This battle near Kaṟcilai Maṭuvu has proved my observation." Van Dreburg held Edward by his shoulder with a sorrowful face but a voice enthusiastic at their victory. Edward Madge for his part did not remain silent.

"My friend! There is no necessity that the soldiers who are on a battlefield to occupy the land of another should necessarily have the same involvement, interest and zest that their leader may have. Those who are resolved that they should not leave their land to be enslaved fight with scant regard for their life. They kiss death happily. But the same enthusiasm, zest and steadfastness cannot be there with the army that fights to enslave the other. There cannot be two opinions on this score. That is why hundreds of mercenaries have to die to kill two of the idealists."

"Both of us think alike Edward. Shall we go in search of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ or..."

"We should not think of it right now. We have lost many of our soldiers. Paṇṭārakaṉ has also lost many of his soldiers. Yet we cannot underestimate the few soldiers that escaped with him. What we have to do now is to occupy Mullaittīvu taking advantage of the absence of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ."

"What then do you think will be Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's intentions?"

"He will not fight face to face with us when he is numerically so weak. The caves in the hills will be his palaces. The forests will be his mansions. His camps will appear here and there and everywhere."

"Are we supposed to keep quiet watching his strength grow?"

"We also have to take time to become stronger, you see! Let us first go to Mullaittīvu."

"Edward! I have a desire. Let us have it fulfilled and then we will go to Mullaittīvu."

"What desire? Is there any difficulty in having it fulfilled?"

"Nothing. I want to install an inscription here. You should declare it open for public view."

"Inscription? What inscription?"

"I want a stone inscription with the message, 'Van Dreburg defeated Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ at this place near Kaṟcilai Maṭuvu', to be installed here."

"I appreciate the wonderful intelligence of my friend. Both of us have led the army that won the battle today. But an inscription in honour of Van Dreburg only! The other officer is to unvail it. It is all right. This is a passing victory against Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. Let the whole credit for it go to Van Dreburg."

Though Van Dreburg understood the ridicule behind Edward's smile, he shook hands with him and thanked him. Desire never blushes in bashfulness, you see! He ordered that the stone with the inscription be readied.

A piece of stone was ready in a little while with the inscription:

"Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ Memorial Stone at Kaṟcilai Maṭuvu.

Van Dreburg defeated Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ at this place."

Van Dreburg bloated in pride when he saw the inscription. The stone was covered with a garment of silk. The wounded and the surviving soldiers were served their drink endlessly. That was their way of celebrating their victory.

Edward was really in the high when he went to the stone and shouted, "Hail Van Dreburg!" He unveiled the inscription and donned the silk around his neck.

He started dancing around the installation. The other soldiers joined him with unsteady steps. Van Dreburg felt elated at the thought that the stone would sing his praise down the annals of time. He drank to his fill and hugged the stone, taking it for Edward.

Those who fell in a drunken stupor around the stone took time to get up one after the other. When Van Dreburg and Edward had regained at least half their senses, they urged the soldiers to march towards Mullaittīvu.

As the army proceeded through the forest, Van Dreburg was taken aback and showed Edward something on the ground. Edward halted his horse and looked at where Van Dreburg had pointed out.

It was a slushy path. There were the marks of hooves of horses.

"Paṇṭārakaṉ should have gone this way. It is certain that this does not lead to Mullaittīvu. He should have abandoned Mullaittīvu. He is crouching to camp somewhere here."

Van Dreburg accepted Edward's reading of the situation.

"My friend! Edward! Listen to my words, will you?"

"Say it first!"

"Let me! I will take a few of these soldiers with me and follow Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. I will try to locate him."

"That's good. I will enter the palace at Mullaittīvu with the others."

They discussed their plans for a little while in private. When Van Dreburg turned his way to locate the whereabouts of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ, Edward led his army towards Mullaittīvu.

Edward was surprised as he entered Mullaittīvu. There was no one to resist them; no one to stop them. For that matter, there was none to be seen at all.

When he found that there was no opposition of any kind, Edward felt proud and urged his horse through the façade of the palace at Mullaittīvu. None intervened even then. Edward could not contain himself any more. He shouted, "Do you see? There is neither a crow nor a sparrow to stop us."

Before he could complete his words, one could hear a valiant voice.

"The crow is dead since long. Here is the sparrow to stop you."

Edward Madge and his soldiers were shocked as they turned to where the voice came from. Kuruvicci stood there with her drawn sword.

75 Living Legend

Kuruvicci Nācciyār laughed aloud furiously at Edward and his soldiers whose eyes were full of fear.

"Why are you surprised? You wonder how this lady who is supposed to have been killed at Paṉaṅkāmam happens to be here? You madcaps! We have killed all your soldiers at Paṉaṅkāmam and we are here to save Mullaittīvu. What do you say? Are you going to go back alive or have you decided to unload your life here and send your bodies to their graves?"

Kuruvicci Nācciyār brandished her sword intimidatingly at them.

One could only wonder how Edward Madge worked out a strategy. He did not retort angrily when standing in front of the furious Kuruvicci Nācciyār. He smiled and spoke steadily.

"Lady! You speak hastily. Besides you are angry as if something untoward has happened. Please listen to me. The war is over. Your lover and the lord of Mullaittīvu, Paṇṭārakaṉ has been defeated and has made an agreement with us. One of our lieutenants, Van Dreburg and Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ are at dinner, shaking hands."

Kuruvicci easily believed the words of Edward. If such a thing had not happened, Edward and his soldiers could not have so easily arrived at the palace at Mullaittīvu. This surmise made her fall in the net that Edward had cunningly spread.

"Where is he now?"

"He is in the camp of Van Dreburg. They have forgotten enmity and are talking to each other as if they are friends of long standing."

The sword that Kuruvicci held up was brought down and touched the ground. Even then she was anxious to get more information. "Where is his camp?"

Edward could have answered the question only if such a camp existed and Van Dreburg had had his dinner with Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. Yet, he was able to manage the situation adroitly.

"We are new to this region, you see. So I cannot give you the name of the place where Van Dreburg has camped. If you accompany us, we can show you the place. We know the way to the place for certain."

Kuruvicci was a little confused. She could not immediately believe that Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ would have been defeated and that he would be sitting for his dinner with the enemy having made a peace pact with him. But one thing. She could not overrule the possibility of a defeat to Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ given the modern weapons with which the British were equipped.

"Did you come here to take me to where he is?"

"No, no! We did not know that you would be here. We came here to occupy the palace of Mullaittīvu in accordance with the agreement that Paṇṭārakaṉ had made with us. When we came here, we happened to meet you. Why should your energy be wasted with the army that has defeated Paṇṭārakaṉ of all people? That is why we decided to tell you the truth. It is left to you either to go to the camp or not. If you were to come, I would take you with me. Otherwise, you may have to vacate this palace. Or you may have to face our army. Why are you surprised? Come along with us without a word and meet Paṇṭārakaṉ. You can get all the details, can't you?"

"I will go along with you." Kuruvicci Nācciyār put her sword back in its sheath and followed Edward. Two of Edward's soldiers and two of Kuruvicci's soldiers followed them from the façade of the palace. The six horses passed through many streets of Mullaittīvu and were going through a narrow road. A British soldier came from the opposite direction riding his horse very fast. He stopped his horse in front of Edward.

Edward looked at that soldier with a sense of pride on his face and said, "What is it?"

The soldier took out a letter in a scroll and gave it to Edward. He read the letter pretty fast and silently.

"Dear Edward, Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ and fifty of his soldiers have been surrounded by our men near Neṭuṅkēṇi road in the Ōṭṭuccuṭṭāṉ region. Friend!

You should go immediately to Paṉaṅkāmam and defeat Kuruvicci Nācciyār who is giving a fierce battle to our men. – Van Dreburg."

Edward became happy within. He appreciated himself in that there was no necessity for him to go all the way to Paṉaṅkāmam and that he was deceiving her into accompanying him. Lest she should read anything on his face, he smiled at her and said, "You asked me where the camp was. This letter has the details." said Edward.

"Where is it?"

"Near Neṭuṅkēṇi road in the Ōṭṭuccuṭṭāṉ region."

He rolled the letter into a scroll again and threw it at the soldier who had brought it. He caught it skilfully.

The seven horses reached Neṭuṅkēṇi road. There was a grove with tall trees. There was the camp. One each of the soldiers of Mullaittīvu was bound with chains to each of the trees near the camp. There were fifty such. Right in the middle, bound to a huge tree, was Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ.

As soon as she saw the cruel sight, Kuruvicci ran to Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ and hugged him. She could not contain herself as she wailed. Paṇṭārakaṉ brushed her hair with his fingers and spoke.

"Don't worry. When we were taking a rest in the grove, these fellows surrounded us suddenly. And now they claim that they have defeated us."

Paṇṭārakaṉ roared like a tiger.

"They brought me here telling me that you have made a pact with them."

"Pact? A pact to enslave the land of Lanka and Tamiḻ Iḻam to the alien British? Do you believe that this head will nod in assent for such a thing?"

Kuruvicci stood silently. She thought deep for a little while. Then she appeared to have come to some conclusion. She turned to Van Dreburg and Edward and said, "He will talk only thus. I can bring him round. Even if we have made no pact with you, I am ready for a pact hereafter. He will also listen to me."

She winked her eye at Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ and said, "You should not say no to me. Is that right?" Paṇṭārakaṉ understood that Kuruvicci was up to something and stood without a word.

"Silence is an indication of acceptance. We are tired having fought against the British all our lives. Our weapons are wonderful. They are quite powerful. But they could not stand before your modern weapons. We can perform wonderful feats without any weapon whatsoever. With our swords and spears we will make the whole world wonderstruck."

Van Dreburg intervened. "What are those wonderful feats that you can perform with your swords and spears?" There was surprise in his tone.

"Let us make our fifty soldiers stand in two rows on either side. Let them have their swords. I will have a large fruit on my head with a spear stuck through it. These fifty soldiers will ride their horses from opposite directions and slice the fruit into fifty pieces in a single stroke. There will remain just a single slice on my head with the spear stuck in it."

When Kuruvicci said this, Van Dreburg became curious. He ordered that all the soldiers shall be freed except Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ. Kuruvicci was disappointed when Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ was excluded. Yet she managed the situation.

She stood in the middle with a large fruit on her head. A spear was stuck through it. The Mullaittīvu soldiers who were released of their bindings sat on horses in two rows facing each other and with swords on hand.

The moment Kuruvicci said that they could spring into action, the fifty soldiers sprang upon the British soldiers who were watching the game. Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ was freed amidst a lot of furore. Paṇṭārakaṉ became a leaping tiger as he mounted a horse and stabbed Edward who fell off his horse. Hundreds of British soldiers fell dead, hacked to pieces.

Edward who fell down was breathing the last few breaths of his life. He lifted his gun and the bullet flew towards the centre of Kuruvicci's forehead. Meanwhile, Paṇṭārakaṉ had sprung to her on horseback. But she had already been killed by the bullets.

Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ was unaware of her breath having stopped. He held her close to him and rode away to make good his escape. The soldiers who survived also followed him.

The lady who desired to don the bridal attire and feel the taste of life was moving fast with death as her attire, fallen on the lap of Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ as an ausipicious lamp of ideals and a lamp that was put out and yet burnt bright as a sacrificial lamp.

Believing that she was alive, Paṇṭārakaṉ was riding a long way through the forest and his Tamiḻ soldiers followed him.

The path that they showed that day through the forest had been the path of the valiant. It is not the history of just one Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ's life. It has not failed to be of service for the rise of many of his kind endowed with passion, resolve and the light of truth. It is indeed a legend, living and alive.

Postscript :

Whether Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ died naturally or died in the battlefield is an unresolved question in history. But one thing! He had been fighting against the aliens until his last breath. So I request that the readers of this novel read the Preamble that I have written as the conclusion too.

About the Project Makers

Bharathiar University, Coimbatore – named after the nationalist Tamil poet Subramanya Bharathi, who exhorted the Tamils to identify things worthy in their language, and give them unto the world for enjoyment and edification – conceived this Project, viz., *Kalaignar in English Translation* by which to make available in English the extraordinarily rich and varied literary works of Kalaignar M. Karunanidhi, who, by the sheer volume and weight of his output, makes a compulsive demand on us that he be studied and given his due.

Prof. G. Thiruvasagam, Chairman of the Project Committee and Vice Chancellor of the University. The genesis of this Project owes to his academic vision. His initiative and leadership as much as his passionate and studied interest in the excellence of Kalaignar's creativity has seen this Project through within a short span of ten months.

Kavipperarasu Vairamuthu, Vice-Chairman of the Project Committee. An intellectual poet in Tamil endowed with an astonishingly fecund poetic energy and representing a rare blend of ratiocinative powers and aesthetic sensibility, Vairamuthu has brought a sense of direction and significance to bear on the dynamics of the Project.

Dr P. Marudanayagam and Dr V. Murugan comprising the editorial team – the former a ripe Professor of English and a comparatist of towering erudition, and the latter a bilingual lexicographer and a distinguished translator with the translations of *Tolkappiyam, Kalittokai, Tirukkural* and *Narrinai,* and *Oxford English-English-Tamil Dictionary* to his credit.

Dr C. Sivashanmugam, Professor of Linguistics, **Dr R. Palanivel**, Professor of English and **Dr S. M. Ravichandran**, Professor of Tamil, Bharathiar University, the coordinators of the Project, who kept the Project on track.

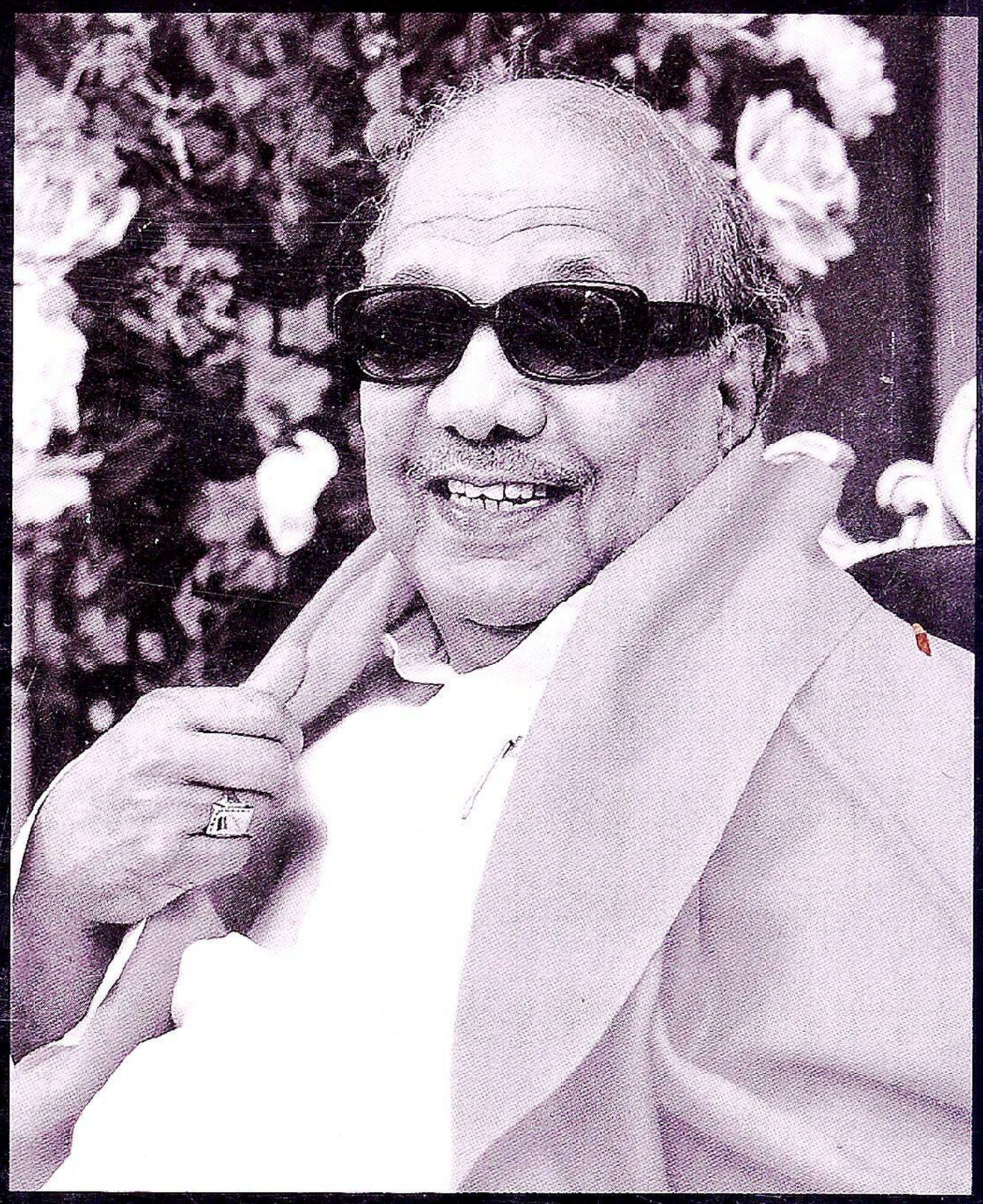
The late **Dr S. Agasthialingom,** a renowned linguist and former Vice Chancellor, Tamil University, **Sirpi Balasubramanian,** a highly decorated poet in Tamil, **Prof. Tamizhachi Thangapandian, Poet Kayalvizhi Venkatesh** and **Dr N. Ramani**, members of the Expert Committee, whose learned counsel, suggestions and views have added to the strength and credibility of the translations as a whole.

Macmillan Publishers India Limited, who have done an excellent job through their passionate commitment to the Project, their legendary technical expertise and their unfailing feel for accuracy and perfection.

The different layers of history, politics, romance and psychology are all intertwined, one defining and influencing the other. The work consists of an absorbing dramatization of mutually warring forces, love vs lust, emotion vs reason, goodness vs evil, patriotism vs treachery, valour vs cowardice, societal good vs self-interest, hope vs frustration, pride vs subservience, confidence vs deception, friendship vs betrayal, and compassion vs malice, each of which is individually symbolized by a chosen character. The novel then is built on the conflicts between these binary opposites, some of which successfully move towards resolution, while others meet their doom unable to find harmony.

'Paṇṭāraka Vaṉṉiyaṉ' is one of Kalaiñar's finest achievements, a triumph of historical fiction and a symbol of ethnic Tamil pride, marking its author as the maker of legends of the mortals, which not many writers can lay claim to.

Kalaignar M Karunanidhi, one among the select 'who is who' of contemporary India, is a ripe political personality of more than seven decade standing, a statesman and a proven administrator, with the rare distinction of being the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu for five terms, besides being a relentless crusader for rationalist revival and an undaunted, missionary-like fighter for social and political causes.



Notwithstanding, it is the title 'Kalaignar' meaning 'an artist par excellence' by which he is identified and characterized, so much so that it is no longer a title but a proform designation of Dr M Karunanidhi, in the same way as 'the Bard' is used to refer to Shakespeare.

For Karunanidhi, whose formal education did not extend beyond the secondary school, is a multifaceted, prolific writer with an amazingly large volume of literary output to his credit. He is a poet, a playwright, a novelist and short story writer, a letter writer, an elegist, a journalist and a columnist, a script-writer, a political satirist, an essayist, a translator, an autobiographer and a social and literary critic, besides being an extraordinarily eloquent and powerful speaker. His creative and critical works have been published in 59 volumes, memoirs and autobiography in another 8 volumes, and other writings in 115 more volumes, large and small.

What astounds one is the fact that he has been writing on all these genres contemporaneously, putting the same amount of interest and energy in each kind, that too in the midst of his most exacting administrative and political activities.

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