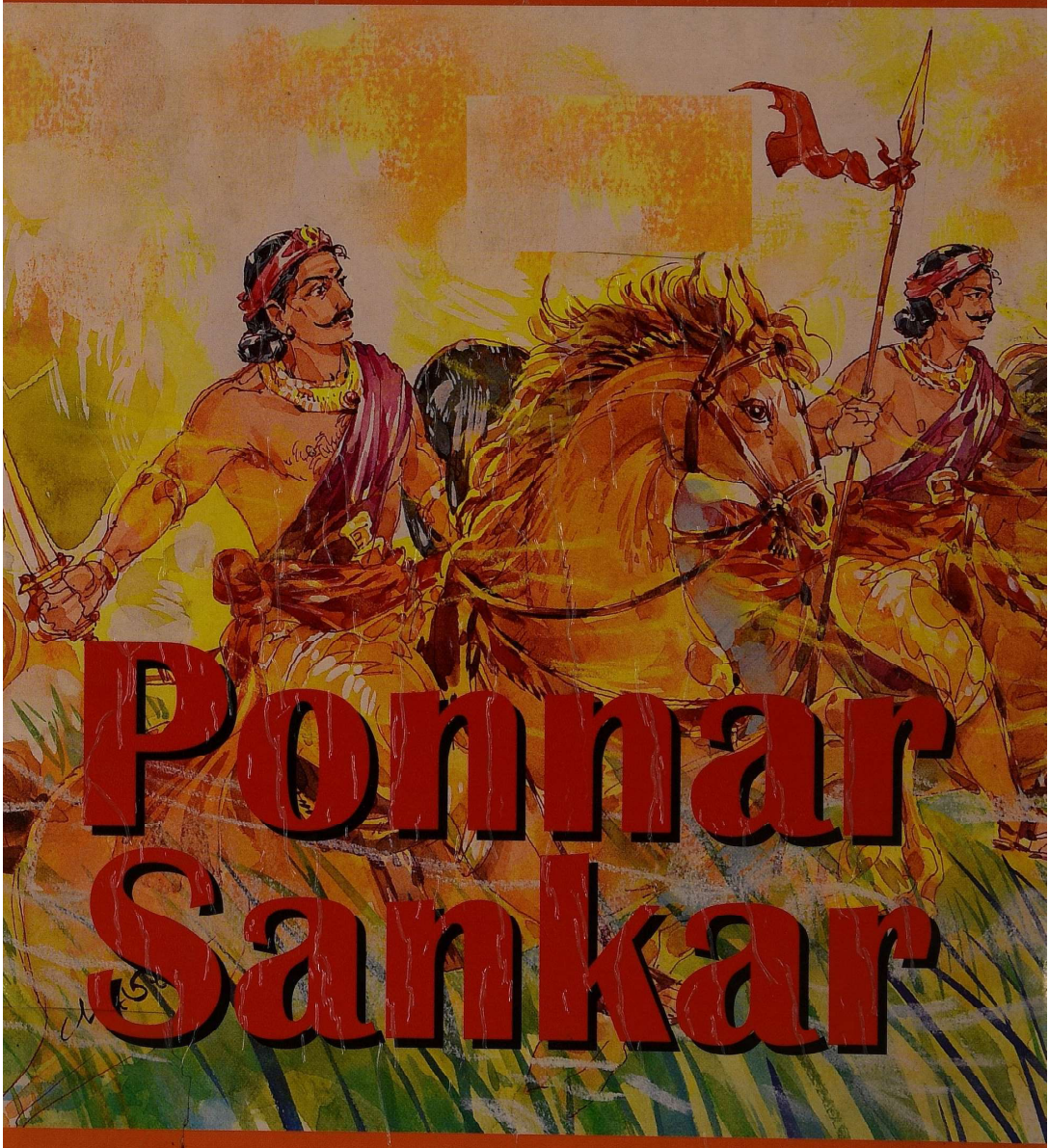
Kalaignar in English Translation



Ponnar Sankar

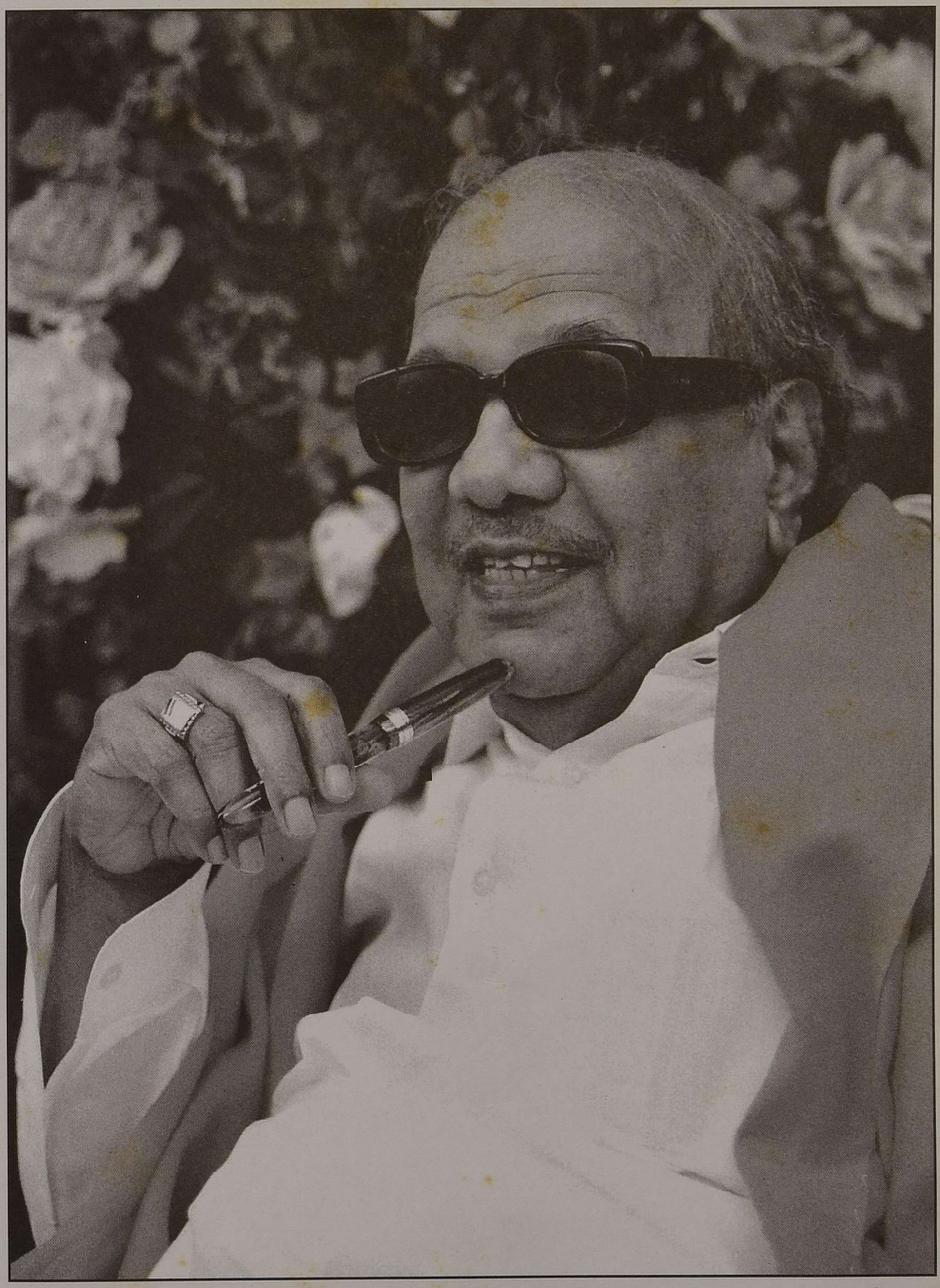
BHARATHIAR UNIVERSITY

Kalaignar M. Karunanidhi's Ponnar Sankar is a historical novel of epic dimensions.

It is woven around the legendary folk heroes of the ancient Kongu Velala community of Tamilnadu, a community whose contribution to the Freedom Movement of India remains etched on the pages of history. Besides, its role in the evolution of the cultural history of Tamilnadu is exemplary.

An imaginative remake of the martial exploits of the Kongu heroes, Ponnar and Sankar, this novel tells the engaging tale of the several strands of universal human interest, all rooted in the cultural mores and customs of the Tamil race in general and the Kongu community in particular.

The galaxy of characters Ponnar, Sankar, Arukkani, Thamarai, Nelliangodan, Rochiannan, Kali, Veeramalai, Muthayi, Pavalayi, Kuppayi, Malaikolunthu Gounder, Chellatha Gounder, Manthiappan, Mayavan, and several others represent the varied clans and communities, the intricacies of their bonds and conflicts, the value systems and ideals built around them and the complex web of events, all running into a natural stream-like narrative pattern, making the novel one of the finest creative achievements of Kalaignar.



Dr Kalaignar M. Karunanidhi

Kalaignar in English Translation

Ponnar Sankar

Translated by

S. Thillainayagam

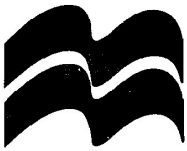
Edited by

P. Marudanayagam

V. Murugan



Bharathiar University
Coimbatore India



MACMILLAN



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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

அன்புடன்

(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 *Iraṇiyan 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 Sundaraṉār'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 novel *Ponnar-Sankar* was first published as a serial in the Tamil periodical *Kungumam*. During that time it was so popular among the Tamil reading public that the sales of the periodical witnessed an upward swing. Since its publication in book form it has seen five editions and occupies a special place among the literary creations of Kalaignar Karunanidhi.

Though it has been authored on the basis of materials gathered from field studies, research papers, documentary evidences, folk songs and tales and hearsay, it is mostly Kalaignar's chronicle.

Ponnar-Sankar is a prose epic of Kalaignar's ideas and principles, a historical epic of the cultural mores of the Gounder community, a paean that celebrates the greatness of the hoary Tamil language and culture, and a powerful exposition of female prowess. The rich creative skills of the author have blended all these unobtrusively into a fictional work of excellent literary merits. The tale has been woven retaining the essentials of the folk tradition in folk style.

We can see the influence of the great Tamil oeuvre all through the novel. The rich flavour of the Tamil classics is seen in every page. Ideological gleams from the gems of the Tamil literary cannon – *Tirukkural, Cilappatikaram, Kamparamayanam, Mahabharatam, Kalingattupparani, Purananuru* and a few others add to the beauty of this novel.

Among these, *Tirukkural* finds a pride of place and the novel almost looks like a commentary on it. The preamble and the last chapter are especially impressive with their accent on *Tirukkural*. In several places the author has quoted the distiches of *Tirukkural* in the original form or has rendered them, in his inimitable prose style or has given his own interpretation of them. Wherever and in whichever way it has been used, it adds to the richness of the novel. Quite a few of his descriptions are word pictures of choice *Tirukkural* couplets.

Kalaignar's love for *Cilappatikaram* is no less than his love for *Tirukkural*. In daring and integrity, the major female characters resemble Kannagi, the sole protagonist of *Cilappatikaram*. Thamarai Nachiyar who grows from a defiant young bride of iron determination into a benign and protective materfamilias is almost an incarnation of Kannagi. The author has very ingeniously made use of this story about a feud between two families to give voice to his ideas about the emancipation and rights of women. Arukkani Thangam, with her honesty, courage, fortitude and exemplary sense of gratitude, looks like the cultural daughter of Kannagi.

The friendship between Arukkani and Kuppayi is unparalleled in Tamil novels. They are like the proverbial Jonatham and David and remind us of Sydney Carton and Charles Darnay in Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*.

The author has made judicious and liberal use of the Tamil war classics *Purananuru* and *Kalingattupparani* to poetically express the bravery of his heroic characters and the ravages of war. There are apt references to *Mahabharatam* also. The betrothal and marriage celebrations of Thamarai Nachiyar and Nelliangodan, Ponnar and Muthayi and Sankar and Pavalayi are carried out as per the details given in the *mangala valththup padal*, supposedly composed by the poet Kambar.

A literary work can retain the attention of the readers by evoking various emotions and feelings. It is of particular need to a historical novel. Kalaignar has done this job of blending the varied emotions so well that the reader forgets that he is reading a historical novel. The readers feel emotionally one with the admirably good characters of the novel. The deplorably bad characters suffer as much aversion and derision. Valour, nobility, heroism, sacrifice, love, death, loss, meanness, cruelty, deceit, and betrayal are all presented in their most intense manifestations.

The novel portrays women as equal to men not only in bravery and mental fortitude but also in impulsive actions and inspiring speeches.

The 'karagam floating festival' delights the readers by blending brave deeds, love, fear, surprise, suspense and humour in a marvellous manner.

The scenes of war are intensely tragic as they portray the devastation and deaths with the subtext constantly telling the readers that they are all avoidable and only the results of a few men's inherent tendency towards evil.

The admirable women—Thamarai, Alagu Nachiyar, Arukkani Thangam, Muthayi, Pavalayi and Kuppayi—die or commit suicide at unexpected moments and the readers feel the pathos poignantly. The death of Nelliagnodan happening immediately after the death of Thamarai reverses the male chauvinist saying, "Behind every successful man there is a woman."

The heroic Tamil tradition eulogises its mothers as ever ready to send their sons to wars. Their joy knew no bounds whenever their sons performed the supreme sacrifice of laying down their lives in their valiant attempts to protect their country. A man running away from the battlefield was the most shameful disgrace that could happen to his mother or his wife. A Tamil girl could chase away a tiger with a winnow. In Kalaignar's fiction, Thamarai, the mother of Ponnar-Sankar and Arukkani, shines as an epitome of this legendary courage.

Ponnar-Sankar has all the embellishments of poetry. The exquisite metaphors and imagery add to it a poetic charm. Besides that, there are ample references to poetic classics of Tamil and apt quotations from them. There are several instances where Kalaignar's prose reaches poetic heights.

Following Kambar, he has made use of nature to underline the joy or pathos of the situation. The chapter that narrates how Ponnar is duped by the wicked Chembakulan begins with the following words:

> It was daybreak. But the sun was hesitant to come out. Its rays started dispersing the darkness; yet they were inexplicably disinclined to come out of the jet black clouds that had spread through the eastern sky and emit light.

Ponnar-Sankar has been very much appreciated for presenting the culture of the Kongu community in a perceptive manner. Their rituals and rites find detailed descriptions, especially marriage and death. Kalaignar has done a yeoman service by bringing to light the special features of most of their ceremonies. In doing so, he has breathed new life into a large number of Tamil terms which have almost become extinct. They will be of much interest to linguists and social historians.

Ponnar-Sankar is a virtual manifesto of Kalaignar's principles. It makes for entertaining reading and at the same time draws the attention of the reader towards his ideas about a better and more harmonious life free from communal animosity. The author has expressed his personal opinions in a simple, powerful and yet a beautiful way. He has made use of this historical serial as a vehicle for propagating his views about god, caste division, rationalism, superstition and women's rights. To him 'personal is political'. His scant regard for the decadent dictum, 'Art for art's sake' runs unobtrusively through the novel.

The best friend of Ponnar-Sankar is the Adi Dravida Veeramalai. He is their trusted counsellor and they look up to him as their elder brother. The bond between them transcends caste hierarchy and constantly ridicules the pivotal feud of the novel, which, according to one version, is based on caste.

His preamble to the serial presents his views about god without offending even the staunchest theists in any way. He says that his heroes Ponnar-Sankar emulated the traits ascribed to god by Tiruvalluvar and lived like gods in human form. His predilection to warn people against superstitious beliefs and the wickedness of evil-minded people is seen subtly and on many occasions obviously.

His protagonists Ponnar-Sankar value self-respect and personal reputation as more precious than their lives. They rise to great heights in our esteem when they stall the moves of the Chola King to exercise domination over their Valanadu. Sankar's outbursts and Ponnar's extempore but studied orations in the royal court of Akkaladeva Cholan are Chief Minister Karunanidhi's intelligent plea for state autonomy!

Writing disciplines the mind and translation does it most rigourously. Translating Ponnar-Sankar into English was an arduous as well as an enjoyable experience. It was formidable and also and education by itself. In the limited time available I struggled as much as I could to solve the knotty problems that are typical to translation. Still, there are passages which could be improved upon. I will gratefully acknowledge any help towards that end.

S. Thillainayagam
Professor of English (Retd.)
M.S.University, Tirunelveli.

Preamble

Thambi Murasoli Maran badgered me that I should write one more historical serial in the periodical *Kungumam.* I hesitated fearing that it might not be possible to spare time for that amidst a thousand jobs. During the trip to Madurai and Ramnad districts there was a talk about the serial. Thiru. Thennarasu who was travelling with me said that I could write the story of Kundrudaiya Gounder as a serial. When I had been living in the Chinganallur area of Coimbatore twenty years ago, I heard many people there pronouncing the names Kundrudaiyan, Annanmar Samy and Ponnar-Sankar and a very passionate and moving story connecting these three names. Now, that story cast its shadow in my heart.

I began reading with deep interest *Ponnalagar Enum Kallalagar Ammanai; Varaguna Perungudikoottam Ponnar-Sankar Varalatru Nool* edited by Thiru. A. Palanisamy and *Annanmar Swamy Kathai* edited by Sakthikanal from the palm leaf manuscripts of Pulavar Pichai. I had consultations with Thiru. Silamboli Sellappan, Director, Tamil Development Board. I requested my friends Thiagarajan (Chinna Kuthoosi) and Kungumam Pavaichandiran to visit the areas in which the historical events took place and collect the details. I wanted to make a personal visit. But people would crowd around me. The expected benefit would not accrue. Tmt. Subbulakshmi Jegatheesan was very helpful to Thiagarajan and Pavaichandiran. She took them to the historically important places and later on collected some more details and sent them to me. (I visited those places a week or two after I started writing.) I had the opportunity to listen to the recorded version of *Annanmar Varalatru Kathai* broadcast by the Coimbatore radio station as songs sung to the accompaniment of the beats of a small hand-held drum known as *udukku.*

Owing to the following reasons - several persons have done research on this, a lot has been passed on through hearsay, it is rare to get complete information about any section of Tamilnadu history, these events happened some three or four hundred years ago and in the course of time these events have been presented in various forms - there is confusion like the bewilderment caused by a stone falling into a clear stream. Yet the clarity of the stream has not been impaired.

In the imaginary serial based on the history of Ponnar-Sankar that I propose to write there will be an attempt to create a superstructure that will coalesce with the foundation and there will certainly be no inconsistency with the foundation.

The scholars who have done research do not deny the fact that the books published on this history, the notes on the palm leaf manuscripts, the copper plate documents and such are full of details which contradict one another.

There is a note which says that the ancestors referred to in this history of bravery came from Thiruvalur (Thiruvarur) area of the Chola country and established the Kongu region.

The following lines in a song meant for singing when the idol of Kaliamman is seated on a swing bear evidence to this. This Kondichettipatti Kaliamman is the clan deity of the people of Vagurampatti in Namakkal District.

> Those who left the famous and ancient town of Thiruvalur in the Cauvery flowing Chola country settled in the Chera country to live with the golden-hearted people of the Chera and Chola kingdoms. Ponkaliamma, you are the goddess of the arid land and the sister of the majestic Madukkarai Chelli, the clan deity of the people born in the Ganga community! Amuse yourself in the swing with the salutations of the highly pious Velalas!

Besides this, we get from research articles, palm leaf manuscripts and old songs a note which says that they came from Thirupadhur, another note that they came from the Manamadurai region, one more note that they migrated from the Kolar region of Karnataka State and yet another that they came from the Tirunelveli region.

It becomes clear that in those days they had to change their places of habitation according to the prevailing situation. When we consider the facts that the Kongu Velala community known as Velangudi citizenry is at present spread over the districts of Trichy, Salem, Kovai, Erode and Dharmapuri and that the Tamilnadu of yesteryears occupied a larger area than today, it becomes clear that they are a part of the Tamil population and that they migrated from place to place within Tamilnadu itself. They had to change their places of stay according to the needs of the prevailing situation as in the sea a sailing boat is driven in the direction of the wind.

There was a time when the three crowned Tamil kings, Chera, Chola and Pandiya, had extended their rule over a large area. Later they became chieftains of small areas but retained their ancestral names - Chera, Chola and Pandiya. The events of the present history took place in this era. A few kings bearing the name 'Cholan' and a few more the names 'Cheran' and 'Pandiyan' ruled over fragments of the erstwhile larger kingdoms.

That era also disappeared slowly and the era in which the British, the Portuguese and the Dutch began to bring our land under their control as a market emerged.

This history of valour happens like a silver lining before the foreigners stepped in - in the dark era of Tamilnadu when local chieftains ruled over very small areas and were losing even them mostly.

There is no evidence to say that the hatred that arose between one clan and another clan among the people of the Kongu region who lived as Velala Gounder, Vettuva Gounder, Mudaliyar, Chettiyar, Vanniyar and Sambuvar is the starting point of this brave history. Contrary to that, only the jealousy among the agnates of the Velala citizenry is the thread that runs through this history. If it had been the history of a clash between the Velalas and the Vettuvas, could it have been possible for people of both these clans which existed then and also exist now to find a place on either side?

The enmity that arose among the agnates of a great Velala family runs through not one or two, but three generations; takes various forms and ends as a moving historical epic.

Since the naïve and innocent Kundrudaiyan who is so credulous as to believe that anything white is milk is the hero of the early stages of this history, there are people who call it 'Kundrudaiyan Kathai'. There is also an anthology of songs known as 'Ponnalagar Enum Kallalagar Ammanai' in praise of Ponnar, the elder son of Kundrudaiyan. Besides this, we can hear songs of 'Annanmar Samy Kathai' sung to the accompaniment of *udukku*. This title combines the elder brother Ponnar, the younger brother Sankar and their younger sister Thangam alias Arukkani who called her brothers 'annanmar' very affectionately.

This serial entitled 'Ponnar-Sankar' is being written with the wish to understand the underlying culture, the affectionate feelings, the fortitude, valour, love, the cool and calm disposition of a few innocent hearts and the wickedness of a few for whom persecuting those innocent hearts alone was a pastime and to make the characters that emerge out of that understanding dazzle like cut diamonds.

Several writers of Tamilnadu have written a large number pf serials, books and novels with history as the background. The readers know very well that I have

written a historical romance called *Romapuri Pandian* using the history of the Chola and Pandiya kings during the period of Karikal Peruvalathan and the information about an emissary of the Pandiya king discharging duties in Rome during the reign of Augustus Caesar as background material and a heroic epic *Thenpandi Chingam* using the historical notes on the great warriors who were famous in the areas known as Paganeri and Pattamangalam.

In Tamilnadu which is reputed for various admirable qualities like glorious antiquity, literary richness, abundance of art, valour, concern for the protection of honour, the great evil 'absence of unity' continues to be an incurable disease from the Sangam period.

My great wish is that the serialised portraits I create with history as background material must get rid of this evil and provide a chance to see a healthy and prosperous Tamilnadu at least in the future.

Ponnar-Sankar have been eulogized as 'Annanmarsamy' and temples have been built for them in the Kongu region. In those temples the idols of their clan deities Periyakandiamman and Chellandiamman have also been installed for worship.

Arukkani also called Thangam, the queen of chastity and the sister of the brothers Ponnar-Sankar who possessed valour, venerable noble qualities and strength of mind is deified as a goddess not only by the Velala Gounders and Vettuva Gounders living in the districts above-mentioned but also by people of many other clans.

We can also see that in the temples above-mentioned people of that area worship the statues of Veerabahu Sambuvan who was a trusted friend and a loyal assistant to the brothers.

From ancient times it has been a practice to extol the virtues of those who differ from ordinary people and perform extraordinary deeds by comparing them with gods.

Valluvar also did not reject the criteria set for divinity or God or deity but wanted human beings to attain that excellence.

According to him, God epitomises pure wisdom and if we do not pray at His feet our learning is of no use.

He points out that He has no likes or dislikes and that those who seek shelter under Him will not suffer in any way.

'He is *nonpareil*'.

'He is a sage of immense virtue'.

Valluvar marked out the qualities of God in these ways.

He wished that one should live with the excellence ascribed to God.

He made it clear in one of his couplets, "Ever so many rare virtues are ascribed to God who is said to inhabit the world above. Anybody who lives following that code of virtue meant for worldly living will be respected on a par with God."

My assessment is that Ponnar-Sankar known as "Annanmar Samy' were revered in that way.

Ms Brinda E. F. Beck, who hails from Canada, is an assistant professor in the University of British Columbia, Canada. She stayed in the village Olapalayam near Kangeyam for her research and published her findings on the people of the Kongu region as a book. She has also done research on the folk songs of 'Annanmar Kathai' and published her findings as a book. From this we can understand the significance of the historical background of 'Annanmar' very well.

In the books published by Kavignar Sakthikanal and Thiru. A. Palanisamy there is a map showing the region ruled by Ponnar-Sankar. We can understand from this map that the areas which they ruled in those days have since been extended by the people of Kongunadu for their habitation.

Though the people are divided into so many castes as to amaze and pain everyone, Bharati sang of 'a single Tamil community'. I am one of those who eagerly await the day the lines of Bharati will cease to be a dream and become a reality.

With that hearty feeling and the hope that I will get the support of the whole Tamil community, I begin this historical serial.

Kalaignar M. Karunanidhi

1 Masachamy in Marriage Celebration

That village known as Arichampatti and also as Maniankurichi wore the look of a grand festival. All around there were agricultural lands made fertile by the overflowing Cauvery, fields full of crops gently swaying their heads and groves full of towering coconut trees with a large number of bunches on the top. The richness of the soil was in no way less than the abundance of water. In that area known both as Arichampatti and Maniankurichi, the men of Malaikoluntha Gounder, the great landlord of that village, were very eagerly making preparations for celebrating the third day of the programme in a much grander scale than the previous two days. Everywhere, in all the streets of the village, they had tied festoons made of split coconut and mango leaves. In street fronts they had planted tall and strong bamboo poles and tied fruit-laden plantain bunches.

Outside, on the way to the village, unmindful of having been cut, banana trees hugged bamboo trees and played with the wind with their broad and long leaves. At several places in the middle of the streets beautiful domes made of coloured papers in a variety of designs had been hung. Landlord Malaikoluntha Gounder's son Chinnamalaikolunthu and his mother Perumayi Ammal were immensely pleased on seeing the entire village decorated in such a lovely manner. Chinnamalaikolunthu visited all the places of the village enthusiastically and hurried up the workers involved in the preparations of the third day function.

An enormously big pandal had been put up in front of the entrance to the house of Malaikoluntha Gounder. To have a full view of it one should raise his head and look upward as it had been built like a small palace with ground limestone. More than fifty men were very actively engaged in decorating that pandal. Malaikoluntha Gounder was observing those hectic activities from the front yard of the house reclining in an easy chair. Sitting at his feet, his wife Perumayi Ammal handed over to him betel leaves with lime and areca nut. She was also chewing a mouthful without swallowing, and mulling over the celebrations of the next day. Her face was filled with joy.

From the long pandal near that house and very close to the tank bund came drum sounds. At the projections and the cornices of the pandal tightly knit palmyra leaf festoons hung in large clusters. On every pole of the pandal there were areca and mango bunches. A huge gathering of men and women– not fewer than a thousand – queued up to the entire length of the pandal. All of them were simple poor people in dirty or worn-out clothes.

Their eyes, full of eagerness, were riveted on the stage put up in the middle of the pandal. The reason - on that stage only they had stored in large baskets the food grains to be supplied to them.

Wasn't it a fact that varieties of food grains such as rice, maize, common and bulrush millet were stored there in large heaps for free distribution among them and wouldn't that give those poverty-stricken tramps immeasurable joy!

Three day celebration - that day was the second day - the next day celebration would be a fitting finale to the entire function. The decoration of the village and arrangement for the free supply of food grains were all in connection with that. If so, what is that function?

Hark! Cholan Thotti was beating his drum under the shade of the Amman temple in the village common place! If you gave your ears to him you would know all the details.

"Let it be known to all the villagers – as a part of the marriage celebrations of Thamarai Nachiar, the daughter of Malaikoluntha Gounder, the landlord of Arichampatti which is also known as Maniankurichi, and Manthiappa Gounder, the son of Chellatha Gounder, the chieftain of Nelli Valanadu, to be held tomorrow morning, Thamarai Nachiar will distribute from her own hands food grains free of cost to the poor today. The landlord requests everybody to receive the same and bless the couple."

Cholan Thotti announced this three times amidst the 'dum-dum' beating of his drum and left for the next village. Soon the poor and the needy rushed towards the pandal.

Cholan Thotti, an Adi Dravida, was about fifty years old. His son, about six or seven years old, also walked fast behind him. A street dog which saw them walking along with a drum started barking and ran behind them. The young boy lost his temper and picked a stone to hurl at the dog. But Cholan Thotti snatched the stone from the boy and said, "Hey, no, no, Veeramalai! Pity the dog. You should not beat it. It is a meek creature. It barks out of fear. You just come along with me." Veeramalai responded, "*Appa*!* *Appa*! Walk slowly. I am unable to keep pace with you."

"You are Veeramalai in name only. Can't you walk fast and prove yourself worthy of the name?" Cholan Thotti laughed and patted his son on the back.

After Cholan Thotti made this announcement in several villages, poor and simple people began thronging Arichampatti in thousands to receive food grains and to witness the marriage celebrations of Thamarai Nachiar.

To the delight of those crowding the pandal a bevy of young girls walked towards the stage. Thamarai Nachi, like the shining moon amidst stars, sailed through the crowd like a golden chariot and ascended the stage covered with red carpet. Old grand mothers standing in the queue opened their toothless mouths and said by way of praising her dazzling beauty and blessing her, "Our golden girl! Dear child, you look exactly like Rathi," as if they had seen that legendary beauty Rathi. Men also, forgetting the weariness of their old age, stood still like trees and gazed at Thamarai Nachi unaware of houseflies entering into their wide-open mouths. Should anything be said about the young hearts? Many among them mused and sighed, "There is an advantage in being poor. How else could we receive food grains from the hands of this great beauty? After looking at her intently for a while under the pretext of receiving food grains, where is the need for a place in heaven after death?"

The distribution of food grains began. One after another they came near the stage. One of the friends of Thamarai Nachi would ask what they wanted: millet? maize? or rice? and each would express his or her choice. Another friend of Thamarai would hand over that to her and she would give it away. Old women blessed her, "*Amma*†, may you be happy and prosperous!" Some of them touched her head and congratulated her, "May you get all the sixteen boons and lead a grand life!" Her face, without hiding anything, showed very clearly that her body alone was on the stage while her mind was wandering somewhere else. Without wings to fly, her eyeballs which resembled two black beetles in white conches were fluttering excitedly.

The noise of several horse-drawn chariots entering the village was heard. Thamarai Nachi observed it keenly.

**Appa* = father/a term of address by elders for a young man

†*Amma* = a term of address by elders for a younger woman/mother

All the carts were covered with brilliant silk curtains. There were not fewer than a hundred. In those carts only Chellatha Gounder of Nelli Valanadu and his friends and relatives came. Manthiappan's cart was decorated like a chariot and was drawn by four horses. Manthiappan wore a gold embroidered silk turban on his head and priceless jewels etched with diamonds, pearls and corals all over his body. He was seated majestically in that chariot beaming a proud smile and thinking about the marriage to be held the next day.

At the place where the carts entered the village, on behalf of Malaikoluntha Gounder, his son Chinnamalaikolunthu gave a pompous welcome resounding with drums, trumpets, tambours, conches and cornets. Chellatha Gounder introduced his son Manthiappa Gounder to Chinnamalaikolunthu and both embraced each other affectionately. The carts then rolled through the streets of Manıankurichi in a procession.

The entire village was floating in joy as the marriage function became a spectacle too big for eyes.

In the pandal where Thamarai Nachi was giving away food grains more than three fourths of the crowd had dispersed. She was very tired and weary.

"Hey, Thamarai! What is this? You are so tired today itself? Everything awaits the marriage to finish tomorrow. The bridegroom is said to be a big rough and tough man. What are you going to do then?" asked one mischievous friend in a mild voice.

Thamarai could not relish this joke in her state of distress. She jumped in sharp anger and shouted at her, "Hold your tongue."

A few youths were found among those old men and women. Since they did not leave the place immediately after receiving the food grains, there was a delay.

Thamarai whispered to a friend, "Why do these persons, though young, suffer from hunger!"

That friend muttered, "Anybody who is too lazy to work will wilt like this."

At that time a bearded man with unkempt rough hair and clad in worn-out dress which appeared to have been soaked in a gutter approached the stage to receive food grains. He was so emaciated that he was not able to walk even. But he was neither old nor sick. With pity in her eyes Thamarai looked at that man who appeared to have eaten nothing for several days.

Thamarai Nachi's mother Perumayi Ammal came there and enquired, "Thamarai, isn't the distribution over?" Just then that starving beggar came within the view of her eyes.

Perumayi Ammal asked him, "What do you want - rice, or some millet?" The indigent young man sang in lightning speed a reply nobody would have expected.

Auntie, I didn't come to get maize or millet
Auntie, I did come as your daughter's husband
To tie the sacred *thali* around her neck.

On hearing this audaciously astonishing reply, Perumayi Ammal felt as if she had stepped into fire. Before she could get at him and ask furiously, "What did you say?" the man removed his beard and made up unkempt hair, laughed at them innocuously and sang:

You used to make fun of me
And called me silly Masachamy
How is it, this Masagounden's grand venture?

Not minding the presence of her mother, her friends and the crowd of people around her Thamarai Nachi shouted *'athan'** and embraced him. On the back of that young man who just then experienced a pleasure he had never felt all his life fell stinging whiplashes. "*Appa*! Leave him." Thamarai cried and tried to stop her father. But she could not. "Hey! You Nelliangoda! Have you chosen this crooked way to ruin my family? My name is not Malaikoluntha Gounden if I don't slice out your intestine and wear it like a garland." So saying he pounced upon that youth and thrashed him severely with his whip. Unable to bear that sight Thamarai cried, "*athan, athan*", became unconscious and fell down. The young man lay on the ground like the withered stem of a lily. Malaikoluntha Gounder ordered his men to lock him up in a cell infested with termites and white ants. Four men carried the unconscious youth, put him in that horrible cell and locked it.

Malaikoluntha Gounder told his wife, "Let not Chellatha Gounder know anything about this. Take Thamarai home at once and give treatment." He then left the place hurriedly.

**athan* = son of one's maternal uncle or paternal aunt

2 Guesthouse and Torment Cell

Chellatha Gounder, Manthiappan, the would-be bridegroom, and their friends and relatives dined happily in the guesthouse allotted to them and fell asleep without knowing anything about what had happened. A few who could not sleep began to play dice. The friends of Manthiappan sat around him and enjoyed themselves by talking about the next day's marriage in a teasing and mocking manner.

"Tonight you are with us; will you even think of us tomorrow night?"

"Will I forget my old friends for the sake of somebody who is going to come tomorrow?"

"You won't forget, Manthiappa! But she who comes will make you forget. Moreover, Malaikoluntha Gounder's daughter is a grand beauty. When you lie down with your head on her lap you won't be conscious of this world even!"

"Are you telling me your experiences?"

"Take it that way, if you please!"

"As far as I am concerned it may be true that I have come to marry Thamarai for her beauty and to enjoy new pleasures. But you do not know that this also contains my father Chellatha Gounder's deft stroke of state diplomacy."

"State diplomacy? What is that?

"Do you know anything about my father's elder brother Kolatha Gounder?"

"We have heard about him. We have heard that he provided sustenance to a large number of families by carrying out several schemes for the development of the seventy large segments of land donated to him by the Chola king, that he named the region under his control Nelli Valanadu, that its capital was Chitralai Pattanam, that he established a new village and called it Valanadu, that he dug many lakes such as Vellangulam, that all the citizens respectfully called him *'maniam'* and that the son born to him and his wife was given the name Nelliangodan"

After one of his friends narrated all these details about his paternal uncle, Manthiappan said with a smile, "My father and I were blessed with good luck only after Nelliangodan was born!"

"What luck? Tell us, tell us! Tonight you are not going to sleep. Tell us at least how you became lucky!"

"They named him Nelliangodan as he was born by the grace of Nelliamman. But the sorrow over the birth of Nelliangodan shortened the life of my *periappa** Kolatha Gounder and my *periamma*† Pavalathal."

"What is this? The birth of a son is an occasion for joy. How did it make them sad?"

"Haven't you heard that the soundness of the plant can be seen as it germinates? Nelliangodan did not speak until he was four or five. People of the village made fun of him and called him by nicknames such as 'dumb owl' and 'silent conch'. Later, he began to speak. Even after that the parents could not feel easy! He could not distinguish between good and bad, was imbecile and stupidly credulous. He remained a dullard. My uncle and aunt were very unhappy on seeing their son so dull, and worried how he would discharge his duties, manage all their wealth and rise further. They became veritable images of sorrow, fell ill and did not recover. While in death-bed my *periappa* called my father and entrusted his son under his care. He requested my father to help Nelliangodan and take care of the administration of the region till he became old enough to rule by himself. Later on, he was to handover all the responsibilities to Nelliangodan and marry him to Thamarai Nachi on whom he had the customary marital claim as her maternal uncle's son. And my father promised to do so."

"What happened to that promise?"

"Didn't I touch upon my father's diplomacy? In that diplomacy the promise got blown off. The 'masachamy' Nelliangodan became mentally unsound and remained a wastrel in Chitralai Pattanam. He disappeared suddenly and my father

*_periappa_ = father's elder brother/husband of mother's elder sister

†_periamma_ = mother's elder sister/wife of father's elder brother

could not trace him at all. My father calculated that if Thamarai Nachi was married to me the power of Malaikoluntha Gounder would accrue to him and he would get control over the region belonging to Nelliangodan. Only out of the fear that marriage between Nelliangodan and Thamarai would stand in the way of his plans to extend his territory, he is so hurriedly conducting this marriage."

"Eh, *appa*!* Your father is a great Saguni, indeed! Became the owner of somebody's land and property, appropriated somebody's power to himself and to crown all these now he marries you to Malaikoluntha Gounder's daughter and vastly increases his influence and power."

"Nowadays, one should conspire like a Saguni and betray like a Vibishanan. Office, power, status, influence, and wealth enough for ten generations will come nowhere near you, if you hesitate, considering intrigue and betrayal sinful. If one's prosperity and influence depend on another's ruin or suffering, state diplomacy is completing the tasks suitably."

Nobody among those friends came forward to speak against Manthiappan's policy. The reason - that gang kept itself always near him and partook of all the pleasures he enjoyed! Whether the activities of Chellatha Gounder or the behaviour of Manthiappan were to their liking or not, they all sponged on him and enjoyed life as much as possible. So they all smiled and gave a boisterous approval to Manthiappan's policy of conspiracies.

Chellatha Gounder came there shouting in his rough voice, "Why so much noise and uncontrolled merriment? Tomorrow is wedding day! Only if you sleep well, will your body be fresh and sound! Go, all of you go and sleep." At once Manthiappan and his friends very obediently slipped into their beds.

In Thamarai Nachiar's chamber treatment for reviving her was given hurriedly. Mother Perumayi Ammal was seated beside her with a face wrapped up in sorrow. In her mind incidents of the past cast their shadows. Perumayi took very good care of her brother Kolatha Gounder and his wife Pavalathal when they were very sick and dying. Perumayi Ammal was aware of the sad plight of the parents who got after many years of longing a child that was inactive, slow and dull. Perumayi always pitied Nelliangodan who never caused any harm to anybody and bore any suffering silently. But, for his innocent nature he was only ridiculed as an imbecile lout. The last words of Kolatha Gounder to Chellatha Gounder - "You should marry the girl child born in the house of Maniankurichi Malaikoluntha Gounder to my son" - were even now ringing in her ears.

But what can be done? Nelliangodan had lost everything: his property, his comforts, Nelli Valanadu and its capital Chitralai Pattanam. He had come back after wandering like a vagabond. Her husband had locked him up in a cell infested

**appa* = an expression of pain or surprise/father

with termites and white ants as a punishment. Perumayi Ammal sighed in grief and told herself that even if she could not make her daughter and Nelliangodan man and wife she should at least help him escape from the cell. But she did not know what to do.

The treatment began to yield result gradually and Thamarai opened her eyes slowly. Perumayi observed it and shouted 'Thamarai'. She hugged her daughter and tears flowed copiously from the eyes of both.

Nelliangodan, cooped up in the cell, wallowed in unbearable pain as he was unable to find enough space even to put one of his feet down without being bitten by termites and white ants. Termites and ants were all over his body as if pollen gathered from countless flowers of a park were strewn over him from head to foot. They crawled, slithered and bit every part of his body. It looked like a ritual coating of pollen but Nelliangodan writhed in pain inflicted by those cursed insects. He couldn't stand nor could he sit or lie down. He looked up and noticed a thick wooden beam across the walls. He thought that if he clung to the beam, ants and termites could not attack him there. He leaped, caught hold of the beam and hung.

Within a short while termites and ants swarmed his hands. He jumped down from the beam.

He thought of a plan to escape from the assault of those insects in their multitudes.

Countless worms and insects swarm corpses and eat; birds like eagles, vultures and crows peck at and eat corpses; dogs, foxes and wolves tear and devour corpses. So if I also became a corpse I would not feel any pain however hard these insects were to bite me! So that is the right way - he decided.

He tore his dhoti lengthwise into two pieces; wore one piece around his loin and tied one end of the other piece around his neck and another end of the same to the beam.

There lay a damaged stone mortar nearby. He decided to become a corpse by hanging himself from the beam. With that idea he rolled the mortar up to the level of the beam and stood above it. He put the knotted end around his neck. If he pushed the mortar under his feet a little distance away from him he would slip and hang breathless. He lifted his legs to roll the mortar away.

The same moment he was surprised to feel the pressure of somebody holding him tightly. Thamarai cried desperately, "*Athan*, why did you dare do this?" With the free end of her saree she brushed away the termites and ants swarming his body and took him out of the cell.

Perumayi Ammal alone was in Thamarai's chamber. Seeing her daughter with Nelliangodan she immediately bolted the room from the inside and dimmed the bright lamp.

When Nelliangodan knew that his auntie was also on his side he felt infused with new energy and confidence.

"Nelliangoda! Where had you gone all these days? Your *chithappa** Chellatha Gounder fixed this marriage between Thamarai and his son by telling us that after becoming mentally ill you had run away to some far-off place," Perumayi said with tears in her eyes.

"Auntie! You don't know the entire story! I ran away from Valanadu unable to bear the torture of my *chithappa* Chellatha Gounder. He drove Cholan Thotti also out of the village for speaking in my favour. Cholan Thotti searched for me in several places but could not find me. He then found employment in your place. I who had lost power and all my assets and property was reduced to the level of a total destitute. I spent some time as a goatherd. I who was used to the comforts of a palace had to pull on like that. Then I served as a handyman in a Chettiyar's house in Athichettipalayam, a village near Karur. There I slogged on in poverty out of fear that my *chithappa* would kill me if he were to know that I was alive. When Cholan Thotti sensed that a conspiracy was being hatched for a marriage between Thamarai and Manthiappan he took immediate efforts and found out where I was. The moment I knew from him about the marriage I rushed to your place. Only on the advice of Cholan Thotti did I disguise myself as a beggar and meet Thamarai.

With tears in his eyes Nelliangodan continued, "Auntie! You cannot just measure the love, affection and sense of gratitude that Cholan Thotti has for me and my father! My *chithappa* doesn't have even a miniscule of that affection - as much as a mustard seed - for me. Alas! How many times had he tied me to a post and thrashed me with thorny brambles. Had he asked me to sign a paper relinquishing all my lands and possessions to him and his son Manthiappan I would have done that. I don't want anything my father left for me. It will be enough if I get Thamarai."

"My dear, first eat something," said Perumayi affectionately.

"*Amma*, insect bites are all over his body. See the swellings. Let him first bathe in hot water. *Athan*, please come." Thamarai said this to him gently. He got up cheerfully to take bath. The same moment the door was knocked repeatedly

Perumayi Ammal and Thamarai were frightened and stood still.

Kicked powerfully, the door crashed and fell down. Through the broken door Malaikoluntha Gounder pounced like an enraged tiger and stood before them.

**chithappa* = father's younger brother/husband of mother's younger sister

3 Joy and Bewilderment

"Where is that Masachamy?"

Perumayi Ammal and Thamarai Nachi stood dumbfounded without giving any reply to that question which came like a thunder from Malaikoluntha Gounder.

"I am here, *mama**," Nelliangodan said and came out from behind the silk curtain. He was not afraid. Perhaps, he was emboldened by the presence of his aunt and his beloved Thamarai!

"I should not have stopped at locking you up in the cell. I should have killed you. Since it was a happy occasion in my house I left you at that. Now I know that it was a blunder," Gounder flew at him furiously and shook his hair.

"Take your hands off him," shouted Perumayi and pushed her husband aside by pulling his hands. Thamarai said loudly, "*Appa*! Kill me first and then kill him," and stood between her father and Nelliangodan.

"Are women ruling this house? Because of your behaviour, tomorrow not only our village but all the neighbouring lands also would spit upon me with derision," Malaikoluntha Gounder jumped in fury.

"We didn't do anything. It was only you who fixed this marriage believing the words of Chellatha Gounder that Nelliangodan had gone somewhere and died. Now he is alive. Chellatha Gounder got hold of all his belongings, beat and bruised him, reduced him to the level of a goatherd and frightened him so much that he ran away to save his skin. He has come back just now and you fall foul upon him like

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**mama* = mother's brother/husband of paternal aunt

this. Is it just? You yourself tell me," Perumayi Ammal asked with tears flowing from her eyes. Malaikoluntha Gounder was nonplussed for a second and then began to speak.

"He has come, all right. But has come back mentally unsound to vex us." Nelliangodan smiled, affectionately addressed him as '*mama*' and pathetically asked, "Is anyone who is free from guile, cunning and deceit a madcap? I will ask with folded hands even the snake that comes to bite me to go away without harming me. I will never think of cudgelling it. If the snake tries to bite me obdurately, well, I will bear it. *Mama*, will you call this madness?"

"Did you notice? How good his heart is? Was it not a grave injustice to lock him up in that cell and punish him so severely?"

Perumayi Ammal caught hold of her husband's legs and melted like wax.

"All right; what has happened cannot be undone. What else can be done now? Let us attend to the tasks of tomorrow's marriage." Perumayi put a counter question in a cringing tone, "The marriage is between him and our daughter, isn't it so?"

He suppressed his anger, shook his wife's shoulder and in a mocking tone asked, "Do we have a daughter other than Thamarai?"

"*Appa*, in my young age itself you decided that I was to marry *athan*. And I cherish him in my heart and worship him. Even when you fixed my marriage with Manthiappan, I was certain that my *athan* would somehow or other come back. He has come as I expected. Father, please at least now, without objecting in any way, solemnize our marriage." In Thamarai's words there was a note of despair.

"*Mama*, I will marry her forgetting all your harsh actions against me," said Nelliangodan in a manner of 'let us forget and forgive'.

Maniankurichi Gounder growled, "Oho! So you are pleased to give your acceptance to marry my daughter out of pity for me!"

"Is not joking a habit with your nephew? Why do you take it seriously? All right, leave it. Please tell us that you agree to conduct the marriage tomorrow morning as desired by Thamarai Nachi," pleaded Perumayi Ammal.

"Yes, *mama*! If you agree now as suggested by auntie, Thamarai and I would lie in two different cots in two different rooms and spend the whole night in pleasurable dreams! In that dream all the clouds in the sky would float like skiffs. The rainbow there would come as a decorated boat. In that boat Thamarai would be leaning back elegantly wearing all the stars as jewels. Me, the prince of the lunar region would suddenly jump from the skiff into that beautiful boat. On seeing me Thamarai would rush towards me, rush towards me and..."

Before Nelliangodan completed the description, his aunt intercepted wisely and said that he could tell all these to Thamarai after the marriage.

Malaikoluntha Gounder who stormed into the room like a fire-spitting volcano understood the affectionate feelings that Perumayi Ammal had for Nelliangodan and the loving heart of Thamarai when she said she had been waiting to marry only him. So he now tried different tactics to change their mind.

He said, "Chellatha Gounder is many times more influential and wealthier than us. He has the wherewithal and the status of a chieftain. Is it good for us to antagonise him?"

When Malaikoluntha Gounder raised this question Nelliangodan said sadly, "What *mama* says is also right. If Chellatha Gounder is a Yama his son is Yama's attendant! If we earn the enmity of these two, Maniankurichi will most probably be in trouble. So please think carefully and decide." Feeling sad over the silly way her *athan* spoke Thamarai began to weep and said, "*Appa*! Do you understand at least now what a nice person *athan* is! How can I betray a noble person like him?"

"All that you say is right. But don't forget that in this the honour of our Maniankurichi is also at stake."

"For the sake of honour, is it just to be remiss about the life of your daughter?"

Now Perumayi Ammal intervened gently, "Can't we give a true account to Chellatha Gounder, pacify him and request him to stay and join us in conducting the marriage?"

On hearing his wife's suggestion Malaikoluntha Gounder's face turned angry. He muttered something to himself and kept walking up and down the room. Then he turned towards his wife and daughter and began to explain the dilemma he encountered.

"Perumayi! Thamarai! Listen to me. Having decided that Manthiappan is the bridegroom we have already performed the betrothal ceremony. The priests of our Kongu clan have handed over platters of marriage gifts to *sumangali* women after sprinkling water on them. The goldsmith has made the three-stranded *thali* with the gold provided by us and it is with us now. The ritual of boiling paddy and drying it has also been finished. We have performed the milk-pouring ceremony in front of a sappy tree, cut a branch of that tree, tied a threefold knot around it and thrown it over the roof of the marriage hall for drying. Both families have exchanged two baskets of salt. As per the custom, soft earth thrown up by white ants has been collected for daubing the stage to be put up in the marriage hall. We have invited the elders of all the twenty-four countries for blessing the couple and most of them have arrived. Our son Chinnamalaikolunthu, the bridegroom's

maithunan, has got ready the decorative shawl to be hung from the groom's head, the silk dhoti for wearing it as grooms do and a handsome well-built horse for bringing the groom into the marriage hall. Information about the marriage has been announced with the beating of drums in all the villages by Cholan Thotti. The groom's family has sent the customary rice basket and female relations of the groom have come to our house for performing the ritual *'pon pooti kulam othudal'*. We have hosted to them the dinner called *'puthukalathunnal'*. After all these how can I face Chellatha Gounder and tell him that the marriage has been stopped? Not only the relatives of the groom from Valanadu but also a large number of Kongu people from other places have assembled here. Won't they ridicule our decision and laugh at us uncontrollably? If both of you, Perumayi for my crime of marrying you and Thamarai for my crime of fathering you still insist on wiping out the honour of Maniankurichi Malaikoluntha Gounder, it is agreeable to me also."

He could not proceed further. His tongue would not rise. He wiped the tears from his eyes with the silk shawl worn on his shoulders. Nelliangodan became jittery on seeing his condition. He caught hold of his legs tightly and burst out with emotion, "*Mama*! I don't want to marry. I shall remain a bachelor for ever. Let not the reputation of your family suffer because of me."

Thamarai, who was not in a mood to agree with him even a bit forgot herself and shouted angrily, "*Appa*! *Amma*! *Athan*! You three can decide in any way you like. But at the same time listen to my decision. If at all I marry, I will marry only my *athan* Nelliangodan. If not, tomorrow morning as per your wish ask Manthippan to tie the sacred *thali* to the dead body of this Thamarai Nachi,"

Noticing the spark of fire in her eyes and her iron determination Malaikoluntha Gounder stood still like a pillar.

Nelliangodan tried to stop Thamarai from saying anything more and began "Thamarai!"

Thamarai cast an angry look at him and said, "*Athan*, you be quiet." He was simply moved by the depth of her love for him and desisted from saying anything.

For a while there was silence in that room, like the calm following a storm.

Malaikoluntha Gounder who stood like a pillar moved a little and looked at Perumayi and Thamarai with his lustreless eyes. "As you wish the marriage between Nelliangodan and Thamarai Nachi will take place. I will meet Chellatha Gounder now itself and pacify him."

Even before he finished saying this, mother and daughter in extreme joy fell at his feet and offered reverential obeisance. Nelliangodan stood there scratching his head. Malaikoluntha Gounder asked both of them to get up and wiped their happy

tears. He blessed them to live long and happily and went out of the room. Thamarai hugged her mother and showered kisses on her cheeks. Nelliangodan who was watching this intently felt a tingling sensation all over his body and stroked his cheeks gently. Thamarai noticed this and her cheeks turned red. Overpowered by bashfulness she bowed her head, like a deer jumped into her bed and buried her face into a pillow.

Realising that he had no option other than conducting the marriage of Thamarai with Nelliangodan, the broken-hearted Malaikoluntha Gounder entered the guesthouse in which the groom's family was staying. His servants woke up Chellatha Gounder who was in deep sleep. He got up and ordered them to bring Malaikoluntha Gounder into his room. Chellatha Gounder nodded his head and Malaikoluntha Gounder very respectfully entered the room and took a seat.

"What's the matter at this odd hour?" Chellatha Gounder's rough voice sounded majestically.

"It's nothing. I have come to beg your pardon."

"Why? What mistake have you committed? You have carried out all the marriage rituals traditionally observed by our Kongu Velala people very beautifully; then what for should you apologise?"

"Regarding those things I didn't leave anything undone."

"Then what is the problem? Tell me with an open heart."

"I just do not know how to say that. Accepting my invitation almost all the important people of the nearby regions have come. Some are on the way, too."

"Yes, yes. Oh! I forgot to tell you. Even Thalaiyur Kali, the prince of Menadu is coming on my invitation. Have you any objection to that?"

"Hm, hm... but..."

"Oho... it seems you don't like Thalaiyur Kali coming here and you are mincing words unable to say that. You, Maniankurichiyar, you must not forget one matter. The relationship that has developed in my period between Valanadu and the young lion Thalaiyur Kali is very deep and strong. This young man is a very good friend to me. Even if he doesn't like my ideas at times he will never let me down. A noble friend who will do anything for me. I have invited him as I think that it is improper to conduct my son's marriage without his presence. The palm leaf missive announcing his arrival has come. Don't fail to arrange a suitable place for him to stay."

"Don't I know about him? He is not only a chieftain, but also a brave youth capable of rolling hillocks by his foot. A friend who will never be ungrateful. The friendship between him and you can never be impaired by anyone. I am fully

aware of this. His attending the marriage is a matter of pride for me also. But now I have come to see you for some other reason."

Chellatha Gounder was upset a little; shook his body, stroked his moustache and asked eagerly in a stern voice, "What other reason is there?"

Malaikoluntha Gounder's tongue became dry. Yet, he weathered the storm as he was firm about explaining the situation. So he again said, "Please forgive me!"

"If you ask me to forgive you without telling anything, what am I to forgive? Why should I forgive?

When Chellatha Gounder put this question sullenly in an irritated tone, Manthiappan entered the room with his friends. He seemed to have waded through fire and shouted, "*Appa*, I will tell you. It is nothing. The reason is this. Nelliangodan has returned from somewhere. He has decided to marry his daughter to him."

These words rushed out of Manthiappan's mouth as hot as iron pieces fallen into fire and burnt to a glowing red. The same moment Chellatha Gounder rose from his bed like a tiger and shouted, "Ah! What?" Instantaneously he took the sword kept near his bed and raised it against Malaikoluntha Gounder.

An arm stretched itself like lightning and prevented the sword of Chellatha Gounder from striking. Everyone witnessed it with surprise and trepidation. All of them stood still amidst joy and bewilderment as they found that it was Thalaiyur Kali who prevented the assault.

4 Sweet Ambience and New Sorrow

"Who? Is it Thalaiyur *thumbi*?" Chellatha Gounder put this question filled with surprise and at the same time bowed his head in shame over the insult he had suffered.

Body strong as a teak tree - moustache like the sting of a scorpion- eyes sparkling like a sharpened sword - tall mien - silken turban etched with precious jewels like a crown - the spirit of a youth barely twenty or twenty-five years old - amidst all these a countenance that indicates a mind prone to analyse and decide anything calmly - Thalaiyur Kali, the prince of Menadu, was the person who possessed all these.

He put his hands gently on the shoulder of Chellatha Gounder and asked, "What has happened as to strike down the father of your prospective daughter-in law dead?" Chellatha Gounder who had driven away Nelliangodan, a man with a heart as soft as cotton by the power of his deceitful brain began reeling out unalloyed lies in order to win Thalaiyur Kali entirely to his side and to frighten and cow down Malaikoluntha Gounder.

"I told him that I had sent an invitation to Thalaiyur Kali and that he is coming to attend the wedding. At once Maniankurichiyar began jumping up and down. Asked me angrily, 'with whose permission did you send the invitation?' I said,

'Thalaiyur Kali is my best friend. I needn't ask for anybody's permission.' He spoke derisively, 'If Thalaiyur Kali comes to attend the wedding, I won't conduct the marriage of my daughter with Manthiappan. All of you can leave now itself.' Thalaiyur *thambi*! I would not have minded had he insulted only me. But had he not spoken in my presence lowly of the prince of Menadu, the dear friend of Valanadu? After that, should his head remain? That's why I aimed my sword at him. But his lifespan seems to be stable and strong and he has escaped, thanks to your intervention."

Contrary to the expectation of those assembled there that the young and spirited Thalaiyur Kali would jump up and down in anger, he smiled silently and said, "To the great landlord of Maniankurichi my visit to this function might have appeared ordinary. He might have even considered my visit a blot on his status. Or he might have thought that it would not be possible for him to entertain me properly and find suitable accommodation for a prince like me in his village. Should you blow up this ordinary matter into gigantic proportions and commit sacrilege in a place meant for an auspicious occasion?"

In the calm and even-tempered speech of Thalaiyur Kali regal dignity occupied the front seat.

Malaikoluntha Gounder panicked at the cunning web Chellatha Gounder was weaving. He went close to Thalaiyur Kali and asked in a shivering voice, "Do you believe this?"

"I consider believing whatever that Chellatha Gounder says as the biggest boon of my life! I know that if he is enraged to the extent of aiming that deadly sword at you the reason must be the immeasurable love and respect he has for me. Maniankurichiyar esquire! Note this point. I am not at all angry or unhappy about your not inviting me or Chellatha Gounder making an issue out of it. I am only worried that both of you quarrel and the marriage between Manthiappan and Thamarai is getting cancelled because of me," Kali explained calmly.

Maniankurichiyar caught hold of his hands and presented the truth, "Please listen to me. You know that Nelliangodan is my sister's son and so has the customary right to claim Thamarai as his wife. He came suddenly from nowhere. My daughter is adamant that if she were to marry she would marry only him. I came to Chellatha Gounder only to tell this and appease him. But he tells a different story."

Is it possible to organise the dance of truth on a stage spread with thorns of lies?

Chellatha Gounder was very careful and cautious that such a thing should not happen He used his experience in the art of instigating and insinuating without making even a small mistake.

"You, Maniankurichiyar, now I ask again. And I ask for the last time. If you did not get angry but was immensely pleased over the visit of Thalaiyur's great son Kali who is also my friend and able supporter of Valanadu - are you ready to conduct the marriage as it was decided upon?"

Malaikoluntha Gounder struggled vainly to answer this question - no, not a question - but a challenge. The landlord of Maniankurichi, who was like a mountain in human form, shrank in shame. He stroked the thick moustache that spread thickly over his face and said, "Now the decision is not in my hands."

"Why did you - you who have not the daring and the will to take a decision - agree to give your daughter in marriage to a family as great as this? Imagine this situation exactly upside down! Your daughter cherishes Manthiappan as her bridegroom and is waiting for the next morning to marry him and at that time Manthiappan changes his mind and says he is going to marry some other girl. How much incited and angry will you be? So, you reconsider your decision taken in haste and anger because of my visit. If you think that your honour will be impaired in any way, I will shut up my mouth and not even greet the couple. Do not spoil a good occasion on account of me."

As Thalaiyur Kali was telling this to Maniankurichiyar, Chellatha Gounder patted Thalaiyur Kali on his shoulder and said, "Alas! What an injustice is this? Should you demean yourself and plead for my sake? No, no! After all this, my son will never marry into this family. Thalaiyur thambi! It is certain that a terrible conspiracy lays hidden behind this sudden decision. It will reveal itself by and by. I will definitely tell you that, some time later. Otherwise, he would not have become as audacious as to antogonise you even."

Manthiappan burst out angrily, "After what has happened, even standing in this house is injurious to our reputation. Even if opposition as miniscule as a mustard seed is shown against the prince of Thalaiyur, my heart will not permit me to take that enemy as my father-in-law. Even if the daughter of Maniankurichiyar is as beautiful as Ramba or Urvasi - even if she were to fall prostrate at my feet - I will not take her as my wife. And let me make it clear, Maniankurichi will have to answer for this insult suffered by us. It will have to pay terribly for it very soon."

He then roared, "*Appa*, come, let us get back to Valanadu."

Thalaiyur Kali muttered, with his eyes resting upon the ceiling of the guesthouse, "Can anyone change what has been destined?" Before taking leave, he addressed Malaikoluntha Gounder in a slightly mocking tone by way of expressing his displeasure, "Thank you for patiently bearing with my stay in your village for so long a time."

Kali then hugged Manthiappan and said. "The decision you have taken is unavoidable. I welcome it. There is no other way. Make preparations for leaving with all your relations at once. An auspicious function is to be held in this house tomorrow. So you should be quiet and ensure that nothing untoward happens. This is the demand of Menadu, friendly to Valanadu." He then left the place.

All those who were staying in the guesthouse got ready to leave with Chellatha Gounder. The crowd expressed its opposition by cracking jokes, casting innuendoes and making fun of Maniankurichiyar who stood there silently. But, in the bustle of their preparations to leave, not a word was audible. Before dawn all of them left.

This news spread all over the entire region before sunrise. Early morning Chinnamalaikolunthu warned his father of the terrible fallout to his decision of fulfilling the wishes of Thamarai. He met his younger sister and spit fire, "By marrying that madcap you are going to destroy yourself. Not only that, you have also darkened the future of Maniankurichi." Without giving any answer to Chinnamalaikolunthu who was walking alone up and down in unabated anger, his father and mother involved themselves in work connected with the marriage. There was absolutely no sign of happiness in the father's face. The mother's face was elated thinking about the daughter's marriage. Still, like a line running through a precious opalescent stone a feeling that disturbed her mind was visible in her face.

Whatever might happen, Thamarai was going to marry her *athan* Nelliangodan as she had wished. This thought filled her with rapturous joy and she looked like a fully blossomed lotus in a pond full of cool water.

The face of Nelliangodan was sad and looked like a jasmine bud with closed petals; yet like the fragrance inside there was happiness in his heart.

Before daybreak Cholan Thotti beat his drum and announced the sudden change in the marriage function in as many places as possible. People assembled here and there outside their homes and exchanged excitedly their views about the marriage.

Cholan Thotti showed special interest in announcing the change as it was only on his advice did Nelliangodan enter Maniankurichi in disguise and preparations were afoot for his marriage with the girl of his choice. So, Cholan Thotti went about his job untiringly with renewed spirit like a spinning top. Nelliangodan understood his grateful heart and sighed happily.

As detailed in the wedding invocation composed by the great poet Kamban, it is necessary that in the marriage function of the Kongu clan a lot of relatives of both the bride and the bridegroom must be present. For this marriage, on behalf of the

bridegroom, Cholan Thotti had to bring Nelliangodan's relatives to the marriage pandal all by himself. When Chellatha Gounder left, most of the relatives who had come with him also left. Yet, some of the close relatives of Nelliangodan, mostly first cousins, sympathized with him and stayed behind. They regretted, "It's a pity. This boy is from a family that wielded a lot of power. If his father Kolatha Gounder or mother Pavalathal were alive, in what a grand manner would they celebrate this marriage!" The efforts taken by Cholan Thotti in that emergency to get their concurrence for the marriage and to make them attend the function were praised by everybody, especially those who agreed to attend.

Somehow, the marriage function attained a grandeur of its own at the appointed time. After the relatives of both families assembled in the pandal the first ceremony of planting the wedding pole was done. A priest of the Kongu Velalas put the nine kinds of grains in a cloth soaked in turmeric water, knotted and tied it to the branch of a pipal tree which served as the wedding pole. Then he poured milk and performed the pooja. Nelliangodan was asked to sit in the bridal chamber and his bachelorhood was annulled. As per the ritual *vetrilai kattuthal* the priest bundled betel leaves, areca nut, coconut, plantain. mirror, comb, turmeric, lime fruit, sandal paste, bridal saree and blouse cloth in a dhoti and performed pooja to it. It was taken to a Pillaiyar temple with the accompaniment of drum music and brought back to the bridal chamber. It was then sprinkled with water, untied and handed over to Thamarai Nachi. She wore that *vetrilai* bridal saree and did obeisance to three elders. Nelliangodan was made to sit on a three-legged stool and the ritual of dispelling the ill-effects of any evil eye was done by throwing cooked red rice and water around him. The priest tied two nodeless turmeric pieces to a thread string soaked in turmeric paste and held them for a while in front of burning incense. He then tied the turmeric pieces on the right hands of the bride and the bridegroom. With relatives walking around him and musicians playing the drums the bridegroom mounted a horse and proceeded to the Pillaiyar temple. There he broke a coconut in front of the deity and worshipped. The family of the bride went to the *nattar sabai* - the place where the Kongu clan had assembled for the marriage - and made a formal request to all of them to attend the function. All those who were related to the bride through the mother were daubed with sandal paste, presented with new dhoti and fed with milk and fruits. A Kongu Velala priestess sent round a container filled with water up to the brim, removed the five cakes made of cooked red rice and concluded the ritual of dispelling the ill-effects of evil eyes from the bride.

The bridal chamber was decorated with flowers, banana and areca trees. Two copper pots, one full of paddy and another full of water were there. In front of

these *karagams* there were an image of Pillaiyar made of turmeric, a thousand stranded wick, the food to be served by the bride to the bridegroom for the first time after marriage, betel leaves, areca nut and a heap of sugar cane jaggery.

As soon as the groom reached the bridal chamber on his horse the ceremony of tying the sacred thread started. The whole pandal was in an excited mood when a Kongu Velala from a noble family sang Kamban's wedding benediction faultlessly in his powerful voice. Although Perumayi Ammal, with assistance from her husband, was very keen that all the rituals must be carried out in the proper order there was a little bit of mishap. All those who had come attributed the cause of it to the sudden change in the marriage.

The priests made Thamarai stand facing the East and Nelliangodan in front of her facing the West and exchange garlands. After the piece of turmeric worn around the wrist was removed, Nelliangodan received the sacred thread from the priests very deferentially and tied it around the neck of Thamari Nachi. Musicians played auspicious music throughout.

The wedding benediction rendered by the worthy person was also heard continuously.

The couple, drenched in happiness, fell prostrate before Malaikoluntha Gounder and Perumayi Ammal and received their blessings. Tears of joy flowed copiously from Perumayi's eyes. Malaikoluntha Gounder's face looked like a mirror lacking amalgam coat and would not reveal the waves of thought beating in his heart. Thamarai after receiving the blessings of her parents turned to her brother Chinnamalaikolunthu to fall at his feet and receive his blessings. He, who was attending the function till then half-heartedly, forgot that he was standing amidst hundreds of relatives and friends and shouted in a voice choked with anger, "Chi! You obdurate virago!" and stormed out in uncontrollable temper.

The marriage pandal which was till then basking in sweet ambience got enveloped in terrible sorrow. Perumayi Ammal worried about the sufferings the anger of Chinnamalaikolunthu would cause them. She broke into tears and cried, "Periyakandiamma! You are the only support."

5 Thamarai Nachi's Vow

Thamarai Nachiyar stood with her eyes fixed in the direction her elder brother had walked away. Most of the relatives left the pandal as if they were not interested in joining the marriage feast. A few relatives who wished to observe the etiquette of presenting the wedding gift also took leave immediately after presenting it. The bridegroom's brother-in-law is bound to remain until all the ceremonies are over and the priests take *arugumanam* and offer their blessings. But the bride's brother Chinnamalaikolunthu himself had left without caring for all these after hurling words that hit his sister like a hammer. Then why should the other relatives bother themselves? Only a few, out of pity and to be of some consolation to Maniankurichiyar did not leave at once. Those who were vexed with the sudden change of bridegroom screwed up their faces and indulged in exchanging broadsides. They showed undue haste in retuning home in whatever vehicle they had come in accordance with their affordability. Only a few felt that it was improper for humans to desert a person in misery as birds do when the pond dries up. They stayed in the marriage house and underlined the importance of relationship.

That the newly married couple should wash the feet of their parents and worship with flowers is an important ceremony! Thamarai did this ceremony to her parents. From the eyes of Nelliangodan tears flowed as from a waterfall. The yearning and the sorrow – my father Kolatha Gounder and mother Pavalathal are not alive to bless me; I am not lucky enough to do pooja at their feet – pierced his heart through and through like arrows.

The son of Kolatha Gounder who converted Nelli Valanadu into a fertile land and thus extended his influence and power was now reduced to the level of being laughed at. Unable to reveal it to anybody he felt weak and ashamed of himself. No wonder his eyes turned into a waterfall as he pondered over this!

With folded hands Nelliangodan paid reverential respect to Malaikoluntha Gounder and Perumayi Ammal and said in an emotionally choked voice, "To me who has lost both father and mother, hereafter you are the father and mother." Father-in-law and aunt felt miserable. Perumayi Ammal tried vainly to contain her heart's agonising cries. It was also obvious that Malaikoluntha Gounder was very much upset over what had happened against his wishes. Sighing silently, Perumayi Ammal embraced her daughter and wiped away the tears rolling down her cheeks like snowdrops found on the tips of grass blades early morning. But that resulted in her eyes turning into water springs!

In that situation too, women relatives and elders were busy doing the remaining few rituals without any let up.

They placed the footwear especially made for the couple on a stool kept at the gate and made them wear it to the accompaniment of auspicious music. They gave Thamarai an iron ladle and asked her to serve food with it to Nelliangodan. Ladies surrounded them and enjoyed themselves in making fun of them. Neither the couple nor Maniankurichiyar and his wife could participate in these happy activities spiritedly. They did all these just for the sake of formality.

After all these, they took the couple into the house and asked them to sit.

Perumayi Ammal was in dismay; she could not think of her only daughter's marriage with pride and feel happy about it. She never expected that her son Chinnamalaikolunthu would behave so indecently in the marriage pandal. In those days it was considered a crime for a man to cry loudly even when whipped repeatedly. He would just wriggle and bear the pain silently. In the same manner Perumayi Ammal suffered everything silently and participated in the marriage activities. When the couple was brought into the house she was with them. But Malaikoluntha Gounder was not there and her eyes rolled around in search of her husband.

Malaikoluntha Gounder was then reading agitatedly a letter marked 'urgent' and addressed to him. Sorrow enveloped his face. From the manner Chinnamalaikolunthu stood near him and looked at the letter and his father alternately, it was obvious that it was he who brought the letter!

The letter was from Thalaiyur Kali! While reading the letter the hands of Malaikoluntha Gounder trembled!

"From Thalaiyur Kali, the chieftain of Menadu, to the esteemed Maniankurichiyar: I do not regret having been insulted by you in your village, nor do I mind it. But, for my sake, my friend and patron Chellatha Gounder is deeply pained. You may not fully know the friendship between us and to what extent my country needs the support of the region under his control. The region administered by me is rich in forest wealth. The Valanadu region is a fertile area. We have trained our people to be warlike. We supply to Valanadu the armaments we have in excess of our needs. In return for that we receive food grains. Such relations exist between our regions. When my father Periya Kali died I was very young. Even when he was alive he left me in the care of Chellatha Gounder. Brought up by him from my young age and having learnt the art of governance in his loving protection I acknowledge him as my patron. I helped him gain control over Valanadu after the death of Kolatha Gounder only because his son Nelliangodan did not possess the strength, the ability, the knowledge and the intelligence to protect the land or provide succour to the people. Now Chellatha Gounder is ably administering Valanadu with a political acumen and intelligence especial to him. The proposed marriage between your daughter Thamarai and Manthiappan would have paved way for friendship not only between you and Chellatha Gounder but also between you and me! As fate would have it that had not happened! The doubt that Chellatha Gounder and I have now is not to be ignored! We suspect that there is a big conspiracy behind making Nelliangodan your son-in-law! What Chellatha Gounder believes I also believe! To be brief, you have not just given your daughter to Nelliangodan! You are going to help him get back the land lost by him! Only then could your daughter Thamarai live like a queen, couldn't she? For this to happen Nelliangodan should get back Nelli Valanadu from Chellatha Gounder and become its chieftain, shouldn't he? Our firm understanding is that for this purpose only you changed the bridegroom suddenly! You may refuse to agree with our viewpoint. If your refusal is genuine, you must prove it by your action. Otherwise, I will have to conclude that you have a plan ready for a confrontation with Chellatha Gounder in support of Nelliangodan. If any such hostility comes up against my patron the forces of Thalaiyur will not remain idle and watch. I will have to take steps following the policy of 'prevention is better than cure'. The first step towards that end will be the siege of Maniankurichi by the troops of Thalaiyur and conquering it! If you want to avoid such a crisis you must come forward to show in your action that apart from marrying your daughter to Nelliangodan, you will not support him in any manner. It is up to you to interpret this letter as a request or as a warning." Maniankurichiyar read this long letter that bore the signature of Thalaiyur Kali and the seal of Menadu and felt distressed as if he were forced to stand in fire.

He was shocked, got hold of his son's shoulder and said, "Chinnamalaikolunthu what you said had become true? A danger is fast approaching Maniankurichi."

"*Appa*! You ignored my words. Acting upon the advice of mother and daughter you have ruined the future of Maniankurichi. Thalaiyur Kali is the chieftain of Menadu. He will never do anything against the wishes of Chellatha Gounder. How can we live after antagonising both of them?" asked Chinnamalaikolunthu.

"Come with me," he said and entered the house with his hands around his son's shoulders.

On seeing both of them together, Thamarai forgot that she was seated next to Nelliangodan among women relatives for the performance of the ritual game *nalangu*. She sprang up in glee and rushed towards them crying, "*Appa*! *Anna*!" Before Chinnamalaikolunthu opened his mouth, she rattled off, "What is this *anna*, why so much anger against me? Why did you speak like that in the presence of so many? Don't I have the right to choose what is good for my life? *Anna*, is it wrong to marry the person I have been cherishing in my heart as my husband all my life? Why did you insult me in the marriage pandal like that, *anna*?"

Thamarai Nachi cried bitterly, clasped her brother's legs tightly and sobbed. Perumayi Ammal lifted her up and consoled her, "What is this, Thamarai, it was only your brother who got angry with you - what of that? Will water move away if pushed about by water? For some reason he doesn't like this marriage. For that, will he let down his sister? Do you know how fondly your brother has been taking care of you ever since you were born?" As Perumayi was consoling Thamarai, Chinnamalaikolunthu intercepted and spluttered in bubbling rage, "*Amma*! Why this old story? Here is father with a new story. Listen to that." Nelliangodan who was till then seated for the *nalangu* ceremony got up shocked.

"I don't have anything to say. Chinnamalaikolunthu, you tell the whole thing." The father passed the burden on to his son. Chinnamalaikolunthu hardened his heart as strong as iron to the extent of not considering it a burden. He came close to Thamarai and told her emphatically and unambiguously, "We brought you up grandly and with special care. We rocked you in a silver cradle and gave golden rattle to play with. Now you are on the point of leaving this house! To which place are you going? That is the tragedy! You are going; but I don't know where, with a homeless vagabond! It is all right; that is the paradise you chose for yourself! We have stockpiled all that we should give you as dowry at the gate. Gold plates, silver pots, a golden conch cup with a diamond-etched handle for the baby you may beget, an ivory cot, chairs etched with gems, silk mattresses - all articles of dowry are piled up there. Taking all these you and your husband must leave this house immediately. But one thing, to carry these gift articles you yourselves must

arrange for the conveyance! Another big problem; you don't have a place of your own to keep these expensive gifts and enjoy their beauty! I pity you! It's all right! On behalf of *appa* I tell you - you are departing from this place with your husband this moment!"

Even before he stopped, Perumayi Ammal asked, "*Thambee*! What are you saying?" She fell at her husband's feet and asked, "What? Is it acceptable to you?"

Malaikoluntha Gounder said, "With my approval only my son speaks."

Thamarai screamed, "*Appa*!" Chinnamalaikolunthu roared, "From now on there is no business for you and your husband in this house. The affection and relationship between you and us are burnt to ashes!"

Thamarai spoke as if she were frenzied, "*Anna*, today you can drive us out; it doesn't matter. You can keep the dowry you have so generously given us! As you said, we do not have a house to keep them. But, *anna*, I take this vow in front of you; I swear this vow on my mother who gave birth to me, and also on my father. You said the affection and relationship between us are at an end. They will definitely not end. Never, never. You, my brother, who made fun of us as homeless, you are certainly going to see me and my *athan* living in a multistoreyed palace! You, my dear brother, who said that affection and relationship have been consumed by fire, are going to beg me for marrying your daughter to the lion cub of a son I am going to beget."

To his sister who made this vow in a loud voice, Chinnamalaikolunthu answered in a mocking tone, "Why one, you can as well give birth to two lion cubs! I will bring those two and tie at my gate as watchdogs."

Thamarai again vowed, "Yes, *anna**, yes. I'll beget. And you'll beget two daughters. I am certain I'll enjoy the scene of your coming in search of those lions," She then told her husband, "Come on, let us leave," and led him out by pulling his hand.

Malaikoluntha Gounder and his son Chinnamalaikolunthu stood there watching them step out.

They did not notice Perumayi Ammal swooning and falling down on the mat.

Thamarai and Nelliangodan crossed the doorstep of the great landlord of Maniankurichi and covered a long distance by foot.

The gold, silver and ivory articles gifted to Thamarai as dowry lay at the gateway with no one to care for.

**anna* = elder brother

6 Tell Not Your Name Town

The sun rose in the East driving out the black darkness with his rays. The beauty of the river Amaravathi overflowing its banks joined with the radiance of the sky sparkling like gold and turned the scene of Nature's lovely waking up into a sweet spectacle. That the Amaravathi was spiritedly eager to meet and happily mingle with the Cauvery was discernible in her speed. The fronds of the tall coconut trees on the banks of the river were swaying in the morning's gentle breeze. Minnows leaped through the sluice-gates of the channels into the fertile green fields bordering the river and frolicked. Fishermen were catching fish in their nets with the help of small boys. Women were filling their baskets with the fish caught in the nets. Beyond them, in the mid river and near the opposite bank leaping brilliant carps reflected the sun's rays and presented an alluring spectacle. On the bunds ploughmen were walking here and there with their spades and other agricultural implements to attend to the work in the fields. The sound of the flooding Amaravathi and the *thenpangu* songs hummed by the fishermen and the ploughmen were like a welcome song to dawn.

On the northern bank of the river, in the western direction the sound of a horse approaching from far off was heard. The ploughmen and the fishermen turned in that direction, had just a glance of it and resumed their duties. From this it was clear that men crossing that area on their horses was nothing unusual. Seated on the horse, a man feasted his eyes with the beauty of the Amaravathi in its hurry to shower on the mother Cauvery the flowers that had fallen over her from the trees and the richness of the lush coconut bunches hanging from the trees that stood tall on her banks. He was not a ripe old man nor was he a youngster. He was between

fifty-five and sixty. Black-grey moustache and beard gave a gracious charm to his face. He was wearing clean white dress but was not lacking in stockings and other articles necessary for horse ride. Had sharp eyes and elegantly shaped long and curved nose. Hair flowed down a little below the nape and touched the shoulder blades. His body was trim and well-built. He did not rush the horse to compete with the speed of the Amaravathi. It appeared as if he had left the pace to the horse's wish! But he only must decide the destination! That was why his eyes were rolling fixedly on the men working in the fields near the bank and fishing in the river.

When he reached the riverside village Othamanthurai, he pulled the bridle and stopped the horse. An old woman came near the river bank from a field and asked eagerly, "Oh! Is it Mayavar ayya? Ayya, what brings you here at this time?" The old woman had known Mayavar very well. Though the peasant woman had lost a few teeth due to old age her speech was loud and clear.

"Oh! Is it Vangalayi? How do you do!" Mayavar got down from his horse.

Kolatha Gounder who was the powerful chieftain of Thirukambuliyur extended his authority over the Vangal region of Karur. There he renovated the Amman temple in Vangal and performed the ceremonial function of pouring sanctified water over its tower grandly. For this and for conferring the land rights of Vangal region on the people of his clan he was addressed with the honorific 'Vangalan'. In memory of Vangalan people began naming their baby boys 'Vangili' and baby girls 'Vangalayi'. One such old woman who had been named that way came hurriedly to see and enquire Mayavar.

"Will you have hot gruel at this time of the day? I can provide just that. You - from the palace - I don't know whether you'll have it!"

Vangalayi didn't stop with asking affectionately. She extended the gruel pot to him.

"I was wondering whether I could get something that would keep me a little cheerful in the crispness of this cold morning. Right food given at the right time. Come on, give it at once! What...the pot itself is hot! I am sure the gruel also is hot!"

Mayavar emptied the whole pot and gave it back to Vangalayi. The elation born out of the happiness over giving a pot of gruel to a hungry man blossomed on her face.

"You doubted whether this Mayavar would partake of your gruel. Do you understand the character of Mayavar at least now?" he asked her and laughed.

"The whole world knows that you are a gem of a person! What is there for me to know additionally!" answered Vangalayi.

"All right, all right, Vangalayi! I came here for a different purpose. Tell me the way to Marigounden Palayam."

"Is there a place not known to Mayavar? You ask me; isn't it a good joke?"

"No, not at all. I hadn't gone that side for several years. That's why I ask. I have an important work in Marigounden Palayam."

"If you proceed in the northern direction and turn slightly southwest ahead of the Cauvery bank you'll reach Marigounden Palayam."

"All right, *ma*, let me take leave of you. Thank you very much for providing me with sweet hot gruel – especially for giving it with a guileless heart typical of your Kongu Velala clan!"

Vangalayi became bashful even in that ripe old age. In bubbling joy she slightly bowed her head in the direction of Mayavar and interjected, "Are there not guileless people in your Vettuvar clan? You yourself are an example of a spotless heart as white as a nettle flower!"

"*Ma*! Vangalayi! Only when you say that am I reminded that I was born in the Vettuvar clan. Somehow, owing to the differences in the places they lived, the professions they pursued and the varied cultural practices they adopted there arose many divisions among people. In the course of time a wrong idea that these divisions were birth-related established itself. So you are identified as a person of Velala clan and I as of Vettuvar clan. As far as I am concerned all belong to one clan, ma! Let me now take leave of you."

Mayavar spurred the horse and it began galloping towards Marigounden Palayam. Beyond regions like Idaikadu, it was seven or eight miles from the bank of the river Amaravathi. Mayavar didn't take much time to reach the border of Marigounden Palayam from Othamanthurai. He halted the horse at the border and looked around. Suddenly he witnessed an unbelievable scene and was struck with wonder.

A pack of more than a score of wild pigs. Three handsome youths amidst that pack. There are only daggers in their hands. They are in tucked up loin-cloths and are warding off the attacks of these pigs with their daggers. The pigs are not like the common ones loitering in the streets, but are huge in size and strength like rhinoceros.

Having surrounded the youths, the pigs were attacking them fiercely and trying to pounce upon them and fell them. The three youths didn't get weary or tired. Fear was not at all seen in their faces. Mayavar did not move his horse from there. He was thrilled to see three young men keeping at bay those wild pigs which attacked them so ferociously.

When Mayavar saw that frenzied attack of those wild pigs he could very well perceive the folly of underestimating pigs. So he watched very eagerly without blinking his eyes. He understood that the youths were trying to tire the pigs by brandishing their daggers at them as if they were going to stab and kill them. But the pigs did not appear to tire so easily. That terrible fight came to an end only after a very long time. The daggers of those youths pierced a few pigs through the stomach and a few more through the neck. They lifted some pigs like black boulders and dashed them against the ground and threw off the carcasses.

A few pigs which managed to remain alive ran pell-mell and scurried off. The youths congratulated each other by patting on the shoulders and moved towards a big well at a little distance to wash of the mud and dirt settled on their bodies.

Mayavar directed his horse on their way. Seeing a man on horseback the youths stopped. Mayavar asked them, "Little brothers! Can you tell me the way to Rockiannan's barracks?" The three youths exchanged glances with each other and opened their eyes wide. One of them came forward and answered, "Go straight this way and you will reach the barracks."

"*Thambi**, thank you very much. I very much enjoyed the fight all of you put up against the pigs. I appreciate your bravery." said Mayavar and a smile spread over his lips. The youths looked at him from head to foot, exchanged hints with their eyes and silently walked towards the well without taking leave of him. Mayavar felt affectionate towards those young men and enjoyed looking at them. With the intention of getting to know their names he followed them on his horse and asked, "Little brothers! May I know your names?" They stood still without answering Mayavar. He again asked, "Won't you tell me?" Again the three of them looked at each other.

They then turned suddenly away from the direction of the well and walked fast through a very narrow footpath dense with stones and thorny shrubs.

Mayavar was sorely disappointed! He remained on his horse and kept watching them until they disappeared from his sight. Then directed his horse in the way one of them had indicated.

Mayavar entered a large and dense grove situated on the other end of Marigounden Palayam on his horse. On one side there were mango trees with clusters of fruit. Another side was full of jujube trees. On yet another side squirrels were hopping about and nibbling the fruits of guava trees. A high barbed-wire fence had been put up around the grove. A rebuking voice prevented Mayavar from proceeding further. A young man stood on his way majestically and asked in a fault-finding tone, "*Ayya*†, who are you? Where are you going without permission?" With the calmness typical of him, Mayavar said, "I want to meet

*_Thambi_ = younger brother

†_Ayya_ = a term of respect

Rockiannan." That youth in a slightly mischievous way said, "Let that matter wait. First tell me who you are. Only then can I get his permission for you to meet him." "*Thambi*, tell him that Mayavar has come to see him." The youth shot back, "Is that one word enough?" Mayavar said, "That word contains everything. You just tell him and Rockiannan would immediately get up and rush here to welcome me!" Suddenly rays of anger spread over the face of the youth and he asked heatedly, "Why *ayya*? What do you think of our mentor Rockiannan? Don't you know that he is the lion of the Kongu Velala clan? Will that lion get up and run here to welcome you?" Mayavar smiled and looked at him keenly and said in a kind tone, "*Thambi*! There is no doubt that Rockiannan is the Kongu lion. You are a small boy. You do not know the bond of love between us. Go, go and tell him that Mayavar has come." That youth hesitated for a while and walked in slowly.

A short while after the youth left a man with the figure of a tiger came running towards him. The moment he saw him Mayavar jumped down from his horse and hugged him.

"Rockianna, are you in good health?"

"I am quite well. How about you?"

"I am also fine."

"Mayavar! How long is it since I saw you last! What a rare meeting it is! Please come, we'll go into the barracks."

Both, with their hands on each other's shoulders and swimming in a flood of joy, entered the barracks. Rockiannan offered Mayavar a chair inlaid with ivory and sat on another chair opposite to him. Mayavar very much enjoyed looking around the barracks stacked with bows, arrows, spears, swords, wooden props, wooden *cilambam* staffs, daggers, shields and other weapons of war. The youth brought tender coconuts for them. Mayavar looked at him fixedly and smiled. The youth twisted his body in embarrassment.

Rockiannan said, "Mayavar ayya, please condone the severe way he behaved with you."

"Pardon, what for? He discharges his responsibilities with a sense of duty. For that he must be appreciated."

Mayavar patted the youth on his back.

Both finished drinking the tender coconut. The youth scraped the soft kernel of the nut for Mayavar and Rockiannan and they ate it with relish. Mayavar asked him to drink one but the youth declined the offer and expressed his gratitude with a gesture from his eyes. Mayavar cast a fond look over him and asked, "*Thambi*,

what's your name?" The youth stared at him and turned to Rockiannan. He then left the place without answering the question of Mayavar.

"What is this, Rockiannan? It seems this village can be named 'Tell not your name'"

"Why?" asked Rockiannan.

"Because nobody tells the name when asked! Fortunately, I knew your name and so I could enquire where you are and come here!"

Rockiannan heard this reply and burst out a laughter that made the rock there vibrate.

7 The Dawn of Truth

Mayavar intercepted Rockiannan, "What! Is your guffaw the only answer to my question?"

Rockiannan replied in definite terms, "No, not like that. I never divulge the names of those who take training in my barracks. And I have given strict orders to my students that they should not reveal their names to anybody, whoever he may be."

Mayavar was not ready to drop the matter at that. He expressed surprise, "Earlier, there was no such order on the students of this barracks! When Kali, the prince of Thalaiyur, took weapon training under you nobody's name was kept a deep secret."

Rockiannan got up, cleared his throat loudly, began strolling like a tiger and then explained, "Mayavar! What you say was true some thirty years ago. There was none who did not know prince Kali, the son of Thalaiyur king Periya Kali. When he took training here in archery, horse riding and elephant riding and such other martial arts there was no need to hide the names of students, nor could we do it. Today the condition is not the same. Now a few students are here whose names being known to others is not good for them. So, a new rule that no student should reveal his name to anybody has been imposed" He then posed a query to Mayavar:

"All right, I heard that you who left Thalaiyur some twenty or twenty-five years ago announcing that you were becoming a monk returned to Thalaiyur two or three years back. Once I even saw you riding a horse speedily near the bank of the Amaravathi. I was then swimming in the river. I thought of calling you, but did

not, as I felt that my voice could not be heard by you when you were riding at such a high speed. You gave up everything and went away to all kinds of place. Now, why did you renounce your renunciation and come back?"

Mayavar laughed and answered this question, "Only if I had renounced could I give up my renunciation. When prince Kali took up the reigns of Thalaiyur after the death of his father Periya Kali, I was made the minister and I took care of all aspects of governance. Not a single thing happened without my approval. But such a condition did not continue for a long time. I understood that my words were failing to carry value with Thalaiyur Kali. Should I also become a party to the misdeeds that were taking place? This was the question constantly disturbing my mind. I did not want to continue in office in such a distressing situation and so left the palace after telling Kali himself of my intention. For more than ten years I was travelling in various regions of Cholanadu, Cheranadu and Pandianadu. Later, I went up to Kasi in the North. I wandered through the towns and villages situated on the banks of the Ganga and the Yamuna. For quite many years I stayed in the schools of Jains and the viharas of the Buddhists and read a lot of great books. This way twenty or twenty-five years passed. But all the time my mind was revolving around Tamil Nadu, particularly I was always worried about Thalaiyur Kali. My mind was constantly troubled by the thoughts that I had left Kali alone and uncared for, that I had reneged on the duty of taking care of Kali as enjoined by Periya Kali when he died. To put it briefly, the love of my native place overpowered me and brought me back."

Mayavar's reply impressed the mind of Rockiannan deeply.

"What was the wound that pained your heart so much that you left your native Thalaiyur which you loved so dearly? I think passage of time would have healed the wound by now. If you think it proper, will you give me a chance to know about it, please?"

"That day I left without telling you even, my close friend. As atonement for that, I don't have any hesitation to tell you the reason now."

"You might have feared that I would have prevented you from going. However, it had happened and let it end. At least from now on let your wisdom, acumen and pure heart be of use so that whatever happens turns to be good."

"Ayya Rockiannan! You think positively. But as far as Thalaiyur palace is concerned I don't have that faith even now."

"Is it so? Why, Mayavar, why do you think like that?"

"Even now Thalaiyur Kali is infatuated with the flattering words of his nice patron Chellatha Gounder and is caught in the spider web woven by him. Ayya

Rockiannan! With his speech skills Chellatha Gounder mesmerised Periya Kali and took the prince Kali to Valanadu in his young age itself and brought him up. Only to pay back his gratitude for that did Kali help Chellatha Gounder in so many ways. Kolatha Gounder migrated from Vazhavanthi to Thirukambuliyur and performed the ceremonial function of pouring sanctified water on the tower of the Amman temple in Vangal. As a young boy, you must have known him rule over the region containing this Marigounden Palayam besides Pasupathi Palayam, Kuppachi Palayam, Panjamadevi, Karuppam Palayam, Kadambamkurichi and Vangal. With Chitralai Pattanam as the capital he administered Nelli Valanadu. Vellangulam was one of the lakes dug by him. Since he gave priority to agriculture his land came to be praised as 'the land of rich paddy fields'. Nelliangodan was the son born to him after a long wait. That male child born to appease the desire of the parents caused only misery to them. It grew up without knowing the world. Fitted the epithet *masai* exactly. Briskness and activeness were strange to him. Was guileless and innocent. Kolatha Gounder feared that his son wouldn't be able to rule and protect Nelli Valanadu and so entrusted him to the custody of his brother Chellatha Gounder and died. Nelliangodan became an orphan as his mother Pavalathal also died soon after her husband's death. Chellatha Gounder conspired to bring the entire Valanadu under his regime. Periya Kali of Thalaiyur was of the opinion that Valanadu would not be a strong country if Nelliangodan assumed power over it. If Valanadu were to become strong enough to be a supporting power to Thalaiyur, the conspiring genius Chellatha Gounder alone would serve the purpose. To execute this plan Chellatha Gounder proposed some steps. On the advice of Chellatha Gounder, Nelliangodan was driven out of Valanadu in his young age. He was subjected to torture whenever he returned and argued for the restoration of his rights over Valanadu. For all that Chellatha Gounder could get the help of Thalaiyur. Chellatha Gounder. Prince Kali, a few representatives of the government and me were present at his death-bed. Periya Kali announced that I was appointed a minister to assist prince Kali in governing the country. Then he took the hands of the prince, placed it in the hands of Chellatha Gounder and said, 'Gounder esquire, from now on you are father and mother to my son'. He turned to his son and said, 'thambi Kali! Chellatha Gounder is your patron. The relationship between his Valanadu and our Menadu must continue for ever. You must never go against his wishes; must always consider his word as my word,' and breathed his last."

Before Mayavar finished narrating these details, Rockiannan intervened by way of expressing his grief, "My goodness! Couldn't he understand Chellatha Gounder's character even after knowing him for such a long time?"

Mayavar proceeded with his narration, "The orphaned Nelliangodan visited Arichampatti-Maniankurichi one or two times and met Thamarai Nachi secretly. From her he got some help and pulled on somehow. Maniankurichiyar found out that love had sprouted between them. In order to prevent it from ripening and attaining fruition he drove away Nelliangodan and saw to it that he never again visited Thamarai. Chellatha Gounder came to know this. Was he not aware of the consanguineous relationship between Maniankurichiyar and Nelliangodan? So, in order to prevent that relationship from getting stronger and to annex the power of Maniankurichiyar to himself he took efforts to make Thamarai the wife of his son Manthiappan and succeeded."

Rockiannan again intervened sporting a smile, "But that marriage did not take place as Chellatha Gounder wished! Didn't it happen as per the wishes of Thamarai?"

Mayavar said, "The disastrous happenings after that were not to my liking, and so I forced myself to leave Thalaiyur."

Rockiannan mocked at him, "You have not yet come to the point of explaining the reason for getting angry with Thalaiyur Kali and leaving for far-off places some twenty or twenty-five years ago!"

Mayavar stroked his beard, cast a cool glance at Rockiannan and said, "I have come! I have now come back to Thalaiyur! Have also come near the reason you want to know!"

"The day after the marriage between Thamarai Nachi and Manthiappan was stopped Thalaiyur Kali returned to his palace. I met and appreciated him. I praised him for not toeing the line of Chellatha Gounder at least in that matter. I told him that by refusing to support Gounder he had ensured that a woman's life was not ruined. He considered me as an elder – not just a person working under him – touched my feet and thanked me for the appreciative words. Kali always had that kind of regard and respect for me. I was feeling happy that he was slowly extricating himself from the spider web of Chellatha Gounder. But that happiness did not last long!"

That incident which happened some twenty-five years ago stirred his heart even then. Perhaps, his eyes brimmed with tears.

So Rockiannan asked eagerly, "Why didn't that happiness continue?"

"Even before returning to Thalaiyur from Maniankurichi, urged by Chellatha Gounder, he had written a warning letter to Malaikoluntha Gounder. As a result of that Nelliangodan and Thamarai Nachiyar were driven out of Valanadu immediately. The day of marriage – even the auspicious post-marriage rituals had

not been completed. They gave Thamarai Nachi dowry in gold and silver; but said, 'you and your husband shall not enter this house hereafter' and drove out the desperately crying daughter along with her husband. It was like saying, 'a fine feast is here for you, but a miniscule of poison is mixed in it!' Nelliangodan could not understand anything. Not knowing how to live he sank in sorrow. But Thamarai who gave importance to family reputation and culture and who had the fighting spirit was determined that she and her husband must live. So she went with her husband to Chellatha Gounder and argued that even if he was not prepared to entrust the powers due to her husband, he must at least hand over a part of his land. Do you know what happened in Chellatha Gounder's palace?"

There were tears in Mayavar's eyes.

Silence for a while. Both of them walked up and down the barracks. Though Rockiannan did not reveal his inner turmoil, he showed a lot of eagerness to know what happened.

"Father and son pretended very well as if they were happy to receive them. Chellatha Gounder said that Thamarai would stay in the palace and he would take Nelliangodan in his chariot and demarcate the required land."

"Then what? Then what?" Rockiannan, too anxious, closely watched the lip movements of Mayavar.

"What then? He dragged Nelliangodan along a paddy field, tied him upside down to a tree and his employees whipped him till his whole body became sore. And Manthiappan dared to molest Thamarai in the palace!"

Rockiannan screamed, "Ayyo!" even before Mayavar finished saying it.

"Thamarai is not just a queen of chastity; she is also a Kannagi in daring and determination! She kicked Manthiappan and he fell down. The trounced Manthiappan got enraged and tried to cut her hair with his sword."

Rockiannan asked, "What?" and his moustache quivered.

"But Thamarai snatched the sword and ran out in search of her husband. She attacked the miscreants who were whipping him with thorny twigs. Those rascals ran away and escaped. Thamarai with the drawn sword in one hand and supporting her wounded husband with another left Valanadu. Two days after, I heard about all these and at once very sadly asked Kali how he could support Chellatha Gounder who indulged in such atrocious activities. Kali pleaded ignorance and conceded that such activities must be severely condemned. I told him that it was not enough and insisted that he must condemn Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan through a missive. He nodded his head as if he agreed with me. I don't know whether he sent such a missive or not. But after some time he sent his

men in support of another injustice that Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan perpetrated on Nelliangodan and received a smile as a prize from his patron."

"What was that next injustice?" asked Rockiannan, and Mayavar continued.

"Nelliangodan and Thamarai Nachi went to the Uraiyur Chola king and sought his support by explaining to him that Kolatha Gounder was the custodian of Valanadu under the Chola reign and Nelliangodan was his son. They also described how Chellatha Gounder robbed them of their rights with the support of Thalaiyur Kali. Cholan listened to them and felt very sorry. But he was not prepared to attack Valanadu or antagonise Thalaiyur Kali on that score. Yet, as a token of his gratitude to Kolatha Gounder he presented to them a large area of dry land, agricultural implements and cattle."

"Long live, the Chola king!" Rockiannan's lips muttered. Mayavar also echoed, "Yes, may he live long, may he live long!" Rockiannan was keen to observe what Mayavar was going to say next.

"Nelliangodan who should have reigned with a sceptre began tilling the land with a plough. Both husband and wife toiled on their lands along with hired labour. Hard work always pays and they were rewarded with bounteous yield. Thamarai and her husband saw their lands turning into a beautiful scenery of green carpet and rejoiced. Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan heard about it and their face screwed up in anger. At once a missive flew to Thalaiyur Kali! When it reached him I was there."

"What missive was that?" Rockiannan's interest increased.

"That the soldiers of Thalaiyur should come in hundreds. They should drive wild pigs into the cultivated lands of Kundrudaiyan and destroy the crops. I told Kali that it was improper and should not be done. First he hesitated. He dithered as to how he could reject the request of Chellatha Gounder. I was adamant. But he did not listen to me; he said that his father, at the time of dying, had asked him to do everything according to the wishes of Chellatha Gounder. He sent soldiers and pigs for destroying the crops. The peasantry may even bear their lives being plucked out of them, but how could they tolerate their crops being destroyed? I couldn't bear it. I left Thalaiyur the same day. It took twenty-five years for my wounds to heal." Mayavar sighed and asked, "All right! Nelliangodan and Thamarai, where are they now? I heard that they are in Kudaiyur, on the southern bank of the Amaravathi; is it true? Are they alive?"

"They are not only alive; but are in a very high position! The assets they gathered by their hard work increased vastly and Nelliangodan became the owner of a lot of hilly areas and earned the sobriquet 'Kundrudaiyan'".

"I heard that also. I am very happy. But is it true that Thamarai doesn't have any male issue to fulfil the vow she made in front of her brother? It seems she has only one daughter. Am I right?"

Now it was the turn of Rockiannan to laugh. He looked at him keenly and said, "You are my true friend and a good man. Not only that; the time is ripe for the truth to be let out and so I tell you. The sons of Kundrudaiyan and Thamarai Nachiyar - Ponnar-Sankar - are here in this barracks and are getting trained in martial arts under me!"

"Is it so?"

"On your way, didn't you see three valiant heroes who felled wild pigs? The eldest among them is Veeramalai Sambuvan, the son of Cholan Thotti, the elder among the other two is Ponnar and the youngest is Sankar!"

8 Karagam Floating Festival

Ponnar-Sankar and Veeramalai left Mayavar who repeatedly asked for their names guessing and they walked away like lion cubs. They took the short route and reached the Vangalamman temple on the southern bank of the Cauvery river. The river was full up to the brim. The Cauvery girl carried in its wavy hands the flowers that had fallen from the trees and plants on its banks. The gurgle of the foaming and frothing river mixed with the humming of the beetles which followed the floating flowers. On listening to this musical melody the three young men were reminded of the *Cilappatikaram* song they had learnt from their mentor. and observed the river keenly.

"With beetles humming around
Lovely flowers spread over
Black fishlike eyes open aslant
Cauvery, may you flow for ever!"

They enjoyed themselves singing that song cheerfully and rhythmically.

Veeramalai had a close look at the Vangalamman temple. His mentor had told him that the temple was built during the reign of Kolatha Gounder. From their conversation it was obvious that none of them was aware that Kolatha Gounder was the grandfather of Ponnar-Sankar.

"Eh, *appa*! Do you know people from how many villages worship this Amman? Not only the villages on this bank, but also on the other bank; people of villages such as Maruthampatti, Namakkal, Vakurampatti, Vasanthapuram, Periyapatti, Vettampadi, Muthukkapatti, Chalaipalayam, Palayapalayam, Neikarapatti, Nallaya Goundenputhur, Erumapatti and Marurpatti never fail to offer pooja to Vangalamman." Veeramalai described the special features and the reputation of the temple. As he was seven or eight years older than them he had known all those details.

Rockiannan had once told them that when Cheran Chenguttuvan came to know that the northern kings Kanakan and Vijayan had spoken insultingly of the valour of the Tamils, he got enraged and vowed to make them carry the stone for carving the statue of Kannagi on their heads. He brought the stone the same way and got ready an idol of Kannagi. A festival was organised for the consecration of the idol, and following that a large number of Kannagi temples came up. Elders had told him that the Vangalamman temple was one such.

Sankar asked his brother Ponnar, "*Anna*! The Vangalamman temple has this historical importance, I have heard that the Chellandiamman temple which is in Madukkarai also has an ancient legend about it; do you know that?"

"*Thambi*, if there had been a legend like that our mentor would have told us."

A voice arose from nearby, "That story is a big one. I will tell you." It was the voice of the boatman who had moored his boat on the bank of the river.

Veeramalai went up to him and asked, "What do you say?"

The boatman replied with a grin, "Today is the day of the Karagam floating festival in the Chellandiamman temple. It happens every year on the eighteenth day of the month of *Aadi* without fail. If you wish you can go there in my boat and witness the festival."

Ponnar asked eagerly, "What is that Karagam floating festival?"

"Can I keep you standing and tell that? First, pay me the fare." said the boatman firmly.

Veeramalai Sambuvan retorted angrily, "Will you tell the story only if we pay you?"

"Today hundreds of men and women from all the nearby villages will visit the Chellandiamman temple. Some will come in carts. Some will come by walk, carrying food prepared in their homes. Some will use boats like mine. The river bank near the temple will be agog with festivities and folk performances. If you get into my boat I will narrate the story while we cruise along. If you are interested, pay me the fare!" he said and started rowing the boat away.

Sankar was very much interested in knowing about the temple and also about the Karagam floating festival. So he said, "*Anna*! Hasn't the mentor given us leave today? Why don't we go there in this boat?"

Ponnar objected, "No, *Thambi*! We can know about the Chellandiamman temple from our mentor. It is not proper to go to the next village without getting his permission."

Veeramalai intervened. "Mentor won't get angry with us. Even if he finds fault, I'll somehow manage. Let us get into the boat." Ponnar remarked, "Annan Veeramalai is older than me; but is more spirited and smarter than my younger brother! All right! Victory to your obstinacy! Let us all go!" and got into the boat first. Sankar and Veeramalai smiled and followed suit. Ponnar counted the money from the small cloth bag tucked into his waistcloth and paid the boatman. The boat headed for Madukkarai.

Sankar said, "*Ayya*! Begin the story of Karagam floating festival!"

The boatman nodded his head and said, "Here and now!" and started singing a devotional song about the greatness of Lord Ganesh.

"Oh! Vinayaga, the first one
The son of three-eyed Shiva
You the powerful one
The son of great Parvathi
The elephant-faced one
The son of the Protector!"

Sankar pulled the boatman to his side and said, "You boatman, if you begin with singing songs in praise of Lord Ganesh it may go on up to dawn. Tell the story of the festival briefly."

"Is it so? All right... I'll tell. Listen to me. In Kailas there is a mountain called Nagamalai. There a cobra. As it had no issue it undertook a penance to appease Lord Siva. It was a five-headed snake. Siva took pity on it and told Parvathi, "Go to that snake and take birth as its baby!" And Parvathi was born as a daughter to that snake. The cobra called her Periyakandi and brought her up. He put the question: 'How did it bring her up?' and began to sing again:

"The snake spread its five heads into a canopy
The good conch rocked the Ambal's cradle
The Ambal grew up every hour and everyday
The Ambal grew up hearing the conch lullaby."

Thus brought up, Periyakandiamman left Kolli hills, passed through forests and deserts, crossed the river Cauvery at Thottiyam and reached the Veeramalai forest. There a quarrel arose between her and a potter and it ended in his begging for her pardon and agreeing to make a mud karagam for her. Madukkarai Chellandiamman noticed Periyakandiamman with the mud karagam. She did not know that it was Parvathi Devi who had taken birth as the snake's daughter and was coming there in the person of Periyakandiamman. Chellandiamman's karagam was made of gold. So she blocked the way of Periyakandiamman and made fun of her:

"I hold a golden karagam in my head
And rule over the whole world.
Who is this that comes
With a mud karagam on her head?
Is she greater than me?
Is she better than me?
Thus contended Chellandi
And blocked the way."

It resulted in each challenging the other and a big contest ensued," the boatman spoke loudly and his moustache quivered.

The inquisitive question, "What contest?" was visible in the eyes of all the three.

"Both will float their karagams in the river - the golden and the mud. The contest is that the owner of the karagam, which reaches Thiruparkadal, takes a holy dip and comes back, is the greater. Accordingly, Periyakandiamman floated her mud karagam and Chellandiamman her golden karagam. Do you know what happened? The golden karagam submerged in the river. The mud karagam floated and reached Thiruparkadal, took a holy dip and returned. At once Chellandiamman conceded that Periyakandiamman was greater than her and requested her to get back her golden karagam. Periyakandi retrieved the mud karagam for her. Chellandiamman offered to accompany her to the Veeramalai forest. But Periyakandi advised her to remain where she was and offer her blessings to the people and left for the forest to continue her penance so that she could get back to Kailas. People now celebrate this incident every year without fail." Thus the boatman concluded the story.

Sankar remarked, "Did you notice that even gods get into contests?"

"Leave alone the competitions and contests. We must not forget the philosophy behind the story," observed Ponnar.

All the three, including the boatman, watched Ponnar eagerly. "The mud karagam won and the golden karagam lost! Though simple, if you are modest, you will win. But pomp and the resultant pride will one day definitely face defeat! This is the truth, I think, the story explains," said Ponnar.

The resplendent brightness that flashed in the eyes of Sankar and Veeramalai Sambuvan underlined the thrill felt by them on hearing this subtle explanation. The boatman was in no way affected by it. He was rowing the boat and at the same time calculating the day's earning.

A lot of signs which indicated that the boat had approached Chellandiamman temple came into view. Poles decked with flowers had been planted along the banks of the river. The boats moored near the bank around the temple had all been decorated. A large crowd of men and women was watching the festival. On the bank, there were various kinds of entertainments such as dummy-horse dance, *cilambattam* and folk plays! Sounds of drums such as *pambai* and *udukku* deafened the ears. Innumerable *thavils* and *nayanams* were being played in the festival pandal.

Sankar asked the boatman, "When will they start the karagam ceremony?"

"Two girls - every year they will select anew two virgins living with their parents - one decorated as Periyakandiamman and another as Chellandiamman will get into the river and float the mud karagam and the golden karagam for the competition." At once Veeramalai expressed his surprise, "Is it so! Will girls get into this deep river and float the karagams?

"No, no. they won't get into the river! Just a show of doing like that. Each will get into a boat alone with the respective karagam. As both the girls are in possession of the Ambal's grace even the boatman must not be present. They will put the mud pot or the golden pot as assigned to them in the river. Then men will go unnoticed deep into the river and bring out the mud pot only," said the boatman.

Veeramalai asked at once, "In that case, the golden pot will be lying at the bottom. Can anybody carry it away?"

"Oh! See this man's extraordinary desire! No, that shouldn't be! Shouldn't Periyakandiamman, according to the story, retrieve the golden pot at the request of Chellandiamman!" said the boatman and burst into laughter. The boat reached the festival venue.

Musical fanfares, fireworks, bursting of crackers and the chanting of the devotees 'Ambigae! Ambigae! marked the start of the festival. Amidst these, two girls in two boats - one holding in her hands a mud karagam and another holding

a golden karagam arrived like swaying swans. On seeing the two girls dressed and decorated as Periyakandiamman and Chellandiamman, the devotees who had by now thronged both sides of the river to watch the festival stood still with wide-open mouths. The devotees who had been regularly visiting the festival expressed their unanimous opinion that in several years they had not seen any girl playing the role of those deities as beautiful as these two. Then the question, 'who are these angels?' arose.

The same question was put to the boatman by Veeramalai Sambuvan. The boatman thought for a while, remembered suddenly and replied, "They are the grand daughters of Maniankurichi Malaikoluntha Gounder. You know, he isn't alive now. They are the daughters of Chinnamalaikoluntha Gounder."

Before the boatman could complete his words, a sudden whirlwind blew uproariously as if to uproot all the trees of that region. It was a violent dance of destruction.

In panic, the festival crowd shrieked and shouted. Many boats floating near the river bank toppled upside down and all those who were in the boats fell into the river and struggled to get out. The boat of Ponnar-Sankar was also about to capsize; but at the right moment Veeramalai Sambuvan jumped into the river, propped the boat from below and held it up. In the melee the boatman fell into the river and was found swimming.

Ponnar-Sankar alone were in the boat. A terrifying incident happened in front of them. The two boats in which the girls were seated as Periyakandiamman and Chellandiamman lost course in the battering storm and drifted away along the current. Ponnar-Sankar rushed their boat in the direction of those boats.

9 Valiant Warriors on the way to Maniankurichi

In panic, a middle-aged woman was running along the bank of the Cauvery shouting "Muthayi! Pavalayi!" She did not mind the whirling storm. Chinnamalaikolunthu was screaming and running behind her. Those who noticed the anxiety and screams of both would have easily understood that the two girls in the boats drifting along the current bore the names Muthayi and Pavalayi and that their parents were Chinnamalaikolunthu and Silambayi.

The river was in spate. The storm teamed up with the flooding river and the boats of Muthayi and Pavalayi drifted speedily towards the East. Probably because they were in the make-up of Periyakandiamman and Chellandiamman the two girls remained calm and collected as if ready to face whatever might happen. Just as they had kept their eyes closed in pious devotion when they got into the boats holding the mud *karagam* and the golden *karagam* in their hands, now also, even when the whirlwind tossed the boats up and about, they sat with their eyes closed.

Using their hands as oars, Ponnar and Sankar rowed their boat very fast and tried to reach the boats of Muthayi and Pavalayi which were whirling and whirling away. For a while, pushed by the wind, the boats appeared to be veering towards

the bank. At that time the parents, with one foot in the river and another on the bank, tried to reach out to the boats and shouted, "Ayyo! My daughter! My daughter!" But within one wink, the hurricane uprooted a huge tree and it fell with a heavy thud between the parents and the boats. If it had fallen even a thread's breath apart, both the boats would have broken into splinters and those lovely girls would have floated on the river as corpses. Under the impact of the fallen tree the level of the water rose and the boats were tossed about and driven to midstream. With nobody to save them, the boats whirled away fast.

Chinnamalaikolunthu and Silambayi lost hopes completely. They thought they had sacrificed their daughters to the wind and the river Cauvery and wept beating their heads. Muthayi and Pavalayi saw their parents desperately running about and the big crowd watching them. They requested them to be calm by waving their hands. They also saw two young men approaching them fast in a boat.

The Cauvery waves rose higher than the waves of a rough sea and were about to hurl and shatter all the boats into pieces. As the hurricane whirled and blew destructively, the boat of Ponnar-Sankar fought against the hurricane and the current and came close to the boats of Muthayi and Pavalayi. They tried to block those boats by going on the right, the left, and the back. All efforts were in vain. Muthayi and Pavalayi appeared to be worrying whether the men in that boat which followed them from behind and circled around were intending to harm them further.

Ponnar-Sankar anticipated that they might get terrified thinking like that and so shouted to them, "Don't be afraid! Don't be afraid!" As they heard their loud appeals even amidst the blaring noise of the hurricane's angry sweep, they gripped the boats more tightly so that they would not fall into the river.

Ponnar-Sankar realised that they could not save the girls if they remained in the boat. They jumped into the river and swam. Their idea was to reach and stop the boats by swimming and save the girls. Though they swam with all their strength, saving those girls did not appear possible!

Yet, they did not give up. As if to prove that their hearts were not only full of valour but also mercy, they kept on swimming.

Chinnamalaikolunthu and Silambayi kept running along the river bank wondering whether those young men would be able to save their girls or not. Meanwhile, Veeramalai swam ashore, joined the distraught parents and watched the calamity.

Manthiappan who had come to witness the festival with a lance in the attire of a soldier ready to enter the battle field also came to that place of terrifying excitement.

He who was disappointed in his effort to marry Thamarai Nachiyar did not know that her sons Ponnar-Sankar were now trying so valiantly to save the daughters of Thamarai's brother! Why, even Ponnar-Sankar were not aware that they were the sons of Thamarai and anything connected with that!

Though the youthful sprightliness that was perceptible in Manthiappan on the day he came as a bridegroom was missing now, he appeared majestic in his tough and well-structured body and thick moustache.

When Manthiappan, the son of Valanadu chieftain Chellatha Gounder, came there everybody stepped aside and gave way.

On seeing Manthiappan, the eyes of Chinnamalaikolunthu brimmed with tears. His lips twitched as if he wanted to say, "Please, save my daughters!" He also doubted whether he would be still angry with him for not marrying his sister to him.

After the demise of his parents Malaikoluntha Gounder and Perumayi Ammal, Chinnamalaikolunthu had established himself as a landlord of the Maniankurichi region. He got married to Silambayi when his parents were alive. Within four years of their marriage they became the father and mother of two daughters Muthayi and Pavalayi and a son Vaiyamperuman. After that the parents of Chinnamalaikolunthu deceased one after another.

Whatever it was, whether a good or a bad incident, Thamarai Nachiyar and her husband were never invited to Arichampatti Maniankurichi. Bearing in mind the proverb 'Not entering a place where respect is not given is worth a crore', she did not even think of going there!

But now, Thamarai Nachi also did not know that it was her sons who were trying to save the daughters of her brother from the Cauvery. Neither did Ponnar-Sankar know that they were the sons gifted to Thamarai for her penance.

The two warriors fought against wind and Cauvery flood and advanced towards the boats of Muthayi and Pavalayi in their anxiety to prevent those two live statuesque beauties from drowning into the river.

Manthiappan, not knowing who they were, just grinned like a fool and said, "Little boys! After all what can they do?"

Before he completed saying that, Ponnar got to the front of Muthayi's boat and stopped it. Emulating his brother, Sankar also swam fast, but got caught in an eddy. Yet, he managed to come out of it, swam ahead of Pavalayi's boat and stopped it.

Since they were young girls, Ponnar-Sankar deemed it improper to get into the boats. They swam along and pushed the boats slowly towards the river bank.

At that time a python that was hanging amidst the aerial roots of a banyan tree that had taken roots on the bank and spread its branches above the river coiled around Ponnar's body. Ponnar could not let the boat off but must keep swimming and push the boat safely to the river bank. In between he had to fight with the python. Ponnar did not give up. He clutched the boat in one hand and fought with the python with the other hand. His legs kept going through the swimming strokes. The python coiled around Ponnar and tightened its grip. Muthayi was terribly frightened.

The long fatty python stretched its whole body, opened its mouth wide and tried to swallow Ponnar. He fought carefully and prevented its head from closing on his head and its slippery but powerful body from strangulating him. He also had to keep the boat afloat. However hard he fought, the struggle appeared to be too difficult for him. At one point, the python bent Ponnar's neck and with its mouth wide open like a big cave was about to swallow his head. Muthayi screamed on seeing this and swooned inside the boat. At that time Veeramalai who was standing on the bank aimed his dagger on the python exactly. The sharpness and the speed of the dagger befuddled the python and released Ponnar from its firm grip. When he started swimming again to push Muthayi's boat towards the bank, another danger struck Sankar.

A wide mouth got hold of Sankar's leg as he was swimming and towing the boat of Pavalayi! He shook his leg vigourously. The blood oozing out of the extricated leg reddened the river. Sankar had got into the clutch of a crocodile! Pavalayi also swooned on seeing this. Sankar did not lose his grip over the boat, but tightened it still more and fought with the crocodile. Can't a crocodile in water fight ferociously like a thug occupying a seat of power? Danger to the life of Sankar appeared imminent.

Sankar would take his hand off the boat for a while and during that time punch the crocodile heavily on the stomach; and it would roll in water and hit back Sankar fiercely. Soon Pavalayi's boat got stuck in the crevice of a rock that stood vertically in mid river. He left the boat as it was and grappled with the crocodile. Blood oozed profusely out of his body and spread over a large area. The blowing wind let the boat loose and the waves tossed it up and down again. Sankar left the crocodile to hold the boat. The exhausted crocodile got ready to make use of this opportunity to fix him within its legs. And it did fix him. Just at the time it was about to clench him in its mouth, Sankar somehow wriggled out and again fought hard.

The situation was such that the fight would end soon; Sankar's dead body would float on the river. Veeramalai Sambuvan leaped like lightning, snatched the lance of Manthiappan, aimed exactly and threw it at the crocodile.

The wounded crocodile lost its energy to fight with Sankar and folded up. Sankar brought Pavalayi safely to the river bank.

Chinnamalaikolunthu hugged Ponnar-Sankar and shed tears of joy. "My boys! But for you I would have lost my dear treasures!" Silambayi and Vaiyamperuman took Muthayi and Pavalayi to a nearby building to restore their consciousness. Besides appreciating Ponnar-Sankar, Chinnamalaikolunthu praised Veeramalai also highly.

"What would have happened, if you had not killed the python and the crocodile?" he wondered and patted Veeramalai.

Manthiappan bubbled in anger. "You are praising all and sundry. Didn't he kill the crocodile with my lance? But for that lance what would have happened? This little boy survived thanks to me only!" he said and twirled his moustache.

The hurricane which had been blowing noisily stopped by and by. Chinnamalaikolunthu turned to Ponnar-Sankar and Veeramalai and enquired kindly, "My little brothers! What are your names? Who are you?" The three looked at each other. Ponnar and Veeramalai were in a hurry to dress the crocodile bite on Sankar's leg!

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Chinnamalaikolunthu said, "You need not at all worry. There is a wonderful doctor in our Maniankurichi. We'll go there and take treatment."

Silambayi expressed her concern, "Should we not complete the Karagam floating festival? If not we will face the wrath of Ambal."

Chinnamalaikolunthu replied, "You and Vaiyamperuman go with Muthayi and Pavalayi and float the karagams in the river. Finish the pooja and come home. I'll take them to our Maniankurichi palace."

Ponnar supported Sankar on his shoulder and led him. Veeramalai also left with them. The carts were got ready. Chinnamalaikolunthu asked the three of them to get into one cart. Before getting into another he approached Manthiappan and greeted him respectfully. But he saw him off in the most insolent manner.

While leaving for the temple, Muthayi and Pavalayi watched the cart of Ponnar-Sankar longingly.

Manthiappan observed those girls from behind. He was stunned by their beauty and stood still for a moment.

He then moved! He felt an impulse to follow those beautiful peahens! He did follow them!

The elders, who had assembled in front of the Chellandiamman temple, kissed Muthayi and Pavalayi on their foreheads and blessed them. It was to ward off the evil cast by jealous eyes.

The temple priest advised them, "It is enough if you float the karagams for the sake of completing the ritual. You need not get into the boat again for that. Stand on the river bank facing the deity and leave the karagams in the river."

They did like that. The priest waved a lighted lamp clockwise before the idol three times and offered *kumkum* to everybody. Muthayi and Pavalayi removed their ambal make-up.

Manthiappan hid behind a pillar and gratified himself by gazing at their beauty sans any make-up.

10 Pooja – in Whose Name?

Muthayi and Pavalayi who had fasted since morning for completing the ritual of floating the karagams wilted very badly in the distress they endured in the river because of the storm.

Silambayi firmly believed that her daughters escaped only because of the mercy of the Amman. Shedding tears of joy, she went round the sanctum-sanctorum of Chellandiamman, fell prostrate in front of the deity and worshipped.

Silambayi who came to the festival with prayers that her dear daughters should get a splendid and prosperous future felt relieved and happy as she believed that the accident marked the end of the adverse period in their horoscopes.

Silambayi, Muthayi and Pavalayi lighted a wick-lamp in the hollow of rice dough known as *mavilakku* in front of the consecrated idol of Chellandiamman and prayed with closed eyes.

The calm that pervaded the banks of the Cauvery after the storm occupied their minds also. Praying before the Amman in that peaceful atmosphere soothed their minds.

Most of the families that had come to witness the festival lighted wick-lamps in rice dough hollows and offered prayers in a transcendental state.

Since they were from the family of Arichampatti Maniankurichiyar, the temple priest very respectfully greeted Silambayi and said, "Amma! If you wish to do special pooja for the Amman, I am at your beck and call."

Silambayi answered with a smile, "We have brought everything necessary for the pooja," and indicated the silver basket kept nearby.

The priest said, "Is it so," with even more respect and lifted the basket. There were four or five coconuts, flower strings, fruits, a lot of betel leaves and areca nuts.

The priest asked very politely, "Amma, in whose name do you want the pooja to be given?" She said, "In the names of my two daughters Muthayi and Pavalayi and my son Vaiyamperuman."

At that time Vaiyamperuman was standing near their cart stroking the horses. They were being fed under his direction.

Before Silambayi finished uttering the names, Muthayi intercepted, "Ma! Why don't we give a pooja in the name of that person who saved me?"

There was a flash of surprise on the face of Silambayi. But she contained herself with the conviction that her daughter wouldn't say anything wrong. She then felt that it was but proper to show gratitude that way and said to Pavalayi, "Look here! Did you notice what your elder sister said?" Pavalayi spoke in the same strain, "Yes ma! I also wanted to say the same. We must give a special pooja in the name of that person who saved me by baulking my boat from capsizing and for my sake got bitten by a crocodile."

The eyes of Silambayi popped out of the brows and rolled like the heads of chicks awaiting the return of the mother bird to the nest. But at the same time her face did not turn red out of anger. Though she looked at her daughters with her teeth pressing the lips there was no trace of anger.

She was comforted by her thoughts which convinced her that only a sense of gratitude motivated her golden daughters to give pooja in the names of those youths.

So she said, "All right! But we don't know the names of those youths." Both daughters replied at the same time, "Father or somebody else enquired. We don't know what they said." Silambayi remonstrated with them endearingly, "Couldn't you listen to it properly? Don't you have at least that much interest?" Muthayi suggested anxiously, "Ma! *Annan* was there then. We can ask him."

Meantime Pavalayi went closer to the cart and shouted, "Anna! Ma calls you."

Vaiyamperuman who was getting the horses ready for the return trip rushed hurriedly into the temple. "*Ma*! What? Why did you call me?"

"Nothing important. I wanted to give a special pooja to Ambal in the names of those two youths who saved the lives of your sisters."

When the mother was telling this to her son the eyes of Muthayi and Pavalayi became winged beetles, embraced each other and hummed. Those eyes exchanged glances in appreciation of their mother's love for them and the affectionate care she bestowed upon them. In that emotional moment their cheeks looked like red mangoes. The deeply heaved sigh of joy swelled the ripening breasts of those young statuesque beauties and put up a contest of glamour on the banks of the river Cauvery.

Manthiappan, standing unseen, watched the bewitching beauty of those living portraits and was getting intoxicated and befuddled. When those beauty queens were getting ready to present themselves as offerings in their anxiety to be accepted by the 'gods of their hearts' desire', Manthiappan twisted and contorted impatiently like a donkey eager to crumble, crush, chew and eat the flowers that had bloomed to adorn the temple idols.

"*Thambi*! Do you know the names of those boys?"

"I don't know, *ma*."

"After they rescued your sisters somebody standing on the bank enquired their names. Neither me nor your sisters listened to what they said. Didn't you also listen?"

"No, *ma*!"

"Then how can we give pooja in their names?"

Vaiyamperuman laughed and said, "Just give their names as 'our boys'. That's all."

"How can we do like that?" the mother hesitated.

"Two boys! Let us name the elder boy 'big boy' and the younger 'small boy'! We shall give the pooja like that!"

"What do you say? How can we assume a name like that? Only the names given by the parents will stand for ever."

"But what can we do when we don't know the names? Either give the pooja as suggested by me or give up the very idea."

When Vaiyamperuman gave this kind of answer both girls were visibly perturbed. But Pavalayi controlled herself and said looking at her mother from the corner of her eyes, "*Anna*! Mother wishes that. So, why don't you find a way out for that? Instead, if you say the pooja itself can be cancelled, how sad will mother be?"

Silambayi got a nice opportunity to figure out the mind of her daughters. But she hid what she understood like a leaf that hides the fruit. She cast a mischievous look

at Pavalayi and said, "I am not bothered. Can anything be done, when we don't know the names? All right, priest! Perform the pooja in the names of my daughters and son." Now Vaiyamperuman wouldn't agree to that.

"Please wait a little, *ma*! See there, the families of Athichettipalayam Thanakodi Chettiyar and Kundrudaiyar are performing *mavilakku* pooja. I will go and ask them whether they know the names of those boys." So saying he started in that direction.

Silambayi shrieked in fear, "Wait! Wait!"

Vaiyamperuman was shocked at his mother's behaviour. He asked, "Why, *ma*! What has happened?"

Silambayi explained. "How casually you have referred to the family of Kundrudaiyar!"

"No, *ma*! I know that he also is a big landlord. He has come to this festival with all the appurtenances of his status. I did not say anything about him casually."

"I don't mean that! You know him as Kundrudaiyar. But do you know who that Kundrudaiyar is?"

"Who is it, *ma*?"

"Do you know the husband of your aunt Thamarai Nachiyar?"

"I have heard about her. I have heard all the stories about how that aunt and that uncle were driven out of our house."

"You have heard about them! But have you seen them?"

"How can I? How many times has father said that there is absolutely nothing between them and us; be it life or death?"

"Now you have seen them!"

"*Ma*, what are you saying?"

"Your uncle Nelliangodan is now known as Kundrudaiyar. The light of our clan standing beside him is your aunt Thamarai Nachiyar."

On hearing this, not only Vaiyamperuman but Muthayi and Pavalayi also sank in surprise.

"Don't they say 'close relationship'? Like that the severed relationship has come close, *ma*!" Vaiyamperuman looked at his mother with a joyful face.

"*Thambi*! Go to them as if your intention is just to enquire. Come back without saying a word about our relationship or any such thing. Otherwise you'll become a victim of your father's wrath. Your father will hate not only you but me also. It will bring utter ruin to our family," warned Silambayi.

"All right, *ma*. I will just give myself the boon of seeing my aunt and uncle. Let my sisters also come with me. I'm sure they are also very eager to see them."

Silambayi gave her consent. "All right girls! Go with your brother and come back soon."

In the pandal put up in front of the temple Kundrudaiyan and Thamarai Nachi were deeply engrossed in the ritual of *mavilakku* pooja.

Though Kundrudaiyan had a slightly old look, the sheen in his face had not at all changed. As a result of her restless agricultural work she did along with her husband, Thamarai Nachi's golden complexion had darkened a little. Still the face had retained its charm fully. Both appeared brisk. Beside them there was a man wearing gold chains around his neck, bracelets around the wrists and ten rings around ten fingers. That man was Thanakodi Chettiyar. He was also worshipping the Amman in awe and reverence.

Vaiyamperuman, Muthayi and Pavalayi went close to them and greeted them. Kundrudaiyan and Thamarai Nachi turned and saw them. The moment she saw them Thamarai Nachi's heart palpitated, her eyes shed tears, her fingers trembled and her whole body shook.

She had found out that they were her brother Chinnamalaikolunthu's children!

It is no wonder that she had heard about them as the whole crowd assembled there for the festival had done!

Thamarai was shocked when she heard that the daughters of Chinnamalaikolunthu were caught in the storm while they floated the 'karagam' and that they were rescued by two brave youths. Since enmity had grown, taken roots and flourished for about twenty or twenty-five years between the two families, she regained her composure in due course and was not unduly perturbed.

But now her brother's daughters are standing in front of her. Leaping over and thrashing the feelings of enmity, feelings of affection and consanguinity sprang and overwhelmed her.

On her day of wedding her brother drove her away along with her husband and just watched it passively. The burning lava of that sorrowing volcano has cooled off and is now showering snow of affection!

Kundrudaiyan took note of Thamarai's condition. He shook her shoulders and said, "Do not give way to emotions! You have chest pain. Just two days before you suffered. Do not forget that. Take everything easy."

But Thamarai Nachi forgot herself, hugged them fondly and showered kisses.

Her eyes rained heavily. In the same manner the girls and Vaiyamperuman felt heavy in their hearts and faltered. In affection's dance of joy the pages of the life history of several years turned over fast. Without uttering a word hearts exchanged bonhomie and wishes for well-being. Kundrudaiyan hugged Vaiyamperuman and kissed Muthayi and Pavalayi on their foreheads. Then he turned to Thanakodi Chettiyar who was silently watching all these and said, "Chettiyar Ayya! They are the children of Chinnamalaikolunthu. My daughters-in-law and son-in-law!"

"Oh, is it so? If only your sons were alive now, they would have married these girls and fulfilled Thamarai Nachi's vow!" said Thanakodi Chettiyar in a mocking tone mixed with sorrow.

"Don't talk about those things now. Does anything happen as per our wish?" Kundrudaiyan lamented and sighed heavily.

Thamarai Nachi tried her best to prevent her eyes from becoming a waterfall again and said, "All right, please take leave of us. If your parents know about this there will be a lot of problems."

"Yes, aunt! We take leave of you. We want to know this. If you or uncle or Chettiyar happen to know please tell us."

"What is it?" intercepted Kundrudaiyan.

"Amma wants to give a special pooja to the Amman for the health and well-being of those two youths who rescued my sisters. But we don't know their names. We came just to know them from you."

Kundrudaiyan said, "We also enquired. But nobody knows who they are!"

11 Arukkani Thangam in the River

The chariot left for Arichampatti speedily from the festival pandal of Chellandiamman temple. Vaiamperuman was seated in the front and in the next row Silambayi with Muthayi and Pavalayi on either side. Maniankurichi, known also as Arichampatti, can be reached through Kulithalai by the rough South-easterly road on the Cauvery

Though she could not go near her brother's daughters and bid farewell to them, Thamarai Nachiyar wished them well from her heart and watched the chariot moving away. The two epic beauties Muthayi and Pavalayi who looked like portraits that had come to life did not at all leave Thamarai Nachi's eyes. Even after the coach had traversed a long distance the faces of those two young parrots appeared before her and spilled pearls of laughter, pearls of Korkai.

The scene that had made its imprint in Thamarai's mind brightened up the charm of her face. But suddenly a ray of distress pierced through that charm. The heated conversation she had with her brother on the day of her marriage came floating on her memory waves and shook her.

"*Anna*! I take this vow in front of you; I swear this vow on my mother who gave birth to me, and also on my father. You said the affection and relationship between us are at an end. They will definitely not end. Never, never. My brother, you made fun of us as homeless and without a place to

keep the wedding gifts! You are certainly going to see me and my *athan* living in a multistoreyed palace! You, my dear brother who said that affection and relationship have been consumed by fire, are going to beg me for marrying your daughter to the lion cub of a son I am going to beget."

To his sister who made this vow in a loud voice, Chinnamalaikolunthu answered in a mocking tone, "Why one, you can as well give birth to two lion cubs! I will bring those two and tie at my gate as watchdogs."

Thamarai again vowed, "Yes, *anna*, yes. I'll beget two sons. And you'll beget two daughters. I am certain I'll enjoy the scene of your coming in search of those lions."

All these appeared to be happening just then!

Thinking about that she stood like the very image of sorrow. As she had vowed that day she did give birth to two lion cubs. But within two years of their birth the lion cubs disappeared. She and her dear husband Kundrudaiyan, not knowing where they had gone, left no deity unprayed for, no temple unworshipped and no holy spring unvisited.

After seeing the daughters of brother Chinnamalaikolunthu her yearning deepened.

She stood suppliantly before Chellandiamman and wept loudly, "As I said, my *annan* has now two daughters. But the sons I begot are not with me for him to beg me to marry them to his daughters! *Amma*, my mother! For how many years we have been praying; aren't you moved to pity us?"

The words that sprang forth from the heart of his wife affected the mind of Kundrudaiyan very much. He wiped his tears without Thamarai noticing it and said with his hands on her shoulders in a kind and pleading manner, "What is this Thamarai? You don't listen to me. How many times should I tell you not to spoil your health?"

Thanakodi Chettiyar consoled her, "Nachiaramma! For your good intentions and your husband's innocence nothing bad will occur. Do not worry. As day and night follow one another bad and good also will follow one another. That is life. Only if there is night can day feel proud. In the same way, only the presence of bad makes good feel proud. Now your life is in darkness – it will certainly turn into day. Wait and see."

Kundrudaiyan, as if to underline his innocent nature, said in a mocking tone, "Oh! Does Chettiyar know astrology also?"

Chettiyar said, "I don't know anything about that. Nor do I believe in it. An astrologer told me that I would have ten children to protect and enjoy my wealth.

But till now not even a single weakling of a child has been born. So what I say now is not an astrological prediction. It is just a general assessment of life; that's all."

As if to change the direction of their conversation the hoof sound of a speeding horse was heard near the temple.

Kundrudaiyan took two steps backward, enquiringly looked at Thamarai Nachi and Thanakodi Chettiyar and asked himself, "Who is suddenly coming here on horseback? Is anybody coming from our Kudaiyur palace? Or, is anybody bringing some urgent information to Manthiappan from Nelli Valanadu?"

The sound of the horse-hoofs slowly died down and the horse stopped at the front of the pandal.

All watched the person alighting from the horse. Kundrudaiyan alone looked at that man with surprise.

Mayavar, dressed in pure white attire and his grizzly beard swaying in the wind, got down from the horse majestically. He cast a kind look at the pandal. Though Kundrudaiyan was bewildered as if struck by lightning, he recouped himself immediately and convinced himself that the person was none other than Mayavar. He eagerly turned to Thamarai and Thanakodi Chettiyar and said, "The minister of Thalaiyur Kali is coming. Whether he occupies the post of a minister or not he is a great man, a man of high virtues." So saying he walked towards Mayavar.

They stood close to each other with a gap of less than one foot. Both stood looking at each other without moving. This state did not continue for long. Kundrudaiyan greeted Mayavar with the salutation 'vanakkam', bent before him and bowed his head. Mayavar lifted his shoulders with both his hands and enquired affectionately, "Nelliangoda! How do you do?"

Kundrudaiyan put this poser to him: "You are the minister of Thalaiyur. But you have come to the temple festival without any of the appurtenances attached to that post." First, Mayavar gave only a little smile as answer. Then he said, "According to you, how should a minister arrive? Should the minister come pompously with battalions of elephants and horses preceding him and a posse of soldiers marching behind him? I am only a minister; but you are a king and so many hills are under your protection! You also don't seem to have made your visit in a pompous manner."

To Mayavar's remark Kundrudaiyan replied in a polite manner typical of him, "Me and a few others like me just do the job of protecting the borders! You are not like that. Aren't you the minister of the Thalaiyur chieftain? And are you minister only? You are a great scholar too. I asked in my anxiety that everything -

surroundings and security arrangements - must be in consonance with the greatness of your post."

"You know me fully! I like only simple life. Should ministers like me order a march past of elephant battalions and soldiery in front of us whenever we go out as we do when we go to the warfront? Now I haven't come here in connection with the temple festival, as you think. I came mainly to see you."

Kundrudaiyan expressed surprise, "Is it so? To meet me? Really?"

"Yes! Why this much surprise? Shouldn't I come to see you? You are a great son of the Kongu Velala clan known for collecting the harvested ripe corn in heaps, threshing it with elephants and distributing it among the workers as recompense. You are a man of integrity who pay the peasants working for you as much as they want. You have done creditable work that enhances the prestige of the great Varagunna Velala clan. Even in the fire of antipathy you swam on the strength of your kind heart and reached the shore. I came to see you and your wife Thamarai Nachiyar - this mother who shines as the chief lady of the Tamil clan. I went to Kudaiyur palace in search of you. You were not there. I heard that you had come here and hence rode to this place not minding the difficulties posed by the bad condition of this path."

When Mayavar spoke in praise of Kundrudaiyan, Thamarai stood near them. She felt coolness spreading over her forehead and honey of joy flowing through her whole body. But when Mayavar said a few good words about her also, she unconsciously folded her hands, made a salutation, moved away respectfully and stood near a pandal pole.

"How many years since I saw you!" Kundrudaiyan said with a sigh and introduced Thanakodi Chettiyar to Mayavar.

Mayavar's appearance, his beard, dress, bearing, and the sweet way he conversed had made Thanakodi Chettiyar forget himself.

Kundrudaiyan became emotional when he spoke in praise of Thanakodi Chettiyar, "After everybody had ditched us, this Chettiyar alone gave us a place to stay. Only with his support did our family raise a farm and through that become prosperous. We can never forget him."

Through his shyness the Chettiyar made it known that he did not deserve the praise. He then said, "Why do you praise me unnecessarily? This great man Mayavar who is standing in front of us - didn't he leave the king of Thalaiyur in anger just for your sake? If he renounced his comfortable job and wandered from place to place enduring a lot of difficulties for over twenty years - was it not for your sake? Who has the magnanimous heart to fight against anything that is not

good, even though it may be as tiny as mustard? If you compare the good intentions of Mayavar with my greatness, mine will not equal even the dust under his feet." As he said this, tears started trickling from his eyes.

Thamarai Nachiyar looked at her husband from the corner of her eyes and said in a way that highlighted the cultured manners of the Kongu country, "Why don't you first ask him to sit and then talk? We can sit in that mandapam and converse."

"Yes, that is right. Please come." Kundrudaiyan invited Mayavar. That building was full of pictorial graffiti depicting scenes about Chellandiamman and Periyakandiamman. The story narrated by the boatman to Ponnar-Sankar was pictorially represented on the walls of the mandapam.

In one picture the region called Nagamalai in mount Kailas is seen. In the next picture a five-headed snake is doing severe penance cherishing Lord Shiva. That snake is doing penance asking for a progeny. The next picture shows Lord Shiva and his consort Parvathi. Another picture presents Parvathi agreeing to be born as a child to the five-headed snake and leaving Shiva. In yet another picture Shiva is found bidding farewell to Parvathi. Next picture - the five-headed cobra gives birth to an offspring! That offspring grows into Periyakandiamman in the next picture! The next portrait presents seven virgins springing out of the sweat drops Periyakandi wipes off with her fingers! Next scene is the arrival of Periyakandiamman in Vazhavanthi town! In the picture after that Periyakandiamman decides to perform pooja before crossing the river Cauvery via Thottiyam and for that sends the virgins to bring pooja pots. In another, a potter lies to the virgins that there are no pots. Another large picture is on the episode of Periyakandi cursing the potter and because of that snakes slither in every pot in his house. In the next picture the potter apologises to Periyakandi and gives a pot. The boatman makes fun of the seven virgins in another picture. In the next one Periyakandi curses the boatman and his boat catches fire. After that the picture which depicts the contest between Periyakandi and Chellandiamman! In the next picture both the Ammans are at peace with each other! In the last one Periyakandi explains the greatness of Chellandiamman!

Mayavar looked at those pictures in that ancient portrait gallery with his eyes riveted on them. He then took the seat offered by Kundrudaiyan and asked him to sit. Thanakodi Chettiyar and Thamarai had remained in the pandal. Thamarai placed the *mavilakku* rice dough offered to the Amman in a silver plate, poured butter milk into a tumbler and looked for a person to take them to Mayavar.

Thanakodi Chettiyar told Thamarai that he would take them to Mayavar. But Thamarai could not think of using him for that job and so hesitated. Mayavar called Thamarai from the mandapam and said, "Let Thanakodi Chettiyar remain

there itself. I want Thamarai Nachiyar alone to come here. I am going to discuss family matters with Kundrudaiyan." Thamarai entered the mandapam with plate and tumbler. Mayavar emptied the silver plate and said that the rice dough was very tasty.

Thamarai sat behind her husband. With cool eyes Mayavar looked at her intently. His face was full of pride. The words which fell from his lips were firm and clear like ice rain.

"How did that Manthiappan dare to behave so badly with this paragon of virtue?"

As Mayavar raised this question sadly, waves of old memory began rolling in her mind.

Once when they had gone to Chellatha Gounder to claim the property belonging to them, Manthiappan tried to behave like a beast with her. Thamarai was scared to think of that even then!

Kundrudaiyan asked Mayavar gently, "Manthiappan would have changed now, wouldn't he? Then he was a youngster! Now the responsibilities are more. Though just a prince, he is taking care of the entire administration. So he would have reformed himself, wouldn't he?"

Mayavar laughed and said, "Will everybody change after taking up responsibilities? Can a hen dance just because you tie a small strip of metal bells around its legs? It will only go and rummage rubbish?"

Thamarai sighed at the intelligence and integrity displayed by Mayavar.

Kundrudaiyan was unable to figure out the purpose of Mayavar's visit and did not know how to begin. He struggled for a while but took courage and said, "Please excuse me. It is not proper to ask a visitor why he has come. Yet, because I am afraid that I am wasting your time unnecessarily I ask you. Is there anything you want me to do for you?" Mayavar looked at him up and down. He then quenched his thirst with butter milk.

That moment they heard the loud cry of Thanakodi Chettiyar, "Alas! Rush to this place! All of you come running." Kundrudaiyan and Thamarai rushed out of the mandapam.

Since it was dusk the figures were not clear. Some people were running towards the river Cauvery. Thamarai and Kundrudaiyan enquired Chettiyar, "What has happened?" Chettiyar shouted, "Arukkani has fallen into the river" and headed towards the river. Mayavar came running to that place and asked excitedly. "What has happened? Who fell into the river?"

Thamarai and Kundrudaiyan said in one voice, "It is our daughter Arukkani Thangam" and dashed towards the river. Mayavar jumped into the river without a moment's delay. The same moment a horse started galloping away from that area piercing through the wind.

12 Damsel on Warpath

Mayavar, even as he jumped into the river instantaneously like lightning, did not fail to identify the person who mounted the horse and sped away. He was none other than Manthiappan. Though it was dusk Mayavar was able to recognise him. But not thinking about it - that thought vanished from his mind like a flying eagle's shadow whisking off from earth during daytime - he swam in the river.

Caught in an eddy near the bank of the river, the girl's head was found going beneath the water level and coming up a little above alternately. Thamarai became aware that the girl was Arukkani Thangam and cried aloud, "Thangam! Thangam!"

Kundrudaiyan consoled her and at the same time rushed to the edge in order to jump into the river. Thamarai feared that her husband might not be able to swim in that whirlpool and might get caught in it. So even in that crisis, out of love for her husband, she ran fast and prevented him from jumping into the river.

Mayavar overtook everybody, carried the girl and swam towards the bank. The big crowd was greatly surprised to see a man well beyond his youth and past middle age so strong and so brave. Arukkani Thangam was given first aid in the mandapam opposite to Chellandiamman temple. Noting that she had gulped a lot of water, Thamarai made her lie down on her back and pressed her back and shoulders heavily. The water choking her from inside got out through the mouth and Arukkani opened her eyes slowly. Thamarai Nachi laid her on her lap and sobbed and cried bitterly, "Thangam! Thangam!" Arukkani wiped the tear drops

rolling down the cheeks of her mother with her hands soft as a flower tendril and said, "Don't cry ma! I am all right."

Mayavar said loudly, "Don't crowd here. All of you leave. Let the air flow freely" and dispersed the crowd. Only Thamarai, Kundrudaiyan and Mayavar were with Arukkani.

Kundrudaiyan asked his daughter very fondly, "Amma! You don't know swimming. Then why did you do this? And will anybody swim in a river full of eddies? Oh! How big that whirlpool was!"

Mayavar mused within himself, "How exactly the name 'masachamy' fits this man! Did she jump into the river to swim?" and chuckled thinking about the innocent mind of Kundrudaiyan.

Then he asked her very kindly, "Arukkani, what happened? Who chased you?" Arukkani began shedding tears without giving any reply. At the same time sparks of fire flew in her eyes. Mayavar did not fail to note that. But he pretended as if he did not see it and pressed her to answer, "Amma! Stop crying and tell me. I ask you only after seeing by my own eyes that wicked rascal bolting away speedily on his horse. Tell me, what happened!" The incident that took place a short while before cast its shadow in her mind's eye.

Arukkani Thangam had moved away from her parents and was going round the temple and at the same time joyfully watching the stalls put up for the festival. A large number of statues were kept on pedestals in several places on the paved way around the sanctum-sanctorum. Arukkani lost her heart to the beauty of the statues and wondered at their artistic skill. When she saw the statues of Lord Shiva and Parvathi she practised the mudra depicted in the statues and enjoyed herself by adopting various dancing postures. She observed every statue keenly. She went near the stone pillars of the mandapam and tapped with her hands an ornamentally carved stone bell. But the stone bell gave out the ringing tone of a white metal bell. When she heard that sound she could not contain her joy. She tapped the stone bell again and again. Her hands appeared to have been made of lotus petals inserted with red *kanthal* flowers for fingers. The joy of that sound thrilled the young lass.

At that time, Manthiappan who was hiding behind a pillar and watching Muthayi and Pavalayi happened to notice Arukkani. From there he peered at her beauty and gratified himself.

Of course, there are innumerable statues of physically well-structured beautiful women in temple corridors and mandapams. Manthiappan felt that Arukkani was the synthesised beauty of the most beautiful feature drawn from each of those statues. His body heated up. He who had been ogling at Muthayi and Pavalayi got

a little annoyed as they were always with their parents. Perhaps, he thought he would try to get at those parrots later and should not allow the white dove standing so close and alone slip out of his hands. He moistened his throat which had gone dry with saliva and waited.

Arukkani tapped the stone bell and kept one of her ears close to the pillar. She heard the sweet musical reverberations and forgot herself in that pleasurable sensation. She did not feel like leaving that music which provided sweetness to her ears and cheerfulness to her mind. She pressed her ear more closely and stood leaning elegantly on the pillar. From a distance it appeared as if a lovely statue had been carved on the pillar.

The pretty posture and the angle at which the colourful peafowl brimming with youthfulness from head to foot was leaning on the pillar would slightly befuddle even a sanyasi who had renounced everything. Then how could Manthiappan who had the habit of staring even at a stone mortar clad in a saree with saliva doodling out of his lips escape from the fire of lust?

Arukkani, as she was enjoying the musical pillars one by one, came to the pillar behind which Manthiappan was hiding. But she did not notice him. Since a stone bell was attached to that pillar also, she quickly moved towards it to know the special features of that pillar and to find out whether the tune of that bell was different.

As she hopped to that pillar rather fast, she did not notice Manthiappan standing close to it.

On hearing a male voice, "Slowly! Slowly! Be careful! Be careful!" she was startled. Yet, she shouted sternly, "Who are you?"

"You have come to the place where I was standing! I should put this question, not you. But when a lass like you asks it is not proper for me to refuse. I am none other than Manthiappan! The prince Manthiappan, the rare son begotten after penances by Chellatha Gounder, the administrator of Nelli Valanadu and the patron of Thalaiyur Kali." Manthiappan gave this reply uproariously and got closer to her as if he was determined to gobble her up.

Since these names - Nelli Valanadu, Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan - had been uttered by her parents, her relatives and friends and also by the people of Kudaiyar ad nauseam and had already sunk into her mind with utmost aversion, she did not want to stand in that place even a second. She conveyed through her facial gesture what she felt in her heart and began to walk away abruptly. Her appearance which was hitherto like a young deer's suddenly changed into a tiger's. Manthiappan leaped across her, stretched both his hands and stood like a wall in front of her. He laughed at her mockingly and said, "Why are you so much

frightened? Am I going to bite and eat you?" In that laughter fire of lust was burning. The limbs that trembled in anger and the change caused to her body by the lungs that swelled and subsided and again swelled while sighing deeply heated up the body of Manthiappan even more.

"Have you come to witness the festival from the divine world? Are you *Urvasi*? Are you *Rambai*? Or are you *Tilothamai*? I think you have lost your way and are distressed. Just get on to my shoulders and I will show you the way without any bother. Not an ordinary way! The way to a world of pleasures!" so saying he grasped her arm with his rough hand.

If a woman gets extra strength when forced to fight for her life, will she not fight with even more strength when forced to protect her chastity, which she values more than her life?

Arukkani gave a firm twist to her arm and released it from his iron grip. Her forearms and fingers became blood red and the green veins showed up.

Arukkani shouted hoarsely, "Are you a man? Chi!"

Manthiappan queried, "Don't I look like a man?" and got closer.

"No! You are not at all a man! You are only a beast in human form. Some magician had shed his body and got into an animal's. At that time you, an animal, had got into that magician's body and come here!" Arukkani replied furiously and turned to go away.

Manthiappan berated her, "Give respect. Do you know who I am?"

"Didn't I say you are an animal? Do I need to know anything more? You fool! Do you know who I am? I am Arukkani Thangam, the daughter of Kundrudaiyan and Thamarai Nachiyar, the pride of our clan! At least after knowing this get away from here!"

"Oh! Is it so? After you said that my desire increases even more! I didn't get Thamarai, the mother - let me get at least her daughter, this lily!"

"Chi! How correct I was in calling you an animal? You have proved yourself to be the axe-handle that was born to ruin the Kongu Velala clan reputed for its cultural greatness! Hm; stand aside and give way."

Arukkani hurled these words like sparks of fire and tried to go though he blocked her way.

Manthiappan clasped her tightly with his arms that were as long as the legs of a sea crab and said ferociously, "No; I won't allow you to go! There stands my horse. I will carry you on my horse. Come on!"

She slapped him on the face, wriggled out and ran. He did not leave her. She got into a thick bush on the western side of the temple and hid herself. Still,

Manthiappan did not give up the search and chased her. Under the cover of the bush she ran hither and thither. He ran crosswise and baffled her.

Arukkani scurried fast and fell down near Manthiappan;s horse. She got up and looked around. Manthiappan, standing beside the horse, bent down and was about to lift her. Arukkani realised that even a moment's delay would ruin her. She got up instantaneously and sprinted towards the river to protect her wealth of chastity which she valued more than her life.

A deer can run extremely fast so that its feet touching the ground cannot be seen easily. But doesn't a tiger possess the skill to run crosswise, catch hold of its throat and tear it to pieces? Likewise, Manthiappan ran across to catch and molest her. Noting that there was no way to escape, Arukkani jumped into the river.

A few persons who were standing near the bank of the river saw a frightened woman falling into the river and were stunned. Afraid of the consequence, Manthiappan mounted his horse and flew away fast.

Though Thamarai and Kundrudaiyan felt happy that Arukkani Thangam had escaped from a grave danger and an accident, they could not but feel immensely sad at the same time. Both were very much worried that the family of Chellatha Gounder was still bent upon ruining and victimising their family.

Mayavar patted Kundrudaiyan's shoulders and told him, "Nelliangoda! Don't get emotional. Emboldened by the support of Thalaiyur Kali, Chellatha Gounder and his son are indulging in all sorts of atrocities. I have come back and accepted the appointment in Thalaiyur only with the conviction that I can put an end to their misdeeds and that I can make Thalaiyur Kali distinguish between good and evil."

From Thamarai Nachiyar's eyes tears flowed like streams. Once, when they went to Chellatha Gounder's palace to claim their land, their property and their right over administration the father endangered the life of Kundrudaiyan and the son endangered her honour. Thamarai brought these back to her mind and she felt as if her heart had cracked. Though she cried while speaking, Mayavar was able to perceive the sparks of fire flying within her heart.

"Ayya! Among the children born to us she alone is alive. What will we do if we lose her also! How can we pull on?"

Mayavar looked at Arukkani with overflowing affection. He was not perturbed by the sad words of Thamarai. The reason: he knew that the belief of Thamarai that Arukkani was the sole survivor among her children was wrong. Since Rockiannan had told him that the sons of Thamarai - Ponnar-Sankar - were alive, Mayavar did not show any interest in sharing her sorrow.

He could understand that they were just aware of the loss of their children at a very young age. They were drowned in that misery but did not know how they were lost or who caused that loss.

Arukkani after resting a while on her mother's lap and then on her shoulder became normal to some extent and stood up.

Thamarai was still weeping and Kundrudaiyan was staring at her with moist eyes. Arukkani made an angry and courageous outburst, "*Amma*! *Appa*! I have lost both my elder brothers. You have lost your two sons. I alone remain. Why shouldn't I get the prowess and the daring of both my brothers? Permit me to fight against the family of Chellatha Gounder and Thalaiyur Kali who have no aim other than wreaking vengeance on us! To be patient even after today's atrocious incident is cowardice. In the moral war we are going to start today against injustice, it doesn't matter even if our family is wiped out without a trace. Let future history add a new chapter to say that we got destroyed in our fight for a holy cause. Please grant me permission!"

Arukkani spoke like that in uncontrollable indignation. Mayavar stroked her hair and said with a smile, "*Amma*, Arukkani! Don't be in a hurry! You must wage a war only if it is certain that Ponnar-Sankar are no more!"

Thamarai sprang to the very acme of fervent eagerness and asked, "What do you say? Are Ponnar-Sankar alive? The darlings I gave birth to, are they living?"

13 Disaster on the Way

When Thamarai asked Mayavar whether Ponnar-Sankar were alive he did not say either 'yes' or 'no', but only allowed a gentle smile pass over his lips. That smile too hid itself in his thick and long beard and showed up like the lovely moon piercing through dark clouds.

He then asked Kundrudaiyan, "I intend to come with you to your Kudaiyur palace. It is prudent to speak about Ponnar-Sankar in your palace rather than here. Can I come?"

"Please come by all means. We can start now itself," said Kundrudaiyan happily.

How could Thamarai and Kundrudaiyan know that Ponnar-Sankar were just then joyfully enjoying the sweet hospitality of Chinnamalaikolunthu in Arichampatti Maniankurichi? Wasn't it a fact that even Mayavar who gave information about them as sweet as honey did not know that they were in the Maniankurichi palace?

Chinnamalaikolunthu not only welcomed Ponnar-Sankar and their intimate friend Veeramalai Sambuvan with a deep sense of gratitude for having saved his daughters Muthayi and Pavalayi from grave dangers but also showed keen interest in bringing physicians to treat the wounds of Sankar with herbal essence.

The medicine applied was the juice of 'pachouli' which immediately removed pain and itch and stopped the oozing of blood. So Sankar got up easily and looked majestically at Ponnar with his sparkling eyes. Ponnar hugged him. Chinnamalaikolunthu observed their affectionate feelings and was reminded of

the legendary characters familiar to him. He put his fingers over his nose and said, "Eh! *Appa*! Both of you are full of brotherly love like Rama and Laxman!"

At once, Veeramalai Sambuvan said with a smile, "Of course! And I am the Hanuman to this Rama-Laxman!" All present in the palace hall laughed hilariously.

Sankar said with a mischievous smile, "The tail alone is missing!"

Ponnar intervened, "Stop *Ramayana* at this point! Beyond this, don't mention *Vanavasam, Asokavanam, Lankadahanam, Yutha Gandam* and such." Chinnamalaikolunthu did not fail to notice the restraint and humbleness in the speech of Ponnar.

The cook came, bowed his head respectfully and announced very politely, "Master, food is ready." Water was brought in silver tumblers for washing the hands.

With a pleasant face Chinnamalaikolunthu invited everybody to come and dine.

In the very same house from which Thamarai Nachiyar and her husband were driven out with the instruction that they should never again enter, her precious sons Ponnar-Sankar were being given royal treatment!

This fact was not known to Chinnamalaikolunthu; nor to Ponnar-Sankar and their parents.

Chinnamalaikolunthu sat between Ponnar-Sankar and by his own hands served the dishes on the leaves spread before them. He listed all the good features of Maniankurichi food and urged them to eat more and more, "Hum! Eat well. Potato roast of Maniankurichi will be nice. The fries made here have a special taste. Pepper *rasam* will not be too hot. It is good for digestion. Generally, nothing need be said about the curd of Kongu Nadu; that too, the curd of Maniankurichi has a unique quality!"

Sankar responded, "Listening to you is more enjoyable than eating.

With bubbling eagerness, Chinnamalaikolunthu asked them, "Well, how long it is, since you came! You didn't tell me when we were on the bank of the Cauvery. Nor did you tell me during the journey. Can you tell me your names at least now?"

They stopped their boisterous laughter and became silent. Chinnamalaikolunthu asked them pretending to be innocuous, "Oh! Your mouths are full of food?"

Everybody looked intently at the lip movements of Ponnar-Sankar. They even forgot to eat. But no reply was forthcoming from them. In a way the feast came to an end and all of them washed their hands and moved to the front hall of the palace and sat in silk cushioned chairs.

Betel leaves and other necessaries were brought in silver plates. Ponnar-Sankar kept looking at the plates. Veeramalai Sambuvan folded the betel leaves and gave them. Chinnamalaikolunthu noticed that both of them hesitated to receive the betel leaves and so asked, "Don't you have the habit of taking betel leaves?"

Veeramalai Sambuvan said, "Whether they have the habit or not, they must take it now. Only then can they go on munching and avoid answering your question!"

Chinnamalaikolunthu told them, "Do not worry! I won't disturb you any further by asking your names! There are comfortable rooms to rest. They say 'even labourers feel dizzy after taking food', so lay down for a while and relax yourselves."

Ponnar-Sankar exchanged glances and looked at Veeramalai Sambuvan. It appeared as if Rockiannan were standing in front of them. They had come such a long distance unexpectedly and their mentor had not been informed of it. They thought it would be proper to return immediately. So they turned to Chinnamalaikolunthu and said, "Please let us go. We take leave of you now."

Maniankurichi Gounder stood up at once and gave almost a lecture, "What a good thing you are proposing! My wife Silambayi, my son Vaiyamperuman and my daughters whom you saved would have by now travelled half the distance. What can I say if they ask me where you had gone? How eager they would be to see you and to entertain you!"

"Please excuse us. In our barracks life this is the first time that we have come such a long distance and have been away for such a long time from our mentor. We don't know what he will be thinking about us and how much he will be worried and wheresoever he will be searching for us. So we must reach Marigounden Palayam quickly," so saying Ponnar took the hands of his brother and got up.

Maniankurichiyar burst out, "Don't I know about your mentor Rockiannan? I know how he was in his young age and how rough his nature was. In those days he would flare up instantaneously. I also underwent training in warfare under him for some time. Only then he was like a volcano. Now he has become a placid stream in restraint. If he gets angry with you, tell him that you went to the palace of Maniankurichi Chinnamalaikolunthu. He will feel very happy. Please listen to what I say. You can leave as soon as my family returns from Chellandiamman temple. I will not object to that in any way." Ponnar-Sankar looked at each other with the idea of respecting the words of Maniankurichiyar and remaining there for some more time.

For them there was the urgency to go and at the same time the inexplicable desire to have a look at Muthayi and Pavalayi once again. Veeramalai Sambuvan alone among those present understood this secret correctly!

Veeramalai Sambuvan did not fail to notice those girls soft as creepers looking without batting their eyelids even once at those matchless young men who managed to overcome the swinging whirlwind, the strangulating cobra and the crocodile, rescued them and brought them ashore. He had till then seen only raw courage and masculine vigour in their faces. Now he could see the spring of love and affection spreading thickly like a snow film on a rock. Veeramalai could also understand that though they were impatient to go, the wish that their host should press a little more and make them stay until those peafowls returned drew colourful patterns in their young hearts. So he spoke for his friends but pretended as if he was advocating the cause of Chinnamalaikolunthu.

"If we tell our mentor all that had happened he wouldn't get angry. I will tell him in an apt manner and pacify him. Let us not ignore the words of Maniankurichiyar. We can stay here for some more time." Ponnar-Sankar sulked as if they did not like it but in their heart of hearts appreciated him as the most proper friend and heartily congratulated him.

If red *kumkum* falls on white dress it will not go away however hard you may dust it! The more you dust the stronger it will stick! Like that, it must be said, the image of Muthayi in the mind of Ponnar and the image of Pavalayi in the mind of Sankar had stuck.

Muthayi and Pavalayi who were returning to Maniankurichi in their chariot were also in the same condition.

Though they took a lot of efforts they were not able to know their names. So they gave the pooja, as suggested by Vaiyamperuman, in the names of 'Periyandan' and 'Chinnandan'. The priest uttered the thousand names of Amman and finished the pooja, showed the camphor light, handed over *kumkum* in a plate and a short strand of flowers from the garland worn around the deity. All through this Silambayi prayed, "Mother! Those boys must fare well, very well. They must live a full life." The lips of the hearts of Muthayi and Pavalayi supplicated, "Will Amman gracefully grant us the boon of marrying those intrepid men? Since they were love utterances none could hear them!

They were thinking in the same way while travelling back! A large number of security guards on horseback preceded and followed the chariot. Since darkness began to set in, the journey went on rather slowly.

Silambayi was happy that her daughters had an opportunity to meet Thamarai Nachiyar and her husband Kundrudaiyar. She went on chatting about it.

As the fracas that followed Thamarai's wedding took place before Silambayi came to Maniankurichi palace as daughter-in-law, she was not fully aware of that storm, nor was she directly affected by it. She had heard about Thamarai Nachi's

vow that she would marry her sons to the daughters of her brother. She had also known that two sons were born to them and both of them were lost soon after. So the dream that the families of Kundrudaiyan and Chinnamalaikolunthu would be reunited had come to nothing. Silambayi knew that Thamarai had a daughter. If her son were married to that girl the old relationship might revive.

Will her husband agree to such a proposal? Even if he is willing, will Thamarai Nachi accept it? Her aim was to marry her sons to the girls of Maniankurichi. When that cannot happen, will Thamarai be interested in fulfilling Silambayi's wish?

Silambayi was seated in the chariot with these thoughts.

Ponnar's stalwart figure, face full of graceful charm, moustache proclaiming the man's bravery, shoulders like the split ivory of a male elephant - if looked intently the figure of a lion, if looked with a raised head the figure of a tiger - Muthayi thought about these again and again and enjoyed sweet sensations.

How strong the heart - like wrought iron! The moustache like two spear points placed above the lips! Body-structure makes one wonder whether it is chest or chariot plank! I have heard about the legendary heroes like Arjuna, Abimanyu and Inderjit - but only today I have had the opportunity to see one of them. Pavalayi thought like this and sighed. Her breast swelled and puffed up!

Amidst night's thick weave of black lines their chariot went over the south bank of the Cauvery up to Kulithalai and from there turned south and gathered speed. Since the road towards Arichampatti beyond the river bank was wide and free from bumps the horses could gallop with less trouble.

Though the path was smooth they had to pass through dense bushes now and then. At places where there were bushes on both sides the soldiers riding in the front shouted, "Vel! Vel! Victory Vel!" On hearing those loud sounds fox cubs and wild rabbits that lay hidden in the bushes made screeching noises and ran from one bush to another. While running across the road a few mongooses got killed under the hoofs of horses.

They had crossed all the places infested with bushes - but for one! The last one was very long and too dense. When the chariot crossed that area the sounds 'Vel! Vel! Victory Vel!" were heard. But that noise did not come from the bodyguards alone; it was also the noise made by many other soldiers on horseback who had surrounded the chariot.

Along with that noise the clatter of clashing swords was also heard. In that shrill-pitched noise death whinings 'Ah! *Ayyo*!" were also mixed.

Vaiyamperuman shouted, "Don't stop! Drive the chariot fast!" As per his order it was driven fast. But not for a long time. Too many soldiers on horseback surrounded the chariot and blocked its way.

The Maniankurichi bodyguards pounced upon the intruders unmindful of their lives. But to no purpose. They fell down dead.

The sounds of spears clashing against shields and swords rubbing against one another resounded through the whole area. The birds which had retreated to their nests after hunting for food the whole day were startled by that terrible noise. Beating their wings they flew out in search of other places.

A few among the bodyguards, unable to withstand the onslaught, died! A few, severely mauled and wounded, rolled down from their horses! A few, not even aware whether they were dead or alive, got scattered in panic!

The blockade around the chariot became too strong. Those inside did not know who the attackers were. Among those who made a circle around them and attacked not even a single soldier opened his mouth and uttered a word. Vaiyamperuman drew his sword and got ready to jump off the chariot.

Silambayi used her full strength to force him back into the chariot. But he was determined to save his mother and sisters even if it were to cost his life. With that firm aim he pushed his mother aside, roared like a lion and jumped down. His sisters cried, "Don't, *anna*, don't", and got hold of his arms. The soldiers on horseback waited for the moment Vaiyamperuman would wriggle out of their grips to pounce upon them. So they surrounded the chariot even closer with their swords and spears held high.

14 Towards Rachandarmalai

As anticipated by those soldiers who had by now formed a close circle around the chariot, Vaiyamperuman shook off the hands of his sisters, swung his sword and barged into them like a typhoon. The enemies were too many! He was alone! Moreover, those who attacked him wielded all kinds of weapons! Vaiyamperuman did not repose faith in his sword alone; but also in his doughty heart which he considered a more powerful weapon. He wielded his sword so deftly that some of the enemies who attacked him crudely got their brains smashed and slumped down. One or two lost their limbs and fell headlong from their horses.

If Vaiyamperuman fought fearlessly against so many in that darkness, the reason was his determination to save the honour of his family which he considered more valuable than life itself. So he did not mind the spear wounds inflicted on his body. Nor did he mind the pain of the wounds on his chest and loins.

That crowd of ruffians understood that it was impossible to overpower that young hero in straight fight and decided to employ a trick to fell him.

There was a large boulder near the place where the chariot had been stopped and the path was full of bumps and pits and dense bushes on either side. Near that boulder there was a deep pit. The enemies noted that the dense foliage of the bushes around had made the pit invisible. Their plan was to use it. So they kept fighting but slowly moved back as if retreating from the fight. Vaiyamperuman who was attacking them fiercely in anger and rage did not notice the pit and put both his legs into it.

Next second he got trapped in the pit. Tried to jump over the pit with the sword in his hand, but could not. Meantime they snatched the sword from him. Did they stop at that? No, they grasped both his hands and pulled him out of the pit.

Silambayi shouted, "Ayyo! Don't kill him," and ran towards them.

A majestic voice was heard: "Not only your son, nobody will face any danger at our hands!" Vaiyamperuman and Silambayi looked in the direction of the voice. A man with shaven head, more like a flesh mountain, was seen approaching them. He held a sword soaked in blood. Muthayi and Pavalayi saw him well in the light of the flambeaux tied on both sides of the chariot, got terror-stricken and turned their faces the other side.

That flesh mountain introduced himself: "Don't you know me? I am Thirumalai! I am the chief guard of Rachandar Thirumalai! One of the generals of Thalaiyur Kali. Since Rachandar Thirumalai is under my custody, the king of Thalaiyur used to call me, 'Thirumalai'".

From the facial expression of Vaiyamperuman it was obvious that he had already known all these details.

That flesh mountain continued, "My only duty is to carry out the orders of Thalaiyur king Kali. I was ordered to arrest the two beautiful daughters of Chinnamalaikolunthu and their retinue on their return journey from the Chellandiamman festival and to lock them up in the Thalaiyur palace in Rachandarmalai. I have come to execute that order."

In the speech of that man possessed with a gigantic body, by now severity was in a lower key. His extraordinary interest in obeying the orders of the higher ups showed itself.

Even while trapped in the grip of the soldiers, without a miniscule of fear Vaiyamperuman held his head high and confronted Thirumalai, "Why should we be arrested and taken to Rachandarmalai? Has your Thalaiyur Kali started playing with girls also?"

Thirumalai laughed and replied. "*Thambi*, he is not doing this for fun! This attempt is to fulfil the promise given to Chellatha Gounder, the patron of Thalaiyur Kali and the custodian of Nelli Valanadu!"

On hearing this answer Vaiyamperuman ground his teeth in extreme anger and shouted loudly, "What promise? What a wonderful promise? Is it brave to waylay like thieves during night for the sake of a promise given to Chellatha Gounder? If you really have manly qualities, you should declare first that you are waging a war and then attack during day."

"*Thambi*, your young blood is hot and boiling! A part of Thalaiyur Kali's forces will be enough to reduce your Arichampatti palace to dust! It is not the intention of our king Kali to bring Arichampatti under the control of Thalaiyur! He just wants to be loyal to his patron and friend Chellatha Gounder!"

"Let your king Thalaiyur Kali be loyal to anybody! Why should he interfere with our affairs?"

Thirumalai explained, "My king will not interfere with anything unnecessarily. In your Arichampatti, twenty years ago Chellatha Gounder was humiliated in the presence of Thalaiyur Kali. What *thambi*, don't you understand? Your father Chinnamalaikolunthu knows this very well. Your grandfather Malaikoluntha Gounder stopped midway the marriage proposed between his daughter Thamarai Nachi and Chellatha Gounder's son Manthiappan. Because of the disgrace he suffered that day Manthiappan has not married anybody till now. Well, your father did not give his sister in marriage to Manthiappan; now can't he at least refrain from objecting to his daughters marrying him? Chellatha Gounder sent emissaries many a time proposing the marriage and your family ignored them. The enraged Chellatha Gounder, with the help of Thalaiyur Kali, planned this arrest and all arrangements have been made for taking all of you to Rachandarmalai."

"Are you up to take us to Rachandarmalai and get our acceptance to marry the girl to Manthiappan?"

"*Thambi*, don't use the singular term 'girl'; say 'girls'. Both your sisters Muthayi and Pavalayi must be married to Manthiappan! Nelli Valanadu has been harbouring this revenge - this vow - for twenty years! To fulfil that vow, you, the rulers of Arichampatti, can come forward and help us! Even if you refuse, Manthiappan is certainly going to marry Muthayi and Pavalayi in Rachandarmalai."

When Thirumalai said this to Vaiyamperuman categorically and firmly, Silambayi who was till then listening to it with tears in her eyes was shocked as if she had suddenly stepped into fire. She shouted loudly, "That will never happen! You may see our dead bodies in Rachandarmalai; but we will never allow you to conduct the marriage as you wish."

Thirumalai was in no way moved by the scream of Silambayi. He only guffawed. Meanwhile, the ring of soldiers around them narrowed and closed in on the chariot, Vaiyamperuman and the women. Thirumalai stopped his guffaw and said with a tone of finality, "I pity you because you are women. But what has been destined for you cannot be altered. And, why change it when it is good? Nobody

intends to compel you and extract acceptance now itself. You are coming with us to Rachandarmalai without showing any resistance. There is a beautiful palace belonging to Thalaiyur up there. You are going to be kept in custody there. Chinnamalaikolunthu will be informed of this tomorrow. If he agrees to the marriage, all the problems will be at an end. If not, if any hurdle is thrown in, Thalaiyur will extend its help to Nelli Valanadu to attack Arichampatti. Arichampatti Gounder and you, his son, will become slaves! Both Muthayi and Pavalayi will become the wives of Manthiappan."

Before Thirumalai finished saying this, Muthayi and Pavalayi elbowed each other, advanced to the front and shouted in one voice, "This will never happen! This will never happen!" Sparks of rage flashed in their eyes. Next second each drew a dagger and pointed it towards the chest. Even if there had been a delay of batting the eyelids once the songs of two cuckoos would have come to an end. But within that time the flesh mountain Thirumalai stretched his proboscis like hands quickly and snatched both the daggers.

The mother is standing in dismay - the two sisters are upset totally - and Vaiyamperuman is unable to move, caught in the tight grip of thugs. Thirumalai's order came like thunder:

"Hm! Soldiers! March towards Rachandarmalai. Women can get into the chariot. Soldiers! Close in on the chariot like a fence."

He then addressed Vaiyamperuman, "*Thambi*! Now bound by the soldiers you cannot do anything. The order given to me is that I must treat you all with honour and respect. But I have to chain you and take you to Rachandarmalai. Please bear with it till then."

Even as he was saying this, the soldiers circled around Silambayi, Muthayi and Pavalayi very closely and they themselves got into the chariot and sat. The daring that those rough soldiers could not do anything to them flashed in their faces. The hearty boldness that comes to anybody who decides to protect honour by sacrificing life has accrued to them. Vaiyamperuman's hands and legs were put in chains. As if it was not enough he was chained bodily and hauled into the chariot.

To go to Arichampatti via Kulithalai from Chellandiamman temple one must cross the villages Nangavaram and Panaiyur. Though the village Rachandar Thirumalai was just a few miles from Arichampatti, Thalaiyur Kali's general Thirumalai did not like to go to Rachandarmalai passing through Arichampatti. He had planned to take a different route, though longer, via Thogaimalai. If he passed through Arichampatti, he might have to contend with the forces of Chinnamalaikolunthu. So he ordered his men to proceed as per the plan already

chalked out. He ordered one of his soldiers to drive the chariot. Everything went ahead as planned. The chariot and the soldiers surrounding it started for Rachandarmalai. Thirumalai, the general, mounted his horse and went first.

The wounded soldiers on both sides, mostly belonging to Arichampatti, lay on the roadside in a dying condition. They moaned and bewailed. There lay scattered some bodies without life. In that darkness, one soldier among those rolling in pain crawled inch by inch towards a tired horse standing near a boulder. He was unmindful of a dagger stuck deep in his loin and blood oozing out of the wound. He was an Arichampatti soldier and that horse was his own. So it began walking towards him. It came close to him and stopped as if it was aware that he was unable even to crawl. He tried his best to mount the horse, but could not. The horse looked at him with pity. Then it went and stood close to a nearby rock and beckoned to him with its head. The Arichampatti soldier crawled further and went near the boulder. Then he crawled over the boulder, reached up to the height of the horse's back and clung to it. Still, he could not sit erect on the horse. He reclined on its back and caught hold of its head tightly.

The horse was sure that the man was secure on its back and started running towards Arichampatti in a slow pace.

When Chinnamalaikolunthu came to know that an Arichampatti soldier was approaching the palace in a dying condition, he was terribly shocked. He was then conversing with Ponnar-Sankar and Veeramalai Sambuvan. He hurriedly rushed to the entrance of the palace.

Ponnar-Sankar and Veeramalai Sambuvan wanted to know what the shocking news was and share the sorrow caused by it. They rushed behind the man who invited them to his home so kindly and gave a feast in their honour.

Chinnamalaikolunthu ran fast and by his own hands helped that soldier who was in a pool of blood to get down from the horse. He could not live for even a second or two. The soldier struggled to pass on the information within that time. But when he opened his mouth the tongue did not rise. It fluttered. The eyes were losing lustre.

Chinnamalaikolunthu shouted for water. A soldier came running with a tumbler of water. Chinnamalaikolunthu put the soldier on his lap, sprinkled the water on his face and poured a little in his mouth.

Then he asked excitedly, "What happened? Where is Vaiyamperuman? What happened to Silambayi, Muthayi and Pavalayi? Are they on their way?" He shook his head as if to say 'no' and shed tears.

Chinnamalaikolunthu's voice cracked in fear and anxiety when he asked again, "Come on, tell me what happened?"

Words spluttered out of his mouth - broken and bruised, "Thalaiyur Kali ... his general Thirumalai ... arrested Vaiyamperuman ... took all to Rachandarmalai ... to marry both the girls to Manthiappan ..."

With these words the life of that loyal soldier came to an end!

"What?" shouted Chinnamalaikolunthu and got up in anger!

15 Army on the March

Following Chinnamalaikolunthu's outburst the prime drum of Arichampatti fort was sounded. As everybody knew that the sounding of that drum was an emergency call from the palace, the soldiers who were taking rest in the barracks and the brave young men of that area who usually attached themselves to the army in wartime assembled at the entrance of the fort with their weapons in tucked up loin cloth.

Chinnamalaikolunthu stood as the very image of anger and boldness on a high pedestal built of black stones in front of the entrance so that he could be seen by all those who were standing there in orderly rows. In the long line of burning flambeaux the shield fronts, sword tips and spears held aloft by the soldiers shone brilliantly. Chinnamalai flourished a heavy and broad sword in his right hand and began addressing the soldiers who stood around him.

Chinnamalai was a burning volcano as well as a heart-broken man because of the grave danger in which his wife and children had been caught and the challenge thrown to Arichampatti. Indicative of his condition his words were both fiery and emotional.

"Chellatha Gounder of Nelli Valanadu has decided to fight against Arichampatti. Emboldened by the support of Thalaiyur Kali he has nonchalantly underestimated Arichampatti as a small area and has thrown this challenge at us! Nelli Valanadu, when compared with ours, is a bigger country - they rule a bigger area than ours and command a larger army than ours. That was why till today we lived in amity with them and took care to keep the relationship on an even keel.

But they, smarting under the cancellation of Thamarai Nachi's marriage, tried so many times to attack us. Recently, they argued on the strength of some old documents that Rachandarmalai belonged to Valanadu. Though those deeds did not appear totally reliable we gave up our rights over Rachandarmalai just to avert a war. For the past two years Chellatha Gounder has been regularly sending emissaries for negotiating marriage between his son Manthiappan and both my daughters Muthayi and Pavalayi. He continuously compelled me saying that his son had not at all married because my sister Thamarai Nachi was not given in marriage to him and that both my daughters must be married to him to recompense the insult suffered by them. I told them categorically that it was absolutely impossible to marry both the girls to one person. I then thought of marrying one of the girls to Manthiappan. But the information I got about him was terribly shocking! Even now it is so! He is always found with a wine cup. In his inebriated state whichever woman he comes across is ordered to share his bed. Women are dead scared to come in front of him. How can I agree to give my daughter in marriage to a beast in human shape? That's why I refused to give my two daughters; even one daughter. I had not understood that Chellatha Gounder had taken my refusal to heart and had been waiting for an opportunity to take revenge on me! Had I known that I would have taken a big army for the protection of my family returning from Chellandiamman festival. I returned to the palace earlier with these young lions standing here - I don't know their names but I cannot forget them all my life. They saved my daughters from falling a victim to the river Cauvery. Thalaiyur Kali's men had intercepted my wife, my son Vaiyamperuman and my daughters Muthayi and Pavalayi on the way and had taken them to Rachandarmalai. Our soldiers fought against them and lost their lives. Only one severely wounded warrior came here, informed us about what had happened and died heroically. As declared by Thalaiyur Kali's general Thirumalai, my family will be kept under arrest there. Attempts will be made to perform the marriage of Manthiappan and my daughters under coercion. But of course, nobody - my daughters, or my wife or my son - will agree to that! They will prefer death to that marriage. You alone must tell me what I should do now. That's why I have called you. Do you tell me that I should make peace with them and send a missive that I am prepared to make my daughters the wives of Manthiappan? Or do you want me to fight with them and face whatever the result may be? Should I bow before them? Or should I wage a war?"

As soon as Chinnamalaikolunthu gave his explanation and concluded with this question all the spears and swords around went up in the sky. All waved their weapons and shouted in one voice, "We will wage a war! We will not bow before them!"

"They have a strong army. And don't forget that they have the support of Thalaiyur Kali!" Chinnamalai said in a warning tone.

"We don't worry about defeat! It must be written in the blood oozing from our chests that we were defeated. There is no pride in getting the word 'surrender' etched with diamonds on our backs. It will anyway only be a symbol of shame!"

Thus shouted a man in a loud voice. In that voice the music of daring was heard. All, including Chinnamalaikolunthu, turned in the direction of that voice.

Veeramalai Sambuvan only had spoken like that. Ponnar-Sankar smiled and looked at him. Both hugged him. The whole gathering at the entrance of the fort looked at those three young men without batting their eyelids.

Ponnar-Sankar were thinking about those two girls Muthayi and Pavalayi who were rescued by them from a whirlwind and then from a python and a crocodile and the war they would have to face for getting them released and wondering whether they would get an invitation to join the war for their release.

Veeramalai Sambuvan was certain that Ponnar-Sankar would be in that state of mind. So only he told Chinnamalaikolunthu very definitely that 'surrender' was a symbol of shame.

Though Chinnamalai was in possession of only a very small area, he acted with the political acumen of a royal diplomat.

Otherwise – who had determined to wage a war as soon as he heard that his family had been arrested and summoned them by beating the drum – would not have asked for counsel from the same persons whether 'a war should be waged or not'!

Though, as a mark of victory for the diplomacy of Chinnamalaikolunthu, the soldiers and citizens of Arichampatti declared that there was absolutely no question of surrender and that they were ready to take any order from him, he knew very well that the war was going to mete out only heroic death and defeat to him, his family and all the people under his dispensation.

His only hope was that if they started for Rachandarmalai immediately and attacked they would have to fight against only Thalaiyur general Thirumalai, the soldiers there and the soldiers of Nelli Valanadu.

His calculation was that though it would not be easy to win over Thirumalai, if the forces of Arichampatti entered Rachandarmalai before the arrival of the entire forces of Thalaiyur there could be a slight chance for victory.

Yet he was urged by his intuition that he should seek the support of those three young men and thus add strength to his forces.

Chinnamalaikolunthu made use of the bold words of Veeramalai as a rope ladder to approach those young men and addressed all the three. "Please come over this pedestal. Let the people of Arichampatti have a look at your bright faces, your strong and broad shoulders, your eyelids which will not blink even if spears and lances flew straight before you in the battle field. Please come!"

It is a fact that Ponnar-Sankar were standing there with their shoulders throbbing for a chance to participate in the war for rescuing those girls of joy who had taken shelter in their hearts and had gained absolute control. But Ponnar felt shy of expressing it in the presence of Sankar, and Sankar was bewildered by the presence of Ponnar and so hesitated. The call of Chinnamalai put an end to that shyness and hesitancy!

They looked at each other and together looked at Veeramalai. Reading clearly what was written in their hearts; he smiled and signalled to them by his eyes that they could get on to the pedestal.

The scene of the three young men standing on the pedestal was like three tiger cubs standing around Chinnamalai! Those who surrounded them raised their weapons and shouted in joy.

Chinnamalaikolunthu patted Veeramalai and asked, "What did you say? Didn't you say that defeat must be written with the blood spilling out of our chests and that there is no pride in getting the word 'surrender' etched on our backs with diamonds? *Thambi;* I have a way to enter the battlefield with the firm conviction that there is absolutely no room for defeat or surrender and victory is certain - the most reliable way - a way in which there is no miniscule of doubt - and that way can be carved out only by the three of you for me! Will you do it for me?"

Though Chinnamalaikolunthu put this question to Veeramalai, Ponnar-Sankar raised their hands simultaneously and signalled their approval.

Chinnamalaikolunthu's joy knew no bounds. He had concluded that Arichampatti would attack the ramparts of Rachandarmalai fort. In the counter-attack Arichampatti would face defeat. Only heroic death would be the end. He had resigned himself to any such result but stuck to his decision. Now, after ensuring the support of Ponnar-Sankar and Veeramalai he did not have even a slight doubt about the war's result.

Chinnamalaikolunthu ordered his troops, "Soldiers! Get ready, quick!" Before getting down from the pedestal he hugged Ponnar on one side and Sankar on another side and then spelt out another proclamation:

"If we attain victory in this war by overcoming the treachery of Chellatha Gounder and free my family imprisoned in Rachandarmalai, I promise that I will make my daughter Muthayi the life-mate of this young man and Pavalayi the

life-mate of this other young man. And they will take charge as the generals of our forces in the war against Rachandarmalai."

On hearing this announcement of Chinnamalaikolunthu everybody shouted in joy. The fort of Arichampatti resounded with the loud cries, "Veeravel! Vetrivel!"

Ponnar-Sankar entered the Arichampatti arsenal along with Veeramalai to dress and equip themselves with the weapons of a general.

In no time they came out with drawn swords in battle attire. Chinnamalaikolunthu was waiting for them on horseback. Ponnar-Sankar and Veeramali leaped and mounted the horses kept ready for them.

Chinnamalaikolunthu looked at the soldiers majestically, brandished his sword and shouted loudly, "Veeravel!" Like thunder there arose the return cry, "Vetrivel!" The troops left Arichampatti fort.

Men with flambeaux, men with swords, men with bows and arrows, men with spears, men with lances - all on horses wholly occupied the path to Rachandarmalai in that dark night.

Since Rachandarmalai was not far away from Arichampatti they entered that area before dawn.

Thalaiyur general Thirumalai who was under the impression that the men of Arichampatti would only come to negotiate peace and not come with forces to attack was surprised to hear that news!

Without a moment's delay he gave orders to his soldiers!

The soldiers of Thalaiyur Kali reputed for their invincibility in archery remained inside the fort and began shooting volleys of arrows on the forces of Arichampatti.

Chinnamalaikolunthu saw the arrows falling on them like drops of summer rain and was taken aback. The generals Ponnar-Sankar who were advancing towards the fort with the soldiers hesitated a little and pulled up the reins of their horses.

16 War Strategy – New?

Ponnar turned and addressed the soldiers in a loud voice, "Soldiers! Just stand there and block the arrows with your shields. Only after the enemy had exhausted most of their arrows should our counter-attack begin. Till then we must use our strength only to block and endure the assault."

This idea of Ponnar was new to Arichampatti soldiers. Ponnar-Sankar had learnt this strategy of not responding to the attack of the enemy immediately but tiring the enemy at least to the extent of reducing its strength by half and then mounting the attack. When Ponnar suggested this method Arichampatti soldiers could not understand the idea behind it. Yet, they did as they were told in obedience to their general's command.

Thirumalai remained inside the fort and issued orders to his men. Manthiappan sat beside him and went on gulping cup after cup of liquor and was laughing uproariously.

Nearby, in a richly decorated room the heavily chained Vaiyamperuman was tied to a big pillar. To prevent anybody from coming anywhere near him two tough soldiers stood on either side of the pillar with wide-open eyes and terrible daggers in their hands.

In that room there were two big ivory-legged teak cots. On one Silambayi was seated as a veritable image of sorrow. In front of her, Muthayi sat holding her

knees and shedding tears. On another cot Pavalayi was seated leaning her head on her knee. Tears were found rolling down their cheeks. The noisy bustle of the war going on outside could be heard by them. They were certain that Chinnamalaikolunthu should have come there with his forces.

In this world, though there are people like Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan who have concluded that they should somehow multiply their comforts by committing betrayal, or indulging in arson or behaving like beasts, there are also a large number of Chinnamalaikolunthus in the famous annals of the Kongu Velala clan. They are of the firm opinion that if one lives one must live heroically and honourably. Based on this strong conviction they were certain that it could only be Chinnamalaikolunthu who had come there to attack Rachandarmalai.

But they could not feel happy about it in that locked up condition. Nor could they console themselves. As the number of soldiers under the control of Thirumalai was very high they had come to the firm conclusion that it was impossible for the troops of Arichampatti, less than one tenth the size of the Thalaiyur army, to defeat Thirumalai, conquer the fort and rescue them.

A few Rachandarmalai soldiers rushed to the portion where Manthiappan and Thirumalai were seated. "What? Why this hurry?" enquired Thirumalai!

"Arichampatti soldiers are not advancing at all. They are on their horses and keep to their places. They are just able to block with their shields the arrows starting from us like winged white ants," they said. Manthiappan, in his befuddled state of intoxication guffawed and shouted like a wolf, "Excellent!"

He patted Thirumalai on his shoulders and said, "Those boys, they would have been frightened! Would have struggled miserably to advance even a foot! Who is this Thirumalai? General or just a wimp? I am coming now. I will enjoy that pitiable scene from the casement of the rampart." He took with him two of those soldiers to the casement.

The latticed casement was smaller than a balcony but afforded a clear view of the outside. Manthiappan watched from there and was surprised.

He was surprised because he could see Chinnamalaikolunthu, those two young men who jumped into the river and saved the lives of Muthayi and Pavalayi and another young man in the forefront. Their exploits unmindful of the whirlwind, the life-or-death struggle they put up against a python and a crocodile - all these came to his mind and the doubt whether the forces of Thirumalai, despite its larger size, would be able to stand against those young men's indomitable will power took hold of him.

He lifted his eyes from the Arichampatti forces, stood erect and started thinking. His attendant handed a cup of wine and he gobbled it up. Within seconds his

sudden fear and doubt flew away. The dizzy feeling stirred by the wine gave his heart new strength and extraordinary daring.

Manthiappan returned to Thirumalai. He was ordering his soldiers to rain arrows on the enemy incessantly and was watching the war operations majestically.

Manthiappan drew the attention of Thirumalai to those young men who were leading the enemy forces. Since he did not know their names he explained all that happened in the *karagam* festival and warned him not to underestimate the capability of those young men. But Thirumalai's bravado under the intoxication of authoritative power was more than that of Manthiappan's under the intoxication of alcohol!

Thirumalai swaggered, "What do I care? Let anybody come. What can mice do against this Himalayan mountain? You can't even find out the place where they were trampled upon and dead!" and ordered his men to continue the attack.

Arrows from the fort kept raining on the Arichampatti soldiers without a let-up of even a second!

The Arichampatti soldiers who were blocking the arrows fell down from their horses in ones and twos, later in tens and hundreds. A few dismounted horses began to run; a few, struck by arrows, fell down and writhed in pain.

Information about the war came continuously and Manthiappan danced frantically and stalked proudly towards the chamber in which the family of Arichampatti was kept under arrest.

The door was locked and bolted from the inside. Looking through the glass door of the balcony, Manthiappan made faces at those inside. They poured their aversion through their fiery eyes. In anger Manthiappan hit the balcony glass with the hilt of his sword and broke it.

Now his words were audible inside: "You, the pride of women created by Mayan just for the sake of marrying me! To free you from here not only your fool of a father has come, but also those rough youths who fought against a python and a crocodile and saved you have come."

When these words fell on their ears, not only Muthayi and Pavalayi but Silambayi and Vaiyamperuman also felt consoled and confident.

Manthiappan noticed the change in their facial expression. He laughed derisively, threw away the wine cup after kissing it and bragged, "Oho! You think that you will be rescued because those boys have come? That will never happen! Our forces here are not the python or the crocodile of the Cauvery! More than half of your Arichampatti troops have been destroyed in sallies carried out by us from

inside the fort. In a short while Chinnamalaikolunthu and those little wimps will be arrested! After that, my marriage! On one side Muthayi - on another side Pavalayi - I will stand like Lord Krishna between Bama and Rukmani!"

Nobody answered him. Since they had some vague hope, they thought it was unnecessary to bandy words with him and remained silent.

Spurred by joy over victory and liquor-induced intoxication, Manthiappan moved away from the balcony and went to Thirumalai.

Thirumalai was found in an extremely cheerful condition. The reason: bombarded with arrows by the Rachandarmalai forces, the Arichampatti soldiers lay scattered and motionless on the ground as if they had come there to commit suicide and beg of them battlefield death. A man brought the latest news:

"Chinnamalaikolunthu is seated motionless on his horse. The three youths who came in support of him and led their forces are also seated on their horses like that. Using their shields with dexterous ease they just stave off the arrows we shoot at them! Otherwise, the entire forces of Arichampatti have been wiped out!"

Thirumalai patted the man and guffawed. He then issued this new order to his soldiers!

"Enough! Stop shooting arrows! Don't kill Chinnamalaikolunthu! Let him and the one or two who came with him get away with their lives! Shouldn't the father see the marriage of his daughters? Shouldn't he bless them?"

As per the captain's order the volley of arrows from the fort of Rachandarmalai stopped.

Manthiappan shared his desire with general Thirumalai.

"Thirumalai! Chinnamalaikolunthu is standing outside our fort! Let me take both Muthayi and Pavalayi to the ramparts of the fort and garland them in front of him. Only this way must this bigwig of Arichampatti be disgraced!"

Thirumalai did not accede to the desire of Manthiappan.

"The marriage between you and the princesses of Arichampatti is going to take place somehow or other! Why this hurry? It is not only unseemly haste; but won't fit in with cultured behaviour! For Thalaiyur Kali everything must be done according to custom. If he happens to know this he will get angry with me! So, I won't agree to this."

Manthiappan put on a silly face at this reply of Thirumalai.

At that time Thirumalai was informed that a Thalaiyur soldier was on his way to Rachandarmalai fort. Following this message it was announced that he had shown the official seal of Thalaiyur at the entrance and was proceeding towards them.

Within a few seconds that soldier handed over a missive to Thirumalai, greeted him with a respectful bow and stood aside.

Thirumalai read the missive with some excitement. Manthiappan looked at him intently with the question, "What's that urgent missive?"

"Muthayi, Pavalayi and others must be brought to Thalaiyur immediately. The marriage must be celebrated in Thalaiyur. This alone appears to be a safe arrangement. The king of Thalaiyur has ordered us to take the Arichampatti family to Thalaiyur at once."

Thirumalai gave a brief account of the missive and got ready to execute the order.

A chariot was brought and stationed at the fort gate. Soldiers on horseback kept guard over it.

Thirumalai went to the chamber in which the Arichampatti family was locked up. The door was opened from the outside. Yet, the inside bolt could not be unlatched. Those inside did not agree to open the door. Anticipating a new danger they shook in fear. They were in a confused state presuming that rescue had not been possible. The soldiers making use of a hole in the already broken glass unlatched the inside bolt.

Thirumalai got in and politely told them about the latest message. Manthiappan behaved as if he was totally unhinged.

"We are starting for Thalaiyur! The forces of Arichampatti have been fully destroyed. Those who came to your rescue stand dumbfounded! It is their luck that we have not arrested them also! Thalaiyur king is very eager that your father must be present and offer his blessings when the auspicious marriage celebrations take place in Thalaiyur. Please get ready. Don't give any trouble".

They heard these words of Thirumalai and stood like dolls drowned in sorrow and did not give any trouble.

Muthayi, Pavalayi and Silambayi were brought to the chariot stationed at the entrance. First they were asked to get in and then Vaiyamperuman was helped into the chariot with the chains intact.

Thirumalai and Manthiappan mounted two stately horses.

Seated on their horses, Chinnamalaikolunthu, Ponnar-Sankar and Veeramalai watched this scene keenly from a distance outside the fort. The chariot made a fast start.

When the chariot was about to enter the outermost gate after crossing the main entrance and the two surrounding stone walls, a loud cry, "Vel! Vel! Vetrivel!" was heard. Yes, the cry voiced by Ponnar-Sankar and Veeramalai!

Even before that cry subsided, the Arichampatti soldiers who were lying on the ground outside the fort, excepting for a few got up. With that same speed they attacked the Rachandarmalai warriors who formed a protective ring around the chariot!

Ponnar-Sankar, with their swords drawn, stormed into the fighting arena. Thirumalai took on Sankar. Ponnar fought against Rachandarmalai warriors along with Arichampatti soldiers. In between, Veeramalai leaped into the chariot and cut the chains that bound Vaiyamperuman. When Chinnamalaikolunthu was aghast in fear that Thirumalai's sword was about to knock Sankar's head down, Sankar pierced his sword into the chest of that mountain of flesh and felled him.

Rachandarmalai warriors saw their general falling down dead, panicked and ran away. Before the soldiers could come out of the fort, Vaiyamperuman started driving the chariot. Arichampatti warriors followed him along with Ponnar-Sankar, Veeramalai and Chinnamalaikolunthu.

The chariot flew faster than the wind.

In that melee Manthiappan rode his horse post-haste without a clue as to what was happening and somehow saved his skin.

17 Meeting at Sankaranmalai?

Even before they had travelled a mile, the horses of Ponnar-Sankar and Veeramalai overtook the chariot driven by Vaiyamperuman.

Ponnar said in a commanding tone, "The chariot and all the soldiers shall follow the route we take."

Chinnamalaikolunthu drew up the reins of his horse and said rather hesitantly, "Doesn't this path take us through a jungle?"

"Yes, it is a jungle path. We may have to face some difficulties! Not only a jungle path, but also a bumpy one! Our enemies may pursue us thinking that we are proceeding to Arichampatti. In such a situation it is wise to change our route." said Ponnar.

"Then, where are we going?" asked Chinnamalaikolunthu in surprise.

Ponnar replied, "To Sankaranmalai!"

Chinnamalaikolunthu asked, "What? To Sankaranmalai?" His question was not a meaningless one.

Sankaranmalai was one of the so many hills under the control of Kundrudaiyan!

Chinnamalaikolunthu thought about the bitterness that rose between him and Kundrudaiyan over the marriage of his sister Thamarai Nachi with him. He wondered how he could go to Kundrudaiyan's Sankaranmalai when the rancour still persisted.

He was ashamed to explain that past incident to those intrepid young men.

Later, Chinnamalaikolunthu heard about the aversion that Chellatha Gounder and his son Manthiappan were earning among the people by their inhuman misdeeds and formed a terrible picture about them in his mind. At times he would even think that the sudden change that happened in the marriage pandal proved to be good as far as his sister was concerned. Yet, the shock he suffered when Thamarai Nachi ignored her home where she was born and brought up in a second and went away to begin her marital life with Nelliangodan did not leave his heart fully!

He did not have the heart to say anything in objection to Ponnar's words. Out of respect and deep love for those brave men who protected his family from dangers that struck him in quick succession, he agreed to the suggestion of Ponnar and followed him with Arichampatti warriors.

The jungle path, dense with trees, branched off northward from Rachandarmalai. The journey started at great speed with Ponnar-Sankar and Veeramalai in the front and Chinnamalaikolunthu just behind them. The chariot, closely surrounded by other warriors, followed them.

After traversing a mile or two Chinnamalaikolunthu put this question to Ponnar-Sankar: "Do you know anybody in Sankaranmalai?"

Ponnar replied, "Our mentor Rockiannan has taken us to that place once or twice. He told us that the place belonged to Nelliangodan, known as Kundrudaiyan. Kundrudaiyan used to come and stay in the palace there, now and then. Our mentor has also told us that Kundrudaiyan had given him permission to come there any time and stay as long as he wanted. So only our mentor took us there. We decided on that past experience that it would be appropriate for us to go there. If we go and stay there the enemy cannot reach us easily. The protective wall around the fort and the moat around the wall can crush the power of any enemy."

Chinnamalaikolunthu was not satisfied with Ponnar's reply and hence asked, "If we enter Sankaranmalai all on a sudden with troops, will the generals or the warriors there permit us?"

"You need not have any fear on that score! As I have already said, it is a place familiar to us. We will ask the troops to stay outside and explain the situation to the security guards. Without any hesitation they will receive us and treat us very well."

Chinnamalaikolunthu was not completely satisfied. Noting it from his facial expression, Sankar explained, "From Rachandarmalai we could have gone straight to Arichampatti. Rachandarmalai warriors, excepting those who had deserted,

would certainly go there in pursuit of us. Now, they would go some distance in the direction of Arichampatti and only then realise that we had headed towards some other place. Before they decide on some other route we would have safely reached Sankaranmalai."

Chinnamalaikolunthu appreciated the wise trick behind Sankar's plan. Still, doubts rose in his mind one after another and dashed like waves.

Manthiappan who ran away unable to tackle the attack will go and tell Chellatha Gounder about the happenings! He will run to Thalaiyur Kali with his son! Something very terrible has now happened to spur his anger! They have killed Thirumalai, one of his generals! Definitely the forces of Thalaiyur Kali will march towards Arichampatti in two or three days. Chinnamalaikolunthu thought like this and his heart fluttered. At the same time the determination to face anything in order to protect his honour took deep roots within him.

The eyes of both Muthayi and Pavalayi were feeding on Ponnar-Sankar who rode on their horses in front of their chariot. Pride was discernible in their eyes.

As a result of the accident that happened on the way their lives could have been spoiled and their family could have been ruined. But the same accident brought those warriors to them again and they saved their lives once more. Those deer fawns thought about all these as their eyes feasted on those heroes and shone bright in happiness.

Those treasures of beauty had already been impressed by those young men who with extraordinary courage and bodily strength fought against the whirlwind; overcame the python and worsted the crocodile. Now they lost themselves in the comfort they enjoyed on seeing them as victory heroes in the battle against a mighty force.

Muthayi imagined herself as making Ponnar a feast to her eyes, seating him on the royal pedestal of her heart, pressing her face on his knees, stroking his chest filled with courage by her flowery hands and enjoying herself happily. She looked stealthily at her sister Pavalayi from the corner of her eyes lest her sister might see her in that condition and bowed her head in shyness.

Pavalayi roamed about in a dreamland. She lost herself to the beauty of Sankar's moustache, sat beside him on the horse and clasped her arms around his teakwood-body tightly. She also cast a stealthy glance fearing that her sister might laugh at her and bowed her head in coyness.

Ponnar who rode in front of the chariot was angry with god. Had he given him one eye on the face and another on the nape, couldn't he at the same time have a look at the lass inside the chariot and also the path?

Ponnar imagined like this! How about Sankar? He also did not imagine in an ordinary manner! He would lift his palm and look into it! At once it must change into a mirror! The face of Pavalayi must be seen in it! And he would go on riding looking at her!

Further, the announcement made by Chinnamalaikolunthu before the troops started for Rachandarmalai was dancing on a golden swing in their hearts.

Those young lions again and again thought about the way he emphatically stated that he would marry his daughters to them if they brought victory. Those thoughts soaked their hearts in a fountain of joy.

The temple steeple appeared and they could understand that they had come very near Sankaranmalai fort.

Accompanied by Ponnar-Sankar and Veeramalai, Chinnamalaikolunthu, his wife and his daughters were going there without knowing who were inside the fort.

Though, while on the point of leaving Chellandiamman temple, Kundrudaiyan agreed to the suggestion of Mayavar that they could go to Kudaiyur palace and talk about everything in detail, he suggested an alternate plan before getting into the chariot.

"*Ayya*, Mayavar! You have brought good tidings about our long-lost sons! For that you are prepared to come to our palace. But I would like to say this. Please come to the place where we lost our children. Tell us the happy news that they are alive in the very same place where we lost our children. We will rejoice on hearing about them through you in the same place where we cried inconsolably after losing them."

"Nelliangoda! Where do you want me to come?"

"Nowhere else, but to Sankaranmalai which belongs to me."

"Why do you hesitate to take me to Kudaiyur? Do you foresee any trouble on my account?"

"No, no! Nothing of that sort. From here Sankaranmalai is nearer than Kudaiyur. I wish that you must see Sankaranmalai. You will very much appreciate the architecture of that palace, the strength of the fort and the structure of the moat. If you don't like my idea we can go to Kudaiyur itself; I don't have any objection."

Mayavar intercepted, "No, no! We will go to Sankaranmalai. When you say that the children were lost there, I also want to see that place. Let us go there."

From Chellandiamman temple Sankaranmalai via Madukkarai being nearer than Kudaiyur which was situated on the southern bank of the river Amaravathi

and Mayavar having agreed to go there, Kundrudaiyan directed Thamarai Nachiyar and Arukkani to get into the chariot by his eyes.

Thamarai had gone to Sankaranmalai with her husband five or six times and every time she went there she was very much distressed on thinking about the loss of her sons in that palace. Though a mother's heart will always be lamenting the loss of her children, will she not feel like seeing the tombs of those children whenever she visits the place where she lost them? So on a few occasions she even refused to go there when her husband asked her. But now she liked the idea of her husband very much.

Mayavar who had subtly indicated that her dear children were alive was going to give them the full details about how they were and where they were in the very same place they slipped out of her hands. Thamarai's heart was heavy with expectation and unbearable joy. Arukkani had known about the loss of two elder brothers from the tears that her mother shed without any let up. She considered Mayavar's visit to their place a big opportunity and was very enthusiastic about it. They reached Sankaranmalai the same night.

Without knowing that they were all inside the palace, Ponnar-Sankar reached that village along with Chinnamalaikolunthu, his family and Arichampatti warriors.

At the entrance of the palace, Ponnar-Sankar noticed that the presence of soldiers and bodyguards was unusually heavy and officious and exchanged glances with Veeramalai.

Veeramalai asked them to wait outside and went in to make enquiries.

As Veeramalai approached the fort gate the soldiers there recognised him at once. They bowed to him respectfully and they themselves took him inside the fort.

Outside the fort Ponnar-Sankar, the family of Chinnamalaikolunthu and his warriors waited under the shade of trees. The chariot was stopped under a neem tree, Vaiyamperuman got down and paced up and down. The soldiers lined up at a distance.

Silambayi remained in the chariot and thought with some irritation, "We are also a family of rulers. Yet, we have to wait at the gate of a ruler." When she was kept a prisoner in Rachandarmalai fort she was worried about her life! Now it was a question of prestige as to how long she should wait!

Though it was true that there was some delay, Veeramalai came out smiling which was an indication of the joy bubbling within him. Chinnamalaikolunthu asked him very eagerly, "What happened?"

From Veeramalai came the reply: "Kundrudaiyar, his wife and daughter are in the palace." On hearing that Chinnamalaikolunthu was shocked and shouted involuntarily, "Ah!"

18 Vow or Promise?

Before his surprise, wonder and hesitation could compete with one another and make Chinnamalaikolunthu unconscious, auspicious music was heard at the entrance of Sankaranmalai fort. Kundrudaiyan came there surrounded by men carrying large circular fans made of cloth and fragrant roots which were usually taken in front of the procession of idols of deities and kings. Soldiers with swords and spears kept pace with him on either side. Chinnamalaikolunthu watched Kundrudaiyan without moving. On the faces of Ponnar-Sankar, Veeramalai and the warriors bright rays of light flashed.

Chinnamalaikolunthu and others understood that Kundrudaiyan was coming with his retinue to invite them personally and so got down from their horses. Kundrudaiyan sported a short smile and came straight to Chinnamalaikolunthu.

Though both of them smiled, tears were about to trickle down!

Both were unable to speak! They hugged each other simultaneously and stood like stone statues for a moment.

"Please come, let us get in! Is there a need to speak when persons get reconciled after a quarrel? Separation of how many years?" said Kundrudaiyan mildly in an emotionally choked voice and took the hands of Chinnamalaikolunthu. He followed Kundrudaiyan with surging emotions. Kundrudaiyan did not fail to notice Ponnar-Sankar. Ponnar-Sankar could not understand why Kundrudaiyan did not at all take his eyes off them.

Both bowed to him respectfully and entered the fort along with others.

Kundrudaiyan ordered two of his soldiers, "Get food and accommodation ready for all these people from Arichampatti." Then he took all of them into the palace hall inside the fort.

Though it was not built grandly and extensively it appeared to be very strong. Since it was used only now and then for taking a rest it was not as big or impressive as his Kudaiyur palace.

As soon as Chinnamalaikolunthu entered the palace hall, an emotional incident that thrilled him through and through happened quite unexpectedly. Yes, his sister Thamarai and her daughter Arukkani fell at his feet and wept. He cried, "Thamarai!" lifted his sister up and showered his brotherly love on her.

Despite the many years that had rolled by, rancour had taken deep roots in their hearts because of the hot words they had exchanged between them. But all that crumbled in a trice when they saw each other face to face and feelings of affection only ruled the roost!

"Thamarai! This is Vaiyamperuman, my son! These are my daughters, Muthayi and Pavalayi!" Before he could complete, Thamarai said in overflowing eagerness, "I know. We met in the Chellandiamman festival!", drew them close to her and embraced both of them.

"My name is Arutkanni! My parents affectionately call me 'Arukkani Thangam'" said Arukkani without waiting to be introduced. Chinnamalaikolunthu stroked her head and kissed her on the forehead endearingly. Silambayi pulled her to her side and hugged her.

Like the eyes of Kundrudaiyan, the eyes of Thamarai also did not fail to feast on Ponnar-Sankar! Mayavar stood a little apart and silently enjoyed the scene of two families estranged for a long time getting reunited and rejoicing over it. But it must be said that more than Kundrudaiyan's and Thamarai's it was his eyes which were fixed steadily on Ponnar-Sankar and drank joyfully their appearance, beauty and majesty.

They also looked at Mayavar with surprise. They recognised him as the man who enquired the way to their mentor's barracks on the day they fought with wild pigs and wondered why he had come there!

Kundrudaiyan asked him, "Why, Mayavar *ayya*, are you keeping aloof?" and then asked Chinnamalaikolunthu, "*Maithunar*!* Do you know him?" He revealed his inability to recognise him through his sheepish look.

"He is the minister of Thalaiyur Kali. His name, Mayavar. Haven't you ever seen him? Haven't you even heard of him?"

**Maithunar* = wife's brother

Chinnamalaikolunthu now managed to say, "Is it? Is he? Do you ask me whether I have heard of him? I have seen him! Now his beard and moustache make him unrecognisable. It is quite many years since he left our southern region and ..." Before he could finish, Mayavar smiled and answered, "Wandered about in so many places and have come back to Thalaiyur."

"Please all of you take your seats. You must be tired. Let us take some light food as we talk." Kundrudaiyan began to take care of their needs.

All of them sat in that beautifully glowing hall.

Chinnamalaikolunthu noticed that Ponnar-Sankar and Veeramalai were still standing and told them kindly, "Why don't you also sit?" Again all the eyes of those present focused on Ponnar-Sankar!

The way Thamarai's eyes observed them resembled a scene of someone digging the sand with hands to ferret out a pearl earring lost and buried in seashore!

The way Kundrudaiyan's eyes observed them appeared as if he was wondering how his figure had been split into two and got reflected on the opposite mirror!

Mayavar's eyes also observed them. Those eyes emitted clear light!

Kundrudaiyan asked Vaiyamperuman and his sisters suddenly, "You were running hither and thither at Chellandiamman temple to find out the names of these young men only, for giving special pooja in their names, weren't you?" Nelliangodan was naïve by nature, wasn't he? So without any inhibition in his mind he reminded everybody of that.

Fearing that any reply would lead to embarrassment, Muthayi and Pavalayi just nodded their heads shyly as if to say 'yes'. Vaiyamperuman also for his share nodded his head.

"Oh! Did they try that much to give special pooja in our names? So in these portraits of beauty love for us had sprouted then itself!" Ponnar-Sankar thought thus and rejoiced. Like horses running uncontrollably in spite of being tied with ropes and pulled hard, their eyes were constantly turning towards Muthayi and Pavalayi!

Eyes alone know how to serve as lips and tongues of those smitten with love and converse without being noticed even in places where there are several persons! Those eyes did that work now also!

"I have also heard that these young men visit this palace now and then. Mentor Rockiannan of Marigounden Palayam used to come here any time he wishes. They accompanied him a few times."

Mayavar intercepted, "But they will never tell their names. My dear boys! Isn't it so?"

Ponnar-Sankar just nodded their heads as a reply.

"Why don't you tell your names? Didn't your parents name you at all?"

Since Mayavar persisted with this question, Ponnar said, "Our mentor has ordered us not to tell our names to anybody."

Chinnamalaikolunthu cleared his throat and was about to say something.

At that time Arukkani and four or five girls came there with snacks and tea. Arukkani saw to it that everybody was served properly. Meanwhile, Chinnamalaikolunthu shared some secret with his wife and looked at her intently for a reply. She thought over it for a while and asked her husband to clarify her doubt in a hushed voice. He replied to that too. Silambayi thought over it deeply. Then she nodded her head and expressed her approval in his ears.

After the girls who served snacks left the place, Chinnamalaikolunthu cleared his throat again and began to speak: "These young men, though they refuse to tell their names, I am now itself certain that they will firmly establish their names in this world. They are the exemplars of the adage 'you will know the plant from the way the seed germinates'. They saved my daughters from the whirlwind during the *karagam* festival. But for them they would have drowned with their boats in the Cauvery. Not only that; Chellatha Gounder's son Manthiappan waylaid them with the help of Thalaiyur general Thirumalai and locked them up in Rachandarmalai. If these lion cubs had not come my daughters's lives would have been ruined. Entire Arichampatti family would have faced extinction. I have made an announcement that if Thirumalai was worsted and my daughters were rescued, I would marry them to these youths. Now I have to fulfil that promise of mine. In the presence of the able and good Mayavar, my beloved *maithunar* and dear sister I request all of you to give your concurrence."

As soon as he finished, Mayavar asked, "You have announced a prize and you yourself have declared the winners, haven't you? Did you ask the opinion of your daughters? Or did you at least ask what these youths think about it?"

Before Chinnamalaikolunthu could answer this question, the cheeks of the two couples reddened and fresh light flashed in their eyes - Ponnar- Muthayi and Sankar- Pavalayi - and they expressed their acceptance in silent language!

"Rockiannan is our mentor. Nothing will take place without his acceptance." Veeramalai put a spoke in the wheel.

Thamarai Nachiyar put another bigger spoke.

"*Anna*! Have you forgotten the oath I took on my marriage day? -You are certainly going to see me and my *athan* living in a multistoreyed palace! I will give birth to two sons like two lion cubs. Two girls will be born to you and you will

come in search of those lion cubs! - *Anna*, I have taken this vow! You might have forgotten that, bur never will I!"

In Thamarai Nachi's speech there was fiery anger! But at the same time the old feeling of enmity was fast giving way to overflowing feelings of affection.

Chinnamalaikolunthu asked her in a gentle voice, "Why, Thamarai! I am also eager that your promise must fructify! Had it happened, the enmity that had lasted for such a long time between our families would have vanished. It is true, as you said that day, lion cubs were born to you. But, is it not also true that those lion cubs had died?"

On hearing this Thamarai became excited!

She shrieked in anger, "Who told you? My children are alive! I will see them soon, *Anna*! You must change your idea and marry your daughters to my sons only. Even if you refuse, I will somehow fulfil my vow!"

"Now the problem has taken a new shape. Should Thamarai's vow be fulfilled? Or, should Chinnamalaikolunthu's promise be fulfilled?" Mayavar said in a slightly loud voice and created a new problem.

19 The Parade of Truth

"If my sister's vow is to be fulfilled, shouldn't her sons be alive?"

Chinnamalaikolunthu put this question to Mayavar and looked at Thamarai from the corner of his eyes.

Mayavar cleared his throat and got ready to answer that question in a detailed manner. "I believe that the sons of Thamarai are alive. In that case we must all join together and strive to get her vow fulfilled."

Chinnamalaikolunthu was shocked to hear this preamble of Mayavar.

"Why so? Is it proper to ditch my promise under the assumption or belief that the children are alive? What will these young men think of my integrity?"

Mayavar understood that Chinnamalaikolunthu was too much concerned about his name.

His response was like a puzzle. "What do these young men think about it? Are you trying to find it out in this roundabout manner? Let them say whether the promise must be kept or the vow must be fulfilled."

Ponnar looked at Sankar. Sankar made it clear by his look that Ponnar had the right to decide on his behalf also. So Ponnar came forward to settle the issue!

He said, "That promise was not sought as a gift either by me or my younger brother! Of his own accord our Arichampatti elder made that announcement. We did not ask for a promise and it was not given like that. Nobody suffered in this

world as Dasarathan suffered after giving promises to Kaikeyi. We did not help them in expectation of any returns. With a clear mind I make it known on my own behalf and on behalf of my brother that we will not insist on the promise!"

Muthayi and Pavalayi were very much disappointed to hear these words from Ponnar.

The promise can be kept aside; but what about the love we cherish! Ah, how casually these young warriors have ignored them! Even if Thamarai Nachi aunt's sons come back and say, "See, we are alive!" what can be done? For that, can we change our minds? It would have been a different matter if our aunt's sons had come before we met these youths. The greatness of the love we feel for these wonderful youths has mingled with every atom of our bodies and the full expanse of our hearts faster than the energy of ingested food mingles with blood. At this stage these youths pull out saying that they are not going to insist on our father's promise; is it just in any way?

Muthayi and Pavalayi thought like this and sobbed.

Just by observing the change in their facial expression, Mayavar understood the hurricane lashing their minds. As an indication of that a short smile spread over his lips. In that smile maturity mixed with mischief cast its shadow. He rested his hand on the shoulder of Chinnamalaikolunthu and he softened as he very much respected that minister of Thalaiyur Kali. Mayavar rolled his eyes over everybody present and began to speak:

"We cannot consider the feelings of Thamarai Nachiyar as ordinary and brush them aside. It will be good if Chinnamalaikolunthu knows what I had known from Thamarai and her husband. Chinnamalaikolunthu might have got angry that day because the decision taken by Thamarai cancelled the intended wedding proposal with Chellatha Gounder's family and earned the enmity of Thalaiyur Kali. But the difficulties that Thamarai and Kundrudaiyan suffered from the day they left the marriage pandal were not few. Is it not a victory for feminine fortitude, if that exemplary girl of the Kongu Velala clan had stood by her principles, had overcome innumerable hardships and miserable events and has now risen to the supreme level of being given a warm reception with rows of horses and decorated chariots in attendance by that same brother and his family who drove her out along with her husband?"

Mayavar himself felt thrilled at his speech! His voice faltered a little. Thamarai looked up skyward to hide the tears showing up in her eyes. Mayavar did not stop:

"A queen born in a palace! Made herself a queen of sacrifice by not choosing to shift her love from Nelliangodan and marry anybody else! She threw away the comfortable life she lived in a palace that employed innumerable workers to bring

home the paddy and food grains harvested from their lands whose boundaries extended beyond one's ken. She then, along with her husband, toiled in fields and forests to the extent of her body withering like a dry leaf. Now, she is an example of the pride of the peasant community. How can I describe this great woman's grief over the loss of the babies born to her? They used to speak of 'baby born after the performance of penance'! That's only a formal meaningless term. But what is special about this Thamarai is that she really did penance and subjected herself to a lot of pain. In this world which abounds in cunning foxes, she protected her credulous husband with her skill and intellectual prowess and made him worthy of people's praise and finally chief of many hilly regions. She felt miserable that no heirs were born to their family. For that, there was no holy spa or temple they did not visit. You know what Chellatha Gounder did on knowing how they yearned for a child?"

Mayavar gave a pause before answering the question he himself had raised. All of them looked at him eagerly. Thamarai sat silently with bowed head. Kundrudaiyan very carefully listened to Mayavar as he read from the pages of his past life. He continued:

"Chellatha Gounder prepared a few astrologers to suit his needs and sent them to Thamarai and Nelliangodan. Without knowing from where they had come, these two received them well, gave them money and other things as much as they demanded and enquired whether they were lucky enough to have children. Those astrologers lied that if they made a temple chariot for the Madukkarai Chelliamman and arranged for the decoration of the Amman and a procession of her in that chariot they would be blessed with children.

Thamarai and Nelliangodan believed this and made immediate arrangements to make a temple chariot. Chellatha Gounder bribed one of the carpenters engaged by them and sowed the seeds for another trick. A conspiracy was hatched to get the chariot stuck up in its run. The temple chariot festival was going on in a grand manner. But, on the day of the procession, the chariot rolled a little distance and stopped! Then also the astrologers of Chellatha Gounder arrived there right on time. They said that somehow the Amman had been offended and that was why the chariot had stopped. They threatened that if the chariot did not complete its full round a great disaster would befall the village! As a remedy for that a woman living with her husband must be sacrificed at the chariot's wheel. If not, the whole village would face ruin, they brazenly lied. Thamarai thought that even if she were to die and her family were to face ruin, the people living under their protection should not meet with any danger and got ready to sacrifice herself. Kundrudaiyan said that there was no meaning in his living after his wife's death and he also got

ready to lay down his life. The whole village made all attempts to stop them. But they did not listen to them. They never realised that Ambal – the incarnation of love, a deity full of kind grace – would never think of destroying her children. Instead, they believed in astrology! Got entangled in the cunning web of Chellatha Gounder. In defiance of the villagers' request, they lay in front of the chariot wheels and gave orders for pulling it over them! At that time Rockiannan made his appearance there! He understood the trick of Chellatha Gounder. He said, 'Thamarai! Nelliangoda! You get up first. Without giving any sacrifice I will make this chariot roll.' And he did as he said. He unravelled the conspiracy and set it right. The wheels of the chariot began to roll!

Rockiannnan told them with a chuckle, 'Stop this habit of roaming about all the time and thinking constantly of temples, tanks, temple chariots, festivals, poojas and prayers. Instead, stay put in Kudaiyur palace or in Sankaranmalai palace. Don't throw the blame on God for anything untoward in the sexual relationship between man and woman.' First, they were skeptical. Later, they thought over it and stayed in Sankaranmalai palace. All the difficulties they came across after their marriage were at an end and Thamarai's way of life based on the tenet 'protect yourself and care for the man who has married you' advocated by Tiruvalluvar made them very rich and comfortable. They did not want to waste this sudden boom in their life. Then Sankaranmalai area was nature's cradle. Scenes of dancing peacocks, singing cuckoos and leaping deer enjoying themselves on the edges of the ever flowing waterfalls that could induce waves of pleasurable sensations in young hearts were aplenty! Today it may not be like that; but twenty years ago they certainly lost their hearts to those beautiful scenes. When they – now parents of grown up children - are sitting in front of us, it is not proper on my part to say that they began to enjoy the sweetness of conjugal life only because of Sankaranmalai's natural loveliness, or to describe it further. As a result of enjoying those pleasurable sensations Thamarai conceived. Kundrudaiyan felt extremely happy and arranged for a grand celebration.

"Sankaranmalai wore a festive look! Arichampatti was informed of this. Thamarai did not like it. But Kundrudaiyan, true to his way of not taking anything seriously, informed his father-in-law's house in the proper manner. As per the custom of the Kongu Velala clan, the girl's family must go to her home in the seventh month of her pregnancy with sweets, savouries, and varieties of cooked food, host a big feast and bring her to their home for confinement. Kundrudaiyan expected you to come but met with disappointment only!"

Mayavar now looked at Chinnamalaikolunthu intently and he bowed his head as he felt ashamed of his past actions.

"We must only appreciate it, if a person regrets the mistakes he committed in the past, though belatedly." Mayavar commented happily and continued.

"Would the news that Thamarai was in the seventh month of her confinement fail to reach Chellatha Gounder? He feared that if Kundrudaiyan got an heir, in course of time it would demand its right over Valanadu. Kundrudaiyan does not mind his land being under Gounder's control and lives contentedly with what he has. Can anybody think that his children also will be 'innocuous' like him? Chellatha Gounder concluded that Kundrudaiyan should not have any heirs. He and Manthiappan got ready two midwives for delivering the baby of Thamarai, bribed them with gold coins, gave instructions as to what should be done and sent them there. When Thamarai developed labour pains Kundrudaiyan felt utterly helpless. Just at that time the midwives arrived and he thought that God himself had taken pity on his wife! But the fact was that the midwives were deputed by Chellatha Gounder. A plan had been chalked out for them to follow.

After undergoing labour pains that would batter her like a raging storm, Thamarai would become totally exhausted and comatose. The plan was to make use of the time Thamarai would be unconscious immediately after giving birth to the baby and hide it somewhere. Kundrudaiyan would come rushing to see the baby. He should be told that no baby was born and there was only heavy bleeding from the uterus. The midwives should attribute the cause to the decomposition of the embryo inside the womb.

The midwives entered Thamarai's room with such a plan. She was screaming in unbearable pain. The palace maids tried to enter the room in their anxiety. The midwives sternly told them to go away. Kundrudaiyan was very upset and was hanging around. They told him politely, 'If you want us to deliver the baby safely, please go to your place and remain there. Otherwise, we will go. Please bear with us. We say this only to do our duty without any hindrance.' Kundrudaiyan said, 'All right! It is enough if she delivers the baby safely. I throw the burden on you and God.' He wiped his tears and left the place.

Thamarai suffered labour pain for a long time. Finally, there was the climactic pain and the baby was born! A male baby! Thamarai swooned. The older midwife asked the assistant to cover the baby in a piece of cloth and run away with it. She did the same. A few minutes after that the head nurse met with a surprise!

Thamarai went into labour again and another male baby was born. The older midwife took that baby and began running in the way her assistant had gone.

Thamarai lay in her bed completely exhausted. Wondering why there was no noise from there Kundrudaiyan peeped into the room. Thamarai opened her eyes exactly that minute, saw no baby at her side and began to cry, 'My baby! My baby!

My baby!' Kundrudaiyan could not understand anything and shouted at the palace maids angrily, 'Where is the baby? Where are those midwives?' Thamarai guessed there was something amiss and broke into a spasm of sobbing.

A figure covering itself in a black blanket and holding two babies appeared at the doorstep and announced, '*Amma*, not one baby! Two babies! Both, lion cubs!' The two midwives, bound in chains, stood near him.

Kundrudaiyan was aghast, 'What is this?'

'Conspiracy to kill the babies! The plan was to tell you that no baby was born! But I have blasted that plan! And I have arrested these conspirators!' said that dark figure in a majestic voice.

Thamarai shook off her tiredness, ran to her babies and took them in her hands.

The dark figure removed the blanket. It was Rockiannan!

Kundrudaiyan embraced Rockiannan in deep gratitude!"

When Mayavar described this scene both Thamarai and Kundrudaiyan shed copious tears. Others sighed. Mayavar continued further:

"I have told how the babies which were about to be lost were saved by Rockiannan. I will now tell you how they were lost again."

20 Amman's Prophecy

The past incidents described by Mayavar till now, particularly the restoration of the babies by Rockiannan, had all been narrated to him by Kundrudaiyan and Thamarai. To them it was only a repetition. They were now extremely eager to hear what he was going to say further.

Mayavar began with these words: "What I am going to say from now on are the facts I came to know from Rockiannan in his barracks."

"The midwives who were induced with money to kill the babies were locked up in the underground cell of Sankaranmalai fort. They did not know that they were caught because of the intervention of Rockiannan. He killed the Valanadu soldier who was entrusted with the work of carrying away the babies. He then covered himself with the soldier's blanket and stood in his place. The midwives mistook Rockiannan for that soldier and gave him the babies. While taking leave he warned Kundrudaiyan and Thamarai again, 'Be careful! These babies may face danger anytime.'

Kundrudaiyan and Thamarai were troubled by the question, 'why blame the arrow and not he who shot it?' and both of them went to the cellar and met those nurses.

Though the midwives were provided with tasty and well-cooked food, they complained that it was not enough to appease their ravenous appetite. At once Kundrudaiyan ordered the jail warders to serve them as much food as they wanted. They felt guilty for having come to kill the babies of such a kind-hearted person and hung their heads in shame. They developed a special respect for him

who followed the tenet of Tiruvalluvar: 'Doing good and making the evil-doer feel ashamed is the right way to punish him'. Both fell at the feet of Kundudaiyan and Thamarai and prayed for their pardon. They also explained the conspiracy of Chellatha Gounder. Kundrudaiyan pardoned and released them from the cell. Thamarai found that they trembled with the fear that Chellatha Gounder would harm them. She advised them to escape to some other country after providing them with sufficient gold.

There was a youth to inform Rockiannan about all these. His name was Veeramalai. That young boy was undergoing training in Rockiannan's barracks. Under the orders of Rockiannan he visited Kudaiyur and Sankaranmalai often and gathered information about those children. The boy Veeramalai racked his mind over the unusual interest of Rockiannan in those children.

Rockiannan was aware that the boy was confused about it. But he never thought of explaining the reason to him. Rockiannan's policy was that he must voluntarily help simple and innocent persons like Kundrudaiyan who considered even wishing harm to others a sin.

'Today they got expensive silk dress for the children.'

'Today two golden cradles were made and hung for the children.'

'Today the children were adorned with pearl necklaces.'

'Today the children were adorned with chains etched with diamonds.'

Like this, Veeramalai passed information to Rockiannan now and then.

When Mayavar said this Veeramalai was deeply moved. But he was determined that he would not reveal his identity and so listened to Mayavar as if he was talking about some unknown youth. Ponnar-Sankar silently appreciated it and wondered at the fortitude of Veeramalai.

All of them were impatient to know what Mayavar would say next. He continued:

"One day Rockiannan got a missive from Thalaiyur. Since it was from Thalaiyur palace a special messenger brought it. Wasn't he Thalaiyur Kali's mentor who taught him archery, fencing and such war tactics? So that missive was not sent casually but with the respect it deserved. It was an invitation to attend the *kumbabhishegam* of Thalaiyur Kali's family deity Kali in the temple newly built at a great expense. Rockiannan wrote a reply of thanks to the invitation and sent it through the same messenger. As mentioned in the missive preparations for the *kumbabhishegam* were done on a grand scale. Chembakulan, the priest of the temple and a merchant, took care of all the arrangements for the ceremony personally. For that temple Chembakulan was everything - the priest, the trustee and the

manager! The kings of Thalaiyur had entrusted all the work and responsibilities of the temple with the Chembakulan family. This Chembakulan, a progeny of that family, traded in gold and also took care of the temple administration. Since both temple construction and *kumbabhishegam* were entrusted with him he swallowed more than half the money by submitting false accounts!

In order to cover up his theft, Chembakulan, who stole from the funds meant for temple maintenance and indulged in activities against God, celebrated the festival in a manner that made everybody astounded. Rockiannan went to attend the ceremony. Thalaiyur Kali welcomed and treated his mentor with great respect. Thalaiyur Kali's patron Chellatha Gounder and his son Manthiappan had already arrived there. They were put up in two different guesthouses. There was a reason for not accommodating both father and son in the same place. Since Manthiappan and Thalaiyur Kali were young and of the same age group this arrangement was made so that they could together drink and chat. Rockiannan who was staying next to Manthiappan's guesthouse saw the carousal by his own eyes. Before Kali drank one cup Manthiappan drank nine. He wouldn't listen to the advice of Kali. Soon he fell unconscious in his bed and Kali left the place. What happened after that was obscene fun. In that hall there was a statue of a beautiful woman. To the eyes of Manthiappan it looked like a real woman. He imagined that the statue danced, twisted and fell on his shoulders! His imagination became too hot in his inebriated state and he began to fondle the statue and finally fell on the floor with the statue. Rockiannan saw all this and his aversion towards the family of Chellatha Gounder doubled."

When Mayavar referred to the beastly frenzy of Manthiappan, his wicked behaviour with herself did not fail to appear before Arukkani's mind!

She could not forget that horrible incident of being chased by him – it was too bad to be seen in any person of the Kongu region, too lowly behaviour not seen even in the mentally sick. Arukkani sighed in sorrow as she thought that among beasts there was none with human qualities; but Manthiappan was an example of human beings with beastly qualities. Her lips muttered that like the axe handle that helped cut down trees, he spoiled the name of the Kongu Velala clan.

Mayavar continued his narration of what he heard from Rockiannan.

"At dawn, Kali called on Manthiappan to take him to the ceremony. But he was fast asleep holding the statue close to his chest. Kali got angry and ordered a servant to pour a pot of water over him. He became normal. Kali took him, Chellatha Gounder and Rockiannan to the temple.

Under the supervision of Chembakulan, the ceremony was performed. After that, all of them went to the sanctum-sanctorum of the Kali temple. Chembakulan

performed the pooja and walked up to Kali to offer him the lighted lamp for him to get Amman's benediction, sacred ash and *kumkum*. But suddenly he got into a state of hysterical frenzy and started gesticulating wildly.

Chellatha Gounder held him tightly and said reverentially, 'Ha! Ambal has possessed Chembakulan! Through him, she will tell us some prophetic words! Mother, tell us! Please tell us! Say some good words for Thalaiyur Kali! '

Chembakulan who was dancing frantically, shouted at a high pitch: 'No, I can't offer good words. A danger is about to strike my child.'

Gounder asked excitedly, 'Mother, to which child? What danger? Kali Devi, please tell us. '

'I have only one child; this king of Thalaiyur! This child is in danger!'

Kali heard this and was shocked. He feared that he might have done something wrong in the ceremonies done to the deity and stood there confounded.

'Two babies have been born in the palace of Kundrudaiyan in order to destroy Thalaiyur family! If those babies grow into adulthood, the dynasty of Thalaiyur will face disaster, great disaster!'

Chembakulan's eyes shone terribly like the eyes of Kali idol. Thalaiyur Kali believed that Kali Devi herself stood in front of him and so knelt down and asked in a trembling voice, 'Mother, Kaliamma! How can I prevent this danger? Please show me the way. I will make a golden vest and adorn you!'

Chembakulan who had converted himself into Kali Devi said, 'Consult your dear friends and decide. But don't forget that anybody who does not weed out a thorny bush even as it sprouts is a fool' He then swirled and swivelled, hurled sacred ash and *kumkum* all over the place and fell down. Gounder and Manthiappan said that Ambal had left for her hilly abode and comforted him.

King Kali became very sad and left for his palace.

But Rockiannan doubted some foul play in all these. He hid himself behind a stone pillar and watched. Chellatha Gounder offered a bag to Chembakulan, patted him and said,'Chembakula! You enacted the drama well and as I wanted. Take the hundred sovereigns I promised.'

King Kali, Chellatha Gounder, Rockiannan and Manthiappan assembled for a meeting in the counsel hall the same evening.

Rockiannan said, 'How can those children cause any harm to you? You need not at all worry. ' But Gounder immediately objected.

'Can we take them casually because they are children? Was not Krishnan born to kill Kamsan? Had Kamsan identified Krishnan in his infancy itself and killed him, he need not have paid with his life!'

This was Chellatha Gounder's contention. Finally, Thalaiyur Kali accepted it as the right one.

He then put this question: 'All right; who will kill those babies?' At once Rockiannan gave his reply:

'Thalaiyur king! If those children are a danger to your life, I will kill them for you, you who are my student.'

When Kali saw that his mentor himself came forward to protect him he fell at his feet and thanked him.

But the suggestion given by Chellatha Gounder shocked Rockiannan.

'The children must be brought and entrusted with Thalaiyur king. And the king himself must undertake the task of sacrificing the children in front of Kali Devi.'

Thalaiyur Kali nodded his head and signalled his approval. Rockiannan felt as if a thousand hammers hit his head."

Mayavar said this and wiped the tears from his eyes. Others became dumbfounded.

21 Veeramalai about Veeramalai

After the silence of a few seconds, a voice rose in that hall.

"I think our mentor Rockiannan had told you everything. So, will you please allow me to tell you what he did after returning to Marigounden Palayam and how he carried out the promise he made to Thalaiyur Kali?"

It was Veeramalai who asked like that. All turned towards him. Mayavar, his eyes wet with tears, said to him kindly, "Yes. It is my intention to tell you all everything I knew from Rockiannan. If you had direct contact with those incidents you could narrate them. In fact, I like it."

Veeramalai who was standing behind Ponnar-Sankar took a few steps forward, rubbed his forehead with his palm, brought back to his mind the past incidents and began to speak.

"From Thalaiyur to Marigounden Palayam, the horse did not at all run. It trudged taking one step after another and stopped at the barracks entrance. The boy Veeramalai was surprised to see his mentor so tired and so sad. He had never seen his mentor so weary. That brave and tall figure which used to walk with uplifted chest like a rutting elephant appeared like a tree battered and stripped of its foliage in a whirlwind. Veeramalai took the horse to the stable and stood

wondering why his mentor was so sad. Rockiannan entered the barracks and threw his body - yes, he did not sit - in the rattan chair. The noise of the sighs he let out again and again spread through the barracks. Veeramalai went near him silently and asked, "*Ayya*, may I bring milk mixed with honey for you to drink?" He shook his head as if to say 'no' and got up. He kept pacing up and down as if he were measuring the barracks with his footsteps. His voice sounded clearly 'Veeramalai' and the boy rushed to him.

Rockiannan stroked Veeramalai's shoulders. Again he uttered the name 'Veeramalai' sadly and clearly.

He asked, "Hasn't Alagunachi come?" and came out of the barracks and stood under a guava tree, resting his hand on a branch.

Alagunachi was the wife of Rockiannan. He loved his wife as much as he loved bravery. His home was very near the barracks. Alagunachi would walk up to the barracks, every evening. Then both would take a stroll in the garden, converse, laugh and thus spend their time happily. Alagunachi would return home before it became too dark. Rockiannan would remain in the barracks till dinner time and go home.

Veeramalai answered politely, "*Amma* was here waiting for you. Since it was getting late, just now she left for home. She asked me to rush home and tell her as soon as you arrived. May I go now?"

"You need not go. I am going now itself." He then drew water from the well in a heavy bucket using the roller pulley and washed his face, hands and legs. Veeramalai observed every action of his mentor.

'Veeramalai! You must do some work for me."

"What is it, *ayya*!"

Veeramalai said with his usual politeness. He could see a pale cloud of sorrow spread on his face and thicken darkly. He cleared his throat and sat on a black stone. He then drew Veeramalai close to him and stroked his hair.

"Not anything new. Go to Sankaranmalai and find out how Kundrudaiyan, Thamarai and the twins are faring and come back before tomorrow night. Don't tell anybody that I sent you. Gather information in such a way that nobody suspects you and come back."

Veeramalai agreed confidently. His mentor urged him to start immediately and he left for home saying that he was too tired after the journey.

Veeramalai left immediately for Sankaranmalai fort, but was very confused. His mentor had taken him to Sankaranmalai a few times. Since his father Cholan Thotti had served Thamarai's father in Arichampatti, Thamarai was kindly disposed

towards his son Veeramalai. So it was an easy task for him to go there and gather information.

Why should Rockiannan feel so much agitated over sending him there? Why should he, a man who used to face anything boldly, be so upset now? Unable to find any answer to these troublesome questions, he started walking towards Sankaranmalai.

He arrived there before dawn and was surprised to see a large number of persons decorating the facade of the fort with colourful festoons. He found out that they were going to celebrate the name-giving ceremony of the twins the next day night. Veeramalai did not want to remain there any more. He made a pretense of entering the fort and returned at once to Marigounden Palayam and informed Rockiannan about the ceremony just an hour after dusk.

He said that he had also received an invitation to attend the ceremony and asked him to make preparations for the travel.

At that time the hoof sounds of a horse arriving there fast were heard. A messenger had brought a sealed missive from Thalaiyur. Rockiannan read it and was lost in thought for a while. He then told him, "You can go. Tell him that I will carry out the task entrusted to me. Also tell him that I will come and meet him personally!"

The messenger took the oral reply of Rockiannan, mounted the horse and it sped off.

"Veeramalai! Though you are young, I trust you and you know that. You must bear witness to a matter that is going to happen soon. A reliable witness! Read this missive from Thalaiyur and keep it safely. As Alagunachi has sent for me I am going home. Let everything be kept ready for my journey tomorrow morning."

After he left, Veeramalai read that missive in the light of a small lamp made of fired clay.

> 'What mentor is to know is that there is going to be a ceremony for giving names to the children of Kundrudaiyan! That grand celebration must be made use of for our purpose and the children must be abducted. If you are not able to, I have a plan to commission Thalaiyur soldiers - Thalaiyur King Kali.'

Those words flashed like lightning and seared his eyes! Following that there was another unbearable turmoil in his heart!

It was the reply that his mentor gave to the Thalaiyur soldier! 'Tell the king that I myself will carry out the task entrusted to me.' Is he to assume that his mentor is going to carry off those children and hand over them to Kali! Veeramalai could not make out anything. And why should the mentor entrust this missive with him and

make him know of this terrible conspiracy? Is he planning to enlist my help for this job?"

Is he going to abduct those children whom he himself saved from the midwives? He could not come to any conclusion. Most of the students had gone home for the Pongal festival and he was alone. Even if others were there, was this a matter he could discuss with them? He rolled in bed unable to sleep.

He comforted himself: "Mentor is pure at heart. Whatever he does will be all to the good." He then made all preparations for the mentor's journey.

Rockiannan came and asked Veeramalai also to come with him. He hesitated a little, but soon both of them started. On the way, Rockiannan told him the job he should perform in Sankaranmalai. He also explained to him the reason for his action and Veeramalai was relieved of confusion.

That night Sankaranmalai fort was decorated with lamps as for the *Karthigai* festival. Many small landlords who were under the control of Kundrudaiyan were there. Rockiannan offered his blessings to the babies. Before leaving the fort he put a word into the ears of Veeramalai.

After the festivities were over all were tired and went to bed. Veeramalai sat near the cradles and watched the children with care and kindness. Thamarai gave him sweets to eat. Kundrudaiyan came there and enjoyed the beauty of his children sleeping in the cradle. They asked Veeramalai to take care of the babies and left to take food.

Veeramalai, who was waiting for this opportunity, got up silently, covered the babies in a piece of cloth and ran towards the wall. The babies were very safely delivered to Rockiannan who was standing on the other side of the wall. Veeramalai then assuaged himself with a deep sigh, got back, lay down beside the cradles and pretended to be asleep.

The palace maids who came there to take care of the babies noted that they were missing. They screamed and shrieked, "*Ayyo*! The babies are missing!" Thamarai and Kundrudaiyan were horrified at the scream and rushed to the cradles. They woke up Veeramalai. He rubbed his eyes and pretended as if he was shocked. Thamarai shouted, "Oh, you wretch!" and fell down unconscious. Kundrudaiyan muttered, "Chellandiamma! Why do you put us on this kind of trial?" The palace soldiers caught hold of Veeramalai, beat him severely and asked him to come out with the truth. He said he knew nothing and the soldiers were about to take him to the jail. Thamarai regained consciousness and told the soldiers "Don't do anything to him. He is a good boy; pity, he slept. What will he do for the atrocity committed by some reprobates?" He was released.

Kundrudaiyan and Thamarai could very well understand that Veeramalai was describing events connected with Veeramalai. Still, they were taken aback when they knew that it was he who handed over the children to Rockiannan. Why Rockiannan carried away the children remained an irresolvable puzzle to them.

The children were abducted - the man who did it was Rockiannan - those children grew up and we are here now as Ponnar-Sankar - that too, as the students of mentor Rockiannan - and in front of the mother and father who gave birth to us - if so, were we not handed over to Thalaiyur Kali when we were babies?

Ponnar-Sankar looked at each other with this inexplicable doubt. Their eyes turned into question marks! The hearts of Thamarai and Kundrudaiyan turned into exclamatory marks!

"Only now a history of sacrifice begins," Veeramalai continued his narration.

22 The Highest Point of Sacrifice

As Thamarai took pity on him Veeramalai was released. He at once leaped over his horse and reached Marigounden Palayam so quickly that he himself was surprised at the short duration. He was certain that Rockiannan would be in the barracks with the babies. He entered the fort looking around for Thalaiyur soldiers. As no one was found he doubted whether they might have taken the babies from Rockiannan and gone. The light of faith that his mentor would not have done like that flashed at once and drove away that darkness of suspicion.

He alighted from the horse and went into the barracks. The mentor was not there. He perspired profusely. Could he have gone to Thalaiyur straight from Sankaranmalai? He shuddered at that thought. In his gait there was a slackness very alien to his youthfulness! He took his horse to the stable. There he found his mentor's horse and let out a sigh of relief.

Since the horse was in the stable, Veeramalai was sure that his mentor must be at home and rushed there.

The house was locked from the inside. Only one door on the balcony above the front pial of the house was kept ajar, like the eyelids of some persons while asleep. Veeramalai felt that it was not wrong to eavesdrop in that extraordinary situation.

He got over the pial silently and peeped through the narrow gap of the balcony door.

Alagu Nachiyar and Rockiannan were sitting on a cot. Two babies on the lap of Alagu Nachiyar! Two babies on the lap of Rockiannan! Veeramalai could hear what they spoke.

'Alagunachi! When I knew that twins were born to us I was shocked. Only slowly it blossomed into joy. For me that joy is now multiplying. But I don't know how you feel.'

'Your joy is my joy. Yet, I am mentally perturbed by what you are doing. Who are these babies? From where have you brought them? And what for?'

'Won't I tell you? I'm going to tell. I ought to tell.'

'Right from your arrival you are beating about the bush. You haven't said anything. And that makes me afraid.'

'I will tell you, Alagu! They are the babies of Kundrudaiyan, whose christening ceremony I attended.'

'What do you say? Did you get their permission and bring them? Or ... or...?'

'You want to ask me whether I stole them, don't you? You need not take the trouble to ask me. I'll tell you. I stole them.'

'Did you steal? Why? Tell me at once; don't torture me any more.'

'Had I not stolen them, – as per the conspiracy of Chellatha Gounder – some way or other these babies would be handed over to Thalaiyur Kali. Chellatha Gounder is bent upon putting an end to the lives of these little buds now itself.'

'Why? Why this treacherous thought? Has he not robbed Kundrudaiyan of his Valanadu and been ruling it? Is it not enough? Why should he kill his babies?'

'The reign of Valanadu got by treachery must be under his care till he is alive and after that under his heirs. None must appear in Kundrudaiyan's family and redeem the reign of Valanadu. That is the reason why this good idea had occurred to him. But he has doubts whether he could do it. That's why he has successfully planned to get it done through Thalaiyur Kali by threats and lies. Fortunately, I was in Thalaiyur at that time and requested Kali to entrust me with the work of bringing the babies to him. Now these babies are safe in my hands.'

'Won't Thalaiyur king ask for the babies from you?'

'He will definitely ask. I must go and hand over the babies to him before he asks.'

'If you do that what will be the fate of these babies?'

'They may be killed as per the advice of Chellatha Gounder.'

'What do you say? Are you a party to the killing of these babies who look like golden idols?'

'I don't want to do that. Alagunachi! They are not just the children of Kundrudaiyan. When I think of them also as the grand children of Kolatha Gounder, I'm afraid, my heart will split! In noble qualities he was a rock and ruled this area admirably. He was fortunate in having Pavalathal, a beacon of the clan, as his wife. She was considered as a mother by all. Kolatha Gounder became famous by building many temples and performing *kumbabishegam*. Besides that, he had the reputation of assigning land rights to all the people belonging to the clan. All the good people praised him and respected him by giving him sobriquets like 'Vangalan' and 'Pattappan'. Earlier, the Chera, Chola and Pandiya kings ruled over extensive areas in all directions. But when the regions under their control got reduced, border disputes rose and a war broke out. Kolatha Gounder made a request to all the three kings to stop the war, brought them to Madukkarai Chellandiamman temple for talks, appealed to them for peace and settled the disputes among them amicably. The Chola king was very happy about the settlement and presented to him a large area near Thirukambuliyur as a gift. Kolatha Gounder maintained good friendship with the Chola king, was respected by Cheran and Pandiyan. He possessed the rights to rule over a very large area. Even so, he was a person of nobility who toiled along with ordinary people as any other citizen. Why so much; this large house in which we are now sitting and conversing, the fields, gardens and plantations around it, our barracks and the grove were all given as gifts to our family by Kolatha Gounder! How can my heart agree to hand over the children of the innocent Kundrudaiyan who hails from such a generous and high-minded family to a slaughter house? No; I can never do that!'

'Are you going to refuse to give these babies to Thalaiyur king?'

'If I don't hand over, how can I answer him? Haven't I taken that responsibility on myself?"

'You can tell him that you abducted the babies and you yourself killed them.'

'Simply because they could not believe my words on that score, they told me firmly even then that I should take the babies to Thalaiyur.'

'You need not have willingly borne this unjust burden.'

'Had I not agreed to do this, the men of Thalaiyur Kali would somehow kill these babies.'

'Have you decided that they must not kill, and that you yourself will do it?'

'If I had decided like that, why should I be talking to you all this time?'

'What do you say? How is it possible – the babies must be handed over to Thalaiyur Kali, and they must not be killed also? Have you forgotten that you are

not giving the babies to Thalaiyur Kali; but are putting them on the tip of a murderous sword?'

'The babies must be handed over to Thalaiyur king. But not Ponnar-Sankar, the treasures of Kundrudaiyan!'

Veeramalai who was watching all these from the balcony noted a shiver in the voice of his mentor when he said this. His curiosity crossed the limits. Alagu Nachiyar pressed her hand on the shoulder of her husband and asked, 'Then which treasure are you going to hand over?'

'Alagunachi! Prepare your heart to bear what I am going to say; because I am now going to say something no mother will be able to bear.'

As the mentor said this, tears trickled down from his eyes. Alagu Nachiyar was terribly shocked, pressed her babies close to her chest and asked, 'What strange thing are you going to say?' The mentor was stunned and could not say anything. Then he took the babies in his hands and walked up and down near the bed with bowed head. After some time he laid the babies in bed. Next, he moved close to Alagu Nachiyar and asked for the babies with both his hands.

The mother who conceived and nurtured the babies in her womb wept pressing the babies against the breasts with which she gave them suck. Veeramalai's blood almost stopped coursing through the veins.

The husband stretched both his hands and said, 'Hm! Give!' The wife shook her head as if to say, 'Don't do that! Don't do that!'

'Alagunachi! This is not for me. You and I ought to do this sacrifice for the future good of the people of our great clan. As a token of gratitude to all the benefits that our country and people got because of Kolatha Gounder we ought to protect his grandchildren. That day we were surprised why twins were born to us! But today? How good it has now turned out to be! Our twins can be passed on to Thalaiyur Kali as Kundrudaiyan's, can't they? Can't we now protect both the flowers of Kolatha Gounder dynasty?'

'Alas! Only now do I realise the sorrow in the birth of the twins. If it had been a single baby this idea would not have occurred to you at all!'

Alagu Nachiyar began to weep uncontrollably. The mentor, as he pacified her took the babies into his hands.

'Alagunachi, you mustn't weep. The agony of this father is in no way less than the mother's. For the sake of our great clan's future welfare – for the sake of securing sky-high reputation for our clan's bravery and heroic qualities - both of us ought to make this sacrifice.'

'*Ayyo*! How can a mother willingly lose her own children? You yourself tell me!'

'Of course, certainly not! But there is no other way. Alagunachi! Sacrifice is not losing what you can afford to lose. Some may not be ready to lose anything even to gratify their own selfishness! You will get a chance like this - losing one's own children for one's native country, a wealth which should not be lost on any account - extremely rarely. We must not allow that chance to slip through our fingers and become selfish! Please listen to me! These darlings - Ponnar-Sankar now lying in bed - are our wealth hereafter! Our duty is to bring them up and give them back to Thamarai Nachi and Kundrudaiyan at the appropriate time. Till then nobody should know that they are Ponnar-Sankar! Come on, kiss these babies for the last time and bid farewell to them! Let us forget that we begot these twins! Don't lose heart! Don't cry! If you are the wife of a hero, if you are an unselfish mother and if the welfare and future of our clan is our goal, give me leave to go!'

The stunned Alagu Nachiyar took the babies from her husband and showered kisses on them - a hundred, two hundred times, no, thousands of times and even a lakh. Then fell on the cot, buried her eyes in the feet of Kundrudaiyan's babies and went on sobbing.

Holding the babies, the mentor turned to the gate and said, 'Veeramalai! I know you have been watching everything. I kept the balcony gate open just for that. You are the witness to all that took place here. What I told Alagunachi will fit you also completely. You are also loyal to the family of Kundrudaiyan as I am. I am going to Thalaiyur with these babies. Till then take care of Alagunachi.' He then went away.

Veeramalai finished saying all this with passionate emotion and his eyes were like waterfalls.

23 "We will Abide by the Orders of Our Mentor"

The ears of Thamarai sharpened themselves to listen to the words coming out of Veeramalai's mouth. Her heart had already begun to palpitate. Though she had deduced that her sons were alive from the words of Veeramalai, is it not natural for a mother's heart to beat like lashing waves to know where they are and how they are? Despite her attempts to shore up her heart and wait patiently some more time to know everything, she screamed at Veeramalai, "Are the darlings I begot alive?" Kundrudaiyan comforted her in a very emotional voice, "Thamarai, you mustn't get excited. We have been listening to good news only; and are definitely going to hear more. Before that don't get excited; it will spoil your health. Amidst all this good news, wasn't a tragedy also heard? And that, is it a common one? How are we going to express our gratitude to Rockiannan who took his children in the place of our children to Thalaiyur? Can there be a sacrifice comparable to that?"

Ponnar-Sankar sighed thinking about the situation - in front of their parents, aunt Silambayi, uncle Chinnamalaikolunthu and brother-in-law Vaiyamperuman

– a situation in which they could not reveal their identity. Arukkani Thangam sighed happily when she knew that both her brothers were alive.

But the sighs of Muthayi and Pavalayi were sighs of distress. They were both jubilantly thinking that the brave young lions whom they had placed as idols in the temples of their hearts and been worshipping with flowers of love would marry them and keep them happy for ever. The news that Ponnar-Sankar were alive singed them like fire. Those lovely cuckoos cowered as they could apprehend that their aunt Thamarai Nachi would adamantly insist on marrying them to her sons Ponnar-Sankar in order to fulfil her vow and to renew and strengthen her bond with her mother's family. Had they known that the handsome bulls standing in front of them were Ponnar-Sankar, they would have rushed to them forgetting fear and bashfulness, caught hold of their legs and shed tears of joy!

Alagunachi, in her frustration and aversion, what might she have done to the babies? Would she have brought them up? Or would she have given them to somebody? What, if Thalaiyur Kali later came to know that Rockiannan had cheated him, found out the real Ponnar-Sankar and killed them?

Such undesirable questions even in the minds of feminine hearts softer than flower petals! Later, those hearts cursed themselves! They reprimanded, "Chi! Should Kundrudaiyan and Thamarai lose their sons so that we can marry our lovers? How selfish a thought it is!"

Mayavar knew what Veeramalai was going to say next. Ponnar-Sankar knew to some extent. But the others did not know anything, did they? So they were very keen to pick up every word of Veeramalai and he continued.

"Rockiannan left the place with the children. Veeramalai mulled over the words of his mentor: 'you alone are the witness to everything.' Veeramalai understood that the mentor would need a witness for his action of leaving the babies Ponnar-Sankar with Alagunachi and for carrying away his own twins. He had nominated him as the witness to testify at the time the truth would be revealed.

Veeramalai got down from the balcony and stepped into the house through the main gate. Alagunachi was till then lying on the cot with her head on the feet of the babies. Both the babies were crying at a high pitch. The question as well as the answer echoed in the heart of Veeramalai. How could a mother, lying unconscious after losing both the rubies she gave birth to, hear the cries of those babies? He went near the cot. The face of Alagunachi was pressing on the feet of the babies. Tears flowing from her eyes had wetted those tender feet.

Veeramalai called, "*Amma*!" in a mild voice. There was no answer. He raised his voice a little more and called. Again, no answer. He shouted in trepidation, "*Amma*! *Amma*!" No response at all. He got terribly frightened. He caught hold of

her feet and asked in a trembling voice, "*Amma*! What ails you?" The hands that held her answered him. Alagu Nachiyar's body had become chill. He shouted, "*Ayyo, amma*!" and checked whether she was breathing. It had stopped long back. He felt the pulse. That also had totally gone down. The babies were crying as if for Alagu Nachiar. Veeramalai ran out and informed the neighbours. Everybody asked, "How did she die?" He did not answer that question. The whole village assembled at the mentor's door. Old women wailed, "What a pity! She died after giving birth to two babies like golden idols!"

The next morning Rockiannan returned from Thalaiyur. He found his wife a corpse and sat near her for a very long time. His face indicated the storm brewing up in his mind just as the sea is frighteningly silent and overcast with clouds before a storm. He called Veeramalai and asked for the babies. He showed the cradles rocking in the next room and said they were safe. Rockiannan got up slowly, had a look at the babies and sighed deeply. He came out and made arrangements for the internment of Alagu Nachiyar. The village elders asked him to inform all the landlords, officials and dignitaries. He replied firmly, 'That's not necessary. Alagu Nachiyar's internment will be simple.' Everything was over. Four or five days passed after the lamp that was burning bright and lighting the home of the mentor had gone out.

One day, Veeramalai boldly went near his mentor. He was then fondling Ponnar-Sankar on his lap. He wiped the tears from his eyes and said kindly, 'What is it you want?' Veeramalai struggled for words. But he had come determined and so asked, 'What did you do with the babies?'

The mentor looked at him up and down. Chuckled mildly and said pointing to Ponnar-Sankar,'See, these are my children'

'You have cited me as witness; don't forget it. These are Kundrudaiyan's babies. I ask you what you did with the babies you begot,' Veeramalai put this question rather audaciously.

'I gave those babies to Thalaiyur Kali. He received them believing that they were Ponnar-Sankar.'

In his tone there was determination and also a proud sense of sacrifice.

'Thalaiyur king, what would he have done to the babies?'

'Chellatha Gounder, Manthiappan and others were all there. As per their advice he would have killed them!'

When the mentor said this, his head straightened up, his chest puffed up. He then got up and called to Veeramalai loudly. He beckoned to him to come closer. He listened to his mentor with awe and a heart filled with sorrow.

'Veeramalai! This truth known only to you and me should never be revealed to anybody. A time will come. Then it will be necessary to let out the truth. Till then you and I are the protectors of these babies. You have heard all the explanations I gave Alagu Nachiyar. You know why I am bringing up these babies and how I am bound by duty. My Alagunachi was a queen of sacrifice and handed over to me the treasures she gave birth to. But, as a mother, she could not bear it. A mother would not agree to abandon her child even if it had hollow eyes, sunken stomach, protruding chest bones, sores full of flies and ants and too ugly to be touched with hands. That motherly feeling only had separated Alagunachi permanently from me. As a recompense for that event which is occupying my mind as a perennial sorrow I must bring up these babies and make men out of them. For that you must help me.'

Veeramalai took the mentor's request as a command. Ponnar-Sankar grew up in the mentor's house and barracks and now are like tiger cubs."

The moment Veeramalai concluded, Thamarai shouted, "Where are my children now?" She was not ashamed of shouting like that in the presence of so many persons.

Mayavar got up from his chair with a smile and said, "I came in search of you just to tell you that."

"How long will you test my patience? Tell me at once, where are my golden sons?" Thamarai cried.

"I'll tell you now itself. Here they are; the rising suns! The matchless warriors! They are Ponnar-Sankar!"

Mayavar stood up and hugged Ponnar in one arm and Sankar in another. Thamarai and Kundrudaiyan competed with each other in embracing Ponnar-Sankar. They forgot themselves in the coolness of the affectionate feelings that flowed unobstructed from the springs of their parents' hearts. They fell at their feet and did obeisance. With fresh flowers they did pooja at their feet. For any moving event, 'the heart of a mother, seeing her child separated from her at its birth after the passage of many years' can be cited as a comparison. When such an event actually takes place, can it be described the same way? Silambayi and Chinnamalaikolunthu had to struggle hard to extricate Ponnar-Sankar getting drenched in the flood of their parents' love and bless them with kisses on their foreheads.

"*Anna*! What do you say now? To fulfil your promise you need my favour. You said you would marry your daughters to them if they rescued them; can you do it now without my consent?" Thamarai asked his brother in thrilled joy and pride.

Seeing the unbounded happiness of his sister, Chinnamalaikolunthu kept quiet. The eyes of Muthayi and Pavalayi which were already red, reddened even more. They moved away from that place and hid themselves behind a curtain. Despite being ordered, their eyes took wings and settled on Ponnar-Sankar.

Chinnamalaikolunthu said, "Let my sister's vow get completed first. I ask of my sister. I ask you to marry your son Ponnar to my daughter Muthayi and your son Sankar to my daughter Pavalayi. Is it enough? Or should I cringe a little more?"

Silambayi laughed and said, "Whether you ask or not and whether your sister gives her consent or not, this marriage will definitely take place. None can prevent it."

Chinnamalaikolunthu softened and said in a tender voice, "I give my two daughters to your sons. You must give your daughter Arukkani Thangam to my son Vaiyamperuman."

The innocuous Kundrudaiyan joked, "What is this? Brother and sister are finalising the marriage proposals forgetting that I am here." When they started talking about her marriage, Arukkani turned her face the other side in bashfulness and ran inside crossing the curtain behind which Muthayi and Pavalayi were standing.

"These matters are not to be decided by any of us. The only person who can decide these is our mentor Rockiannan."

Ponnar said like this and the whole place was engulfed in silence. Mayavar's words broke that silence.

"I who had been travelling around for many years in many lands returned to Thalaiyur and met Rockiannan to know about Kundrudaiyan's family. On the way itself I saw Ponnar-Sankar. At that time I did not know that they were Ponnar-Sankar. Rockiannan told me all the details. He requested me to tell Kundrudaiyan the facts about them. Rockiannan was the person who gave me and Veeramalai the permission to reveal those secrets which were guarded very carefully by them for so many years. My aim is not only to tell Kundrudaiyan about Ponnar-Sankar but also to take them to the Chola king. If Kundrudaiyan permits me to fulfil my wish and if Ponnar-Sankar are also desirous of that I will feel happy."

The words of Mayavar tasted sweet like honey drops to all of them. But Ponnar-Sankar intervened and stated emphatically, "Everything must go according to the wishes of our mentor."

24 The Mentor's Vow

"I don't have any difference of opinion with regard to knowing the wishes of the mentor and getting his permission. I appreciate this good quality of Ponnar-Sankar who have so much respect for their mentor and also feel so grateful to him. Today a lot of people habitually give troubles to those who helped them, betray those who stood by them, stab on the back of those who brought them up and made men out of them. With such people around, I feel very much comforted to see two true hearts grateful to their benefactor. All of us must certainly respect this noble feeling of Ponnar-Sankar," said Mayavar, overwhelmed with emotion.

Chinnamalaikolunthu suggested, "In that case, Kundrudaiyan can now itself send a missive to Marigounden Palayam and ask Rockiannan to come over here."

Ponnar-Sankar did not accept that suggestion. They said, "In what way will it be proper for us - we who were brought up by him - to remain here and call him to see us? Our excitement and anxiety will not cease until we go to the place of that great lamp of sacrifice, our mentor, who is also our mother and father. We will hold him by his legs, shed tears of joy and tell him all the happenings. So, please give us leave."

Kundrudaiyan said, "What our sons say is right. Let them go and pay their respects to their god who gave them life. Thamarai Nachi and I also will go with them. We are also very eager to see Rockiannan who made the most supreme sacrifice in order to protect the lives of our dear sons."

Veeramalai intercepted, "We don't have any objection to your coming with us. But do not forget one important point. By now the king of Thalaiyur would have known about the Rachandarmalai battle and the death of his general Thirumalai. Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan will be doing everything to incite Thalaiyur Kali and he might be planning to attack Arichampatti. In such a situation it does not appear proper to send the Arichampatti family to their palace or leave them alone here and take Thamarai Nachiyar and Kundrudaiyan with us." Nobody came forward to oppose this view.

Mayavar turned to Kundrudaiyan and said, "I will take Ponnar-Sankar to Rockiannan. Besides getting his approval for the marriage I will also discuss with him my plan to take them to the Chola king. I think that Rockiannan himself would like to come here and see you all. For the sake of giving him the respect due to him, Ponnar-Sankar and I will start today itself. It is better for Veeramalai to remain here for your support. If Veeramalai likes it and Kundrudaiyan approves of it, a defence section of Sankaranmalai fort can be put under the control of Veeramalai. My assessment is that in strength, skill and intelligence he is suitable for that." Kundrudaiyan said he was agreeable to that. But Veeramalai in his eagerness to go and meet his master showed some hesitancy.

Mayavar said, "I will talk to Rockiannan on your behalf. It is very important that you remain in Sankaranmalai," and got ready to go. Ponnar-Sankar, under the pretext of taking leave of Veeramalai, directed their eyes towards Muthayi and Pavalayi. Though their full-moon faces were not fully visible, the curtain moved slightly and told them the secret that they were there. Their eyes asked, "Are you leaving us to yearn for you agonisingly?" The eyes of Ponnar-Sankar replied that they were leaving without the intention to leave. Father and mother kissed them and bade them goodbye. Chinnamalaikolunthu, Silambayi and Vaiyamperuman stood there smiling. Arukkani Thangam came running from the screen, took their hands and showered her love, "*Anna*! *Anna*! Come back soon!"

The horses of Mayavar and Ponnar-Sankar left Sankaranmalai.

Rockiannan who was taking a stroll beside the grove in his barracks heard the sound of the horse hoofs and turned. The moment they saw him, Ponnar-Sankar alighted from their horses as a mark of respect to their mentor. Mayavar rode on his horse till he came close to him and got down slowly.

Mayavar, without allowing Rockiannan to speak, narrated the exploits of Ponnar-Sankar. The mentor felt extremely joyful.

The devotion of Ponnar-Sankar crossed all bounds when they saw the face of their mentor who up to that time not only desisted from telling who their parents

were but also brought them up as his own children. The mentor was very proud that as desired by him they had established their names as incomparable warriors. Mayavar sat on a stone seat. The mentor directed Ponnar-Sankar by his eyes and they both ran in different directions and brought fruits and milk for Mayavar. He ascertained that honey was added to milk. Mayavar remarked, "I think one of the reasons for your health and strength at this age is your habit of drinking milk with honey." "Can there be any doubt about it? I took to this habit when I was young. Cows eat the herbs that are difficult for us to collect, absorb the nutrients and give us milk. Likewise, bees collect honey with rare medicinal properties from various flowers and build their hives. Elders believe that milk and honey, though not luxurious and glamorous food, are very useful for fortifying the body and clarifying the mind." Rockiannan's reply was very gratifying to Mayavar.

"I am going to tell you something sweeter than honey and milk," began Mayavar. Rockiannan listened eagerly. Mayavar peeled a fruit, ate one slice and gave one to him. As soon as he chewed it, Rockiannan grimaced. Everybody noted it.

Mayavar said jokingly, "What? Is the fruit sour? It was given by you only!" Rockiannan replied good-humouredly, "But you took the sweet one and gave me the sour one!"

Mayavar said, "What does it matter whether the fruit is sweet or sour? We must see whether your reply to the news I am going to convey is sweet or sour."

Rockiannan looked at Mayavar with keenness. "I wish to take Ponnar-Sankar with me and introduce them to the Chola king. For that, they insist, your concurrence is absolutely necessary." Before Mayavar could finish saying this, Rockiannan said, "I am very happy about it! Only if Ponnar-Sankar became worthy of the Chola king's affection could they protect the clan's pride and the traditional greatness of the Kongu people and guarantee their future welfare. It is absolutely necessary for them to secure the unqualified support of the king for the great achievements they have planned for the future and to bury deep the atrocities and the clownish misdeeds that Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan commit in the Kongu region by making Thalaiyur Kali dance to their tunes. You can take them to the king today itself and I am ready to do whatever is necessary," said Rockiannan spiritedly.

"It need not be done today itself! I have a few tasks to be carried out in Thalaiyur. When I am taking them is not important! I have got the mentor's permission, and that is enough!"

Rockiannan handed the cup of milk to him and said, "Drink it before it cools off."

"Let the milk wait. Now I am gong to talk to you about the most interesting section of *Tirukkural*, 'Inbathupal!'"

"If you wish to quote the verses and speak, I will bring my palm-leaf manuscript now itself," the mentor continued the joke.

"Not necessary! I am not going to give a lecture on 'Inbathupal'. It is a matter to be discussed and settled among us," so saying he turned to Ponnar-Sankar.

As Mayavar alluded to 'Inbathupal' Rockiannan thought that he was going to say something raunchy and so ordered Ponnar-Sankar by his eyes to go away. They hesitated for a second and started to leave. Mayavar noticed it and said, "No, no. the matter concerns them. Let them be here."

The face of the mentor changed in lightning speed and regained its previous condition. He asked Ponnar-Sankar to remain there and listened to Mayavar keenly.

"As per the vow made by Thamarai Nachiyar on the day of her marriage, Ponnar-Sankar must marry the daughters of Chinnamalaikolunthu. The marriages must also take place as per the promise given by Chinnamalaikolunthu that he would marry his daughters to them if they rescued them from Rachandarmalai fort. Your acceptance is requested for the marriage celebration."

As soon as Mayavar said this Rockiannan got up abruptly. Looked at the sky. With his strong hands stroked his neck.

The mentor spoke in a loud voice: "Ponnar-Sankar ought to marry the daughters of Chinnamalaikolunthu as per the vow made by Thamarai Nachiyar.I do not have any objection to it," Though the loudness appeared a little odd to Ponnar-Sankar, they were glad that he categorically said, 'I do not have any objection.' Amidst that bubbling gladness the mentor again raised his voice and said, "But, you must note one thing."

Ponnar-Sankar and Mayavar who were extremely happy till then were stunned at this and opened their eyes wide.

"There is a vow I have made. Ponnar-Sankar have the responsibility to carry it out." The mentor said this in a passionate outburst.

Mayavar was too much in a hurry. He asked, "What vow?" Rockiannan's tone cooled down! His voice became hoarse as if his throat was choked. "Without asking me what the vow is, Ponnar-Sankar must promise me to carry out the vow! Will you?" he asked. Ponnar-Sankar immediately ran to their mentor, bowed politely, touched his feet and did obeisance. In his stretched hands they put their hands and sealed their promise. Then the mentor began to speak in a low voice.

"In order to protect the young sprouts of my clan I took the sprouts of my family and handed over them to Thalaiyur Kali. I don't know whether he killed them or let them off. But one thing is certain. Chellatha Gounder and his son Manthiappan who are worse than Saguni would have definitely advised him to kill the babies for stamping out the dynasty of Kundrudaiyan! I did not get any news about what happened to my children. Whether they are alive or dead doesn't make any difference. Had they been killed, in the place where they were buried grass would have grown and the place too would have changed by now unidentifiably. Even if they had not been killed they would not have been brought up properly and grown into warriors of unique qualities. So I concluded that they had died. I was worrying myself all the way from Thalaiyur how I was going to console my wife. She did not give me that botheration; she left me for good leaving behind a much bigger worry. I performed the funeral rites for her. In the night I writhed in bed unable to sleep. The babies Ponnar-Sankar were asleep. An inexplicable remembrance about Alagunachi kindled a rage within me into a storm. I jumped out of bed, took the babies and ran to the place where my wife had been interred. With the babies in my arms I let out a loud scream that tore the silence of the graveyard. It was not a scream; it was a vow! A vow that Ponnar-Sankar must carry out."

The mentor stood with his eyes glowing like burning embers.

"What vow is it? Come on, tell us. We will carry it out for you!" Ponnar-Sankar thundered exultingly.

"Alagunachi! My dearest! My dear life! Don't be angry with me that I killed your children. We have dedicated our children to our land - we have sacrificed them for the sake of our clan's pride. I will use these babies to take revenge upon those who were responsible for killing our babies! Didn't we lose our children so that these children should live? From today these are our children. I will look after them - I will bring them up as warriors - I will use them to destroy those wastrels! This is my promise! My promise! Till my vow is carried out, these children Ponnar-Sankar will remain celibates. This also is a promise! A promise!"

Rockiannan then told Mayavar and Ponnar-Sankar, "This is the vow I made! Ponnar-Sankar ought to carry it out for me - until then they must remain celibates!"

25 Where Justice Fails...

As Veeramalai had guessed, the forces of Valanadu had laid a siege around the palace of Arichampatti. Since a major part of the Arichampatti forces had gone to Rachandarmalai and from there to Sankaranmalai after rescuing Muthayi and Pavalayi, the remaining Arichampatti soldiers found it difficult to withstand the attack for long. After sending Manthiappan to Arichampatti, Chellatha Gounder hurried to Thalaiyur. There he told Kali about the killing of general Thirumalai and incited him in such a manner that he became terribly angry with Arichampatti.

"King Kali! What is the use of my being your patron? I am unable to get my son married to the girls of that Arichampatti fellow who should be like a slave to us. I have lost my honour and reputation. Those Arichampatti people first agreed to give that Chinnamalaikolunthu's sister Thamarai Nachi to my son and at the time of marriage stripped all of us of our honour! Just because all my efforts to perform the marriage of Manthiappan with those girls and thereby attach Arichampatti to our territory without spilling blood failed, did we have to lock up those girls in Rachandarmalai. On knowing it, the father should have come personally and appealed to you. You should have pitied him and imposed the condition that he should agree to marry his daughters to Manthiappan in return for the release of the girls. Contrary to my expectation, if he had waged a war on Rachandarmalai and

had also killed our general Thirumalai, it is not a shame upon me alone but also upon Thalaiyur which had seen nothing but victory till now."

The words of Chellatha Gounder made the strong heart of Kali quiver. Yet, without losing his patience he asked, "I heard that the victory of Arichampatti was not due to the bravery or skill of Chinnamalaikolunthu but because of the rare skill of two young warriors. What do you think about that?"

Chellatha Gounder was not able to answer this question in clear terms as he himself did not know anything about those brave warriors. He knew just that their defeat was due to the bold feats of those youths.

"I don't know who those little boys are. One of the vice generals wounded in the battle told me that they were like tigers in warfare," Chellatha Gounder said with heartburn.

"Who should be those two intrepid men?" Thalaiyur Kali paced up and down with this question in his eyes. The words, "I'll tell you who they are," fell into their ears. He and Chellatha Gounder were stunned and turned around.

Mayavar was slowly walking towards them with a smile in the corner of his lips.

Thalaiyur Kali felt comforted a little and said eagerly, "I have been searching for you. Where had you gone?"

"Didn't I go only after telling you? I had gone to visit a few places to see how our neighbouring rulers are and to find out what should be our approach towards them. I met my old friend, mentor Rockiannan. Came across the family of Kundrudaiyan and talked to them. At that time, the young men whom you and Chellatha Gounder are discussing came there unexpectedly."

Mayavar patted the shoulders of Kali in a manner of telling him not to get agitated or enraged but to be calm.

"I want to know who those young men are. Who could be those so skilled as to worst our general Thirumalai ?" King Kali expected an immediate reply from Mayavar; but before he could say anything, Chellatha Gounder burst out.

"It was not Thalaiyur general alone who had been killed. As Rachandarmalai had been lost, the honour of Thalaiyur has also been killed! We must find out those spirited youths who stood in support of that."

Mayavar perceived the volcano fulminating in the words of Chellatha Gounder.

"Gounder esquire! I know that Kali is endowed with a good heart. If he were a waterfall of enormous height, the poison you mix would get washed out. But he is like a holy tank in which water stagnates. So the little poison you dab on it spreads and spoils his mind!"

The lightning-like attack of Mayavar startled Gounder. Kali was also a little shocked.

"You, Mayavar! You are just a minister to Thalaiyur. Don't forget that I am the king's patron. If pride blocks your eyes, I will turn very bad."

"Your threatening me is like a snake saying that it will bite!"

"The snake will not announce and then bite! Even if you tread on its tail, its poisonous teeth will prick the body; and the poison will spread from head to foot!"

"Let it be. You have yourself accepted what you really are! Thank you!"

"Hereafter, my mouth will not speak; only my sword!" Chellatha Gounder shouted loudly and drew his sword. But Kali rushed to him, took hold of his hands and said firmly, "Please be calm. First, let him tell us about those young persons who killed Thirumalai and hoisted victory flag in Rachandarmalai. Why are you in such a hurry? Why this discordance in the beginning itself." The ruction that was about to erupt was nipped in the bud.

As Mayavar stroked his beard and said, "Yes, I will tell you who those young warriors are," eagerness spread over the face of Kali.

"They are the students of mentor Rockiannan!"

"Students of the mentor?"

"Yes, Kali! Not only students of the mentor, but also his adopted sons."

"Is it so? Rockiannar does everything according to our wish and is loyal to us. That his adopted sons killed our general Thirumalai sounds unbelievable."

"King Kali! Some twenty years ago, didn't mentor Rockiannan do a great service to you on the advice of this same Chellatha Gounder?"

"Which help are you referring to?"

'Have you forgotten that? Is it not something that should not be forgotten! It was: when possessed by the Amman the priest told you that he heard from the Amman the danger awaiting your life in the hands of Kundrudaiyan's new-born babies. Together you planned to do away with those babies. Rockiannan came forward to execute the plan..."

"Who told you all this?"

"Truths are like gold! They may remain buried a thousand feet, even two thousand feet deep. Some day or other mines will be dug. Then truths will come out like gold dust and emit light."

"Enough of comparisons!Who let out the truth?"

"Rockiannan himself!"

"Do you say, Rockiannan?"

"Kali, are you surprised? Yes, it must be a surprise to you why the same Rockiannan who took the babies from Kundrudaiyan and gave them to you should now accept his crime! But one thing; he explained the truth to me just because he did not commit the crime!"

"What do you say? Didn't Rockiannan do that? He handed over those babies in my hands. How do you say that he did not commit that crime?"

"It is true that babies were handed over to you! But they were not the babies of Kundrudaiyan!"

"What? What do you say, Mayavar?"

"A magic island - a mysterious man there - he can change a mango into a coconut; don't think what I say is like that story! I tell you just what happened. The world cannot be darkened by covering the red rays of the rising sun with a black curtain. Like that, the time for dawn has come, and the morning star has made its appearance. That is why I am impatient to carry out the duties I consider important to you and Thalaiyur. I know that good things are bitter. But since they are the medicines for cleansing the evil you must drink it and find ways to get well!"

"Don't protract; tell me. If they were not the babies of Kundrudaiyan, then whose babies were they?"

"Mentor Rockiannan's babies! You killed his children only. All through our lives we must worship at the feet of that noble man who sacrificed his own children for the sake of protecting the gems of the clan born to Kundrudaiyan."

"All right! All right! The mentor, what a great man he is- he has cheated me - and you are garlanding him with praises! Tell me, what happened to the children of Kundrudaiyan?"

"They are the tiger cubs called Ponnar-Sankar - those who demonstrated the prowess of their powerful shoulders and put an end to general Thirumalai in Rachandarmalai!"

"Are they?"

"Yes, Kali! They were trained in mentor Rockiannan's barracks. I tell you now also, you need not consider them as your enemies."

"Oho! Those horned bulls are raring to tear my innards. Do you say I must greet them and get killed?"

As Thalaiyur Kali lost his patience and put this question, Chellatha Gounder who was waiting for the opportunity shot wordy arrows at Mayavar.

"A big conspiracy has been woven. Mayavar's speech makes me suspect whether he is also a party to it. Our situation then was such that we had to act as per the command of the Amman. In no other way could we prevent the danger that

the children of Kundrudaiyan would inflict on us. Rockiannan pretended that he would help us in that effort, but has committed a betrayal of the worst sort. In such a situation, to say that Ponnar-Sankar trained and prepared by him are not our enemies is pure deceit. To believe it is utter madness!"

"Chellatha Gounder esquire! I know full well that the 'Amman's prophesy' was your plan to get rid of your agnates - so that nobody will rise to claim rights over your territory and no heir of Kundrudaiyan would claim the reign of Valanadu which you grabbed from him. Caught in the web of your delusions, Kali who habitually believes whatever you say ordered Rockiannan to kill the children. Rockiannan is not selfish like you! He acted as if he foresaw that the brave legends of the Kongu community had come as Ponnar-Sankar in human forms, sacrificed his own children to save them."

Thalaiyur Kali could not but believe the words of Mayavar. Nor could he forgive Rockiannan who had lied to him, protected Kundrudaiyan's children and had now put them in the line of his enemies. Moreover, he could not tolerate Mayavar speaking in support of Rockiannan in his presence. He flew into a temper. He uttered very hot words:

"Treachery! Treachery! All around me there is treachery!"

Mayavar laughed pitifully, turning over in his mind the fact that the treachery around him was Chellatha Gounder's alone.

King Kali clapped his hands and shouted in a peremptory tone. "Who's there?" Two security guards came running and stood before him with bowed heads. He ordered them, "Call the chief general immediately." The chief general Parakiraman was there at once as if he flew into the hall. Half of his face was aggressively occupied by his moustache. He bowed his head and greeted Kali.

Kali pronounced the orders: "A section of our forces shall go to Arichampatti. It shall support Manthiappan who has laid a siege around the fort there. Another section shall be sent to Kudaiyur at once. At Kudaiyur, Kundrudaiyan's palace and his forces must fall at our feet before tomorrow morning. The aim of this siege is to bring Arichampatti and the entire Rachandarmalai region under the control of Chellatha Gounder's Valanadu reign. Kundrudaiyan's unruly conduct of supporting and protecting Chinnamalaikolunthu must be put an end to. That's why I have ordered the capture of his Kudaiyur. Thirdly, a section of our forces shall go to Sankaranmalai under the charge of able vice generals. The families of Kundrudaiyan and Chinnamalaikolunthu and all others who are there must be arrested at once."

Chellatha Gounder could not contain himself until the orders were pronounced fully. "Those little boys Ponnar-Sankar will be there only. Take them alive or send them to heroic heaven in the battlefield itself." He intervened and ordered like this.

Mayavar could not keep quiet. He could understand that Kali was standing on fire and any attempt to appease his rage would be futile. Yet, in order to fulfil his duty he went near him, held his hands tightly and said:

"Don't decide in haste. You are acting on the wrong advice given by somebody for his personal gain that Ponnar-Sankar will turn out to be the enemies of Thalaiyur. Only your activities will make them your enemies; not that they were born as your enemies as per the Amman's prophesy!. My opinion is that this Chellatha Gounder used the Amman's name by bribing the priest Chembakulan and carried out this deceitful trick."

Mayavar did not complete his words. But Kali, as if frenzied, shouted, "I won't permit anybody to speak badly of Chellatha Gounder."

Wouldn't that be enough for the Gounder? He would only be waiting for a chance like that. He spoke briskly and at length:

"From the time the great king, your father, appointed me the patron of king Kali and his regime, I have been doing my duties with extreme care like a mother who doesn't leave her child alone even for a moment. But this minister Mayavar, who has no patriotism, quarrelled over a petty matter and went away. After wandering about for so many years he has come back lured by the post. On the score that he is a great man, a scholar and all that king Kali respected him and I agreed to all his suggestions without any objection. But he has wrongly calculated all this as our weakness. Why should I care? Am I selfish? If I should give away my Valanadu, my palace , fort and everything to Thalaiyur, I am ready to do it immediately, wear saffron clothes like a recluse, confine myself to a corner in Thalaiyur palace and spend all my time praying! Alas! A time has come when this Mayavar has laid charges against me wilfully and I have had to listen to them! If my reputation is tossed into a waste basket in the presence of the king, should I live even after that?"

In the emotional drama of Chellatha Gounder, Kali lost his head even more.

"Why do you worry? I am not going to stop the war on the advice of Mayavar. The commands I gave Parakiraman will not be taken back. Kudaiyur fort and bastions will come under our possession. Arichampatti will hereafter be under our flag! The family of Kundrudaiyan and the Arichampatti family will do penance in Thalaiyur jail!" Thalaiyur Kali thundered.

"Is it not unwise to allow Rockiannan to be free?" Gounder added incense to the burning censer. It sent out reels and reels of smoke.

"Yes! Don't give any respect to him as my mentor. Arrest that renegade!" Kali screamed.

"Please listen to me, Kali," said Mayavar.

"No! Parakirama! Carry out my commands!" so saying Kali left the place. He saw Mayavar leave uttering the words, "Hereafter, I don't have anything to do here." But Kali did not regret it, nor was he shocked.

26 Sudden Marriages!

As swords wielded fast pierce the darkness like flashes of lightning, three white horses were galloping towards Sankaranmalai. The mentor Rockiannan rode in the front and Ponnar-Sankar followed him.

In the hearts of both only the vow that they took in front of Rockiannan revolved ceaselessly. Though they had love and affection in complete measure for their mentor so as to ignore everything else, they were worried to think how much Muthayi and Pavalayi would be upset on knowing about the sudden change.

Rockiannan flew on his horse while all the time thinking how much respect and gratitude they should have for him if they could forget their sweet hearts dearer to them than their own lives and promise to remain celibates until his vow was carried out.

Kundrudaiyan and Thamarai were talking worriedly to Veeramalai about the delay in the return of those who went to meet their mentor and there being no message from even Mayavar.

To add to their anxiety and worry, the news that under the leadership of Manthiappan the army of Valanadu had laid a siege around Arichampatti and was steadily closing in reached them. The idea that Veeramalai could be sent there to crush the siege was broached and he got ready to go there. But soon the fear that it was not wise for him to leave Sankaranmalai occurred to them and the idea was dropped.

Arichampatti forces entangled in a war - those who had gone did not return - the families of Chinnamalaikolunthu and Kundrudaiyan were caught in this

disturbingly confusing situation. At that time the sound of horse-hoofs was heard and all their ears turned in that direction.

All of them heaved a sigh of relief when they were told that Ponnar-Sankar were returning with their mentor. As soon as the mentor got down from his horse, Kundrudaiyan hugged him tightly and the mentor was moved to tears. Both were unable to speak. The past incidents narrated by Veeramalai and Mayavar flashed in all their minds once again and they looked at the mentor with new respect. It could be said that their respect for him increased further and crossed its limits. Because of his unselfish sacrificial attitude, the respect he was shown for his being a warrior, a mentor and a brave man now multiplied manifold.

"The help you have rendered our family could not be paid back even if we take seven into seven births," said Thamarai Nachiyar very emotionally with folded hands. She called her daughter Arukkani and asked her to prostrate at his feet. Even before he straightened up after blessing her, Muthayi and Pavalayi fell at his feet. The mentor turned with an enquiring gesture.

Kundrudaiyan at once explained, "These girls are going to be our daughters-in-law. Thamarai Nachi and I were about to come to Marigounden Palayam barracks to discuss this with you."

The mentor intercepted, "That's why I myself have come! I have told everything to Ponnar-Sankar and Mayavar. He left for Thalaiyur on an urgent business. Otherwise he also would have come."

"Though we are the father and mother, besides the name 'parents' what other pride do we have? Aren't you the mother, father, mentor, god and everything to Ponnar-Sankar? So your approval for the marriage - isn't it very important?"

The words of Kundrudaiyan were tinged with emotion; there was also sincerity. Chinnamalaikolunthu, Silambayi, Veeramalai and Vaiyamperuman looked at Rockiannan very respectfully and were very eager to hear what he was going to say. Thamarai and Arukkani Thangam expected him to draw Ponnar-Sankar close to him, stroke their heads and bless them with a smiling face. The big toes of Muthayi and Pavalayi drew dotless *kolam* designs on the floor. They thought it would be enough if their ears heard his words of approval for the marriage and kept their eyes down looking at the earth!

"I am one who lost his wife and sons to protect Ponnar-Sankar. I say with the confidence that the respect you have for me will not diminish even by a sesame seed: the persons who killed my children and who were responsible for that must be revenged. That work must be carried out by Ponnar-Sankar. Until then they must remain celibates. I have taken a vow like that in front of my wife's dead body. Ponnar-Sankar have given me the promise that they will carry out my vow and

that they will remain celibates until then. Mayavar is a witness to it!" said Rockiannan. Immediately Ponnar-Sankar, competing with each other as to who would be the first, held his knees and said worryingly, "*Ayya*! Why the need for a witness? Are we going to renege on the promise we have made: Must live as celibates?"

These words shocked everybody there and threw Muthayi and Pavalayi into the fire of shock which began to scorch them. They felt miserable in their hearts at the curious turn of good and bad. They struggled vainly to grapple with the idea of those who were born just to marry them and those who had captured their loving hearts living as celibates. When will the mentor's vow be fulfilled? What might happen in undertaking that job? These questions smothered them. They shed tears of sorrow wondering why they were not drowned in the river during the *karagam* festival or did not fall prey to the python or the crocodile. They wanted to hold the legs of the mentor tightly and cringe, "Please bestow mercy upon us!" But they stood stunned as if the body had become frigid and the tongue was unable to speak.

Silambayi looked at her husband's face in unbearable distress. He could understand how much agonised his wife would be. So he thought it would be better to talk to the mentor.

"Respectful mentor! Your vow is a much needed one. Must be fulfilled. And I am ready to extend any help that is possible for me."

These words should have kindled slight anger in the heart of the mentor. His face darkened and his words were severe:

"I can do it myself! I can take your help also. But my vow is that Ponnar-Sankar alone, my sons who were brought up by me, should carry out my vow."

Even after perceiving his anger, Chinnamalaikolunthu was not ready to give up his request. He was very particular that the lives of his daughters should not become a desert. He forced a smile, but made it appear spontaneous, and continued:

"I gave a promise that I would marry my daughters to Ponnar-Sankar if they rescued my daughters from Rachandarmalai. Earlier my sister had vowed in her bridal attire that she would marry her sons to my daughters. When we were making preparations to get both the promise and the vow fulfilled, how can we bear an unexpected obstacle to that like this?"

Chinnamalaikolunthu was unable to complete. He wept uncontrollably. The place was filled with a deep silence! The mentor, not knowing what to say, paced up and down. He went near Ponnar-Sankar and stood in front of them. Raised his

high shoulders further and shrugged. Lifted his strong hands and pressed the shoulders of his dear students. He then laughed mildly and said to them, "It is for you to answer!"

For a moment Muthayi and Pavalayi earnestly expected Ponnar-Sankar to say that they could not remain bachelors until the vow was fulfilled and it was also not necessary.

But the next moment they prayed from the lips of their hearts, "Alas! If they say like that, wouldn't they fall victims to the charge of dishonest fellows who reneged on their promise? No, no! Even if they don't become our husbands let them not be judged by this world as fickle-minded persons."

As the mentor asked Ponnar-Sankar to give a reply, they moved close to Chinnamalaikolunthu and said. "There is no need for your daughters to wait for us. Please marry them to some other worthy persons. The most important ambition of our life is to honour the promise we have given to our mentor."

Before they could complete their answer, Muthayi and Pavalayi screamed frenetically. Even in the presence of so many they were not deterred by coyness or fear. They ran to their parents, caught hold of their legs and cried:

"*Appa*! *Amma*! If we are to live, we will marry them and live. Otherwise death is the only proper way for us. Let the marriage take place as you and our aunt wished. Until they fulfil their mentor's vow we will lead the conjugal life without indulging in bodily relationship. Perform our marriages now itself. Let both of them remain celibates until the vow is fulfilled. For us marriage celebration can only be with them. Otherwise, you can see our corpses only!"

The mentor understood the nobility of their love not only from their screams but also from their assurance that they would lead their married life without indulging in sex. So he smiled from the depth of his heart and said that he did not have any objection to Ponnar-Sankar marrying them then itself if they remained celibates until the vow was fulfilled. Chinnamalaikolunthu was pleased at this but wondered, "How is it possible to celebrate the marriage now itself?"

Kundrudaiyan's immediate reply disclosed his innocuous mind, "Why not? There are so many men to do the necessary arrangements before night. We are going to celebrate the marriage only. Nothing else now, isn't it so?"

"Any marriage in a royal family must be celebrated with pomp and pageantry. I don't say this because I want to invite not only friends and relatives but also the whole village. Shouldn't everybody from Arichampatti and Kudaiyur palace come and participate? Even if you feel that we need not have a big gathering, shouldn't we at least invite Mayavar so that he comes and blesses the couple?"

Both Silambayi and Thamarai Nachi agreed to this opinion of Chinnamalaikolunthu who was not at all for conducting the marriage that day itself.

Kundrudaiyan changed his mind and said, "There is a point in what my brother-in-law says." He gave one more proof for his imbecility!

Before they could take a definite decision, Chinnamalaikolunthu received shocking news from an Arichampatti peasant. He was a young man. Though he was not in the outfit of a soldier, he held in his hand a spear soaked in blood. He was brought into the hall by the guards of Sankaranmalai fort.

"I come from Arichampatti."

"Is it so? Why is the spear smeared with blood?"

"A Valanadu soldier tried to prevent me on the way. I seized his spear, killed him with that and came here running."

"What news have you brought?"

"Arichampatti soldiers were not able to bear up against the attack of Valanadu forces."

"What happened ?"

"Manthiappan has got into our palace. The flag of Valanadu has been hoisted on the ramparts of our fort. There is no limit to the atrocities that the Valanadu soldiers commit. They gatecrash into houses and loot. Women are not able to come out into the streets. Only weeping and wailing can be heard everywhere"

"Ah! Should such a shame befall Arichampatti? Alas! Even listening to this atrocity is unbearable!"

"Manthiappan is planning a victory celebration... in our Arichampatti palace! He has ordered that for the revelries and carousal ten beautiful women of nice bodily proportions must be brought to his bed. He will choose a girl of his liking for his night merriment. His generals will mess up the remaining ones. Having declared like this openly the miscreants are hunting for charming women!"

On listening to all these from that peasant, Rockiannan's eyes turned red like *kovai* fruits. His moustache twitched and he gnawed his teeth in anger and they grated loudly.

"Such destructive acts can never be permitted. I myself will go. Even if I die in the war to liberate Arichampatti from Manthiappan, I don't mind. We can't tolerate soldiers tuning into thugs and indulging in roguery," he thundered.

Ponnar-Sankar calmed their mentor and made this request: "Both of us will go and teach that Manthiappan a fitting lesson. Order us, mentor!"

"All of you, including Chinnamalaikolunthu, please listen to my request. Let Ponnar - Sankar lead the Arichampatti soldiers who are here to Arichampatti immediately and counter the forces of Manthiappan. Before they start let us celebrate their marriages here and now," said the mentor with overflowing emotion.

"Marriage at the time of going to the warfront? If anything happens to us in the battlefield, won't Muthayi and Pavalayi become widows?"

When Ponnar uttered these words, Muthayi wiped the tears flowing from her eyes and said, "Not in the field; even if they were to leave this world next moment, the auspicious *thali* can be tied around our necks only by them." Seeing her sister weep, Pavalayi also began to cry. In a voice tinged with emotion Thamarai said to Silambayi, "I agree to conducting the marriage now itself." Silambayi did not object to it.

Kundrudaiyan laughed and said, "Can there be any objection when both the household queens have agreed?"

On the drop of a hat the palace bent over backwards to cope with the urgent marriage preparations.

27 Big Armies on Both Sides

Though, as per custom, the marriages of Muthayi and Pavalayi must be celebrated in Arichampatti - the place of the brides - the marriages took place in Sankaranmalai fort amidst war preparations. All the matrimonial ceremonies followed one another according to tradition. First betrothal - immediately after that the marriage function - activities buzzed off in quick succession!

The marriages of Ponnar with Muthayi and Sankar with Pavalayi were formally assented to with the presentation of gifts to the brides and the exchange of betel leaves and areca nuts. A beautiful pandal was put up and decorated with mango-leaf festoons. Fresh sand was spread and plantain trees were tied to posts in rows. Vaiyamperuman and Veeramalai got the grooms ready in wedding attire and make-up. Arukkani sent word for her dear friend Kuppayi and she came with garments necessary for the brides. They both functioned as the bridesmaids and took care of everything speedily like a spinning top. Rockiannan and the elders of Sankaranmalai were found blessing Ponnar-Sankar with joy in their hearts and smiles in their faces. Ponnar-Sankar were asked to sit on horses and go around the fort and then they were taken to the stage put up for the wedding. Muthayi and Pavalayi - their faces reddened by bashful shyness - came and sat on the stage without lifting their heads even once. Thamarai and Silambayi, though countless

problems weighed heavily on their minds, forgot all of them for a moment and felt extremely happy on seeing their children in bridal costume.

The priest of the Kongu clan sang the prayer song and the marriage function started. Betel leaves and areca nuts were put in the palms of the grooms and Vaiyamperuman's. Then all their palms were coupled together and placed in a pot full of rice, and the auspicious wedding song was sung. Amidst the song and the music of various instruments Ponnar tied the sacred *thali* around Muthayi's neck and Sankar around Pavalayi's neck. Rockinnan shed tears of joy while showering flower petals on the bridal pairs. Kundrudaiyan and Chinnamalaikolunthu wiped the tears about to drop from their eyes as they blessed the couple and prayed to God for their welfare.

Though the marriages were hurriedly arranged, all the ceremonies of the Kongu Velala tradition were performed at least for name's sake. After the removal of the *kanganams* tied to the wrists of the bridal couples which marked the happy end of the ceremonies, the guests were hosted a feast. Thamarai Nachiyar, Silambayi, Arukkani and Kuppayi personally took care of all aspects of the marriage feast.

A wedding ceremony at the time of starting for the warfront – that too with the condition that until the vow of the mentor was carried out there should be no consummation – so everybody was in a state of trepidation though they all had confidence in the bravery and heroic potentials of Ponnar-Sankar and did not fear about the future.

Ponnar-Sankar entered the arsenal of that palace to change from wedding garments into war gear. They equipped themselves with sword, rapier, dagger, lance, spear, shield and such eighteen armaments.

Thamarai Nachiyar and Kundrudaiyan were emotionally touched when they saw their dear ones as warriors ready to enter the battlefield. Their mentor Rockiannan stood like a flower in full bloom on seeing those lion cubs whom he had groomed as his students and brought up as his sons. They fell at the feet of their parents and mentor and received their blessings. Chinnamalaikolunthu and Silambayi prayed to God for them, put a *tilak* on their foreheads and blessed them. Arukkani Thangam stood gazing at the valour-brimming faces of her brothers. Ponnar-Sankar stroked her hair endearingly and asked, "*Amma*! Do you want to say anything?"

She said with moistened eyes, "*Anna*! My sisters-in-law are waiting. Don't forget to take leave of them."

They both turned to their mentor for instructions. They feared that it would be excruciating for their wives to give them a send-off and wondered whether it was necessary. The mentor did not fail to understand their questioning look and said

with a smile, "Oh! You are reminded of the *Tirukkural* couplet which says: 'If you decide not to go, you can speak to me. If you should go, come back and speak to whoever is alive!' Are you apprehensive that your wives may speak like that? Muthayi and Pavalayi who are fully aware of the situation will not say anything like that!"

Even after listening to their mentor they hesitated. They looked at each other, avoided the eyes of their mentor and peered at his feet.

The mentor explained, "Oh! You are concerned about celibacy? There is no harm in meeting them or talking to them. Making love alone is forbidden!" He then took their hands and said empathetically, "All right! Take leave of them and go"

Arukkani could not rein in her joy. She jumped and hugged Kuppayi and ran towards the place exclusively meant for the royal women of the palace and cried, "*Anni*!* *Annan*† is coming! *Annan* is coming!"

Muthayi stood there with her eyes riveted to the door. Her heart fluttered. Her husband was coming to see her and talk to her. But wasn't he coming to tell her that he was going to the battlefield, that too, immediately after the marriage? When she thought of this her agony crossed the limits. Ponnar opened the door and went in. He had the imposing bearing of a sprightly lion. He was wearing a shield on his broad chest. His magnificent posture with one hand on the sword hanging from his waist made her feel proud. She was extremely happy that she had got a husband who was not only a well-built and handsome man but also a bull raring to enter the battlefield. Telling herself that she should not show her anguish in front of him she bowed her head and saw him by raising her eyes alone.

"I am leaving and will be back."

They were only words; but not a single letter of those words failed to pierce her heart like spear. But she managed to control herself. She brought *kumkum* and stood in front of him. Ponnar took a little *kumkum* with a finger and applied it on his forehead. Again he said, "I am leaving and will be back." Muthayi said, "Come back victoriously!" Every letter in that expression trembled like an infant shivering in bitter chillness. Ponnar left her. The eyes of Muthayi clung to his shoulders.

Pavalayi was a little bolder than Muthayi. As soon as Sankar entered, she came to him running with the question, "So, you are ready to go?" He stood in front of her like a tall rock with armaments and in war outfit.

"Yes, Pavalam! I am about to leave."

"I'll undertake penance for your victory"

Sankar made fun of her, "Should you seek victory for me as a gift from God? Don't you have faith in my doughty heart?"

**anni* = elder brother's wife

†*annan* = elder brother

"You will certainly return with victory. I don't have any doubt about it." She brought *kumkum* and he applied it as a *tilak* on his forehead; all the time he was looking at her. He then repeated, "I'll come back, Pavalam." She nodded her head and gave her assent. After he left, the room fell into darkness. Only after some time did she realise that she had sent her eyes as his escort!

The soldiers of Arichampatti were on horseback in front of the fort and were ready to start. Ponnar-Sankar arrived there. Veeramalai and Vaiyamperuman came there riding on two horses meant for Ponnar-Sankar. They patted the horses and mounted majestically. Bands were played to enthuse the soldiers. Drums resounded. Arichampatti soldiers hurried behind Ponnar-Sankar in order to protect their land.

Rockiannan, Chinnamalaikolunthu, Kundrudaiyan, Veeramalai, Vaiyamperuman and Sankaranmalai soldiers watched the army marching off. The path taken by the troops disappeared from view in the dust kicked up by them.

Manthippan became terribly angry when he came to know that troops were heading towards Arichampatti to liberate it. He ordered his soldiers to get ready to decimate that army. Both armies clashed with each other at Arichampatti border. Ponnar-Sankar proved that they were adepts not only in fighting but also in war stratagems. A few soldiers of Ponnar-Sankar dressed like civilians and entered the Arichampatti village. Using their oratorical acumen, they made the citizens of Arichampatti rise spiritedly. They had been terribly frightened by the atrocities of the Valanadu soldiers and so remained fear-stricken and stupefied. Now they roared into action and gave the Valanadu soldiers who enslaved them as much trouble as they could give. Manthiappan's army could not bear the attack of the forces led by Ponnar-Sankar from the outside and the inside-attack that resulted out of the upheaval among the people of Arichampatti and found itself in dire straits. Ponnar-Sankar cut off the heads of so many enemies in lightning speed. The outskirts of Arichampatti came under their control and they advanced towards the fort. When Manthiappan came to know that he decided to leave the fort with his forces. He left just as the forces of Ponnar-Sankar were entering the fort and made good his escape. Arichampatti, the fort and the bastions were all liberated. With his forces Manthiappan hurried towards Valanadu.

Sankar's urge to fight had not been spent fully. He very much desired to chase Manthiappan up to Valanadu and capture it. But Ponnar hesitated when he told him about this.

"*Thambi*! the army of Valanadu is quite strong. Just because he surrounded Arichampatti with a small section of his army he faced defeat and had to run away. He will come again after mustering his forces. It will be easier for us to defeat him here. It is not advisable to go there and get trapped in their fort."

Ponnar's advice did not cut ice with Sankar:

"No, *anna*! Please forgive me for contradicting you. We must rout the enemy when he has already suffered a blow. Otherwise, it will be like striking a snake once and letting it off. We must attack Valanadu at this same speed and bring it under our control. We mustn't miss this chance."

Even after a long discussion, Sankar was adamant and so Ponnar had to yield to Sankar's plan.

The victory slogans over the liberation of Arichampatti had not subsided. Before that Ponnar-Sankar set out southward in the direction of Valanadu. In Manthiappan's Valanadu palace the discussion was how to boost up the morale of the Valanadu army which had faced two defeats - one at Rachandarmalai and another at Arichampatti. It was decided to inform Thalaiyur Kali and Chellatha Gounder who was staying there about it and ask them to send the Thalaiyur army to Valanadu. The strategy was to encounter Ponnar-Sankar at the outskirts and hold out against their attack till the arrival of the army from Thalaiyur.

Ponnar-Sankar laid a siege around Valanadu with Arichampatti forces. Valanadu soldiers fought against them ferociously. Since the war was fought under the direction of Ponnar-Sankar the Valanadu army could not do anything against the strength and skill of those two. Yet, it was not easy to capture the border areas as the Valanadu army was much larger in number. It had to sacrifice hundreds of its soldiers. At one point Ponnar turned to Sankar and said complainingly, "Sankar, you didn't listen to me. See the difference in number between our army and Valanadu's." Sankar roared, "Don't worry, *anna*! This sword will definitely wear the flower of victory!"

Just then the noise of thousands of soldiers riding fast towards Valanadu on horses and in chariots was heard.

Ponnar told Sankar, "*Thambi*, it must be the army of Thalaiyur. We are caught between Valanadu forces on one side and Thalaiyur forces on the other side." The astonished Sankar looked in the direction of the advancing army.

28 The Tiger Flag and Ponnar's Precondition

That army was approaching like sea waves rolling and leaping high in a storm and crossing the shore. Neither Ponnar nor Sankar was able to identify the army. Their guess was that it must be Thalaiyur's. The army was still far away from them and the crest of the flag could not be seen clearly. Sankar was not lost in thought as Ponnar was. Without an iota of fear he said, "*Anna*! Let me alone go there and see for myself."

Ponnar felt inwardly happy at the daring of his brother. But he could not accept his idea as wise.

"Sankar! The approaching army seems to be too large. It is not wise to go against it and watch. Again I tell you, don't forget that the Valanadu army is on one side. It will only be proper to think and decide quickly how to tackle this army and the Valanadu army together."

Not heeding the objection of Ponnar, Sankar said, "*Anna*! Please forgive me! I'll return in a few seconds!" He mounted his horse and was away with his sword lifted up.

Ponnar was astonished at the bravery of Sankar whose horse flew tearing the wind. At the same time he was worried thinking about the danger that the enemy could cause to his brother. Making use of that short hesitancy the Valanadu soldiers mounted a more vigorous attack. Ponnar got enraged on seeing that, set aside his anxiety about his brother, roused his men, went straight into the battle front and attacked the Valanadu army.

Sankar who rode alone could not make out the flag crest of the approaching army. It was not clear in the cloud of dust raised by the hoofs of the horses. On his way he saw a small rock and thought it would be wiser to hide behind it and watch for the crest.

If the approaching army was Thalaiyur's and even if a single soldier spotted Sankar, he would be pulverised there itself. Though he was aware of that no sense of fear touched him. The army came close to him. Now he could clearly see not only the crest but also the person leading the army.

At once Sankar moved away from the rock and stood in the middle of the path.

The flag had the tiger crest of the Chola country's army! The man in the front in war regimentals was Mayavar! Yes; Mayavar, the minister of Thalaiyur Kali!

The astounded Sankar remained on his horse and looked at him majestically. Mayavar raised his hand and signalled the army to stop.

"Why Sankar? Why are you stopping us?" there was a dignified verve in his question.

"May I know whether you are coming as a friend or as an enemy?"

In the counter-question of Sankar the courage and sprightliness of youth bounced.

"What can you do, if I say we are coming as enemies? Are you confident that you, your brother and the Arichampatti army can stand against the cavalry, infantry and the huge forces that come behind me?"

"Our mentor has taught us that after entering a war it is cowardice to ponder over the possibilities of victory and defeat. We won't consult an astrologer to find out whether we should or should not fight against you and your big army. I only ask whether the Chola army has also come to rescue the Valanadu army fearing that the forces of Thalaiyur may not be enough."

"Why don't you think in a different way - that the Chola king has sent his forces under my leadership to support you and Ponnar in your war to liberate Valanadu?"

"This is a big puzzle to me! You are the minister of Thalaiyur Kali! Those who rule Valanadu enjoy the allegiance of that Kali. It is natural for him to interfere when Valanadu faces danger! And you are the minister of Thalaiyur Kali!"

"Don't say you are; say you were! Sankar, listen to me carefully. The foul advice of his patron Chellatha Gounder has become the holy text to Thalaiyur Kali. After taking leave of you and your brother in Marigounden Palayam I went straight to Thalaiyur. My intention was to reform Kali and turn him in the right direction. But Gounder has completely changed the amenable and reasonable mind of Kali into a poisonous stream. He says that Thalaiyur forces must enter Kudaiyur palace, Arichampatti must become subservient to Thalaiyur, and everybody in Sankaranmalai fort - including mothers and fathers - must be arrested and brought to Thalaiyur jail. His chief general Parakiraman has received orders to execute all these and has begun preparations for the invasion. Since I thought it was totally useless to serve Kali who was not ready to listen to any of my suggestions, I relinquished my job; went to Uraiyur Chola king; got this army for support; have come posthaste to stand in support of you!"

Sankar was about to get down from his horse to express his gratitude. But Mayavar stopped him and said, "Sankar don't. Every minute we delay here will pave way for the Valanadu army to reach us here. So let us hurry up to the warfront."

Sankar replied, "I will first go to my brother and give him the details," and rode back even faster than earlier and reached the spot where Ponnar was fighting.

"*Thambi*! Don't feel happy that the Chola king's army has come to support us. First we must find out on what condition he has offered his army's support," Ponnar put a dam across the overflowing enthusiasm of Sankar.

Meantime, the Chola army reached them. Though Ponnar offered his greetings and welcomed Mayavar, he did not appear as happy as Sankar was.

"My brother Sankar told me everything. Thank you very much. But I have a doubt. If you don't clear that doubt we will have to think before accepting the support of the Chola army."

Mayavar enjoyed seeing Sankar as the very epitome of bravery and Ponnar as the very epitome of wisdom. He sported his usual smile and asked, "What's your doubt Ponnar? That too, at this time? After liberating Arichampatti you did not stop but came here to capture Valanadu. Is that doubt as important as to reject the help voluntarily offered by the Chola king when you are in the critical hour of facing the strong Thalaiyur army?"

The noise of the clash between the Arichampatti forces and the Valanadu forces was heard unceasingly. The final wails of the dying soldiers were constantly

mixing in the air. The clashes of the swords with swords and spears with spears were deafening the ears. Signs of victory for the Valanadu army could be seen. The situation was that the Arichampatti army could not stand up to the onslaught of the Valanadu forces any more. Amidst such a scene Ponnar spoke calmly.

"Let us assume that we liberate Valanadu from the reign of Chellatha Gounder with the help of the Chola army. After that, if we will have to be under the tutelage of the Chola king, pay tribute to him and rule Valanadu, we don't need that kind of conditional support. Instead, it is better to be routed in the war."

Mayavar was thrilled to see the fortitude of Ponnar. Still, in order to know how strong his heart was he put a few more questions.

"You say that Valanadu doesn't like to be under the reign of the Chola king; all right. Have you forgotten that till now Valanadu and its ruler Chellatha Gounder have been under the control of Thalaiyur Kali, belonging to the Vettuva clan?"

Ponnar answered this question without a second's delay. "Among the Vettuva people there are domineering persons like Thalaiyur Kali and also kind-hearted and generous elders like you. Since Chellatha Gounder is cruel-hearted, he has turned a traitor to the Kongu Velala clan in which he was born. Our way cannot be the same as that of Chellatha Gounder and his son Manthiappan who are the bad blood of the Kongu Velala clan which has a large number of noble persons like our father Kundrudaiyan. It may be the policy of Chellatha Gounder to be a slave and enjoy palace life. Though the Chola country may be more powerful than Thalaiyur we will not like Valanadu to be under its rule and we don't want such victory. For us a defeat will be a mater of pride."

"What do you wish for Valanadu?"

'The self-rule of the Kongu Velala clan under our administration. It should be free from the domination of any other country."

Very much impressed by this majestic and unruffled reply of Ponnar, Mayavar hugged him and kissed his forehead.

"A self-rule just as you want. A rule that will not bow its head to any other country! The Chola king is ready to accept your condition and extend help! But one request; not a condition; both of you must carry it out!"

Mayavar looked at both of them. Sankar stood silently expecting Ponnar to reply to this also.

"What request? Please tell us."

"After capturing Valanadu you both must participate in the reception that the Chola king will host. In the victory banquet you must accept the award that the king gives. More importantly, he wants to meet you, the young lions of Valanadu."

Ponnar acceded to the request of Mayavar. He said the King's wish would be fulfilled. There was no need for further discussion. The Chola army joined the Arichampatti army. Mayavar, Ponnar and Sankar headed a division each, attacked the Valanadu forces, cut through them and surrounded the fort. Since the army of Thalaiyur did not at all expect Ponnar-Sankar to attack Valanadu, only a small section was sent to Arichampatti and the reminder was divided into two sections and one was sent to Kudaiyur and another to Sankaranmalai fort. The Thalaiyur army was not strong enough to fight the combined power of Ponnar-Sankar and Mayavar who came with the Chola forces. As Manthiappan was driven away from Arichampatti, the Thalaiyur army had come to Valanadu without being able to demonstrate its power there. Before it could arrive, Ponnar-Sankar had entered the Valanadu fort with Arichampatti army and the Chola army. The flag mast of Valanadu was cut down. To save his skin Manthiappan had to flee Valanadu with a few soldiers through a secret underground passage. After all these had happened, a small section of the Thalaiyur army arrived and returned unable to make any headway against Ponnar-Sankar who were beating the victory drums.

In great joy over the capture of Valanadu, Ponnar-Sankar entered the palace along with Mayavar.

Whichever way they turned they could see costumes cast off by danseuses and empty wine cups strewn over the floor. Mayavar ordered that the whole palace must be cleaned within a quarter hour.

Ponnar-Sankar fortified the security of the fort, bastions and the palace area with Arichampatti soldiers. A large number of Valanadu soldiers prostrated before Ponnar-Sankar and begged pardon.

The people of Valanadu assembled at the entrance of the fort in thousands. They celebrated their joy over the fall of an unjust government. Everywhere the slogan, 'Long live Ponnar-Sankar!'

Mayavar came up the facade of the fort with Ponnar-Sankar on each side. The people assembled there greeted them with slogans that hit the sky. Mayavar spoke in a loud voice that was audible to every one.

"Injustice - misrule - vindictiveness - slavishness - betrayal - tyranny all these have been brought to an end. Today real free rule blooms in Valanadu. The two matchless heroes who will provide and protect this rule are here! I join you in congratulating them!"

Thousands of people there joined their wishes with those of Mayavar. Ponnar-Sankar waved their hands and expressed their gratitude to the people of Valanadu who showered their love on them.

Then a horse entered the fort speedily. Ponnar-Sankar saw the guards stopping it. They recognised the rider as Vaiyamperuman and ordered the guards to permit him inside.

The news brought by Vaiyamperuman took Ponnar-Sankar to the extreme of anger.

29 The Mentor under a Rain of Arrows

"The Thalaiyur army that crossed the Amaravathy river laid siege to Kudaiyur, captured it and to declare that it had come under the control of Thalaiyur hoisted the flag of king Kali. General Parakiraman is now proceeding towards Sankaranmalai fort. His aim is to arrest the families of Kundrudaiyan and Chinnamalaikolunthu as per the orders of Thalaiyur Kali."

When this news was heard through Vaiyamperuman, Sankar roared like a lion hit by an arrow on its flanks.

"With our forces we must go to Sankaranmalai fort now itself. Parakiraman must be caught and tied to the flagpole. Order me, *anna*!" Sankar shouted impatiently. Ponnar was in no way less enraged. Yet, he controlled his emotions and began to think. Whenever Ponnar thought deeply, lines formed on his forehead and Sankar used to enjoy the beauty of it. Now, that enjoyment was not there. Instead, he appeared very impatient. Understanding his mindset Mayavar advised him, "Sankar, calm yourself. There must be some reason for Ponnar's hesitation. This hesitation is due to his intention to do everything in the proper manner; not the result of fear."

Ponnar called his brother closer to him and said, "Yes, *thambi*! What Mayavar says is right. Only now we have finished this war, that too, immediately after the war in Arichampatti. Our troops have had no rest at all. Though we have won

both, I am now concerned about going to Sankaranmalai and the strategy we must adopt for that. If we take the entire forces with us, protecting the Valanadu fort will become a big problem. So you stay here and take care of Valanadu fort. Mayavar will be here to support you. The Chola army also will stay back. I will go to Sankaranmalai fort with Arichampatti forces and fight Parakiraman there."

Sankar did not agree to this view. He said, "*Anna*! I agree that only one of us should go and vanquish the forces of Parakiraman. But that one must be myself. You be here and take care of the administration and defence of Valanadu. Please entrust with me the job of defeating Parakiraman, driving out the Thalaiyur army and bringing our parents and our families to Valanadu."

In this request of Sankar there was firmness and at the same time respect mingled with concern for his brother. Mayavar also insisted that Sankar's request must be conceded to. But Ponnar did not like to send Sankar alone. Sankar was like the floods of a jungle river. Had the habit of advancing into the warfront unmindful of the eventuality. The forces of Thalaiyur Kali would attack vehemently after the defeat they had already suffered. If by chance, he were to lose Sankar ...? Ponnar could not even think of it. That was why he wanted to go to the battlefield himself. *Thambi* Sankar also understood the bond of affection his elder brother had for him and was keen to save the life of his brother even at the cost of his own life.

Mayavar urged them, "If we waste our time competing with one another on the question of who will lead the forces, Parakiraman may within that time siege Sankaranmalai fort. So decide quickly."

Ponnar said to Mayavar, "Please tell us what to do."

Mayavar said, "Why unnecessary argument? We will draw lots and decide." This suggestion was accepted and Mayavar wrote the names of Ponnar and Sankar on palm leaves and prepared the lots. Both Ponnar and Sankar prayed that the lots must favour himself. Vaiyamperuman picked one and Mayavar got ready to read. Ponnar-Sankar could not contain their curiosity. Mayavar read loudly the name of Sankar and he shouted, "*Anna*!" and hugged him in emotional upsurge. The eyes of Ponnar brimmed with tears.

Mayavar consoled Ponnar, "Feel easy! You needn't worry about your brother. I'll also go with him. A section of the Chola army is coming with me." Ponnar felt relieved of his anxiety and sighed.

The army started for Sankaranmalai led by Sankar, Mayavar and Vaiyamperuman.

The distance from Valanadu to Sankaranmalai and the distance from Kudaiyur to Sankaranmalai are more or less the same. Yet, Parakiraman hoisted the

Thalaiyur flag at Kudaiyur and reached Sankaranmalai earlier than the army led by Sankar could arrive there.

Sankaranmalai fort and the small town in which it was situated had been surrounded by Parakiraman's army. Rockiannan, Kundrudaiyan and Chinnamalaikolunthu put Muthayi, Pavalayi, Arukkani Thangam and her friend Kuppayi in a safe place under the protection of Thamarai Nachiyar and Silambayi and got ready to fight the Thalaiyur army.

Thalaiyur soldiers were skilful at killing the enemy by aiming their arrows even from very long distances. The soldiers standing guard at Sankaranmalai fort had only spears and swords. With these they tried to ward off the attack of those skilful archers. On both sides hundreds of soldiers fell down dead. The wails of the wounded soldiers echoed inside the fort. Thamarai Nachiyar who had locked herself and others in the private chamber of women feared that the girls might face danger any time. So she stood guard with a drawn sword.

As the Thalaiyur army was fast advancing towards the fort to surround it, Parakiraman signalled to his soldiers to stop and reached the fort entrance on his horse with a sword held high. Rockiannan, Kundrudaiyan and Chinnamalaikolunthu could not understand his motive and looked at him with surprise.

Parakiraman assumed a majestic grandeur and spoke, "I wish to end this war without danger to any of your lives. My ambition is to carry out the orders given to me by the king of Thalaiyur. First, Kudaiyur has been captured. Next, I must arrest and take all of you to Thalaiyur. My desire is to take all of you alive. What do you say?"

Kundrudaiyan felt that he was addressing them in a haughty and nonchalant manner as if they had already been defeated in the war and were ready to lay down all their weapons and surrender. He shouted back angrily, "Don't talk, stop!" Sprang upon his horse and the next moment he stood in front of the Thalaiyur general. Surprise shook Parakiraman. He wondered whether it was really the naïve Kundrudaiyan nicknamed 'Masachamy' who stood in front of him so courageously and ordered him to stop talking.

"You Parakirama, the Thalaiyur general! Why should your king order you to arrest us?"

Parakiraman could not answer this question. So he said, "You can put this question to King Kali himself."

Kundrudaiyan did not understand the import of his reply.

So he put one more question that proved how fitting the nickname 'Masachamy' was. "Oho! Is your king arriving here now?"

Parakiraman laughed at him mockingly and said, "Don't you understand? I say that if you don't fight, drop your arms and come with your families to Thalaiyur alive, my king will tell you the reason for your arrest." Kundrudaiyan turned to Rockiannan and Chinnamalaikolunthu and said, "Isn't what Parakiraman says funny? He will arrest us! For that we will extend our hands! Just because I am good, Thalaiyur Kali and his general have concluded that I will not be strong." Kundrudaiyan let out a spasm of laughter and went back to his place.

"I don't have time for any discussion with you. I must execute my king's commands. Are you ready to lay down your arms and agree to be arrested?" Thalaiyur general roared.

Kundrudaiyan's moustache twitched in anger. He tightened his grip on the sword's hilt.

"You can, if possible, arrest the dead bodies of me and my family!" Kundrudaiyan's thundering voice reverberated all over the battlefield. Rockiannan who was till then patiently listening to the exchange of words between Kundrudaiyan and Parakiraman with a raging heart, looked at him keenly from head to foot. Strong body like a matured palmyra tree with hardened core. Eyes spit sparks of fire. Shoulders like two excavated rocks. On his lips moustache like two daggers. Even the tall and stately looking horse struggled to bear the weight of that man on its back. In one glance Rockiannan fully assessed his prowess and began:

"General of Thalaiyur army! You must arrest all of us - isn't that your king's wish?"

"I thought of going to Marigounden Palayam to arrest you. I have been spared of that work."

"Thank you very much! When I said 'all of us' I included me also. We are not bothered about getting arrested. But listen; I come in the tradition of great mentors of warfare. I have had the honour of training young men of many Thalaiyur families, including your king! So I will be happy if I am arrested by a warrior superior to me!"

"I understand your innuendo and jest. It is ridiculous that you are not aware that a warrior superior to you is standing in front of you!"

"Even for fun don't describe yourself as a warrior! If you are a warrior superior to me you must prove it here and now. If you do that, all of us are ready to come behind you with hands bound as prisoners!"

"How should I prove?"

"It is not a matter of pride for you, if the small army here and your big army fight with each other. To answer the question whether you are a warrior superior to me

or not I give you a chance. You and I will meet in a personal combat. That is, we will wrestle. If I am worsted by you, it will mean that all of us have given you unconditional permission to arrest us! What do you say?"

"Rockiannan! You have misjudged my bodily strength and my mental fortitude as that of the wings of glow worms! I will demonstrate that my hands are the wings of vultures! I am ready to accept your condition!"

Thalaiyur general jumped off his horse, threw away his weapons, patted his shoulders and made it known that he was ready for the wrestling contest. Rockiannan also dropped his sword, spear and shield and got ready. Kundrudaiyan, Chinnamalaikolunthu and all the soldiers who were there began watching the wrestling contest that erupted so suddenly.

Rockiannan and Parakiraman clashed like two rocks. The young Parakiraman pounced upon the aged-looking Rockiannan with a leap like a fawn and grappled him like a tiger. But wasn't he a mentor who had taught various styles of wrestling to many? And so he could successfully deal with Parakiraman's sprightly leaps and spirited attacks. When both gnawed their teeth hard and grappled and pinioned each other the noise was that of a country oil crusher at work.

Thamarai Nachiyar, Silambayi, Muthayi. Pavalayi, Arukkani Thangam, Kuppayi and others heard about this fight. They immediately rushed out and watched the contest from the balcony anxiously. As they were aware of the terms of the contest they showed extraordinary interest in Rockiannan's victory. Since their future depended on his victory they prayed to Chellandiamman and watched the wrestling fight very keenly. Parakiraman got caught in the deft grip of Rockiannan. But he carefully avoided it by slipping on to the ground, wriggled out, pushed Rockiannan aside and stood menacingly. Kundrudaiyan and others were shocked to see this. But Rockiannan did not lose heart even a little bit. As speedily as he was hit he cried aloud like a rutting elephant would trumpet when wounded and pounced upon Parakiraman.

Parakiraman planned to kick him off like a ball as speedily as he pounced upon him. He leaped high in the air, raised his legs to the level of his neck and tried to fix him in a scissors knot. Rockiannan's neck was about to be caught between his legs. Anticipating this move, Rockiannan coupled his strong hands close to the neck and when Parakiraman tried to pinion his neck with his legs he caught hold of them tightly and began to swing him around. Caught squarely and well, Parakiraman spun like a merry-go-round. Thalaiyur soldiers realised that within a few seconds Rockiannan was going to hurl him on the ground and thrash him like paddy on threshing ground. As they feared, Rockiannan thumped him against the ground once. The sound he let out was horrible. Another turnaround! Another thump

following that! It became clear to everybody that Parakiraman wouldn't stand another bout of spin and thump - would become a corpse.

The vice generals of Thalaiyur looked at their soldiers and waved their hands. They got ready. The vice generals fixed arrows to their bows and shot them at Rockiannan. From the bows of every soldier cruel arrows flew. All arrows hit the body of Rockiannan. As arrows hit him singly, in twos, in tens and in hundreds he staggered and floundered. Parakiraman whom he held firmly and was swinging, wriggled out of his clutch, took to his heels and joined his soldiers.

Pierced by the rain of arrows, Rockiannan's body bled like a jolly with as many holes and he fell down.

The next moment, the Valanadu forces led by Sankar arrived there. He saw the Thalaiyur army shooting their arrows in the direction of the Sankaranmalai fort and ordered his men to launch a speedy attack on them.

Parakiraman found it difficult to counter the joint attack of the forces led by Sankar and the Chola army led by Mayavar. They were a formidable challenge even to the extraordinary archery skills of the Thalaiyur forces. Parakiraman was very badly disoriented on the sudden arrival of the Chola army and that too, being led by Mayavar. He could not think of any way other than retreating.

In a short while, the Thalaiyur army stepped back and took to heels. Sankar decided to give a chase and destroy them completely.He spurred his horse, but just then saw his mentor in a pool of blood.

30 Woke up; Realised his Duties

Ponnar left Valanadu for Sankaranmalai fort immediately after the news that his mentor who was both mother and father to him was lying unconsciously in his death bed reached him. He was put up in a well-ventilated room, and physicians under the orders of Kundrudaiyan that all necessary treatment must be given and his life must be saved at any cost were struggling extremely hard to save him. Tears trickled down the eyes of Ponnar-Sankar just as blood was oozing out of the arrow wounds on their mentor's body.

The noise of the drum beats, the noise of the clattering swords, the noise of the arrows hitting the ramparts of the fort and the noise of the hoofs of the horses spurred on by the warriors had all died down and Sankaranmalai was quiet inside and outside. Will the mentor escape death? When will he regain consciousness? Or, perhaps, will he breathe his last? Weighed down by these fears the families of Kundrudaiyan and Chinnamalaikolunthu sat around his room all the time. Nobody felt hungry. Did not feel like sleeping. With the only prayer 'the mentor must come back to life', they sat in the corridor of that room like moulded dolls. Kuppayi alone ran hither and thither and helped the physicians by bringing whatever that was necessary for the treatment. Though her heart also was burdened by grief, she was shored up by her inner-counsel that she must not fail from her duties and remain bound to a corner. Despite the physicians' constant

assurance that the mentor would definitely escape death as there were lots of favourable signs, Ponnar-Sankar did not move away from the mentor's bed and stood there like two statues. They stood there with their hearts beating at double speed as the past incidents cast their shadows and rolled in front of their mind's eye one by one - going on all fours and playing on the shoulders and laps of the mentor, sitting near him, sleeping beside him, being taught by him, getting trained by him to become warriors fit for the battlefield, enjoying his love and affectionate hugs and receiving his counsel and guidance.

Kundrudaiyan and Thamarai anxiously enquired about the mentor's condition again and again. Others tried to guess whether the doctors gave an encouraging reply or not from their facial expressions. A whole day had passed after the mentor was wounded and fell unconscious; but still even his eyelids did not move. He was just breathing.

Next day midnight! Till then nobody in that fort had eaten or slept. The physicians were seriously engaged in treating him. As if all their efforts did not go waste, a slight movement was visible in his body. A mild murmur was heard. The physicians were happy that their efforts were going to bear fruit and intensified the treatment. After some time the chief doctor called Ponnar-Sankar near him and asked them to see whether the mentor would respond to their voice.

In an emotionally choked voice both of them called him, "*Ayya! Ayya!*" Unable to control the grief they wept. The eyes of the mentor opened slowly on hearing the voice of his dear students who were also his adopted sons. Ponnar-Sankar watched those eyes and cried bitterly; their bodies trembled. Unable to raise his hands and calm them, he asked them not to worry by moving his eyes. He wanted to say something, but could not.

The doctors asked the mentor to be calm by gestures. The eyes of the mentor were fixed on Ponnar-Sankar and Muthayi and Pavalayi who were standing very sadly a little away. The mentor's eyes became moist. Kuppayi wiped the tear drops with her fingers.

The chief doctor put his hands over the shoulders of Ponnar-Sankar and led them to the place where Kundrudaiyan, Thamarai, Chinnamalaikolunthu and others were present. All of them watched his lip movements keenly.

"The mentor has regained consciousness. It is a good sign. I am now hopeful that he will recover. So all of you go away from here, eat something and take a rest. You may wish to be near him, but at this time it is not good for him. He may become emotional on seeing you. That is natural! But that will be bad for him in this physical condition. So all of you leave this place and take a rest, please.

Tomorrow morning, he will have recovered to the extent of opening his mouth to talk."

This request of the doctor gladdened everybody. Thamarai asked him, "*Ayya*! Can one of us remain here to help?" Kuppayi at once said, "That job I'll take up." The doctor patted her and said, "Yes! Yes! This one girl is enough; very smart! Her presence will be equal to ten doctors being around."

Leaving Kuppayi alone by the side of the mentor, others left for their rooms very reluctantly. Arukkani told Kuppayi in her ears, "When you are tired call me. I will come and attend." Kuppayi replied, "I won't feel tired. If need be, I will call you. You can go now."

Midnight passed; time moved fast towards dawn. The mentor who became conscious and showed some improvement had been administered sedative and so slept calmly. Since all the assistant doctors were tired, the chief asked them to take a rest in the next room. Then he also told Kuppayi to take care of the patient and stretched his legs on a cot behind a curtain. Since he had been engaged in treatment for about two days without any rest, soon he began to snore. Kuppayi felt ill at ease on hearing the loud snore.

"Pity! Snores like this because of exhaustion. If I wake him up, his sleep will be disturbed. But the loud snore may wake up the mentor. What to do?"

This confusion did not last for a long time! The reason - Rockiannan not only woke up but also turned his head both sides and noted the presence of Kuppayi. Her face bloomed as if by magic or some trick. With spirited eagerness she said in a soft voice, "*Ayya*!" The mentor in a mild voice responded, "What, ma!" She could not contain herself. She wanted to call the chief doctor immediately and got up excitedly. As if he understood her excitement, he gestured to her by his hand and said, "No need; let him sleep; you sit down!"

Kuppayi was wonderstruck on hearing the mentor speak so many words. Arrows had pierced his body all over and from the spots where the arrows had been pulled out blood was oozing even then. In such a condition, if a man could regain his consciousness and speak cogently, how strong-willed he must be and what a great heroic warrior he must be - thinking like this Kuppayi was drowned in surprise! She also feared whether it could be the last flicker of a dying flame. Alas! She could not bear to think like that. She folded her hands involuntarily and prayed to God. She then turned to the mentor with the question why he asked her to sit down. She said, "Please drink some milk," and poured some from a cup in the gap between his lips. Since his tongue was dry, he drank a little and comforted himself. Kuppayi kept looking into his face intently. The mentor spoke again, "Kuppayi! Are Ponnar-Sankar very much worried?" When he asked this the light

of love spread in his eyes and shone bright. "Won't they be worried? All these two days they were standing here without taking any food or drink. Only they? In the fort nobody is at ease. Only on the compulsion of the doctor did all of them go away from this place a short while ago. *Ayya*! May I call them?" said Kuppayi.

"*Amma*! Don't. We can call them after the sun has risen. Before that I must ask you something. Will you tell me the truth?"

Even then the snoring noise of the chief doctor was shaking the walls of the room.

Kuppayi said very affectionately, "*Ayya*! What do you want to ask? Feel free to ask anything."

"Aren't Muthayi and Pavalayi unhappy with me?"

'Why? For what? There is absolutely no reason for them to feel like that. Weren't they also here till now and praying for your recovery?"

"They would have prayed. I don't deny it. Whatever it may be, am I not the mentor of their husbands? So they would have prayed for my recovery. Still, they should be unhappy with me."

"*Ayya*! I don't understand what you say."

"I'll tell you. Wouldn't they be unhappy with me over the condition I imposed that Ponnar-Sankar should carry out my vow and until then, even after marriage, they should remain celibates?"

"It is true; any girl in such a condition would regret her inability to taste conjugal bliss! But, they would never be angry with you for that. Since they are observing this restraint for the sake of their husbands who are paying back their gratitude to their mentor, they won't be unhappy about it at all."

"Kuppayi! You have accepted one fact! It is true, those girls are not angry with me. But won't they be very unhappy over this grief of separation? Won't they think that it is like putting an insect and a flower close to each other and a glass pane in between?"

"Yes, they are distressed over the grief of separation. I don't deny it. But my firm opinion is that they won't be angry with you for that."

After this reply of Kuppayi, he became silent. His face indicated that he was thinking deeply. Yes, his waves of thoughts rose, expanded, spread and began to dash against the fringes of his heart.

"The decision I took when I interred the body of Alagunachi that I would carry out my vow with the help of Ponnar-Sankar was, of course, right. But why did I impose the condition on myself that they should remain bachelors till then? Even so, why didn't I keep it to myself and allow it to die and instead revealed it to

them? My remaining very firm about it even at the time of marriage tells me how hard-hearted I am. Is it that only bachelors can be great warriors? Can bachelors alone carry out vows? How many persons, married and living with families, had been great warriors? Celibacy may add strength to determination, but is there any proof to say that conjugal life will not provide that strength? My vow was right! It was also right to entrust the responsibility with Ponnar-Sankar. But... but... shattering the dreams of those young girls was a great sin! I must seek a remedy for that. Now itself I must call the parents of Ponnar-Sankar and Muthayi and Pavalayi and tell them that celibacy is not necessary for fulfilling the vow."

The mentor's conscience was perturbed like this. So his heart beat fast and urged him to call them at once.

"Kuppayi!" he called.

"*Ayya*!" she responded in a loving manner.

"Go at once and bring Ponnar-Sankar and all of them here."

Kuppayi woke up the chief doctor and told him, "Please take care of him, I will bring them."

She ran to every room and called excitedly, "The mentor is quite well. He asked me to bring you."

Everybody jumped in joy and rushed to the mentor's room. The doctors were standing around his cot. The chief doctor saw them coming, went and stood in front of them. He bowed his head in grief. Ponnar-Sankar screamed, "Oh, doctor!" The doctor said calmly, "The mentor has become immortal."

31 The Mentor's Will

The Thalaiyur palace was abuzz with activities. The chief general Parakiraman stood with his head bowed as if a big rock was weighing him down. Thalaiyur Kali paced up and down as if he was measuring the length and breadth of the counsel hall. Chellatha Gounder was immersed in thought. He was stroking his dense moustache with his fingers and now and then pulling out one or two hair and throwing away angrily. Even when the hall itself looked like a question mark, Manthiappan was found sipping from his wine cup. He sat leaning in a chair and somehow endured the pain in his body.

Chellatha Gounder was very much worn down by fear, disappointment, grief and agony over the loss of Valanadu.

Manthiappan's heart was grumbling as his dream of kicking the enemies off like a ball with the help of Thalaiyur army and bringing Arichampatti also under the control of Valanadu had failed miserably.

Parakiraman was smarting as his too much flaunted valour that he would hoist the flag of victory in Sankaranmalai, in Marigounden Palayam and also in Arichampatti as he had done in Kudaiyur had been reduced to dust.

Thalaiyur Kali did not consider the defeat in the war and the first cowardly retreat of his soldiers without carrying out his orders as matters to be worried about much. He was confident that by a well-planned strategy and by leading the forces himself the victory that had eluded him could be wrested later on. Despite that confidence, why was his face deeply perturbed?

All that was disturbing him so much was the demise of Rockiannan!

It couldn't be said that the grief over the death of his mentor was pressing on his mind heavily. Didn't he order his arrest in anger? So it couldn't be that he was upset over his death.

The problem that was racking his mind was whether he should or should not attend the last rites that were to be held in Marigounden Palayam.

As the cause of his death was the Thalaiyur army, what would be the outcome of his participation in the funeral? What would be the comments of the people there?

"See the arrant knave, after killing him he has come to weep over his death!" He was sure people would definitely speak like that at least behind his back even if they did not say so face to face.

On the other hand, if he avoided going there people might say, "Look at this, somehow it has happened; shouldn't Thalaiyur Kali have made a visit to Marigounden Palayam at least to atone for it? Weren't Rockiannan and his forefathers the mentors who gave him and his family training in warfare?" He could not but think in these lines also.

However, the feeling that it would be better to go prevailed over the feeling that he should not go.

When he finally decided to go to Marigounden Palayam, Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan did not keep their mouths shut. They put forward all possible reasons and tried to stall it.

On seeing him, the enemies who had gained a temporary victory might create a battlefield there out of rage and frenzy. They could not go with a big force in anticipation of that. Going with a big force to offer condolences would invite derision. For that, if they were to go with ordinary security it might cost their lives.

Since Thalaiyur Kali considered all these reasons as challenges to his valour, he was not prepared to accept them. He ordered Parakiraman to make arrangements for the trip. After that, Chellatha Gounder did not take any effort to stop him. But at the same time he did not fail to kindle the fire of hatred in his mind.

"That Masachamy Kundrudaiyan would definitely come to Marigounden Palayam. It is he who is making all arrangements for the funeral. Though he had lost his Kudaiyur to our Thalaiyur forces, he would be strutting about proudly over our inability to capture Sankaranmalai. Chinnamalaikolunthu would be standing beside him! Our defeat in Arichampatti would have made him think of himself as a great hero! He would look at you up and down and show indifference. Above all these - what troubles me most is the presence of those rascally boys Ponnar-Sankar! In Rachandarmalai they had tasted victory by felling Thirumalai. They were the fellows who drove Manthiappan out of Arichampatti. They had snatched my authority over Valanadu with the help of the Chola army brought by

Mayavar! When the Thalaiyur army which had done away with Rockiannan was about to beat the victory drum, only these Ponnar-Sankar prevented it in the nick of time! Moreover, you must never forget what Kali Devi herself had told us through Chembakulan. Hadn't she warned us through him that those fellows would be the agents of your death! Who is behind our enemy camp? That traitor, Mayavar! That fact also must not be viewed lightly. In such a condition, is the trip to Marigounden Palayam necessary?" Though it appeared as if Gounder said all these to prevent Kali from going, his primary purpose was to keep the inimical feelings in his mind undiminished.

Nothing could prevent Thalaiyur Kali from going to Marigounden Palayam, as he was firm that he should not earn a bad name by failing to attend the funeral of his mentor. He asked Manthiappan who felt slightly relieved from body pain under the influence of alcohol to accompany him and he trembled at the thought of what might be in store!

"*Appa*! How can I go amidst so many enemies?" he looked at his father cringingly. The terrible report Gounder gave about the enemies was just to rake up the embers glowing in the mind of Kali. He was well aware that they were all very upright persons and so he encouraged him to accompany Kali.

The crowd in Marigounden Palayam was so big that the whole village appeared to be floating in a sea of people. Men and women belonging to the Kongu Velala clan, the Vettuva clan and others, without any difference, lined up to have a final look at his face. Landlords, agriculturists, chieftains and ruling patrons congregated in Rockiannan's barracks with their retinues.

Kundrudaiyan, Chinnamalaikolunthu, Mayavar, Ponnar-Sankar, Veeramalai and Vaiamperuman were seated near his body with faces marked by sadness. Women belonging to their families and other female relatives were pictures of sorrow. Hundreds of women were seated around Thamarai Nachiyar, Silambayi, Muthayi, Pavalayi, Arukkani Thangam and Kuppayi with tear-filled eyes.

A soldier brought Mayavar the news about Thalaiyur Kali's arrival and he walked up to the entrance of the barracks. He received them silently and led them to the place where Rockiannan's body was kept.

When Kali saw the pillar like body of his mentor in that state his eyes became moist involuntarily. He took the jasmine garland from Parakiraman and was about to lay it around his neck. But in the last minute he changed his mind, laid it at his feet and paid his last respects to his mentor by touching his feet reverentially.

The moon is beautiful, clear and sheds bright light when not engulfed by dark clouds. So also Kali's character shines like gold when not influenced by the foul

advice of Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan! He will lose himself when the dark clouds of their foul advice and deliberate false accusations blind him.

That moment, when he was free from their wicked influence, he showed his love and respect for his mentor. He then turned around to see where he could sit. Immediately, the ever polite Kundrudaiyan offered his seat to Kali and moved to another. Following Kundrudaiyan, Chinnamalaikolunthu also got up and Manthiappan occupied that seat.

Just opposite to their seats, accidentally, the women of Kundrudaiyan and Arichampatti families were seated. Naturally, all those who had come to attend the funeral of that great man were immersed in a sea of sorrow and thinking about his admirable life, his matchless courage his indomitable self-respect and discussing them in a mild voice. So when other men turned towards the women it was just like their seeing any other object. But the monkey mind of Manthiappan and his eyes dancing to the tune of that mind were fixed on them as if flies on sweetmeat. They never turned the other side!

To proclaim the sad news of the day a conch was blown again and again. The horse that the mentor reared affectionately and used wherever he went stood there sadly. The big crowd that was jostling around to have a look of the mentor was greatly surprised to see Thalaiyur Kali there. All those who had queued up paid their respects to the mentor when their turn came. As they left they cast a curious look at Kali.

The eyes of Manthiappan which were wandering over the crowd of women suddenly got fixed at a point and stared. He had spotted Arukkani Thangam. He remembered his attempt to play mischief with her during the Chellandiamman temple festival. He had not forgotten how severe she was with him. His brain started functioning viciously. It was already fuming under the influence of alcohol! So the daring to incite audacious mischief sprouted viciously in that brain. He hit upon a plan to sprinkle poison in Kali's mind. He touched his shoulder softly and said in a low tone, "Look there! Do you see a girl there? She is Arukkani Thangam, the sister of Ponnar-Sankar. Note her carefully, later on, I'll speak in detail. A strategy of royal magnitude has arisen in my brain! We cannot discuss it here."

Thalaiyur Kali cast a furtive glance in the direction pointed out by Manthiappan. Arukkani Thangam and Kuppayi were seated next to each other. Both were almost of the same age. At a fleeting glance they looked almost like one another. They were similar in their dress and also in the way they had plaited their hair. He did not ask, "Between those two who is Arukkani Thangam?" To ask like that in such a place did not seem proper to him. Because Manthiappan said it was 'royal strategy' he just cast a glance and took his eyes off. Manthiappan then told Parakiraman, "At least you must make a careful note of her. I have planned for a

grand royal strategy." Parakiraman immediately cast his net with his large eyes.

He put the question close to Manthiappan's ears, "Both girls look alike. Which of them is Arukkani?"

"The red saree! Red saree!" he murmured. Parakiraman looked at them carefully, yet he was not able to distinguish between them. He did not want to ask Manthiappan anything further in that situation.

Meanwhile, Veeramalai ascended the stage in the barracks. It was a little away from the place where the mentor's body was kept. There was a bamboo pipe in his hands. Both the ends of the pipe had been closed and sealed.

Veeramalai began in a loud voice, "All of you, please turn your attention to me." Immediately, the silence got intensified further. He continued:

"This sealed bamboo pipe was entrusted with me by our mentor. It contains his will which he gave me under the order that after his death it must be read in front of the people. First, I will show it to the elders present here."

Veeramalai got down from the stage and showed the bamboo pipe first to Thalaiyur Kali and to other landlords and chieftains for them to verify whether it was properly closed and sealed. All of them nodded their heads in approval and were very eager to know what the mentor would have written in his will. Veeramalai removed the seal in front of them and took out a palm leaf roll. He showed that particularly to Kali and Ponnar-Sankar as they were his students and asked them to verify his signature. They and everybody else nodded their heads as if to say that the signature was genuine. Again Veeramalai ascended the stage and said, "Now I am going to read out this document, the will of our mentor." Everybody listened to him very eagerly and carefully in pin-drop silence. The crowd outside elbowed and pushed each other to get closer and listen to Veeramalai.

Mayavar wondered why Veeramalai who had told him so much about all those incidents had not said anything about the mentor's will and its contents.

32 Emerald Green Ruby Parrot

Veeramalai started reading out the mentor's will.

"I, Rockiannan, the mentor of Marigounden Palayam barracks have written this will in good health, sound mind, good faith and without any room for misgivings. I have written this will sufficiently early, put it in a bamboo pipe, closed and sealed it and have orally instructed one of my students, Veeramalai, to read and make a public declaration of it in the presence of friends, relatives and my village people. My wish is that the items of this will of mine must come into effect immediately after my death, whether it happens due to natural causes or I lose my life heroically in a war and reach heaven. It is a fact known to all that my forefathers established a barracks in Marigounden Palayam and trained the youths of both the Kongu Velala clan and the Vettuva clan in various methods of warfare through generations and following them I have been managing this barracks. Before my forefathers established this barracks in Marigounden Palayam, their ancestors established a barracks in Veerapur forest near Valanadu and enjoyed the reputation of giving training even to soldiers belonging to the Chera, Chola and Pandia kingdoms. That in course of time owing to several wars, the internal enmity among the Velala community and the victory the enemies got by exploiting that internal enmity this barracks run in a large scale by our ancestors had to shift from there to Marigounden Palayam is history. My forefathers who

vacated and left Veerapur barracks because of the enmity that had grown between Valanadu and Thalaiyur and the confusion that arose out of the sieges could not carry with them a few expensive artifacts and so buried them secretly in Veerapur forest itself. The most beautiful and costliest among those artifacts is an emerald green ruby parrot. It is made in the shape of a parrot with emerald and ruby stones. Its structure is that of a parrot within a golden cage etched with diamonds. In order to safeguard the parrot and the cage from even a little damage it has been put in a silver casket and hidden in a secret place in Veerapur forest. There is a reason for my not trying to search for it and take possession of it till now. Since Veerapur forest is under the reign of the Thalaiyur king and the surveillance of the Thalaiyur soldiers around the forest is always vigilant I did not attempt it single-handedly. A war is needed to achieve victory in that effort. My longtime wish is that the emerald green ruby parrot must be given as a gift to Arukkani Thangam, the daughter of Kundrudaiyan. Somehow, a bond of love has developed within me for the family of Kundrudaiyan. When the king of Thalaiyur and Chellatha Gounder plotted to kill the children of Kundrudaiyan, I took upon myself that responsibility and saved those children by sacrificing my own children. Though I had saved those children I knew how Kundrudaiyan and Thamarai constantly wept over the loss of their children, Ponnar-Sankar. I waited telling myself that the truth must not be revealed in a hurry. I waited patiently till Ponnar-Sankar would grew into able warriors. During that time the affection I felt for the family of Kundrudaiyan was immeasurable. Because of that bond I began to be affectionate towards their daughter Arukkani Thangam beyond any limit. Somehow or other, Arukkani Thangam must get that emerald green ruby parrot, our family heirloom, lying hidden in Veerapur forest. I have written the details of the place where it is buried on another palm leaf and kept it separately under seal. Arukkani Thangam must keep it with herself..."

Veeramalai stopped for a moment and turned the bamboo pipe upside down. A folded and sealed palm leaf fell down. The words 'for the information of Arukkani Thangam' were written on it. At once Veeramalai got down from the stage, went up to Thamarai Nachiyar and handed it over to her saying, "Respectful *amma*! Please pass it on to your daughter."

Meantime, Mayavar shouted loudly, "Veeramalai, read the remaining portion of the will." He got up the stage again and unfolded the will. Everybody was in a state of perplexed anxiety. The faces of Thalaiyur king, Manthiappan and Parakiraman turned black. Yet, they somehow managed to retain a proud appearance. Since the villagers came to know only then that the Thalaiyur king once hatched a plot to kill the children of Kundrudaiyan all of them kept looking at him.

Veeramalai began to read the will from the point where he had stopped.

"Arukkani Thangam must keep the secret note about the place where the emerald green ruby parrot is hidden with herself and give it to her brothers Ponnar-Sankar at the time of her marriage function. After the marriage is over, the brothers must bring that parrot and give it to her as a wedding gift. I have written this with the confidence that Ponnar-Sankar have the ability and strength to accomplish this. Besides this, Ponnar-Sankar have another duty to perform. That duty is to carry out my vow. The vow I took in front of my wife Alagu Nachiyar's grave. Thalaiyur Kali and Chellatha Gounder plotted to kill Ponnar-Sankar. In order to save them I sacrificed my children. As requital for that Ponnar-Sankar must take revenge upon those sinners. Till then they must remain bachelors. They who were brought up by me must hold the execution of my vow as their ambition. In memory of my conjugal companion Alagu Nachiyar I have undertaken the expense of putting up a lamp in Chellandiamman temple and lighting it every night. I wish that it must continue even after my death. I also make it known that after my death all the rights over this barracks and the ensuing right to manage it and the rights over my house, garden and all other properties accrue to my faithful student Veeramalai."

When Veeramalai read the final words of the mentor about him, his voice broke. Tears flowed down copiously from his eyes. He was about to swoon, but Mayavar rushed to him and held him by his hands. Veeramalai entrusted the will with Mayavar and began to weep and cry. The cries of all those people who had assembled there rose into a crescendo.

King Kali signalled by his eyes to Manthiappan and Parakiraman and all of them got up to leave.

Arrangements to inter the mortal remains of Rockiannan were hurried up. In that bustle nobody bothered about Thalaiyur Kali's departure.

But one thing, everybody there was of the firm view that the will of Rockiannan had written the introduction to an open confrontation – a fight to finish - between Thalaiyur Kali and Ponnar-Sankar.

Thalaiyur Kali's chariot had gone a long way from Marigounden Palayam. A few soldiers on horseback were escorting it. Parakiraman was driving the chariot. Kali and Manthiappan were seated inside.

Silence reigned in the chariot for a long time. At last Manthiappan's voice broke it and sprang forth furiously.

"For the first time I see king Kali sad. Is the reputation that even if the sun changes its direction none can win Kali a mere figment of imagination?"

These words made Kali raise his head.

"Manthi! I don't tremble in fear. Just to get rid of your father and me that mentor Rockiannan had brought up those Ponnar-Sankar and had also written that will. I am thinking how to tackle that plan! That's all."

"We must counter conspiracy with conspiracy. For that I have had a wonderful brainwave."

"Why this hesitation? You can tell me boldly; Parakiraman alone is with us. Nothing will leak out."

"Isn't it true that only if Ponnar-Sankar become our enemies, will they think of taking revenge upon us? If they don't become enemies...?"

"Manthiappa! What do you say? Are they going to become our enemies only after this? They are already our enemies and they have taken a vow to revenge upon us."

"To blow off that enmity just like smoke I have a kingly idea."

"Only if you tell me can I understand."

"I'll tell you. If that Arukkani Thangam is made the wife of Thalaiyur Kali, Ponnar-Sankar will become your brothers-in-law! The enmity will vanish automatically!"

'But I belong to the Vettuva clan! Arukkani Thangam is a Kongu Velala! How can there be a marital union?"

"You must listen patiently. Hurry and rage will obscure understanding. Rockiannan has entrusted the secret about the emerald green ruby parrot hidden in the Veerapur forest to Arukkani. We can hit two birds in one shot. We can get hold of that precious parrot from the forest which is in our possession; and also make Arukkani Thangam the consort of Thalaiyur Kali."

"What is the way for it? I'm asking you only that."

"There's an easy way. We must entrust this job with our general Parakiraman. He should carry out the task skillfully."

"Which job is to be entrusted with him?"

"A job that cannot be accomplished by waging a war. A job that Parakiraman can successfully finish by using his intelligence."

"Manthiappa! Tell me without testing my patience."

"If need be, he should perform some magic, enter into Valanadu fort and abduct Arukkani to our place. If he is successful, along with Arukkani the secret about the emerald parrot also will be in our hands. Can she escape the Thalaiyur king after coming to his couch? Ponnar-Sankar will agree to marry their molested sister to Kali. Then they would become your relatives through marriage. No fight or

wrangle. Thalaiyur's head will be safe."

"To abduct Arukkani Thangam from Valanadu fort? You are advising me to reach the very summit of immorality!"

"Didn't we sacrifice the two children of our mentor to Kali Devi mistaking them for Ponnar-Sankar? My suggestion is not anyway more unjust than that! I suggest a way to tackle enmity in a cunning manner! Shouldn't that emerald parrot remaining hidden in our forest become the possession of our palace? If you make Arukkani the queen of Thalaiyur, won't Ponnar-Sankar calm down and shrink like tortoises?"

Thalaiyur Kali could not understand that Manthiappan was inciting him to fight against the family of Kundrudaiyan so that he could get back the lost Valanadu!

So he began thinking about Manthiappan's plan and how to implement it successfully.

The chariot proceeded towards Thalaiyur.

33 Strong Shoulder that Broke the Barrier

The chariot reached Thalaiyur palace. King Kali, who had been silently thinking about Manthiappan's plan till then, got down, shook his shoulders and said in mock politeness. "*Manthiappa*! Your plan is accepted. Parakirama! Will you succeed at least in this matter?" Manthiappan was extremely happy that his plan was accepted. Parakiraman bowed his head and assured them, "I will definitely carry out this plan."

Palace guards, vice generals and other dignitaries bowed their heads respectfully and welcomed Thalaiyur Kali. He entered the counsel hall in a very thoughtful mood and occupied a silver chair. Chellatha Gounder enquired, "How was the trip?" and sat beside him. A palace guard bowed and bent in front of him very respectfully and submitted a sealed palm leaf missive as if he had been awaiting his return. He asked, "What's it? From where has it come?" and directed Gounder to read it. His eyes opened wide and his face blackened in rancour as he read the contents.

He said to Kali, "The message is from Uraiyur king Akkaladeva Cholan."

Thalaiyur Kali's eyes reddened. Moustache twitched. Body trembled in anger. As the Chola king had sent an army with Mayavar for capturing the Valanadu of his patron Chellatha Gounder and had strengthened the hands of his enemies Ponnar-Sankar he did not give the respect due to his missive. He casually asked, "What has Akkaladevan written?"

In reply to his question Gounder began reading out the missive.

"The great king of Uraiyur, Akkaladeva Cholan very kindly sends this invitation to Kali, the king of Thalaiyur..."

Gounder read these lines, laughed jestingly and said, "Oho! Is he the great king of Uraiyur? Only a king of kings can be a great king! When did he become a great king?"

Kali got up and addressed Gounder, "We call the eighteen regions under the reign of our close agnates countries. I get the title 'king' by virtue of my being the head of the eighteen rulers of these (those) countries. Likewise, the Uraiyur king who has a few such kings like me under his control calls himself a great king. Let it be. What is written in the missive? Read it out completely."

"We felt happy on hearing about the valour of Ponnar-Sankar, the two young sons of Kundrudaiyan. Their action of fighting bravely and capturing Valanadu which belongs to their family could not be construed as wrong in any way. Only on the realisation that it was the responsibility of the Uraiyur administration to support those who fight for winning back their rights, we sent our army to assist

Ponnar-Sankar. The victory that these young men got with the support of our army is praiseworthy. So the Uraiyur administration has resolved to recognise them as the rulers of Valanadu. To execute that decision, arrangements have been made for an investiture ceremony in Uraiyur palace on Sunday, the twentieth day of the present *Avani* month. Your presence in the function to be held for honouring Ponnar-Sankar and conferring the administrative rights of Valanadu to them is expected. This invitation is sent for that purpose."

Chellatha Gounder observed the face of Kali. Kali felt that the Chola king had insulted him very badly by sending an army in support of Ponnar-Sankar who had taken birth just to take his life. Not only that, he had fallen into the treacherous net of that betrayer Mayavar. To top it all, he was now going to recognise those urchins who wrested from him the reign of Valanadu which was till then protected by the strength of his army and his personal influence. As if to rub salt into that injury he was organising an investiture ceremony to celebrate his act of recognising them as rulers of Valanadu and had sent him an invitation. He slapped his hand on a nearby pillar and roared in rage.

"I will not go. I will also prevent all the eighteen Vettuva clan rulers who are our dependants from attending the Uraiyur function." Chellatha Gounder made use of this angry outburst for his personal benefit and started his usual job of stroking the flame of anger.

"Yes; only then will that Uraiyur fellow realise that by sending his forces to support Ponnar-Sankar on the advice of Mayavar he had to lose the friendship of Thalaiyur and along with it the friendship of the eighteen rulers depending on Thalaiyur. The mental shock he suffers now will make him behave properly in future. Not just that. All the citizens of the Chola country will wonder and praise you as a self-respecting hero. They may not say this in public but will at least cherish it in their hearts."

Kali could not understand that just by praising him sky-high Chellatha Gounder was boosting up his influence in the palace. He who believed and respected him greatly stroked his bushy moustache and nodded his head with a smile in approval.

Chellatha Gounder did not leave it at that. "Our not going there is not enough. In Uraiyur, we must somehow disgrace these urchins Ponnar-Sankar when they are there to attend that function as the main heroes."

Kali asked, "Disgracing them in the Uraiyur function? How can we do that?"

"Don't forget that the chief guard of Uraiyur fort is Parakiraman's younger brother Vikraman. We must find a way to insult Ponnar-Sankar through Vikraman and make them enemies of Uraiyur Cholan. That job must be done by Parakiraman now itself. Nothing very big; a note from Parakiraman to his brother will do." He then turned to Parakiraman and said kindly, "What general! Isn't what I say right?".

Parakiraman replied as if he had already completed the job, "I am keeping my brother in Uraiyur only to look after our affairs. Don't worry. I will inform him today itself."

Manthiappan who was observing all these silently was glad that everything was going in the right direction. He jumped up and Kali looked up to him eagerly.

"We must abduct Arukkani Thangam and make her the queen of Thalaiyur. From her we must find out the secret about the emerald green ruby parrot. Didn't I say all these? This Ponnar-Sankar function is happening only to pave way for all my plans."

King Kali asked in suspicion, "Manthiappa! What do you say? What is the connection between our plan to abduct Arukkani and the reception arranged for Ponnar-Sankar in Uraiyur?"

"There is a lot of connection. Can't we easily finish the job of abducting Arukkani from Valanadu palace when Ponnar-Sankar are on their way to Uraiyur? God himself is sending these urchins to Uraiyur now. We mustn't miss that opportunity, but make use of it to finish our job."

The king of Thalaiyur felt confident and said with new vigour, "Yes! What Manthiappan says is right. Our plan can be successfully carried out without any opposition when Ponnar-Sankar are away from Valanadu."

He spoke about victory in definite terms. Manthiappan wished that Kali must praise his intelligence even more.

"My brain is functioning very fast. If Ponnar-Sankar are disgraced in Uraiyur as per my father's plan, they will get angry with the Chola king Akkaladevan. Since they are youngsters, they will spring to action immediately. As a result their connections with Uraiyur will break. If that happens, who will then come forward to lend army support to these urchins? The weakened Ponnar-Sankar will come to Thalaiyur and say that they are not concerned over the abduction of their sister and bargain with us to get her married to you and become your brothers-in-law. If they become your brothers-in-law there will be no problem any more. The enemies Ponnar-Sankar against whom Kaliamman warned us by possessing Chembakulan will become slaves of Thalaiyur."

Chellatha Gounder was very much impressed by the wonderful imagination of his son. He hugged him and spoke jubilantly, "You have proved that you are my son. If the plan you have given for the diplomatic way of getting affectionately close to the enemies and undoing them is executed successfully, I am hopeful that one day we may be able to hoist the flag of king Kali even in Uraiyur."

Thalaiyur Kali who had immeasurable love and affection for them lost his sense even more in their pretentious action without understanding that they were stroking the fire of enmity only out of self-interest.

He thought, "Whatever be the reason, how sincere they are in doing anything for my sake! They are ready even to ruin their own clan for me. What they do is treachery, but when that treachery is useful to me and Thalaiyur, I have to wink at it. And for that I am bound to be grateful to them for ever! Though it is said that betrayers must not be trusted – I am sure they will not betray me – they will only betray anybody else for my sake. And that's why I am so much affectionate towards them."

Praising Gounder and his son in his mind, he told Parakiraman in a peremptory manner, "The tasks of abducting Arukkani Thangam from Valanadu palace and disgracing Ponnar-Sankar in Uraiyur are your sole responsibility."

"I will complete both the tasks successfully, my king."

"Don't plan anything crude as you are wont to, for bringing that girl. It is only proper to do something extraordinary and abduct her."

"I will do exactly like that," Parakiraman said in the most respectful manner and left. A few minutes later, a Thalaiyur spy entered the counsel hall and said, "King, information has come that from Valanadu Ponnar-Sankar along with Mayavar are proceeding to Uraiyur in a decorated chariot with scant security."

"This information with the reason why they are going there has already reached me. It doesn't matter. Let them watch carefully what follows." Then Kali left for the dining hall with Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan. The spy also left for Uraiyur speedily to follow the activities there.

The entire town of Uraiyur was decorated with colourful flags and festoons. All the citizens were walking gaily towards the palace in new dress. Trees like plantain and areca nut were tied to long bamboo poles all along the streets. Festoons made of palmyra and coconut fronds were hung crisscross and on the sides of the streets leading to the palace. They were aplenty and almost hid the sky. The way they had tied thick paddy bunches to ropes and hung them everywhere bore testimony to the rich fertility of the Chola country. Inside the palace an enormous flood of joyful cheerfulness! Akkaladeva Cholan wore his crown and a lot many jewels and started for the royal court from the queen's private chamber. On the way he mulled over the function got up for welcoming Ponnar-Sankar and conferring on them the recognition that they were the rulers of Valanadu. He was past sixty years of age; but his hair had not grayed, or his skin shrunk. In his well-structured body he appeared majestic. He entered the royal court escorted by his bodyguards. On the velvet carpet covering the floor he walked erect like the tiger in the crest of his flag.

In the royal court many chieftains were present. Besides them, there were also Marayan, Peraiyan, Mooventhavelan, Thondaiman, Pallavarayan, Kalingarayan. Kadavarayan, Kachirayan, Chethirayan, Vanakovaraiyan, Mavali Vanarayan, Viluparayan, Malavarayan and Cholakone. They were all royal officials of the king who had inherited the titles of the Chola country conferred on their forefathers by the government. There were the presidents and members of village councils, and village employees like *mathiasthan, karanathan, pady kappan* and *thanduvan.*

All of them stood up as Akkaladeva Cholan entered the hall and seated himself in his tiger crest-etched golden throne. They then greeted him and took their seats.

Three chairs had been placed next and a little below the king's throne. All those who had assembled there were aware that those chairs were for Ponnar-Sankar and Mayavar and so their eyes were focused on them.

Akkaladevan turned to his general and enquired with his eyes, "Why haven't they come?" The general understood the king's mind and immediately walked towards the portals of the fort.

Meantime, the chariot carrying Ponnar-Sankar and Mayavar reached the entrance of the palace after crossing the streets especially decorated for the function.

They admired the beauty of the entrance and also the special decorations made for their reception. When the chariot driver was about to drive the chariot through the entrance a surprise overtook them. It was the lightning speed at which the palace gate was closed.

Vikraman, the chief of the palace guards, stood in front of the chariot.

"Aren't you Ponnar-Sankar?"

"Yes."

"You who are going to be recognised as the slaves of Uraiyur shall not enter through the main entrance. There is a way at the back. Go that way."

"What?"

"This is the order of the Chola king!"

Sankar turned into a hurricane. "This is an unbearable insult, Mayavar! It can never be tolerated!" he shouted loudly. Ponnar tried to calm Sankar, "*Thambi*, be patient!"

Mayavar looked at Vikraman keenly. Then he said to Sankar, "This is not the order of Uraiyur! But Thalaiyur's conspiracy!"

"What if?" roared Sankar.

"The obstacle can be smashed!" said Mayavar.

"We will not allow you!" Vikraman threatened menacingly. He did not stop at that. Along with a large number of soldiers he rattled the chariot and toppled it. The frightened horses ran amuck. The driver was wounded. Ponnar-Sankar and Mayavar fell down from the chariot.

The same moment he fell, Sankar rose and dashed against the fort gate with the speed of a wounded tiger. It could not be known how all his strength piled up and converged in his right shoulder – he dashed against the gate with that shoulder.

The gate broke into three or four pieces and gave way.

That thunder-like sound was heard in the royal court of Akkaladevan.

There was great excitement in the palace as news spread that enemies had broken-open and entered the palace!

"Ah!" shouted Akkaladevan and got up in anger.

34 Investiture Ceremony in the Royal Court!

The spy who had bundled up the whole lot of information from Uraiyur began to narrate everything to king Kali in the private chamber of Thalaiyur palace.

"Akkaladeva Cholan was informed within seconds that the fort portal was not broken by enemies. Our Vikraman thought one way and acted accordingly. But what happened was something very different! The plan was to block the main entrance and insult Ponnar-Sankar with the idea that they would get enraged and return and because of that enmity would grow between them and the Chola king. Mayavar should have told them about Vikraman. So Sankar dashed against the portal with the strength of a hundred elephants. His drum-like shoulder hit and broke the portal into pieces. As soon as the general arrived at the entrance Mayavar informed him of what happened. The soldiers who toppled and rolled the chariot of Ponnar-Sankar under the command of Vikraman changed sides instantaneously, surrounded the same Vikraman, handcuffed him and dragged him to jail under the orders of the general."

When the spy said this the eyes of Kali became blocks of fire.

"What? Have they put Vikraman in jail? Didn't the Chola king think of enquiring Vikraman and knowing what happened?" Kali asked in anger. But the spy answered in a restrained manner.

"My king! He should have thought that no enquiry was needed to probe the obvious truth. In so many enquiries the real culprits are let off and the innocent are punished. Our conscience knows that Vikraman was a culprit. What would we have done if the chief guard of our palace had done anything like this?"

King Kali replied without even thinking, "We would have cut off his head!"

"My king! Do you understand now that the punishment given to our Vikraman in Uraiyur was much less?"

Since the spy said this very politely by twisting his body in a respectful and obsequious manner, Kali did not get angry with him at the spy advising him like that. The spy understood that the king was thinking calmly, and considered it an opportune time to change his path. He was confident that he could change the course of Kali's activities and so continued:

"I am your spy.A servant bound to take orders from you. The arrow or spear you throw speedily will go straight and hit the target. But I cannot go straight like that arrow or spear. I am like a dog which takes as many turns as necessary, stalks and sniffs for places where animals are hiding. So you must give due importance to the information got through me"

"Don't I give importance? Why do you have this doubt? You can tell me without hiding anything."

"I can tell you - but it may not be easy for you to believe! Just because Mayavar talked to you with an open mind bitterness rose and he left us to join our enemies."

"Mayavar's matter is a different one. He was a stumbling block and interfered with everything. He who should have stood in support of me and taken the responsibility of routing out my enemies was giving only useless advice. Then what can I do?"

"That's why I am afraid of saying anything openly, my king. But one thing; since I consider my duty greater than my life I do not lack the courage to tell you what I must."

"You can tell me anything without fear. To accept it or not is my concern. But I have this hope; I firmly believe that even if I don't accept what you are going to say, you will not do anything treacherous and leave me as Mayavar has done."

"My king! Didn't I call myself a hound that sniffs and finds out the hidey-holes of forest animals?

"Yes."

"Two animals identified by this hound are roaming about in human form."

Kali could guess whom he was going to mention. He wanted to hear the names from the mouth of the spy. But before he could answer they heard some footsteps. Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan entered the private chamber. King Kali feared that the spy might mutter something audaciously. So he very intelligently changed the course of the conversation. Still, he gave a reply that would clarify his position.

"In the *Mahabharat* though Karnan knew very well about Duriyodanan and Saguni he listened to their words till the end. Do you know the reason? In his young age the Duriyodanan group only was in support of him. They made him the king of the Anga country. To discharge his duties of gratitude Karnan stuck to whatever they said till the end; and gave up his life for them."

Chellatha Gounder laughed and asked, "Why this sudden discourse on *Mahabharat,* that too in front of the spy?"

"Nothing. The spy is worried over the imprisonment of Parakiraman's brother Vikraman and I am consoling him. Didn't Karnan give up his life to perform his duty?"

Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan were terribly shocked and shouted in one voice, "What? Is Vikraman in jail?"

"Yes - let the spy tell us the remaining news." Expectably, the spy was ruffled, but cleared his throat and continued.

"Akkaladeva Cholan declared in the royal court itself that his government regretted the unexpected incident that took place in the pleasant reception. Ponnar-Sankar and Mayavar were led to their respective seats. The Chola king looked at the two young men again and again and was visibly pleased. The minister handed over to the king an inscribed copper plate that recognised Ponnar-Sankar as the rulers of Valanadu. The king called Ponnar-Sankar to come near him. They paid their obeisance to Mayavar, received his blessings and then went up to the king. The audience felt thrilled on watching that scene and shouted, 'Long live Akkaladeva Cholan!' At that time a surprise that nobody expected happened. That incident in which Ponnar-Sankar's feeling of self-respect came to the fore, which overwhelmed me even."

As the spy went on king Kali laughed and said, "Enough! Enough! Don't get excited. It is enough if you just report the happenings." Anger was perceptible in that laughter.

The spy then described all that happened in the Uraiyur royal court without getting emotional.

"Akkaladeva Chola held the inscribed copper plate in his hands and addressed Ponnar-Sankar and the gathering."

"What did he say? What happened?"

'Mayavar described to us the heroic exploits and prowess of Ponnar-Sankar and explained the legitimate land rights of their father Kundrudaiyan. So only our Chola army was sent to support them. We have also realised that though Chellatha Gounder who was governing Valanadu and Thalaiyur Kali who supports him appear to be under the control of our Chola reign are only pretending to be so. We won't regret even if they don't respect our government. But there is no limit to the sufferings of the people under their rule. Information is pouring in about the miserable lives of peasants, workers and traders. The people of Valanadu are caught in the clutches of poverty as the land has become sterile due to depleting water sources. How can we silently watch the rulers of Valanadu and its supporter Thalaiyur Kali indulging in a pompous and wasteful life of celebrations and entertainments unmindful of the sufferings of the people? That was why we acceded to the request of Mayavar without any hesitation. We do not have the desire to capture countries. In the Chola dynasty, our ancestors Raja Raja Cholan and Rajendra Cholan went as far as Kadaram with their naval forces and scored victories. Their navy went to the island of Ceylon also and hoisted its flag of victory there. All those who have assembled here know that the Chola country which had extended itself thus far, eventually lost its status of a large kingdom after the reign of King Rajendra Chola III. Later, the Chola region got divided into many smaller regions. Now only one of those regions is under the jurisdiction of our Uraiyur. Thalaiyur is within its limits; yet we have been permitting Thalaiyur and the eighteen Vettuva clan regions dependent on it to govern themselves with some freedom. The Valanadu regime, though it enjoys the support of Thalaiyur, has to accept our Uraiyur as its headquarters and function accordingly. Since we were not strict in enforcing our authority, Valanadu governs itself as per its wishes and has earned the displeasure of its people and us. Now, that has come to an end and the administration of Valanadu has devolved on Kundrudaiyan and his sons. Though Ponnar-Sankar have redeemed Valanadu after a war, they need to be recognised by the Chola kingdom as the rightful rulers of Valanadu. With your blessings I am going to grant them that recognition now in our royal court."

As the spy repeated the speech of the Chola king verbatim, Thalaiyur Kali intercepted, "Why this *Ramayana*? Tell us what happened quickly."

"Shouldn't I tell the king all that happened without omitting anything? Before concluding his speech, the Chola king handed over the inscribed copper plate to Ponnar-Sankar.And they received it from him very respectfully."

"All right! You said something about a miracle. And then about self-respect asserting itself. What's that?" Kali was impatient.

"I will; now itself," said the spy with folded hands.

"When Akkaladeva Chola said, 'Please read this deed that recognises both of you as the administrators of Valanadu carefully and act accordingly,' the smile disappeared and the face of Sankar underwent a sudden change."

"Hm! After that?" Thalaiyur Kali urged the spy.

"The Chola king himself explained the articles of the deed."

"What were they?" Thalaiyur Kali could not remain patient.

"We will do everything for the welfare of the Valanadu people. We will institute village councils to identify and redress the problems of the people. Through the entire region of Valanadu the village councils will perform their duties with the aim of helping the good people to live in peace and restricting the bad and correcting them. You must take an oath that you will establish lake boards for protecting the lakes, ponds and tanks and thereby increase agricultural output; that you will establish horticultural boards to protect dry lands and gardens; that you will establish gold boards to examine gold coins; that you will establish tax boards to collect land tax and remit it to the government; that you will appoint officials to take care of wet lands and audit the accounts; that you will make appointments through proper selection methods and that you will care for the welfare of the people. You will follow the administrative procedures of the Chola kingdom without fail and improve the living conditions of the Valanadu people. Besides these administrative responsibilities, you will execute all work related to defence, education and other sectors with the prior permission of the Chola government in Uraiyur. Further, you must promise in this assembly that you will pay tribute to Uraiyur every year. As Akkaladeva Cholan listed the conditions one by one Ponnar's face darkened though there were no signs of anger. But Sankar burst and exploded like a volcano. He snatched the copper plate from the hands of Ponnar and shouted, 'Is this a deed conferring recognition on us or is it an instrument to make Valanadu a slave to Uraiyur?' and hurled it on the floor of the royal court."

Thalaiyur Kali was simply drowned in surprise on hearing this. He was too much excited and asked, "Was it so? What happened next?"

"All those present stood still as the pillars there. Akkaladeva Cholan froze and stood like a statue. Mayavar was aghast. Ponnar pulled his brother close to him and said, "*Thambi*, be patient."

"After that?"

"Akkaladevar who had become a statue appeared to regain his consciousness. He slowly got down the steps and picked the copper plate that was lying on the floor of the royal court with his hands."

"What did he do with that?"

"Before he could pick it up, the Chola general drew his sword and ordered his soldiers. And they surrounded Ponnar-Sankar with handcuffs."

35 There Came a Shapely Beauty

"Stop!" Akkaladeva Cholan ordered the soldiers who surrounded Ponnar-Sankar in a thundering voice that shook the royal court. They who rushed with handcuffs withdrew like keyed-up dolls. Holding the inscribed copper plate in his hands, the King went near Sankar and observed him keenly. He found that though the flaming fire that sprang up in his eyes had subsided the glowing embers were still flaring. The people in the hall expected Sankar to realise his folly and ask for pardon. Akkaladevar smiled meaningfully and addressed Sankar calmly.

"Young warrior! You have inflicted on the Chola region an indescribable disgrace. Yet I am not angry with you. Can the mother who lovingly feeds her baby with succouring milk and rice punish it for tripping up the plate in her hands? Nor would the mother ask the baby 'why did you do so?' There is no use in it. The reason; the baby has not attained the speaking stage. But you can speak. So I ask you; why did you speak insultingly about the copper deed and hurl it on the floor?"

First, Sankar thought of leaving the hall along with his elder brother without giving any reply to the king's question. But he changed his mind and stood before the king with uplifted chest.

"Respectful king! You gave a copper deed; but we do not consider it succouring milky food. To us it is sweet porridge mixed with poison. We should get the permission of your country for carrying out what we should do to the people of our country. Every year we must pay tribute to you. We did not come here to attend an investiture ceremony of that sort."

"Can you speak without bearing in mind the fact that we sent our troops to redeem Valanadu? From now on our army will be the protecting force of your country. Don't you need all that?"

Ponnar intervened and said, "Anticipating this situation I enquired Mayavar then itself and got clarification. But what Mayavar said then was different from what is happening now." Mayavar found it hard to give an answer. Still, as he was pushed to the necessity of managing the situation somehow, he looked sadly at Ponnar-Sankar and broke the silence.

"King! On my request you sent your army in support of Ponnar-Sankar. Though Sankar welcomed it cheerfully, even then Ponnar imposed the condition - there should not be any attempt to make Valanadu a dependent country after giving military support."

Akkaladeva Cholar asked in surprise, "Is it so?"

"It was so, my king. At that time I thought it was enough if the rule of Chellatha Gounder was got rid of and the influence that Thalaiyur Kali wielded there was brought to an end. So I accepted that condition on your behalf. It was a mistake on my part to have given that assurance without getting your concurrence, and to have behaved in a manner that made Ponnar-Sankar believe it implicitly was a graver mistake."

"Mayavar! Though Valanadu is dependent on Thalaiyur in a way, aren't both Valanadu and Thalaiyur to be under the control of our Chola country? When that is so, how can these young men think that I am trying to impose my authority on Valanadu as if only now? It is not right."

Ponnar replied in his usual calm and firm manner, "Is it the will of God that slavishness must continue? I cannot agree with this view conscientiously. If it is true that you extended your help to us with the pure wish of destroying the bad and helping the people of Valanadu achieve better living conditions, is not your demand that Valanadu should pay tribute to Uraiyur a challenge to our self-respect and our desire for freedom?"

"So, is it Ponnar's view that there shall not be any connection whatsoever between Valanadu and the Chola country?"

The perturbation in the mind of the king was perceptible in this question. But Sankar gave a fitting reply at once. "If we thought there should be no connection at all, we would not have come to attend this investiture ceremony. Uraiyur is a country bigger than Valanadu. Has more military power. In area, in population, in everything it is a bigger country. Such a country should recognise Valanadu, which has liberated itself just now from dominance, as a friendly country and extend support for its freedom and comfortable living conditions. Instead, if recognition is accorded with a view to making us a dependent country, can freedom-loving persons like us accept it?"

Akkaladeva Chola did not get angry even though the reply was against his interests. He was actually pleased and appreciated Ponnar-Sankar's thirst for freedom that combined intelligence and valour. The respect he had for them went up one more step. Still, not acceding to their request immediately, he put one more question.

"If that is so, assume that the Chola country is not ready to have any friendly relationship with Valanadu! Can Valanadu remain an independent country, as you wish it to be? What will happen to your independence, if Thalaiyur's army and the armies of its eighteen supporting countries jointly invade Valanadu?

A whiplash hit Sankar's heart like lightning! He shuddered at it!

"I would like to tell the Uraiyur Cholan this. Please don't think that young calves are gamboling without any sense of fear. Our intention is not to enjoy the comforts of power at any cost - whether it is to bow and bend respectfully before somebody or become a slave to somebody. Even if we were to lose our lives in our fight against the deluge-like attack of the enemy, the satisfaction that we died breathing the air of liberty would be enough for us! On the other hand, we cannot even think of destroying the enemy with your military support and be tribute-paying slaves to you! Even if we dream like that in our sleep we will consider it an insult to our valour and thirst for freedom. King, it is a great insult! If we live after that kind of dream, we will only be a burden to the earth!"

Sankar's speech moved Akkaladevan deeply. He jumped and hugged Sankar. He hugged Ponnar also in the same manner. There was a new glow in his eyes. Looked at the audience proudly! Spoke with bubbling cheer!

"I see that these young men's sense of honour has impressed you as much as it has impressed me. Some strange feeling makes me feel confident that Ponnar-Sankar are going to create history as the towering personalities of the Kongu country. As they wish, Valanadu will have all its rights and be a friendly country to the Chola kingdom. So the recognition inscribed in this copper plate is withdrawn. As Ponnar-Sankar are our dear friends Valanadu is recognised as one of our

friendly countries. As a mark of that I offer them these ornamental chains made of gold."

The Chola king took off two gold chains that were hanging around his neck and adorned Ponnar-Sankar with them. The assembly shouted, "Long live Ponnar-Sankar!" The extremely happy Mayavar in his lone emotionally choked voice shouted, "Long live Akkaladeva Cholan!" The king requested Ponnar-Sankar to stay in the palace as his guest for one or two days.

Ponnar looked at Sankar and Sankar looked at Ponnar. The king noted this and said jokingly, "I am only making a friendly request." The brothers smiled and nodded their acceptance,

When Thalaiyur Kali came to know about the special treatment accorded to Ponnar-Sankar in the royal court of Uraiyur and the love that the king bestowed upon them he began to think in all seriousness. The hearts of Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan began to burn.

Like swords and daggers that take shape in the heat of the furnace, conspiracies took shape in their burning hearts. Father and son competed with each other in suggesting plans. Since Kali felt that the spy would not relish them and their plans he sent him away. After his exit, Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan began brainwashing Kali.

"We must make use of this rare time when Ponnar-Sankar are staying as guests in Uraiyur palace. This opportunity is doubly beneficial because that Mayavar, the greatest conspirator, is also there with these urchins. Both Chinnamalaikolunthu and Vaiyamperuman should have gone to Arichampatti. That fellow Veeramalai alone should have taken charge of the security of Valanadu. Besides him, there will only be Thamarai Nachiyar and her daughters-in-law Muthayi and Pavalayi. General Parakiraman is not going to get an opportunity better than this to abduct Arukkani Thangam. It is better to send him there today itself."

Thalaiyur Kali listened to the idea jointly offered by them and said, "Under my orders Parakiraman has already left. By now he should have reached Valanadu!"

"No, no. Parakiraman hasn't started yet. He is with Vadivalagi!"

When Manthiappan gave this reply with a sneer, Kali was shocked a little and asked eagerly, "Who is that Vadivalagi?" He was puzzled because Parakiraman was not married and so wondered who that woman could be.

"Vadivalagi is not his wife; but concubine. Like gold in a mine she is in the general's palace. Except me, nobody else knows this secret. Don't ever show that you know this. General Parakiraman doesn't go anywhere without bidding good-bye to her."

"Where did he catch such a woman?" Kali now started this enquiry.

"When he visited Uraiyur on official work he happened to meet this danseuse. From her he drinks pleasure in cupfuls. It can't be said that she is immeasurably beautiful - but she is a seducer. Please don't reveal anything that I said to you. Just now I saw them both. That's why I told you so definitely that he had not left for Valanadu."

Thalaiyur Kali got vexed. "Oho! Now there is an answer to the surprising defeat of Thalaiyur. It is because he is all the time in the pleasure hall of his concubine in an unconscious state. Manthi! Go and meet him again. Tell him that I am angry and urge him to go there immediately."

Manthiappan took the words of Kali as a command and went to Parakiraman's palace.

There had never been any obstacle to the entry of Manthiappan into that place. The guards bowed their heads to the extent of straining their necks and received him. He went up to the bedroom. The door was closed. He pushed it slowly and found that it was not bolted. He did not like to open it fully as both of them were hugging each other in a state of undressed openness. The wine cup in the hands of Parakiraman was kissing the jackfruit lips of Vadivalagi and the wine cup in her hands was kissing his large lips!

"King Kali would be under the impression that I had left for Valanadu!"

"Won't your friend go and blurt out indiscreetly?"

"Eh! Vadivalagi, is he a friend of mine only, isn't he your friend also?"

"That is only on rare occasions! Don't we touch the pickle served in a corner of the dinner-leaf with a finger and taste it; he is just like that pickle to me when you are away!"

"Even so, can I dump jewels made of gold and precious stones on your body as he has done? He came here today under the impression that I would have gone to Valanadu and he could play with you. It's a pity, I stayed behind! Eh! Tell me plainly. I won't mistake it. Do you find more pleasure in him than in me?"

"Chi! Chi! What sort of question is it? May I give a succinct answer?"

"Yes, Vadivalagi, tell me."

"He finds pleasure in me; whereas I find pleasure in you. Is that enough? Should I say anything more clearly?"

"Need not, need not! I have understood quite well!"

Though Manthiappan's face wore a silly look at this intimate conversation he contained himself and watched them without moving. Parakiraman said he should be enjoying that feast that night; but Parakiraman was enjoying it like the

Kadothgajan of *Mahabharat.* She was lying on his shoulders like a deer on the forehead of an elephant. The wine cups were filled again and again. Manthiappan gulped only the saliva that secreted copiously in his mouth.

Parakiraman and Vadivalagi kicked away the empty wine jars.

Intoxication reached its extreme! Parakiraman embraced her very tightly. She got out of his grip a little and commanded him with bubbling love, "Put off that oil lamp."

The light was extinguished and Manthiappan did not like to see through the thin silk curtain those two shadowy figures indulging in joyful entertainment. He closed the door silently and stood outside.

How long could he stand; poor fellow, his legs began to ache!

At last he mustered courage somehow and knocked at the door with his fingers.

"Who is that?" An agitated voice was heard.

"It is me only, Manthiappan!"

For some time no voice was heard from the inside. Manthiappan patiently waited outside. After he had sighed heavily three or four times, Parakiraman and Vadivalagi peeped out of the door in incomplete dress. Vadivalagi welcomed him by winking at him and saying, "Please come in."

"The news that you had not yet started for Valanadu had reached king Kali somehow. He asked me about it and I told him that I did not know. He then told me to find out and expedite your departure if you hadn't left. So I came running! I very much regret having disturbed you at a very nice time!"

"It doesn't matter! It doesn't matter!" said Parakiraman and winked at her. And she as if she also could feel shy and bashful smiled a little and bowed her head a little.

"Shall I tell Kali that you had left?

"Oh! Please do."

"When will you leave?"

"At dawn! Shouldn't I take the princess along with me? And that's why the delay."

"Which princess?"

"The princess of the Chola kingdom!"

"What? The Cholanadu princess!"

"Yes! Yes!"

"The daughter of the Uraiyur Cholan?"

"Yes! The daughter of Akkaladeva Cholan! I refer to that princess only!"

36 Udaya Nandini, the Princess of Uraiyur

Evening twilight. The horses of a chariot, the tiger-crest flag fluttering atop, were reigned in by the driver and the chariot stopped at the main gate of the Valanadu fort after a hard jerk. The escorts also pulled up their horses and kept close to the chariot. The security guard of the fort rushed excitedly to that spot and enquired by his eyes, "Who are you?" The blue curtain that covered the chariot was pushed aside and a face stretched out.

The guard noticed that the head was as large as a mountain. Moustache and beard covered half of the face. The figure gestured by its hands to note the iron armour on his chest. The guard looked at the armour carefully. The tiger crest of the Chola king shone bright.

That figure bared its broad teeth, smiled and removed the blue curtain on the other side. The Valanadu soldier was shocked. A beautiful damsel, adorned with a large number of golden chains etched with precious stones, was found. She was seated, leaning elegantly, on the other side. A cloth embroidered with ruby stones which sparkled like stars covered her body. Above the forehead she wore a pearl

chain. Her eye movements and her appearance declared blaringly that she was a palace woman. In her question, "Why has the chariot stopped?" majestic grandeur fluttered like a flag.

"Nothing serious, madam! We have reached Valanadu. The guards have stopped the chariot to find out who we are."

The large figure explained and she got angry. "What? Have they stopped our chariot to ask who we are? Hasn't information reached Valanadu that I am arriving from Uraiyur?"

The guard listened to the conversation between them and was stunned.

He said, "Please excuse me. I am doing my duty. You are from Uraiyur and ...?" Before he could finish his hesitant question the large figure answered.

"Yes, we are coming from Uraiyur. Isn't the famous tiger flag of the Chola country visible to your eyes? The person inside the chariot blocked by you is the Uraiyur princess Udaya Nandini Deviyar! I am her bodyguard Vanavarayan! Information about the arrival of the princess was sent in the morning itself by a palmyra leaf missive. Haven't those Chola soldiers arrived yet?"

The fort guard bowed his head and greeted the princess.

"Please forgive me. It has happened unawares. But one thing, no information has been received about the arrival of the princess. No soldier from the Chola country brought any message."

As the guard was saying this, a soldier holding a tiger flag in his hand arrived there on horseback. He had ridden fast piercing the wind and gasped for breath. The horse sweated profusely. Very tired and exhausted, he got down from the horse.

From the chariot Vanavarayan asked surprisingly, "Eh! What happened? Why this excitement?" The guards who escorted the princess also looked at him with surprise. The soldier calmed himself with great difficulty, went near the chariot and told Vanavarayan.

"To inform the arrival of the princess, another soldier Malayan and I were coming from Uraiyur with the palm leaf missive. Ten soldiers of Thalaiyur army blocked our way and attacked us. Unable to tackle the attack we ran in a short cut route. The horse of Malayan tripped against a rock and fell down. He got into the hands of the soldiers and was killed at once. They seized the missive from him and began chasing me. I escaped from them, rode quite a long distance and reached the Valanadu road. I saw the chariot of the princess and rode behind."

Vanavarayan listened to the soldier and got angry. He stroked his dense moustache and beard and addressed the princess. "Did you listen to this nefarious

act, princess? I was afraid that we might face some harm from Thalaiyur soldiers and that's why I brought so many soldiers for protection. Pity, Malayan is a loyal warrior of the Uraiyur palace! His loss is very sad news not only to me but also to our king."

"First, let the escapee take rest. We shall discuss what is to be done next after getting into the palace. And, as a precaution, send one soldier and inform my father about what had happened."

Vanavarayan said, "It will be done as ordered by you, madam."

The fort guard stepped back and allowed the chariot to pass through. Not only that, he made arrangements for conveying the information about the arrival of the Uraiyur princess to Kundrudaiyan, Thamarai Nachiyar and others by sending a few soldiers.

The chariot of the princess crossed the main façade of the fort, swayed gently and moved slowly through the front yard of the Valanadu palace. The soldiers who went about hither and thither saw the chariot with the tiger flag and greeted it. The soldiers of the Chola country heard that their princess was in the chariot. They expressed their pleasure by greeting the chariot from a distance.

As the chariot was approaching the entrance of the palace, Kundrudaiyan and Thamarai Nachiyar came out to receive the princess. Musicians played on auspicious instruments. Arukkani Thangam, Muthayi, Pavalayi and Kuppayi also came out with cheerful faces. A large number of women carried flowers, fruits, sandal paste and *kumkum* in silver plates and walked up to the entrance like a bevy of peafowls.

The chariot stopped at the main entrance. Thamarai Nachiyar pushed the blue silk curtain aside and received the princess with a smile. Vanavarayan jumped out of the chariot and introduced himself to Kundrudaiyan, "I am the bodyguard of the princess." Thamarai Nachiyar introduced herself to princess Udaya Nandini and introduced others. When Muthayi and Pavalayi were introduced she hugged them tightly and praised them, "You are the wives of great heroes. You should have been very lucky to marry such heroes!" While introducing Arukkani, Thamarai said, "This is my daughter Arukkani Thangam. My husband used to call her Nalla Thangam!" At once Kundrudaiyan proudly intercepted, "Not me alone – the whole village calls her Nalla Thangam!" The princess hugged Arukkani Thangam and praised her also, "You can't get brothers like yours even if you take a thousand births. You are extremely fortunate!" She then turned to Thamarai Nachi and said, "*Amma*, I don't know what penance you undertook – each of your two sons has the combined strength of Bhima and Arjuna. You have a daughter who is exactly like Rathi Devi. I request you and your husband to bless me." So

saying she bent to fall at their feet. Thamarai Nachi was shocked; lifted her up and hugged her. She then said, stroking her hair, "*Amma*! What a thing to do! You are the princess of the Chola kingdom! How can you bow your head to receive blessings in a country under your control? No, no!"

The princess laughed boisterously and said to her bodyguard, "Vanavaraya! Why do you stand there silently, stroking your beard? Did you listen to her? She says Valanadu is under the control of Chola Nadu! Tell them what happened in the royal court of Uraiyur!"

Vanavarayan laughed proudly. He rolled his eyes and cast a steady glance at Kundrudaiyan, Thamarai and others.

He then said, "How long can we all stand here and talk? Are one or two days enough to narrate the great exploits of Ponnar-Sankar? And the princess has ordered me to describe those!"

Kundrudaiyan said, "What the bodyguard says is right. Let us all go to the palace hall. Thamarai! Ask them to prepare fruit juice for the princess and others. Let them get ready a grand feast of tasty dishes for all." He led the princess into the palace and others followed them.

The princess hugged Arukkani and said, "You are really a Rathi! It is not just to praise you." Her usual coyness made Arukkani bow her head. So she detached herself from the princess and kept close to Kuppayi. She said mischievously to Arukkani, "I think we must take some soil trodden upon by the princess and use it for dispelling the evil cast by her jealous eyes!" Arukkani laughed without opening her mouth and admonished her kindly, "You, get lost!"

Vanavarayan began describing the incidents that happened in the royal court of Uraiyur.

"The Chola king is too valiant a hero to whom even batting the eyelids in front of an enemy is cowardice! He is wont to control others, not to be controlled by anybody. The courage Ponnar-Sankar displayed and the intellectual discussion they had with him impressed even the royal court very much. When Ponnar-Sankar declared that they would not pay tribute and that their Kongu flag would not take orders from anybody our king Akkaladeva Cholan forgot himself. He announced, 'Valanadu is not a slave country to the Chola country. It is recognised as a friendly country.' and changed the copper deed itself. He admired the great abilities of your sons and requested them to be the guests of Uraiyur palace. Not only that! The purpose for which he has sent the princess here is to invite Kundrudaiyan and Thamarai Nachiyar to Uraiyur and honour them."

Kundrudaiyan was mighty pleased with the words of the bodyguard and said, "Should the princess come and invite us? Won't we come if a missive is sent

through a soldier?" It once again proved that the nickname 'Masachamy' was quite suitable to him!

"If yours were a tribute paying country a palm leaf missive would have been sent. But now - in your sons' reign - it has got the status of a friendly country! So the princess has come to invite you, Thamarai Nachiyar, the queens of Ponnar-Sankar and your dear daughter Arukkani Thangam. In this there has been a slight mishap. The Chola king sent a message to you about the princess's arrival much earlier. One of the soldiers was killed on the way."

Before Vanavarayan could finish, Kundrudaiyan got agitated and shot question after question, "What... what! Was a soldier of the Chola kingdom killed? Why? For what? How?"

"All this is the work of Thalaiyur Kali! He conspired to create enmity between Valanadu and the Chola kingdom by asking his general Parakiraman's brother Vikraman to provoke and insult Ponnar-Sankar. It boomeranged and instead of enmity, friendship has blossomed between the two countries. Parakiraman had somehow known about the visit of the princess to Valanadu. That's why the soldiers of Thalaiyur planned to ambush and abduct us. I came to know about it and so I took a large contingency of soldiers as escort and had brought her here safely. The Thalaiyur soldiers who were waiting to arrest us waylaid our soldiers, killed one of them and took away the missive. Thanks to that skirmish we somehow reached here without any hindrance."

"Oh! That's good. God alone had saved you all," said Kundrudaiyan very politely and with a great deal of picty.

All were served with fruit juice. Kuppayi took care of entertaining the guests. Noticing her sprightly liveliness the princess remarked in a tone of surprise, "*Amma*! You didn't introduce this girl to me. She looks exactly like your daughter Arukkani Thangam. Even their dress and jewels are similar!"

"Her name is Kuppayi. She is the daughter of Pachana Mudaliyar of Thirukambuliyur. From her childhood she has been a close friend of Arukkani. Whoever sees them will ask whether they are twin sisters. I also treat her as my daughter." Thamarai then called, "Kuppayi! Come here, the princess wants to see you." But she jumped and sprinted away in shyness. Arukkani also ran behind her.

Vanavarayan drank fruit juice two or three times and hiccups followed one another.

The princess kept the juice cup near her lips and pretended to drink. Thamarai cajoled her to drink at least a little.

Kundrudaiyan suddenly looked at the entrance and said eagerly, "Oh! Is it Veeramalai? Good, you have come."

Kundrudaiyan, without any hesitation, introduced Veeramalai to the princess and the bodyguard and explained in detail the purpose for which the princess had come.

The moment Veeramalai entered the hall the princess lost her heart to his majestic physique and fell into a state of ecstatic forgetfulness. She kept looking at him intently!

When Kundrudaiyan said, "He is Veeramalai", the breasts of the princess swelled and slowly subsided and she let out a long sigh. Veeramalai cast a sly look and noticed the strange change that the princess underwent on seeing him.

"When are we leaving for Uraiyur?" asked Veeramalai! The princess cast her sideways glance on Veeramalai and replied to Kundrudaiyan and Thamarai, "I am afraid of travelling in the night, so, I think, we can start tomorrow morning. When will it be possible for you to start?"

When she asked this her cheeks turned into red flowers.

Kundrudaiyan said, "We'll start in the morning. Let the princess rest herself well."

He and Thamarai ordered the servants to take care of the needs of the princess very carefully.

Evening disappeared completely and darkness began its rule in the palace and fort of Valanadu.

Flambeaux and large clay lamps were lighted and they emitted as much light as they could.

Vanavarayan said, "I have eaten too much of the tasty food of Valanadu and I feel very sleepy," and retired to his room to doze off. The soldiers who accompanied him lay down around his room. The snores of a few of them reverberated through the fort.

When all of them were asleep, Veeramalai alone walked up and down the ramparts and corridors of the fort to oversee whether the guards were awake and alert,

Though the princess had been provided with a very finely decorated and comfortable room she could not sleep. Kuppayi placed an *akil* incenser in her room and said. "Aren't you able to sleep?"

"Thoughts of all kinds. Only now sleep seems to touch my eyes," said the princess.

Kuppayi said, "All right, sleep." When she was about to go the princess called her and Kuppayi went near her bed and enquired what she wanted.

"Nothing! This Veeramalai, won't he sleep at all? Will he be walking around the ramparts the whole night?"

Kuppayi was taken aback! She could understand why the princess was unable to sleep! Her mind spoke to her in silent language!

"No princess. He will do the rounds for some time and then take a rest. But will wake up at odd intervals and supervise the watch and ward."

The princes seemed to rest content with that reply. Yet she decided to put another question!

"Kuppayi, I feel very shy to ask. Don't mistake me. Where is Veeramalai's room?"

"There... near the entrance where we received you in the evening."

Kuppayi watched the face of the princess. She smiled gently and said, "All right! Kuppayi, you can go." So many flashes of lightning in Kuppayi's heart! She wondered, "Is it love at first sight? Or, perhaps, love of long standing, or love that has inured the test of time?" Unable to understand anything she walked to her room; her legs tripping one another.

The princess rolled in her bed. Could not sleep. Held the pillows tightly and tried to sleep. Got up again and stood near the balcony.

It appeared as if someone was walking towards her room. She could not recognise the person as the lamps were dim.

That figure reached her room and stopped. The princess leaned her neck through the balcony and found that it was none other than Veeramalai! She ran and opened the door silently! Veeramalai was walking past her room. She kept watching him through the open door.

Veeramalai walked past the entire length of the palace corridor and reached his room. He drew out the wick and brightened up the lamp. He heard some noise near the door of his room and turned that side. The princess stood there with her head bowed and plenteous bashfulness.

37 The Love that Felled Veeramalai

Veeramalai did not at all expect the princess Udaya Nandini to visit him in his room. She stood there with eyes sparkling brightly but head weighed down with coyness. Veeramalai asked, "What's it? At this time?" and moved closer to her. The princess asked, "Why? Is it wrong?" and paraded her sense of shame by hiding her face behind the pillar there.

"I don't understand anything, princess. Why did you come here so suddenly?"

The princess did not reply immediately. She bit her lower lip with her upper teeth, swayed her waist and stepped out from behind the pillar. Veeramalai watched her without batting his eyelids.

"Why? Don't you like my coming here? If you order me to go, I'll go."

"No, princess; if anybody sees you here at this time, what will they think of you?"

"What will they think? I am the princess of Uraiyur. You are the Valanadu general. They will think we are perhaps discussing the affairs of the state."

"What's that urgent state matter? What do you want to discuss with me?"

"If we two discuss and decide something for strengthening the friendship between Uraiyur and Valanadu is that not a state affair?"

"It'll be better if you speak more clearly."

"If Ponnar-Sankar were not married, my father would have made arrangements for my marriage with one of them and strengthened the friendship between Uraiyur and Valanadu!"

"Why should we talk about something that had already taken place?"

"Can we then talk about what must happen?"

Now the eyes of the princess fell on Veeramalai like weapons of love. She continued, "Only Ponnar-Sankar are married; what about Veeramalai?" Veeramalai was shocked to hear this.

A lady - that too, not an ordinary one; but a princess - is she talking like this? The jack fruit - how many layers under which it hides its tasty core? Above them, how thick an outer layer full of thorns! Won't women hide what is in their heart in such a manner so that none can understand them? But she, after all came only in the evening! Entered the room in the night! Without any hesitation begins laying the foundation for marriage talks!

Veeramalai was totally perplexed! Looked at the princess again keenly.

"Princess, all that we wish do not happen. Further, you are going in a one-way track."

"Don't lie! I understood when I saw you in the evening. What's the use of words after eyes have met?"

"I would have seen you just as I would have seen a beautiful scene - say a wonderful portrait. If you understand it wrongly can I be held responsible?"

"What is a beautiful scene? The blue sky - the moon floating swimmingly - a stretch of sand glowing in its light - or waterfall - fragrant flowers on all sides - joyful breeze - isn't it natural to wish to stay there and enjoy that scenery for ever?"

"Desire would spring up - if I were a poet! Or if I were a lover looking for his sweet heart! I am neither! If I stumble upon a thorn while discharging my duty, I just remove it and proceed or if it were a flower I would just enjoy seeing it and walk away. I don't think of plucking it"

"You say it is a wonderful painting! If it comes alive in front of you, will you kick it off and walk away?"

"I am greatly surprised! Also wonder-struck. It is funny that the princess of a country so openly declares her love for a general - and that too of a very small country - so plainly and so hastily!"

"With much difficulty we dig the earth deep for many days to get well-water. Without much difficulty and without digging deep we get water from river springs! Will spring water lack taste just because it is got quickly? Should you underestimate a heart's longing just because it is got easily?"

"Even talking together for such a long time is a serious mistake."

"The whole palace is in deep slumber. Nobody will watch us."

"Nobody may be watching us. But my conscience is observing me. Can I ignore it?"

"It is not my mistake! I came here only to invite the Kundrudaiyan family to Uraiyur. All this ado came in the middle! I saw Ponnar-Sankar in Uraiyur palace. I came here and got jealous of Muthayi and Pavalayi without my knowing it. Later, I met you suddenly and that jealousy vanished. Now I have got the courage to compete with Muthayi and Pavalayi. What made me so daring in such a short while is this gigantic personality standing in front of me! Had you not been endowed with this kind of teakwood body, you would have appeared like any other man. Which girl will not melt away in her desire to lean on your shoulders that rise like the hump of a temple bullock?"

"You are a princess! You shall not talk like this."

"Is the heart of a princess made of gold and etched with diamonds? Nothing of that sort. In my heart a niche has been carved out for pooja. Please occupy it as the idol." So saying she caught hold of his legs. Veeramalai, not knowing what to do, freed his legs from the grip of her arms and moved away.

"Princess, I beg you. Please don't touch me. Born in a royal family - how high your clan is - and where am I - the son of Cholan Thotti!"

"Love doesn't blossom after taking into account clan, gothra or status. If it blossoms that way it is not love. The persons now standing in this room are not the princess of the Chola kingdom and the general of Valanadu! But Udaya Nandini who has entrusted her life with you and her lover Veeramalai who has the responsibility to save her life!"

"Let me tell you about myself. My family is very much indebted to Kundrudaiyan's family. Before my father's time our family was loyal to the family of Kolatha Gounder. Today, the only duty of my life is to be loyal and protective to this family. I cannot take any decision regarding the princess's wish. Only Thamarai Nachiyar and Kundrudaiyan who are like my parents and Ponnar-Sankar who are like my brothers have the right to decide anything for me!"

"If they permit, you don't have any objection. Is it so?"

"Expecting me to answer this sudden question is like asking me to read in the flash of a lightning."

"Does it appear like lightning? Doesn't it look like the moon?"

The sound of Veeramalai swallowing saliva could be heard. He struggled hard to contain himself.

"The Valanadu people may give their approval. But Uraiyur Cholan will stir into action with drawn sword. The friendship that has been forged between our countries thanks to the efforts of Mayavar should not be spoiled. Don't you think so?"

"You need not have any fear on that score. It is my responsibility to make my father agree. You are coming to Uraiyur tomorrow with me and Kundrudaiyan"s family. That is, you come as the guest of the Chola king - and return as the son-in-law of the Chola king. Is it all right?"

"Princess, I am unable to believe!"

"At times certain unbelievable things do happen! And we call them acts of God. Tomorrow, come with me and see for yourself whether it happens or not."

"All right, I'll try to come. First I'll talk to Thamarai Nachiyar and Kundrudaiyan."

"You need not take that trouble even. I will talk to them before dawn and make them agree. Then you are coming with us to Uraiyur!"

"All right, I'll come!"

"Come to Uraiyur tomorrow. Now come up to my room."

"What for?"

"Should I return all by myself?"

"Didn't you come alone?"

"Yes, when I came here I was alone. But ain't I carrying an invaluable treasure in my heart now?"

Veeramalai hesitated. Stretched his thumb and the index finger of his right hand and stroked his moustache. The princess twisted and swayed like a creeper and moved towards him. He stepped aside.

"You asked me not to touch. If you come with me, I won't touch. If not, I will touch. If you refuse, I will droop down on your lap."

Veeramalai said, "All right...all right," and left with her. Both walked together on the palace corridor. The flambeaux fixed on the walls emitted a little light. The palace guards were walking up and down the high ramparts with their swords held high.

A small article seemed to hit the leg of the princess. She stumbled and was about to fall down; but steadied herself and dashed against Veeramalai at the same speed. As it was a dangerous situation he did not mind it, propped her up and put her on her feet. That one moment the nerves and veins of Veeramalai became like iron rods in furnace fire. He felt his body by his own hands and walked by her side.

She walked behind him, but kept close to him. The palace corridor was full of

potholes and rutty. She asked, "Why is it in such a bad condition?"

"It is the beauty of Manthiappan's administration! When did he or his father have the time to take care of the fort or the country? All the time it was only entertainment, pleasure, jollity and such wasteful activities."

Before he could close his mouth, the princess shouted in a low voice, "Ah!" and under the pretext of having tripped over something, fell on his back and pressed both his shoulders strongly with her upper arms. Veeramalai underwent a shock! A joyful shock! Since the princess's breasts did not just touch but pressed on his back for a while, he lost himself completely. He did not try to push her away. The princess could sense that he was losing his battle against her and so she herself moved away from him. Both reached the room silently.

Somebody was watching them from behind a pillar near the room. As the flambeau on the pillar had burnt out, Veeramalai did not see him. He walked towards the princess's room with his eyes set on her. Veeramalai now wished that the princess had tripped again and fallen on him!

The princess stepped into the room first. The figure that was hiding behind the pillar stepped out and peered at the room. In the light shed by the flambeau kept on a distant pillar it was clearly visible that the figure was none other than Vanavarayan.

While stepping into the room, the princess screamed once again, "Oh!" and fell down. Veeramalai who was standing outside leaped in and lifted her up.

She giggled and asked, "Were you frightened?" She then held him in tight embrace.

"No! Princess, what is this? Don't, take off your hands!"

"Why this respect? Why do you call me princess? I am now the sweetheart of general Veeramalai!"

"No! We must not change in this room what we decided in thát room. Never! If we do anything amiss without getting the permission of the Uraiyur family and the Valanadu family, we will become traitors to both the countries."

The heart of Veeramalai was in a muddle. Like the seasonal sea waves rise and fall and dash against one another in a chaotic manner, it oscillated between yielding to her one moment and hesitating the next moment.

"Please sit down for a while. Let us chat."

"No, princess; I am afraid. Let me go."

Veeramalai looked at her longingly as much as he wanted and was about to get out of the room.

"*Ayyo*... just listen to me! I won't bite and eat you!" As she said this she hugged him and bolted the door from inside.

Before he could reach the bolted door she dragged him up to the cot.

Vanavarayan came from behind the pillar and locked the bolted door from the outside. In that dim light his eyes shone like the eyes of a jungle cat.

The same moment there was a big noise from the room! The scream of a woman! "*Ayyo*! Please save me! Save me!" It was the voice of that princess.

Vanavarayan who stood outside the room rolling his large eyes, took out the whistle tucked in his waistcloth and blew it hard.

The next moment the entire palace was in a big rumpus!

38 Kundrudaiyan's Confusion

Veeramalai tried hard to open the door of the princess' room from the inside. But she held him tightly and prevented him from touching the lock. At the same time she shouted uninterruptedly, "*Ayyo*! Please save me!" The enraged Veeramalai pushed her away, unbolted the latch and tried to open the door. But he could not, as Vanavarayan had locked it from the outside.

The palace guards heard the whistle sounds and ran hither and thither all over the palace. They were attacked and wounded by the escorts of the princess. The soldiers of the Chola army who had come there to defend Valanadu could not make out what was happening. The soldiers of Valanadu could not distinguish between the Chola soldiers brought by Mayavar and the Chola soldiers brought by Vanavarayan. So they fought with all of them. As a result the situation was chaotic inside the palace as well as the fort. Further, the flambeaux had been put off by Vanavarayan's men. In the darkness they all fought without even identifying one another and screams were constantly heard.

Kundrudaiyan rushed to the princess' room with his drawn sword. He was followed by some of his men.

Vanavarayan noticed Kundrudaiyan, said something to one of his soldiers and bolted away.

As Kundrudaiyan reached the princess' room, that soldier caught hold of his legs and cried, "King, see this atrocity! See how indecently your general Veeramalai is behaving with our princess!"

Kundrudaiyan asked in trepidation, "Tell me what happened."

"Should anything more happen? The princess will tell you everything. Your general Veeramalai entered the room of the princess and tried to molest her. I came running on hearing her scream and locked the room. Otherwise, he would have made good his escape. Now he is caught red-handed!"

He then removed the lock. Kundrudaiyan kicked open the room and got inside with his men.

The scene witnessed by him in the room took him to the extreme of anger.

Veeramalai stood there in a stupefied condition. The princess stood trembling near the cot half naked. Her dress and jewels lay scattered on the floor. On seeing Kundrudaiyan and his men, she hurriedly covered herself with a bed sheet.

Should the princess who visited his palace suffer this kind of disgrace? How much enraged would the Uraiyur Cholan be if he were to know about this? How disastrous will the consequences be? Questions like these rose one after another in lightning speed and troubled his mind.

Veeramalai felt as if his heart had stopped beating and was about to fall down.

'What is this? Everything is a puzzle! Didn't she come into my room? Didn't she say that she loved me? Wasn't it she who hugged me? Wasn't it she who asked me to accompany her to this room?

Now she acts like this! Is she really the princess of Uraiyur, or a spy from the enemy country?'

All these questions rose in the crumbled heart of Veeramalai. But he could not open his mouth and say anything.

"Veeramalai! How atrocious it is! Is it you who are standing in front of me, or the very incarnation of blatant treachery?"

Veeramalai stood without answering Kundrudaiyan's questions.

"*Amma*, princess! What happened? Tell me soon, my head is reeling."

As Kundrudaiyan asked like that, the princess began to sob and cry.

"How can I talk about them? Kuppayi came in, placed the fragrance censer here and left. Since I felt sleepy, I came near the door to lock it. But at that time your general Veeramalai pushed the door and got in."

Veeramalai shouted, "No! No!" and came running towards Kundrudaiyan.

"Chi! You don't say anything!" shouted Kundrudaiyan in extreme anger. The princess began to weep again.

"Please stop crying and tell me! This is a challenge thrown against our tradition and culture! I will have to answer for it. So tell me all that happened without hiding anything."

"My tongue feels ashamed to repeat the words he spoke to me."

"Don't worry. You have to say what happened; you must."

"After entering the room, Veeramalai praised my beauty. He said I was Rambai! I was Urvasi! I was Menakai! Like that he blabbered like a mad fellow. But whatever he might say like a lecherous rogue! Isn't he your general? So I restrained myself from rebuking him with harsh words. I thought it would be an affront to your good self also. Hence, I advised him with a few words and asked him to get out. He said he would not go without using me for his enjoyment and pulled me by my hand. Bolted the door. I suffered in this room like a parrot trapped in the hands of a cat."

"You rogue Veeramalai! I treated you as my son. Is this the way you show your gratitude?"

The whole body of Kundrudaiyan trembled. His faltering voice clearly indicated how upset and emotionally overwhelmed he was.

Veeramalai knelt in front of Kundrudaiyan and cried cringingly, "Please listen to me!" But the princess did not allow him to speak.

"I am not even bothered about his misbehaviour with me. But when I think of the enticing words he uttered to get me I am extremely terrified. I shudder at the treacherous plan he is contemplating against you, your country and your sons."

"Is it so? Princess, what did he say, what did he say?"

"Don't underestimate this Veeramalai as an ordinary general. I have a plan to get rid of Kundrudaiyan and Ponnar-Sankar in a few days and capture Valanadu. Udaya Nandini who is today the princess of the Chola country will soon become the queen of Valanadu!"

"Is it so? He could have done that even! He could have even killed us and seized the reign of Valanadu! I wouldn't be greatly upset. But he has misbehaved with the princess of Cholanadu when she is under my care. For that he must be sentenced to life!"

Kundrudaiyan roared like an enraged tiger. He then lowered his voice and asked her very politely and sympathetically, "*Amma*, I hope you did not suffer any other mishap?"

"Somehow, because of the power of the penance my parents undertook and the grace of our clan deity my chastity was protected by a hair's breadth," she said and began weeping.

"What? *Amma*, Should you cry because your chastity has been protected?" asked Kundrudaiyan and once again proved how much the nickname 'Masachamy' suited him.

Meanwhile, the entire palace was in great chaos. The noise of swords clashing with one another, spears hitting the walls and the weeping and wailing of wounded soldiers and the terrifying cries of horses and animals were constantly heard.

Kundrudaiyan ordered the soldiers to put Veeramalai in jail. Though Veeramalai made the most earnest attempts to explain the truth, he could not succeed. The palace soldiers dragged him to the prison.

"After this I cannot remain here even for a second. Kundrudaiyan esquire, I am leaving. Eh, where is Vanavarayan? Bring my chariot. I must leave for Uraiyur immediately."

The princess shouted overbearingly. One of her soldiers said, "*Amma*! Vanvarayan is not to be found. The chariot is ready. I am ready to drive it." The princess muttered to herself, "Let him get lost!" left the room abruptly and shouted in an intimidating manner. "Where is the chariot?" That soldier led her to the chariot in that darkness saying, "Here it is, here it is."

The stunned Kundrudaiyan stood there in a quandary not knowing what to do. The palace was choking under the commotion that pierced the darkness and he had not a clue about what was happening. On one side the shrieks of the dying soldiers assailed his ears and on another side the ruckus raised by the departing princess' chariot.

Kundrudaiyan gathered all his strength and shouted as loud as he could, "Stop! All of you stop!" Like a downpour slowly diminishing into a drizzle, the noise of the clashing swords and spears lessened and silence returned. Yet, the wails of the wounded soldiers broke that silence intermittently.

Kundrudaiyan, though totally exhausted, wished to discharge his duties and so gave orders for lighting the flambeaux. Soon they were lighted and fixed to the pillars.

Again the silence was broken by a horse galloping fast out of the palace gate. Kundrudaiyan and others got stirred up again and watched the horse.

Observing the huge size of the rider, Kundrudaiyan guessed that it could be Vanavarayan and shouted, "Who is it? Is it Vanavarayan, the Uraiyur bodyguard?"

"Yes, I came as Vanavarayan. But I am returning now as Parakiraman, the general of Thalaiyur Kali! And I am not returning empty-handed. Vadivalagi and I

are returning after accomplishing our task successfully. Can you see who is with me on the horse?"

Kundrudaiyan did not take much time to understand that Uraiyur general Parakiraman had duped them all.

He peered keenly to see who was with him. At the same time his soldiers ran after Parakiraman.

Parakiraman shouted, "Nobody else; only your daughter Arukkani Thangam." He closed the mouth of the girl with one hand and punched the horse with another hand and it galloped on all its four legs.

The horse flew away at such a great speed that the soldiers could not even go near it.

Kundrudaiyan saw him bolting away and felt ashamed. He lamented, "In that case the woman is not the princess!"

A soldier made it clear, "Didn't he say that her name was Vadivalagi or some such?"

"Chi! I have put Veeramalai in jail without enquiring properly. Release him immediately and bring him here," ordered 'Masachamy' Kundrudaiyan!

A few soldiers rushed to the jail to bring him.

Kundrudaiyan's head reeled in confusion. He walked slowly and attended to his soldiers who were badly wounded or were almost dead. At that time Arukkani Thangam came there shouting hoarsely, "*Appa! Appa!*"

Kundrudaiyan got even more confused! Had not Parakiraman carried away my daughter. Now, how did she come out from the palace? He opened his eyes wide and looked at her. Yes, it was none other than Arukkani Thangam!

He answered her tenderly, "What, *amma*?" Rushed to her and hugged her.

"Appa! They have killed mother!" she shrieked and fell at the feet of Kundrudaiyan.

"Ah! Thamarai! Thamarai!"

His eyes in a flood of tears, Kundrudaiyan ran in that darkness. Arukkani ran after him.

39 Affectionate Birds

Thamarai Nachiyar lay unconscious in a pool of blood in her bedroom. Beside her, Muthayi and Pavalayi were sobbing. Tears trickled down uncontrollably. Everybody in the palace wept and ran agitatedly towards her room. Kundrudaiyan came there with Arukkani and was totally at a loss on seeing the condition of his dear wife.

He cried, "Thamarai! Thamarai!" and shook her head. As her life was still lingering feebly, she regained consciousness a little, opened her eyes and looked at her husband with endearing sympathy.

There was absolutely no fear of death in the eyes of Thamarai. Kundrudaiyan's voice quivered as he said, "Thamarai, what's this? How did this tragedy happen?" And he ordered, "Where is the doctor? Bring him at once!"

Thamarai took hold of her husband's hands and said, "No need for the doctor. Nobody can change my destiny. I am taking leave of you, my children, my daughters-in law and everybody." Her face glowed in a feeble smile.

Kundrudaiyan stood there peering at Thamarai Nachiyar. For the sake of her true love for him she antagonised her parents and brother, scorned and spurned away wealth and prosperity, bore innumerable hardships, always lived with him in equanimity whether the situation was prosperous or adverse, and was not only his life-mate but also his minister who could foresee the future and advise him. She who had lived with him as his companion all through the summer of his life had now been pushed to this end when life was becoming a bounteous spring with the restoration of their rule over Valanadu and her lion-like progeny assuming power

over the regime. Unable to bear the agony of all these, he gripped her hands tightly and asked, "Thamarai, why this? Alas! What happened?"

Veeramalai, released from the jail, came there with the sorrow of a man hit by a spear in the heart. His screams, "Amma! Amma!" made all the people around cry bitterly.

She beckoned to Veeramalai by her eyes to come near him. He went near her, bowed his head in respect and keenly watched her words.

"She who came here calling herself the princess of Uraiyur was not a princess at all. Thalaiyur Kali's general Parakiraman and a fraudster had duped us."

When Thamarai Nachiyar said this his conscience whipped him a hundred thousand times. All the hits fell on his heart and it bled.

"What an enormous error have I committed? The sense of duty I have been protecting all along so well went to its grave in no time at the crooked glance of a cheat. Was she wrong? No, not at all. Casting deceitful glace is a practised art with her. So, it is not her fault; but my own. I could not even understand that if she were the princess of Uraiyur she would not hanker after me like that. I became a shameless slave to her enticing body movements and suffered disgrace. They used to say 'beauty is dangerous', but I have been duped by a danger in beauty's disguise! Chi! Are there women like this? Wouldn't they feel ashamed of feasting the body to anybody for achieving whatever they wanted? What is more disgusting is the fact that there are shameless men who use such white-skinned bitches to increase their royal power and influence! What is the use of finding fault with such human monstrosities and the bewitching charmers who act as their buddies? Only fools like me who are taken in by the treacherous coaxing of these vultures which circle above us with the borrowed feathers of white doves must be punished! She said she was the king's daughter! She came as a seducer and won! Wasn't it me who faced defeat? My defeat - was it not the momentary lapse on the part of my heart due to the instinct of love that flashed in my heart? Was it a feeling of love? No! It was the hurricane of lust - definitely not the fragrant breeze of love! Was it not for the defeat I myself sought did Kundrudaiyan who was like my father jail me? There is such a ruckus in Valanadu palace - here my mother is fighting with death! Isn't my stupidity the reason for all these?"

"Swish! Swish!" Scathing whiplashes like these fell on his heart!

Everybody, including Veeramalai, watched the lip movements of Thamarai.

"Kuppayi, who went to the room of the princess for placing the fragrant incense, became suspicious on listening to her. She could not understand why she enquired about Veeramalai. She got confused and so she went near the room of Vanavarayan and watched. She heard some conversation about Arukkani

Thangam. They wanted to find out the bedroom of Arukkani. One man there said that Arukkani used to sleep in her mother's room. Kuppayi got the doubt at once. She felt that some danger was awaiting Arukkani. She rushed to my room immediately and said, 'Amma! Today I am going to sleep here, with you.' I said, 'Arukkani is already asleep here.' She herself woke up Arukkani and asked her to go to her room and sleep. Feeling very tired she was very reluctant. Kuppayi compelled her and herself took her to her room and made her sleep there. After she returned I asked, 'Kuppayi, what is all this? Why are you so eager to sleep in my room today?' She did not give any straight answer. I persisted and she told me what was discussed in Vanavarayan's room about Arukkani. I asked her why she slept in my room for that. She replied that she wanted them to mistake her for Arukkani and she would be happy if Arukkani escaped from danger somehow or other. I told her, 'What a foolish girl you are! You should not keep this matter of such grave importance within yourself. Let us inform Veeramalai about this at once. You go now and bring Veeramalai here.' She got ready and opened the door. But, within that time the noise of a few persons entering the room was heard. I was shocked. Before Kuppayi could scream they gagged her mouth. The flambeaux inside the room were pulled down and extinguished. A rough arm seized me and blocked my way. I asked sternly, 'Eh! Who are you?' He said, 'I am Parakiraman, the general of Thalaiyur Kali. I have arrested your daughter Arukkani and am carrying her away to Thalaiyur palace.' In that darkness I ran and lifted the sword that was shining on the wall and was about to strike him with it. But before that, dagger stabs and chopper cuts fell on my stomach, neck and head. That cruel wretch carried Kuppayi away."

While Thamarai Nachiyar told all these, tears trickled down from the corner of her eyes. She gasped hard for breath and could not speak. Kundrudaiyan gripped her hands and said in an emotionally choked voice.

"You could have told him that he was abducting Kuppayi and not Arukkani. Will not the sin of having used Pachana Mudaliyar's daughter for protecting our daughter befall us?"

In this question not only the spotless heart of Kundrudaiyan but also his kind heart - the sincere concern that no harm should be done to others and they themselves could bear any impending danger - shone like a cut diamond. Probably this quality earned for him the title 'Masachamy'!

"What can I do at that time? I did not even know that Kuppayi had a plan like this to protect Arukkani! She told me the matter only after I pressed her so many times. Before I could call Veeramalai everything was over!"

Thamarai spoke these words while struggling to hold her life that was slowly dissolving. She smiled lovingly and bent the neck of her husband with her hands

very close to her face and said, " Save Kuppayi at any cost. See that the people of Valanadu live happily. I don't have any complaint. I am taking leave of you, bid farewell to me. Kiss my wedding chain." So saying, with trembling hands, she lifted the turmeric-smeared sacred thread from her neck up to the lips of Kundrudaiyan. He kept his eyes fixed on the sacred thread and the face of his affectionate wife.

The old memories - arrangements for the marriage of Thamarai and Manthiappan, drums resound rhythmically! Tom-toms resonate! Thamarai is distributing food grains to poor people.

At that time, there comes a young man - with unkempt hair, moustache and beard, not energetic enough even to walk - it is Kundrudaiyan. Unable to recognise him, Thamarai's mother Perumayi asks him, "What do you want; rice or some millet?" Kundrudaiyan replies, "Auntie, I didn't come to get maize or millet, I have come as your daughter's husband to tie the wedding chain around her neck!" At once, as if she has got a new life, Thamarai calls him *'athan'*, leaps over him and hugs him unmindful of the big crowd.

That old incident - oh... the young girl Thamarai, when she was like a jasmine flower in full bloom, hugged him with the suppleness of a screwpine flower and he enjoyed sweet sensations - that incident which showed how he cherished him as her heart' s idol brought about a deluge in the eyes of Kundrudaiyan.

Kundrudaiyan is locked up in a cell. He was not Kundrudaiyan then, he was Nelliangodan - he did not possess any hilly region then - but the cell in which he was locked up, there were heaps of termites like hills. Terribly frightened by them he clings to a beam in that cell. Still the horrible invasion of those insects. No other way. Tears his dhoti, wears one half, ties the other half to the beam and decides to hang himself from it. That moment, Thamarai runs into the cell crying, "*Athan*, what is this?" and saves him!

His mind is deeply immersed in that incident. He looks at Thamarai's face and the sacred thread alternately.

The marriage is celebrated as per the wishes of Thamarai. She is seated happily in the wedding pandal after taking the hand of Kundrudaiyan. The father suddenly abuses her in foul language and drives her out. Brother Chinnamalaikolunthu angrily shouts his reply at Thamarai, "Why one, you can as well give birth to two lion cubs! I will bring those two and tie at my gate as watchdogs." Thamarai vows without any perturbation, "Yes, *anna*, yes. I'll beget two sons. And you'll beget two daughters. I am certain I'll enjoy the scene of your coming in search of those lions."

Oh! *Amma*! Wasn't that face the face of a heroic woman!

Kundrudaiyan kissed and kept on kissing the sacred thread of that good lady who was to him pleasant breeze, honey pastry, unsatiating ambrosia, holy lamp, flame of sacrifice, a life-mate, a housewife who considered both the beautiful groves and dreary deserts of life alike.

"Have Ponnar-Sankar returned?" Thamarai did not put this question in words. Only her sinking eyes searched for them.

Unaware of their mother's condition, they were sleeping in the Uraiyur palace. Her eyes expressed the desire that she wanted Muthayi, Pavalayi and Arukkani to come close to her. They all sobbed and placed their heads at her feet.

As she was stroking her husband's head and finding a unique joy in it, her right arm fell down with a thud!

"Thamarai!" The scream of Kundrudaiyan echoed through the entire palace.

Kundrudaiyan's bent head pressing on Thamarai's chest did not at all move after that. Yes, the body of Kundrudaiyan also did not move!

Ponnar-Sankar who were in a deep slumber in the Uraiyur palace got up shocked and shouted as if the whole palace broke into pieces and fell on their heads:

"Amma!

"Appa!"

They woke up screaming!

40 Beastly Man and Deer Fawn

Not only the Valanadu palace and fort but the entire Valanadu floated in tears. Ponnar-Sankar gripped the hilt of their swords tightly and sat near the mortal remains of their dear parents. Mayavar was busy consoling and pacifying them and others in an emotionally broken voice. Veeramalai stood leaning in a corner hanging his head like a withered coconut frond about to fall down. He was very sad that a lapse of a single second in his mental fortitude had caused such a calamity. On behalf of the Chola kingdom, the two ministers sent by the king Akkaladevan put shawls embroidered with the tiger crest on the bodies of Kundrudaiyan and Thamarai Nachiyar and paid last respects.

People from all the twenty-four Kongu regions - Poonthurai Nadu, Kangeya Nadu, Pongalur Nadu, Thenkarai Nadu, Arai Nadu, Varakka Nadu, Thiruvavinankudi Nadu, Thalaiya Nadu, Thattaiya Nadu, Poovani Nadu, Araiya Nadu, Oduvanga Nadu, Vadakarai Nadu, Vazhavanthi Nadu, Kizhangu Nadu, Nallurukka Nadu, Anda Nadu, Anaimalai Nadu, Vengala Nadu, Kavadikka Nadu, Rasipura Nadu, Kanjikoil Nadu, Kuruppu Nadu and Mana Nadu - assembled there without any distinction of caste.

Those people stood in group after group and praised the innocent heart of Kundrudaiyan. There was none who did not eulogise the uniqueness of the chastity and the cultural greatness of Thamarai Nachiyar. They described how she

lived with her husband as if she was bathing in a waterfall even when miseries like volcano lava engulfed her.

'Whether a person is worthy or worthless will be known by what he or she leaves behind'. As an illustration of this *Tirukkural* couplet, the funeral pyre of Kundrudaiyan and Thamarai Nachiyar swam like a boat in the flood of people who had come there to offer their condolences from Valanadu and the entire Kongu region.

After all the funeral rites were over and the flood of people dried up, there was deep calm in the Valanadu palace.

In the inner hall of the palace, Mayavar was found stroking his beard and thinking deeply about the future. Ponnar, appearing like the very image of sorrow - Sankar, tapping his fingers on the sheath of his sword and awaiting the order his brother was going to utter - Veeramalai propping up his cheeks with his hands and contemplating sadly as to how he was going to atone for his misdeed - all these made it clear that they were all under the compulsion to take a decision.

Muthayi and Pavalayi, with eyes reddened with sorrow, were sitting behind a curtain in that hall and eagerly awaiting the decision.

Arukkani appeared there suddenly in a way that surprised all of them. Her coming there was not a surprise. But only the manner in which she was dressed bewildered everybody. The outfit of a warrior ready for the battlefield! Sword in hand! Fire in eyes!

Ponnar-Sankar screamed simultaneously, "Arukkani!" Muthayi and Pavalayi who were standing behind the curtain came out shocked.

She walked towards Ponnar-Sankar calling them, "*Anna*! *Anna*!" Before they could ask why their sister had dressed like that she herself began to answer.

"We have lost both, father and mother - and it is certainly a great loss! We have wept and wailed for them - until our lives end they will remain in our hearts - we have consigned their golden bodies to earth - we must take vengeance on those who were responsible for separating them from us so soon - that is too big an undertaking! Do have ministerial discussion on that! By taking revenge on our enemies we are not going to get back our parents we had lost. But we have forgotten what we must get back! I shouldn't have said 'we' and included me also! Let me correct myself! You have forgotten! I haven't forgotten; and I will never forget! I will not forget my affectionate friend Kuppayi! Permit me, *anna*! I have got myself ready to bring her back! It is enough if a few soldiers are sent with me for assistance. I will come back only if I succeed in my effort - otherwise I will die and get lost! Give me permission!"

Though Ponnar-Sankar appreciated their sister for getting ready to liberate her close friend Kuppayi, they did not fail to see that she could not succeed in her effort. Yet, her elder brothers were very proud that she had proved herself a worthy sister to them by getting ready with her sword unmindful of victory and defeat.

Ponnar patted the cheek of Arukkani lovingly and said, "Thangam! We haven't forgotten your friend Kuppayi. We are thinking about sending Sankar to rescue her. Before that you have made a hasty decision!"

Sankar got the sword from Arukkani and uttered in his valiant voice, "This is the sword you raised. Let it be in my hands. With this same sword I will rescue Kuppayi and bring her here!"

Muthayi and Pavalayi feared that Arukkani might refuse to listen to her brothers because of her love for Kuppayi. So they hastened to her, hugged her and wept.

Sankar told Pavalayi, "Hm! Take good care of Arukkani," and took leave of his sister. He bade farewell to Ponnar, Mayavar and Veeramalai by his eyes and by raising his sword. He then left that hall like a tiger leaving its cave to hunt for food. On seeing her brother marching like a war bull, a feeling of comfort sprang up in the heart of Arukkani. Yet, she wept and cried aloud unconsciously, "Kuppayi!"

* * *

Parakiraman who abducted Kuppayi on his horse held her tightly so that she could not move either side, and reached a secret mandapam in Veerapur forest. He waited for Vadivalagi in darkness. She had already been given directions to reach that mandapam. Kuppayi, locked up there, emphatically told him that she was Arukkani! Parakiraman believed it by half and doubted it by half! Both were of the same age, had same facial features and wore the same kind of dress. And if she were to sleep in the room of Thamarai Nachiyar and beside her, she could be none other than Arukkani! So he treated her - whom Thalaiyur Kali was going to use for his enjoyment - very respectfully. But she did not acknowledge that respect. She knew that it was more disgraceful for a receiver than the giver to accept the respect and honour given by a beastly fellow.

He locked her up in a very comfortable room inside the mandapam and waited for the chariot of Vadivalagi.

Around the mandapam, the sound of trees swaying in the wind, the howls of wolves from far off and the sound of various kinds of birds frightened by those howls and the beating of their wings pierced through the nocturnal silence.

Parakiraman's eyes began to ache as he kept watch awaiting the arrival of Vadivalagi. At last he heard the horse-hoof sounds. The sound reached the mandapam very soon. Escorted by Thalaiyur soldiers who were in the regimentals of the Chola forces, the chariot with the tiger flag atop stopped at the entrance of the mandapam.

Parakiraman gave her his hand and helped her alight from the chariot and laughed at her mockingly, "Welcome! Welcome to the princess of Uraiyur!"

And she hugged him and pressed her breasts against his back. She broke into laughter and said, "All right! Stop your fun!" The Thalaiyur soldiers watched that scene in the dim light of the flambeaux, pretended to look the other side; but actually gratified themselves by viewing it from the corner of their eyes and sighed deeply. A few who could not put up with this scene pressed their legs against the flanks of their horses. A few bit their lips.

Parakiraman and Vadivalagi entered the mandapam hugging each other.

"How is Arukkani Thangam?" asked Vadivalagi and pressed a kiss on his rock-hard cheek.

Parakiraman was enthralled in that tasty kiss. He heaved her up to his lap by holding his hands close to her breasts and waist and sat on a marble stage.

"Didn't you ask me how Arukkani was? She is like a carved statue. She is an unruffled flower. Sweetness, youthfulness and newness – she is a treasure full of all these three. To say briefly, you are a full-grown mango fruit; she is a tender mango! In my youth I had climbed mango trees, plucked and eaten unripe ones. To eat them with a pinch of salt – oh, how tasty it would be!"

"I didn't ask you to elaborate on the structure and beauty of Arukkani. We have abducted her; is she totally upset? Or weeping to the extent of her eyes swelling?"

"Oh! You are asking that? She is blinking like a fawn caught in the net of a hunter. She is after all a little girl – is she like you? Even if several persons touch and lift you, you will crave for ten more persons to do the same!"

"If women care for qualities like fearfulness, coyness, unawareness and modesty, how can they manage men like you?"

Parakiraman kissed her lips and bit them frantically. She cried in pain. He hugged and said to her, "Come on, Vadivalagi! Let us see Arukkani. Try to bring her round slowly. If you also fail, we will have to tie her with ropes and take her in the chariot to Thalaiyur palace." He raised his voice in a threatening manner while entering Arukkani's room. Vadivalagi followed him.

Kuppayi lay huddled up in a corner of that room facing the wall and bowing her head.

"Amma Arukkani, look up; the Uraiyur princess has come," said Parakiraman. She got up hurriedly and Vadivalagi was taken aback.

"Who? Who?" muttered the lips of Vadivalagi.

She then took a flambeau, held it in front of her face and peered at her.

Jubilant over her triumph, Kuppayi now laughed terribly! "Hi, you cheats, aren't you fooled?"

Vadivalagi shouted, "This is not Arukkani! Kuppayi! Kuppayi!" Parakiraman stood stock-still. Could not say anything. Instead of feeling ashamed of himself over his idiocy, he got angry. He was furious that an ordinary girl like Kuppayi had made a blockhead of him.

He dragged Vadivalagi and came out of the room.

She trembled in fear. Parakiraman said, "Don't worry" and pressed on her body once more. She could not understand what he was up to.

"Vadivalagi! There is an advantage even in being duped. Since I believed that she was Arukkani, I hesitated as she belonged to Thalaiyur king. I craved for her and was jealous that the king was going to lap up her ravishing loveliness! Now I don't have any inhibition! In this mandapam, tonight itself I'll feast on her. I will have a whale of a time with her the whole of the remaining night! After that she will be a spit victual!" So saying Parakiraman kissed her once again and entered Kuppayi's room and bolted it.

"Don't come! If you dare, your life is not yours." Kuppayi roared and took a dagger fixed on the wall.

"Girl! You can't split a mountain with a chisel! This Parakiraman is a mountain; you can't split him even with dynamite. We came to catch a macaw for decorating the couch of Thalaiyur king! You, a parrot, has fallen into our net! Yet, a parrot fit for my passion! You cannot escape from here! You can only become a corpse; but why bother? You are not married. If you are willing, I am ready to marry you! Yield, night is running out!"

Parakiraman got close to her. Kuppayi hit him hard on his chest with the dagger. He blocked it, twisted her arm and the dagger fell down. He hugged her tightly. She bit the hand that hugged her with all her strength and freed herself. He looked at his bleeding hand; but in his furious lust that pain was nothing.

How could she escape from that room? She hit her head against the wall! Dashed against the wall! He pulled her dress and vandalised her. That messed up scene pored oil into the fire of lust burning in his heart!

He lifted her bodily and hurled her like a bouquet on the bed.

At that time, outside the room all kinds of strange sounds were heard!

Parakiraman leaped over Kuppayi lying on the bed.

The door of the room splintered to smithereens with a loud noise!

Parakiraman turned in violent fury!

A spear pierced through his chest and peeped out of his back!

Parakiraman staggered! Floundered! His eyes peered at the person who hurled the spear!

He got the shock of his life!

"King! Is it you?" He wailed! He cried!

"Yes; it is me!" said the king and removed the cloth that covered his head.

41 Man-bewitching Rock!

"Is the spy doing his duty properly? To know that, another spy is sent to spy on the first one! Being aware of that diplomatic practice, I sent another spy to watch you, my chief general and head spy. I should have had absolute faith in you. I could have had. But when I heard about your recent activities - and your revelries - I understood that duty for you had been relegated not just to second or third place but to the last. That's why another important spy followed you. On your way to Valanadu you stayed in this mandapam with your concubine. You planned to abduct Arukkani, keep her here, get from her the secret about the emerald green ruby parrot and steal that priceless parrot. On knowing your wicked plan, the spy informed me about it immediately. Only to catch you red-handed I waited here in disguise. You wretch, when you came to know that the abducted woman was not Arukkani, you didn't even regret that your plan had misfired! You were happy that you got something sweet to feed upon and at once made a go for it with your mouth wide open. Even if you had stabbed her to death in your anger over her for obstructing your plan, I would have forgiven you. You were sent to abduct a woman for me - you got somebody else - you did not think that she also belonged to me and dared to rob her of her chastity. What other punishment can I give you for all these?"

Parakiraman listened to Thalaiyur Kali's explanation for his action in words wrought in fire. His eyes began to dim and he slowly slipped into the hands of death.

As his dim sight fell on the corridor, he could see the handcuffed Vadivalagi standing with bowed head in the custody of Thalaiyur soldiers.

When he must weep for his end, can he weep for hers?

"King, if the spy told you that I planned to steal that emerald green ruby parrot, it was a blatant lie."

The stumbling Parakiraman uttered this broken statement in a subdued voice.

The king raised his voice and asked, "Promise in the name of Thalaiyur Kali and say that! Your soul may attain some little peace if you, on the point of death, utter the truth to one who reposed complete faith in you. Can you give your promise and say that?" But Parakiraman slumped and fell on the floor.

Whatever he might have done, was he not his chief general? He had somehow fallen a victim to temptation and had to face the charge of high treason. Still, Thalaiyur Kali could not desist from paying attention to the dying man. He hurriedly placed the fallen man's head on his lap. Like flowers floating on the floods of a jungle river occasionally, mercy and sympathy used to ooze in the heart of Kali now and then. Parakiraman considered this gesture of his king a boon and tried to convince him by his tears flowing like waterfall that the punishment for his crime was unduly severe.

"King! My plan was to get the secret about the emerald green ruby parrot from Arukkani, search for it and hand over to you if ..." The words came to an end! His breath also! King Kali kept staring at his face. He wondered whether he had been too severe in punishing him.

Except those soldiers who stood guard around the arrested Vadivalagi, all others saluted their general for the last time. Thalaiyur ordered one of the vice generals to inter the mortal remains of Parakiraman in the Veerapur forest itself with due respect. Then he passed orders for taking Vadivalagi to her home. She caught hold of his legs and cringed, "Lord! I did not know anything. I just obeyed the orders of the general. Please forgive me."

Kali told her, "I have forgiven you; that's why you are being taken to your home." He then turned to his soldiers and asked, "Where is that girl?" At once they went in all directions and searched for her. King Kali understood that Kuppayi should have run away making use of the disquiet in the mandapam and ordered a few soldiers to find her out. He then roared that all his commands should be properly adhered to and left for Thalaiyur in his chariot.

In that darkness, Kuppayi was running in the jungle path though unable to see anything. As per the orders of Kali, Thalaiyur soldiers ran in all the four directions to trace her. Sensing their chase, Kuppayi hid herself in a dense bush to escape

from them and also to protect her chastity. She heard three or four soldiers conversing among themselves near the bush.

"Will she be hiding in one of the bushes?"

"The bushes are large and too many."

"How to find in which bush she is?"

"We can do one thing. Let us gather the dried leaves and start a fire. She will have to come out in whichever bush she is hiding."

"*Chi*! *Chi*! No. Perchance, she may not come out and may die of burns. Then how can we face the king?"

The plan to set fire was given up. A soldier whispered something in the ears of other soldiers. They all agreed to his suggestion. At once one of the soldiers spoke in a loud voice.

"Poor girl. We don't know in which bush she is hiding. There are poisonous snakes in all the bushes." Their idea was that Kuppayi would be scared and run out of the bush. They could then catch her easily!

But, instead of running out she looked carefully around to get a stick for beating any snake that might turn up. She spotted a long and curved stick in that darkness and picked it up. The stick was slippery and it nestled! She understood that the stick she held in her hands was a snake!

If she shrieked in fear and threw it away there were two dangers: the disturbed snake might get angry and bite her or the noise would land her in the hands of the soldiers. So she mustered courage and allowed the snake to slip out of her hands. Probably, the snake feared that something harmful was inside the bush and slid out fast. On its way a soldier who was standing nearby stamped upon it. The enraged snake sprang up and hissed. All the soldiers ran away helter-skelter in fear.

Kuppayi breathed a sigh of relief and looked out. It was almost daybreak. The soldiers had run far off. As she began walking amidst thorns and stones her legs ached. She kept a close watch around her and continued. She did not take pride in the sacrifice she made to save Arukkani. She was only happy that she played a trick and won. That night, in the Valanadu palace, the only way left for her seemed to be that. When she came to know that a gang of plotters had made its entry into Valanadu palace using the name of Uraiyur, her only concern was how to hoodwink them into leaving the palace. And so, without a care for her safety, she swiftly got into action. Even when she was about to face a situation worse than death in the hands of Parakiraman, she did not grumble.

She did not regret her decision to save her friend Arukkani. She considered her painful walk amidst thorns and stones in that jungle a heroic exploit and continued her journey.

A rock blocked her way. A fairly tall rock. On the ground around it trees had grown very thick. A clear stream had cut its narrow path along the rock. On seeing it, Kuppayi felt enthused. She washed her face with the stream water and also drank as much as she wanted. Her heart which had been fluttering in fear thinking about the impending danger - not to her life; but to her honour more valuable than her life even - was very much soothed by the stream water. She sat on a nearby stone and rested herself. She was confident that she could get out of the Veerapur forest and reach Valanadu before dusk.

She heard some men approaching. She observed that the noise emanated from not one side; but from all the four sides. She immediately got up, kept herself as close as possible to the rock and looked around. No doubt, they were all Thalaiyur soldiers. The same soldiers who had been ordered by their king to search for Kuppayi.

"In which direction could that girl have flown away? How is it that we are not able to get at her?"

"She could not have got out of this forest. She won't be able to escape us during daytime!"

The soldiers who were conversing like this were more than twenty. How could she escape from all those men? Kuppayi again felt very much agitated. Since she had firmly made up her mind not to fear death she did not lose heart. She kept herself very close to the rock and inched her way silently. Soon she found an opening which appeared to be that of a cave. She got into it with the conviction that even if the cave was infested with poisonous animals they would not be as cruel as the Thalaiyur soldiers.

While entering the cave, she felt dizzy. She realised that she was slowly becoming unconscious. Before she could think and find out whether the dizzy feeling was caused by some poisonous herb, she became totally unconscious. Insensible to the place where she was, she lay down at the ruggedly uneven entrance of the cave and fell into deep slumber.

The soldiers who came in search of Kuppayi reached the rock. But they were not aware that she was fast asleep very near them. They were all very tired and thirsty. They also drank the stream water as much as they wanted. One of them bent and straightened his neck and asked the others, "I feel like fainting. How about you?" They looked at each other with the same question. Nobody was able to answer. They all fainted. Everyone tried to get up; but could not. Then they tried to crawl to

a shady place, but lost consciousness completely and fell down wherever they were.

Neither Kuppayi, nor the soldiers were aware that the stream was a poisonous spring. Only a few local people knew that the water of that spring which appeared like glass was poisonous. Those who drank that water would lie down unconscious for a day or two; some weaklings had even died. The poisonous herbs which had grown around the rock and inside the cave had rendered that stream a poisonous pond.

How alluring it was - the attractive natural scenery, the yellow colour of the rock in the morning and evening sunshine, the stream flowing with resplendent silvery water amidst thickly grown trees! How alluring! It could captivate anybody. But unwary people would swoon, some might even die. That was why the forefathers of Rockiannan, during the time they were running the barracks, named it 'man-bewitching rock', wrote the same on a board and planted it near the stream to warn people.

In the course of time, this area came under the rule of Valanadu. As a proof of the lack of an efficient administrative set up to examine the good and bad and tell people about it, all the warning marks about that 'man-bewitching rock' got destroyed and disappeared.

Kuppayi who fainted and fell at the entrance of the cave continued to be so!

Like that, the soldiers also fell down unconscious around the cave and lay there stock-still.

42 Stigma – Real or Imaginary?

Kuppayi and the Thalaiyur soldiers who fell down unconscious a little while after dawn did not get up until next day evening. The poisonous water of that bewitching rock had paralysed them to that extent. The rays of the evening sun peeping through the thick foliage of the trees appeared as if they were apologising to Kuppayi for having scorched that tender shoot for two days unrelentingly.

Her eyes began to open slowly and take in a view of the outside world like a chick coming out of the egg. Though it was the same old world which had been familiar to her for more than sixteen years, as she had revived from a terrible state of coma she could not recognise herself! Only after putting to herself the question 'who am I' several times could she deduce that she was Kuppayi. She had to check whether she was alive or not. For that she pinched herself twice. She was sure that everything was all right and she was alive.

Why was she lying there – no, no – why had she stretched herself out there? She could figure it out only after thinking about it patiently.

If a person gets up in mid-sleep in an unfamiliar place she can identify the place only after careful recollection. How much confused a person will be after getting up from an unconscious state that had lasted two days and a night in between! Memories came back slowly, but in sets. Her efforts to save Arukkani Thangam in

Valanadu palace - the clever plan she devised - the honour she was about to lose in the hands of Parakiraman - the sudden arrival of Thalaiyur Kali - the hardships she underwent until she escaped from the Thalaiyur soldiers - and finally the water she drank from the stream in the man-bewitching rock - all these came back to her mind and she got up slowly.

Soon she felt a strange sensation! Wetness in the corner of her cheek! She felt it with her fingers. The wet cheek was sticky. She looked at her fingers carefully and found that it was blood. Blood had oozed from a small cut and had not congealed fully.

She could not recollect that the cut was actually caused by a sharp stone when she swooned and fell down. She had a doubt that one of the Thalaiyur soldiers who were chasing her should have bitten her cheek. Since she was unconscious it would have been easily possible for him!

She shuddered! But comforted herself as she was not totally ruined! Yet, she was terribly angry that her femininity had been assaulted! As if to confirm her doubt the Thalaiyur soldiers got up from their state of stupefaction one after another. She could hear their conversation.

"I thought so much then itself! How could water be so sweet! Now only I understand that it is poisonous."

"Why do you call it poisonous? We have drunk innumerable varieties of liquor. Did we ever get this kind of intoxication in any of them? So, why don't we call it the world's best brew?"

"Yes, Yes! If pots are available each can carry one full pot to Thalaiyur."

"I have a better idea! If we dig a channel and extend this stream up to our Thalaiyur war camp we can swim in it everyday!"

"Oh! What makes you talk like that? You have regained your consciousness and you are alive; that makes you talk like this! Had we taken one or two more mouthfuls, by now all of us would have reached the upper world! Don't forget it."

"Do you know this? After drinking this water I felt as if I was in paradise! I craved to bite a woman's cheek!"

"Thank god! Had you come across that girl we were trying to catch hold of, you might have bitten her cheek!"

"Hm! We didn't get her. So, what to do? Do you know what I did? I climbed that mango tree, plucked one unripe fruit and took a bite. My head reeled. Fell down and opened my eyes just now!"

Kuppayi listened to their conversation and felt her cheek with her fingers again and again. She saw bunches of unripe fruit hanging from a mango tree nearby.

Still, she could not quell her fears. That scoundrel, whether he bit her cheek thinking that it was mango or bit a mango thinking that it was her cheek, who knows? Who knows what he did in his tipsy condition? Kuppayi's worries got more and more terrifying!

Again their conversation drew her attention.

"Eh! What is this? Your whole mouth is stained with blood. Did you fall down and break your teeth? Or, you suffered a cut while biting the mango?"

Now Kuppayi shivered in fear. A cut in her cheek! And blood in the mouth of a Thalaiyur soldier! Though both were unrelated incidents, she could not come out of her bafflement.

She who did not scream when she was hiding in a bush and inadvertently put her hands on a cobra now shrieked in fear under the mistaken impression that her honour had been sullied. That shriek stirred the entire region. Thalaiyur soldiers acted swiftly like keyed up dolls. They shouted, "The same girl! Catch her without fail!"

Kuppayi saw them, went round the rock once, and took to her heels. The speed of the chasers cannot match the speed of those who are on a run to save their lives. Kuppayi ran very fast. The soldiers ran in all directions and were soon closing in. Kuppayi's feet pressed on thorny plants and blood drops sprang up and settled on the blades of grass like dewdrops. More than twenty wolves! A fawn amidst them. However fast the fawn might run, how far could it go?

Kuppayi spotted a dilapidated well on her way. She decided to jump into the well and increased her speed as a final effort. Thalaiyur soldiers tried to reach her quickly and prevent her from falling into the well. She evaded all of them, climbed the parapet wall and jumped into the well. But a horse leaped there on all its fours and thwarted her intention. Sankar was on the horse. He cried aloud "Kuppayi", lifted her bodily and put her in front of him.

Thalaiyur soldiers now closed in on Sankar. He jumped off his horse with his sword and attacked them. The weapons of all those soldiers broke into pieces. Sankar pushed at least ten of them into the well and the rest ran away and made good their escape. Kuppayi cried, "*Anna*!" caught hold of his legs and wept bitterly. Sankar comforted her by stroking her head and took her to a nearby vacant mandapam.

When Sankar asked her whether the soldiers treated her very badly she just hung her head without giving any reply. Tears flowed as from a waterfall. He wiped her ears and compelled her to eat the fruits he had with him. She accepted them very reluctantly and enquired after the health of all at Valanadu. As Sankar

did not want to make her sadder he turned his head the other side and replied, "Yes, all are well." He was very much surprised to see the feeling of affection that flashed on her face when she said, "*Anna*, how is Arukkani?"

"Arukkani got herself ready with a sword to rescue you! I prevented her, got this sword from her and came in search of you!"

When Sankar said this, Kuppayi's body got the goose flesh. She snatched the sword from Sankar, kissed it and said, "My Arukkani is unique! None can be like her! If I have another birth, in that also I must be her friend!"

Sankar said to her in a very sympathetic tone, "All right! All right! But don't hurt your mouth by kissing the sword! Already there is a cut on your cheek!"

But Kuppayi got terrified. Unable to figure out how she suffered that cut, she was already heart-broken and very much confused. So, Sankar's question about the wound raised a whirlwind within her. He thought that she might have dashed against a stone somewhere. But she construed that it was going to be a perpetual symbol of the stigma her honour had suffered and was very much annoyed.

Sankar got up and asked her to get ready. He placed her in front of him on the horse and started riding. In evening twilight the wind that blew swaying the tree branches was cold and comforting. The horse edged its way towards Valanadu in a relaxed manner.

When they reached the town street lights were burning dimly here and there. Very few people could be seen. Kuppayi did not show any sign of happiness on being rescued. She continued to keep her head bowed.

Sankar directed the horse towards the palace. Kuppayi said, "*Anna*! Let me go home and see my father first. After that we can go to the palace."

Sankar made fun of her, "What! Why this sudden desire to see your father? I thought you will like to see Arukkani first! On seeing you she will rush to you and hug! Both the friends will bathe each other in tears! But contrary to all my expectations you want to see your father. It's a surprise to me."

"No, *Anna*! Don't you know that father's health is not good? He would have by this time known that I had been abducted and that would have worsened his health. His seeing me will set his mind at rest!"

"*Amma*! Is your father ill and bed-ridden? No. He came to the palace two days ago..." He wanted to continue, but realised his folly and became quite.

"What, did my father visit the palace? What for, *anna*?"

If he were to tell the truth, he must say that his parents had died and Pachana Mudaliyar came to the palace to offer his condolences. So he told her, "Just that. When he knew that you had been abducted he came to enquire about it. I calmed him with words of encouragement and came in search of you."

Sankar turned the direction of the horse.

As soon as the Valanadu palace was liberated Arukkani compelled her friend and her father to come and stay there. But Pachana Mudaliyar refused to shift to the palace. So a beautiful house was got ready for him. A few servants were sent from the palace to take care of him. Kuppayi, out of her immeasurable affection for Arukkani stayed in the palace itself. Pachana Mudaliyar suffered heart problems on a few occasions and so confined himself to his home. Not willing to turn down the request of his daughter completely, he agreed to stay in a house very near the palace.

The horse reached that house and both of them got in.

Inside the house a flambeau was burning and Pachana Mudaliyar was reclining in his bed. When he heard the voice of his daughter "*appa*!" he got up with moist eyes and hugged her affectionately. Sankar noticed that both of them were getting emotionally upset.

He drew Kuppayi away from her father and tried to calm down both of them, "What is this? Will anyone worry over a suffering that has already left?" Pachana Mudaliyar was able to note the cut on her cheek even in that dim light.

When he asked, "*Amma*, what is this?" there was a shiver not only in his voice but also in his body!

He lamented, "*Amma* Kuppayi! Our family has lived generation after generation without any blemish to its honour. Until now, nobody has uttered a word of accusation. What a pity, this kind of stigma has befallen such a respected family!"

Arukkani felt that her father was right in his suspicion. Since her father also thought the same way about the cut on her cheek, Kuppayi felt as if her heart was thrown into a boiling oil cauldron. She cried "*appa*" and fell at his feet. Sankar lifted her up.

He said to Pachana Mudaliyar, "Nothing that can spoil the reputation of our family has happened. Don't worry yourselves unnecessarily. Please don't get agitated." Pachana Mudaliyar now feared that he had in haste caused mental agony to his daughter and wanted to change the course of the conversation. He thought he could tell her about the sudden demise of Kundrudaiyan and Thamarai. So he put his hands over the shoulder of his daughter and began, "*Amma*, do you know anything that happened in Valanadu?"

But Sankar thought that it was unnecessary to tell all those things to Kuppayi so soon. He said, "That's a very long story. Can it be said in one word? Kuppayi, first have a change of dress. We can talk about all those things leisurely." After she left he told her father, "*Ayya*! Kuppayi was caught in a grave danger and had suffered for more than two days. Unable to bear the burden of that sorrow her heart is still

shaken. If you tell her now the sad end of my parents she may not be able to take it on. Please don't tell her now. Though Pachana Mudaliyar consented to the suggestion of Sankar by nodding his head, he could not but wipe the tears flowing from his eyes.

After some time Sankar began to wonder why Kuppayi was taking so much time to change her dress and whether she was coming to the palace with him or after some time and turned to see inside. A distraught maid, her hair dishevelled, came running towards the front hall. She was continuously shouting, "*Ayyo! Ayyo!*"

Sankar ran hurriedly into the house and asked her, "Why? What for are you crying?" In a room adjacent to the main hall Kuppayi was found hanging from a beam. In one leap Sankar cut the rope and held her in his hands. But it was of no use. Kuppayi, without changing her imaginary fear that her chastity had suffered a stigma, had sought a remedy.

43 Losing Mayavar was a Grave Mistake

King Kali, his face tanking the burden of too many sorrows, was reclining on a couch in the upper storey balcony of Thalaiyur palace. The spy who described to him all that happened in the Uraiyur palace was standing respectfully at his feet. Since Kali trusted that spy and considered him a loyal dignitary of the court, he listened to him very carefully and at the same time put a few questions and cleared his doubts.

"King! Though Arukkani Thangam became heart-broken on knowing that her dear friend Kuppayi killed herself to save the honour of both her clan and her family, she counselled only patience to her brother Sankar who jumped up angrily to invade Thalaiyur immediately and take revenge."

"Why? For what reason? You say that the friend was as precious as her life! It is natural that any girl will get enraged on knowing her fate. Contrary to that, why did she counsel patience?"

"King! Arukkani had known from Mayavar that it would not be an easy task to invade and capture our Thalaiyur fort or defeat our forces in Thalaiyur. Though he had briefed Ponnar-Sankar also about the strength of our forces, Sankar being

young and high-strung had risen in anger to fight. But when Mayavar and Ponnar advised him to be calm Arukkani also joined them."

"I am not able to believe your words! We lost our general in Arichampatti fort! Victory for Ponnar-Sankar! In Sankaranmalai fort the forces led by Parakiraman retreated hastily after facing defeat! Our forces could not stand against Ponnar-Sankar when they surrounded Valanadu! We crumbled in our effort to prop up Chellatha Gounder's rule! How can I believe you that they are hesitating to attack us, when Thalaiyur has faced only defeats in such quick succession?"

"King! All those defeats were encountered by our auxiliary forces.

It is not an easy task for any enemy to enter the capital of Valanadu and defeat our forces! Not only that; once the forces of the eighteen regions which depend on us join our forces, won't we become formidable?"

"If eighteen forces come in support of us, won't the forces of the Chola kingdom support Ponnar-Sankar?"

"The Chola forces will assist Valanadu only when there is some danger or when it is invaded by enemies. If Valanadu invades another country, support of the Chola country is doubtful. Mayavar, only after considering all these, has advised Ponnar-Sankar not to be in a hurry. Arukkani Thangam is also an obstacle as she does not want to lose her brothers also after the bereavement of her parents and her friend."

"Just now you told me that Arukkani spends all her time in Periyakandiamman temple. How is it possible for her to participate in the affairs of the palace?"

"I told you about her staying in the temple. But I didn't give you the other details. I'll tell them now. King! The parents of Arukkani had a plan to marry Arukkani to Vaiyamperuman. Ponnar-Sankar also wished that. But after the death of Kuppayi, Arukkani had firmly told them that she would never marry. Her ambition is not marriage - but taking revenge upon us by wiping out Thalaiyur - taking revenge upon the family of Chellatha Gounder - that is, not only fulfilling Rockiannan's vow but also supporting Ponnar-Sankar who had vowed to annihilate us for having caused the deaths of Kundrudaiyan, Thamarai Nachiyar and Kuppayi."

"For that, what's she doing in Periyakandiamman temple?"

"She is not alone; there are seven more virgins and they are worshipping the Periyakandiamman. All of them have taken a solemn oath in the sanctum-sanctorum that they will never marry! In the temple they are getting training in fencing, archery and such war exercises. Arukkani visits the palace occasionally. Rest of her time is spent wholly in the temple. Excepting Ponnar-Sankar no other man is now allowed to enter the temple."

"Oh! The damsels of Kongu Nadu also are going to invade Thalaiyur! Who are the seven virgins staying there with Arukkani?"

"Like Pachana Mudaliyar's daughter Kuppayi they belong to various clans - these seven girls love Arukkani as much as they love themselves. After listening to the heroic orations of Arukkani in the temple they have turned into brave warriors. Like Arukkani they also tuck a sword to their waists."

"So you are saying that the forces of Valanadu will invade our Thalaiyur soon!"

"For that preparations are underway! But they will put off the invasion. My surmise is that the forces of Ponnar-Sankar will advance towards Thalaiyur some day unexpectedly."

"All your words are highly confusing. You say that they hesitate reckoning the strength of Thalaiyur forces! That the Chola king will not assist them! That Arukkani and Mayavar have pacified them! That they will however try to take revenge! You are doing the job of a spy very cleverly - you are confused and you are confusing me also!"

"King! Please excuse me. Their forbearance confuses us. Sankar is ready to attack us unmindful of victory and defeat. But, is not Mayavar a great statesman?"

"His statesmanship is not useful to our clan - but isn't it utilised by others?"

"It is of no use to think about what is past. Let us take into account what is happening and what is going to happen and then take any action."

"You will jump at the smallest opportunity to begin your sermon! Hum! What do you want to say?"

"On one side preparations are underway for the past three years to invade Thalaiyur. But at the same time Ponnar-Sankar are very careful in avoiding the bad name that they are always obsessed with war and are not interested in improving the lot of the common people. They have accepted the instruction of Mayavar to strive and prove the words of Akkaladeva Cholan that they would make history and emerge as the revered heroes of the Kongu land. For the past three years they have been showing keen eagerness to provide a good government to Valanadu."

"What special administrative steps have they taken? Anybody can do that if rains are plenty and the lands are bountiful!"

"King! Please excuse me. When I convey the facts to you, don't misconstrue that I am going beyond the limits. In Valanadu also rains have not been adequate in the past three years. But cultivation has not been too badly affected because of that. They are increasing the yield with the help of water drawn from wells dug deep in several places. Royal dignitaries also toil as much as the farmers. Arukkani Thangam owns a large garden. After finishing their work in the

Periyakandiamman temple Arukkani and the seven virgins irrigate the garden by drawing water from the well and produce food grains. Taking the cue from the palace women, all the citizens of Valanadu make good use of the government's assistance and work cheerfully."

"To you the grass looks greener on the other side. Don't we offer charity and doles to our people? Don't they felicitate us?"

"The spy's duty is to express truth! It doesn't become of him to flatter the king for the sake of pleasing him. His code of conduct is not that! I am not against charity. But the humble opinion of mine and several others like me is that doles and gifts given to ward off the day-to-day problems will not pave way for a prosperous and stable future. In Valanadu everything is planned and executed accordingly. Ponnar-Sankar listen to the problems of the citizens straightaway. The administrative sections which deal with redress mechanisms function neatly. There is none who is not happy with the various measures carried out by Ponnar-Sankar in the past three years such as laying of roads to connect all the villages, establishing centres to provide pure drinking water, academies to improve the knowledge of the people and barracks to train at least one person per family in warfare."

"What! You are not able to contain your overflowing joy! Do you see a wonderful administrative structure there only? Mayavar, who was our minister, devises plans and projects for them. Ponnar-Sankar execute them; that's all. Here also, doesn't Chellatha Gounder provide us with excellent plans? Don't you know that under his guidance only the administration of Thalaiyur has been divided into various departments such as transport, drinking water, forest, irrigation and they function under different heads?"

"King! I don't know how you will flare up and shout at me after listening to what I am going to say. But as a loyal servant I consider it my duty to bring certain facts to light. As you said there are various departments to take care of various works. Is it not also true that the main persons who are in charge of those works are all functioning under the supervision of Chellatha Gounder?"

"All right! What do you want to say? Speak without beating about the bush."

"The man in charge of the transport department submits to the treasury expenditure accounts for roads that have not been laid and gobbles up huge amounts. It is needless to say anything about the water board. In the residence of the board chairman government money flows like water. Citizens get not a drop of water! The forest department is busy razing down the trees in the mountains as a head is shaven clean of its hair!"

"Enough of it, stop!" Thalaiyur Kali did not shout in anger but said calmly and in deep sorrow.

"Until now you did not tell me how rotten the conditions are. Is it not a very serious crime on your part?"

The spy was a little hesitant. He braced himself up with the thought that it was his duty to his country, not so much to the ruler, and replied.

"King! When you dig at the river bed water springs forth. But if you pour a pail of water on the same river sand it immediately absorbs the whole water and soon becomes dry. I know that like the springs of the river there are good thoughts in your mind. I also know that the suggestions given by people like me to kindle your mind get absorbed and dry up like water poured on river sand."

"You don't understand that simply because the river sand absorbs water you get spring water while digging. It doesn't matter. It is now many years since I became a prisoner of circumstances. Chellatha Gounder is selfish and indulges in self-aggrandisement. Yet, I cannot forget even in my next birth that he is very much interested in my well-being and in propagating my fame and reputation. That's why, though I am fully aware that the results will be bad, I don't like to go against his wishes."

"King! My warning is that if you wish to continue like this the rule of Thalaiyur will not be able to stand against the youths Ponnar-Sankar and tumble down."

"No! I have decided to change myself. Hereafter, Chellatha Gounder or Manthiappan cannot stand in my way."

Thalaiyur Kali said this categorically and got up. Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan who had come to meet him a short while ago stood behind the door and listened to the whole conversation. They thought it was not proper to eavesdrop any more and entered the hall as if they were coming just then.

"What, have we come at a wrong time?"

Thalaiyur Kali had a look at the Gounder and said in a voice full of sorrow, "Nothing like that. In fact, it is a matter I should discuss with you. Without proper administration our country is declining into ruin! In Valanadu the rule of Ponnar-Sankar is praiseworthy! They give primary importance to the interests of the people and rule well. At the same time they are also strengthening their forces to attack our country. If the rulers don't care for the people's welfare and devote all their attention only to war, they cannot get the support of the people. We did not realise that! But Ponnar-Sankar are aware of it, put the interests of the people above the concerns of war and rule. We are thinking about it belatedly and what are we going to do now? Soon Ponnar-Sankar are going to invade our country with sufficient military power and are sure to score victory over us!"

At once Chellatha Gounder took hold of his hands and said with extreme concern, "No need to fear! Me and my advice are responsible for all these disastrous consequences. Now we must somehow or other prevent this war - and there is only one way out."

"What is that?" Kali asked excitedly. Gounder compressed his forehead with his thumb and index finger and said:

"Losing Mayavar was the greatest mistake committed by us! Valanadu is flourishing thanks to his admirable brain power while Thalaiyur has declined. I also realise that important fact. Mayavar alone, if he wishes, can obviate the opposition of Ponnar-Sankar and make Thalaiyur flourish once again. Mayavar alone can prevent Ponnar-Sankar from attacking Thalaiyur and save the head of the Thalaiyur king."

Kali did not expect these words from the Gounder and was wonderstruck. He looked at him keenly and said, "Is it? You mean Mayavar? But who can approach him? And how?" Chellatha Gounder cleared his throat and sat on the couch there. Everybody, including the spy, eagerly awaited his words.

"We must send an emissary to Valanadu. He must inform them that Thalaiyur wishes to avoid the growing enmity between the two countries and extend an invitation to Mayavar to come over to Thalaiyur for talks to discuss a peace treaty and amicably settle the issues."

As soon as Gounder said this Kali asked him, "Will Mayavar accept our invitation and come? Will he agree to a peace settlement?"

"Peace is the only goal of Mayavar! He will never like to see people dying in war. He will be very happy to know that we have changed!"

The spy intervened and asked, "Have we really undergone a change in our attitude?"

"It is certainly good to avert war. For that, it is essential to discuss with Mayavar! It is to be appreciated that Chellatha Gounder himself has come to this decision! First, we will send an emissary to Valanadu as per the suggestion of Gounder. Following that we will invite Mayavar and have a discussion with him."

Kali said it in definite terms. Chellatha Gounder winked at Manthiappan with a mischievous smile. Nobody noticed it.

44 Will the Plan Succeed?

In the counsel hall of Valanadu, Veeramalai read the long letter sent through a messenger by Thalaiyur Kali. Ponnar-Sankar, Mayavar, Chinnamalaikolunthu, and Vaiyamperuman listened to it keenly. Arukkani Thangam, her seven virgin friends, Muthayi and Pavalayi sat behind a curtain in a corner of the hall and focussed their full attention on the letter. It bore the signature of Thalaiyur Kali and was addressed to Mayavar.

"Though there had been difference of opinion between you and I in day-to-day affairs on many occasions, there had never been any impairment to our common desire that the land of Thalaiyur should be prosperous and its people should live in peace. I write this letter with the firm conviction that if anybody thinks that we, the Vettuva clan and the people of Kongu Velala clan, were especially created by God to fight against each other and destroy ourselves, it is an error of judgment as big as a mountain. You need not think that the Thalaiyur regime harbours hatred towards Valanadu or Ponnar-Sankar and functions as if it has taken an oath that it will not put its mind at rest until it wreaks vengeance. I do not deny that various situations and various reasons have fostered the enmity between the two countries to a great extent. After the feud between the families of Kundrudaiyan and Chellatha Gounder all kinds of incidents had happened. You know quite well that I am under the compulsion to sympathise with Chellatha Gounder who was appointed as my patron by my father Periya Kali. I need not tell you that I have a large army. After the Arichampatti battle or after the Sankaranmalai battle or after my soldiers were worsted and driven away by Sankar in Veerapur forest or after they wrested the Valanadu crown from Chellatha Gounder, whom I ought to have

supported, I could have pressed the Thalaiyur forces into a life or death battle. When such rage rose like fire in my heart it appeared as if your formless figure stood in front of me and calmed me with the words "King Kali, don't be in a hurry!" If a final wholesale war breaks out between the two forces the loss on both sides will be enormous. Not only the people of these two countries but also people belonging to countries in between will undergo a lot of suffering. Only after considering all these points have I come to the conclusion of talking to you personally and finding out a good solution. You may be surprised to know that Chellatha Gounder has accepted my decision with eagerness. I have been the cause of myself and Thalaiyur, the land of your birth, losing you and your visionary intelligence.

Do not laugh derisively at my request and spurn it thinking that it is the usual nature of Thalaiyur Kali to mend his attitude and then commit yet another mistake. At the same time do not think that this letter is the scream of a coward who is afraid of going to the war front. I know that you who have understood me quite well will not think like that. This letter is the result of my worry that neither of our countries is going to get any benefit by fostering useless hatred and by ruining the lives of its citizens. So I request you to accept my invitation and come to Thalaiyur palace once. Whether it is Thalaiyur or Valanadu the regime must be able to rule without any apprehension or anxiety and have the welfare of the people as its primary concern. I have extended this invitation to you for a preliminary discussion between the two of us for evolving an agreeable resolution that will avoid war. I hope that you will send the details about your visit through my messenger."

As soon as Veeramalai finished reading the letter with a scowl, Sankar rose angrily and shouted, "No, never! Friendship with enemies who are to be revenged? The sword I raised against Thalaiyur Kali, Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan will not get back into its scabbard until the foremost duty is accomplished! Tear and throw away the letter of Thalaiyur Kali! Ah... what good counsel he has offered! Like a tiger with blood-stained tongue lecturing on spirituality!"

Ponnar calmed him and said, "Be patient, Sankar! What is the real intent of this letter? Why has wisdom suddenly dawned upon Kali? Is it a letter written with a conspiracy behind? Or sincere statements written in self-realisation? Mayavar can judge it better than us; let us listen to him."

Arukkani Thangam peeped out of the curtain and said, "*Anna*! Excuse me for my intervention!"

Her brothers, Mayavar and others listened to her eagerly.

"The letter addressed to Mayavar is a conjuror's trick! Certainly, there is a conspiracy in it. Didn't this Thalaiyur bloke try to abduct me by sending a strumpet in the guise of the Chola princess and cause the death of my friend Kuppayi? Today, he speaks like a lover of peace! Isn't he the reprobate who plotted to kill my brothers when they were just babies? Are we going to forget the sacrifice of our clan mentor Rockiannan? Are we going to throw his vow into the dustbin? Because of whom did we lose our parents who would have otherwise lived for many more years? Wasn't it because of the Thalaiyur general? Today he indulges in cajolery, talks about country, people and all that! If we are duped by this Thalaiyur fellow who keeps that Saguni Chellatha Gounder and that inhuman Manthiappan by his side and speaks of peace we will definitely be pushed into a perilous path."

Arukkani Thangam gave vent to her feelings in anger and excitement. Ponnar smiled at her bravery. In Sankar's eyes rage mingled with tears.

Ponnar walked up to her and addressed her in a kind tone. Even then her anger did not subside. Her final opinion was that it was dangerous to get entangled in the plot that was lurking behind the letter.

"Thangam! I haven't forgotten any past incident. I don't believe that Thalaiyur Kali who was a Duriyodana until yesterday can suddenly change into a Dharma! But one thing; you mustn't forget that this letter is not a personal one from Kali to the individual Mayavar!"

"Yes *Anna*! He has written only to Mayavar."

"It's true! But what is written is about the dispute between two countries!"

"So?"

"So we must think calmly. Though Valanadu is under the regime of Ponnar-Sankar, the brain of it is Mayavar! Hence, Kali's letter to him must be considered very important."

"*Anna*! I also consider it important. But my assessment is that the importance we give will save a rogue from ruin and push us who have vowed to take revenge upon him into disaster."

Sankar appeared to be in agreement with Arukkani letter by letter. He strode hurriedly towards them and thundered, "What Thangam says is right. Where is the need to have preliminary talks with the enemy against whom we must seek vengeance? Let us assume that we send Mayavar. What will happen? Something calamitous may happen to him – or peace talks will take place on the condition that Valanadu must be given back to Chellatha Gounder! They will undertake not to interfere in Arichampatti, Sankaranmalai and Kudaiyur and get Valanadu! Do we need such a shameful conciliatory discussion?"

"It seems you and Arukkani have not given a thought to what I am going to say. Those who are going to be affected because of the enmity between two countries are the citizens of those two countries. My concern is that these citizens must not mistake us. People might say, 'Thalaiyur Kali sent a letter expressing his readiness for peace talks. But those Ponnar-Sankar wanted war only.' Why should we pave way for such adverse criticisms to swarm us like moths? He has invited Mayavar – let him honour it and go – let him come back and tell us what Kali says – ahead of that why should we imagine anything unnecessarily?"

"If any harm is caused to Mayavar in Thalaiyur palace...?" Veeramalai asked Ponnar.

"I don't think Thalaiyur Kali will be that much uncultured. Not for himself; he will never wish to incur the wrath of his own people. This is a complicated matter and so let Mayavar take a decision,"said Ponnar. Even in that angry mood Arukkani Thangam smiled!

Ponnar asked, *"Amma*! What makes you laugh?"

"Anna! Nothing. People used to call father Kundrudaiyan 'Masachamy' for his naivety. Though not that much, my elder brother has at least half of that. I thought of it and the smile appeared."

Mayavar got the letter from Veeramalai and read it silently twice. Though he did not express his opinion when the debate was going on heatedly, his waves of thought were never at rest. What could be the mystery behind the letter? He was able to find an answer to it. Thalaiyur Kali has realised his mistakes – he wants to earn a good name among the people of Thalaiyur - whether he can face a large scale war or not, for the time being he does not want to! Though circumstances have forced him to change, who can forgive him for his past sins? Perhaps, he is acting with good intentions – but if Chellatha Gounder has a plan to use it for his wicked intrigues? Mayavar's stream of thoughts swelled like this.

The fact that Ponnar-Sankar are giving the people a good administration has been established. Also the fact that they have earned the respect and the goodwill of the whole Kongu clan has spread in all the regions of Valanadu. People will not grumble if they enter the battlefield now to fulfil the vow they have undertaken. If Chellatha Gounder causes any harm to him without the knowledge of Thalaiyur Kali that itself will become a proper reason for Ponnar-Sankar to invade Thalaiyur and revenge themselves on him. Mayavar thought like this.

His silence came to an end. But he did not say what exactly he thought. He feared that if he were to tell them that some danger might befall him and that could be used as a reason to invade Thalaiyur, Ponnar-Sankar would definitely stall his visit to Thalaiyur. So he avoided mentioning that and began with a mild chuckle:

"Don't conclude that Thalaiyur Kali is such a heinous person. I think that he is scared after seeing and hearing about the increase in the military prowess of Valanadu. That's why he is climbing down. I won't say that his invitation to me is a conspiracy. As the former minister of Thalaiyur I always enjoy his love and respect. Why don't we accept his invitation for talks and wait for the outcome? Why should we decide that everything has come to end in the beginning itself?"

All those present in the counsel hall became silent as if they agreed with what Mayavar said. He directed Ponnar to write a letter of acceptance to Thalaiyur. Ponnar asked Veeramalai to call the Thalaiyur messenger. It was decided that Veeramalai would accompany Mayavar.

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Thalaiyur Kali appreciated the messenger who returned with the letter of acceptance and presented him a pearl necklace. He felt happy as he thought that if Mayavar came all the past bitterness would disappear and there would be a new era of peace and prosperity. He said to Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan with bubbling cheer, "Hereafter, everything that happens will be good!" Both acted admirably as they said "Yes! Yes!" But while their heads nodded, their teeth gnawed. The glee on sensing victory of their plan shone brightly on their faces.

45 The Noble Man's Fight with Pig

What was the conspiracy that Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan devised after careful planning? A *Tirukkural* couplet succinctly states that a king who has no righteous man beside him to point out his faults will face ruin even without any external effort to harm him. When such is the case, will there not be people who devise plans to fish in troubled waters? Now the sceptred king regrets his past mistakes. For such schemers this is an opportune time to magnify those errors and present the kingdom as error-ridden and accomplish their selfish ends. These miscreants, the black spots of humanity, surround those who wish to mend themselves, speak coaxingly, do little errands obsequiously and finally neck them into traps so that they never rise.

What these men need are self-gratification, pleasurable lives for their dear ones and favourable circumstances. They constantly sharpen their cunning intelligence to find out suitable persons to make use of them as ladders, make a pretension of praising and worshipping them and after their job is over kick them off.

Could Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan remain idle when such an opportune moment presented itself? Like itching pain spreads on the shoulder without dust or insect bite, deceitful cunning crept and sprawled in their minds! Is that not the characteristic of evil-doers?

Mayavar had given his concurrence to come and meet Kali in Thalaiyur. Kali was pleased about it and was busy supervising the preparations for his reception. He invited all his ministers and had consultations. He told them that his conscience drove home the point that Thalaiyur and the other eighteen Vettuva sub-states were in the grip of famine and in such a situation the only wise course of action was to eschew war and work for peace. So only he had invited Mayavar to make peace with Valanadu. It was resolved that as a first step Kali would have a personal discussion with Mayavar and afterwards talks could be held at the ministerial level. Most of the ministers were happy that al last the war drums which were constantly heard in the streets of Thalaiyur would become silent and there were signs of interest being diverted to the day-to-day problems of Thalaiyur citizens. Kali summoned the temple priest Chembakulan and passed orders that as soon as Mayavar arrived a pooja must be performed in the Kali temple, a thousand and eight lamps must be lighted in the temple precincts and to pray for the welfare of both Thalaiyur and Valanadu a special worship of one lakh chants must be commenced.

In his mind an imaginary meeting - Mayavar has arrived - he has a heart-to-heart talk with him - Mayavar has forgotten all the bitter incidents of the past and helps him take felicitous decisions!

"I am extremely happy that you accepted my invitation without even a slight suspicion and came here!"

"I am also immensely pleased that the king of Thalaiyur has had a fresh clarity of mind. Is not the emergence of the idea that solutions can be found through discussions for problems which warranted the use of weapons a welcome sign by itself?"

"I am not worried about the personal enmity that has arisen between me and Ponnar-Sankar. Nor am I afraid of that. My fear is that this enmity may spread like a disease among the Vettuva and Velala clans. Only to prevent it somehow or other I wished to meet you."

"I am also burdened by that general concern. That's why I explained to Ponnar-Sankar the prevailing situation and came here. But I have a doubt. Won't Chellatha Gounder be an obstacle to this peace process?"

"That's a mistaken doubt. He has an insatiable desire to invite you for talks and build friendship between the two countries."

"He may say that! Whatever it may be, he had been living as the state head of Valanadu. How long can he patiently endure the status of a guest of Thalaiyur palace?"

"Don't I know that Mayavar has the intelligence to find the meaning of his every movement? We must bear in mind the fact that rightly or wrongly he had been ruling a country and see to it that no protest arises from his side while striking the peace deal."

"Two lions are contending as to how they would share the prey. Does a fox standing far off with a lolling tongue need a bone piece?"

"Oh! You have caught the point! Isn't your brain a treasure house of knowledge? Hereafter, Thalaiyur will not involve itself in any ruction with Valanadu - similarly Valanadu must not do anything against Thalaiyur under the pretext of settling the past feuds. As a compensation for the seizure of Valanadu from him he must be granted Sankaranmalai or Kudaiyur and a condition must be imposed upon him that he should be friendly with Thalaiyur and Valanadu."

"I know that this kind of enormous enmity rose just out of jealousy among agnates. Had Chellatha Gounder got along amicably with Kundrudaiyan then itself, now he would not have been reduced to the level of knocking at your doors! His evanescent victories made him lose his head! All right, - is it Sankaranmalai or Kudaiyur? - I will have to talk to Ponnar-Sankar and find out which one they will be prepared to give him."

"Though I don't think that all the problems have been solved, I believe that the path for taking both the countries in the right direction has been laid."

"Faith will not go waste. I hope in our next meeting we will sign the peace treaty between Thalaiyur and Valanadu."

"Everything is in the hands of Mayavar!"

Kali affectionately hugs and draws Mayavar's hands up to his eyes as a mark of pious respect.

He was very anxious that his imagination should not stop at that but bear fruit. He turned in the direction of Kaliamman temple and prayed, "Devi! Bestow mercy upon us and see that everything turns out well!"

The prayer of Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan was different! Mayavar must not meet Thalaiyur Kali at all. On the way Mayavar must meet with some danger. Because of that Ponnar-Sankar must get terribly angry with Kali. And they must invade Thalaiyur. Ponnar-Sankar must die in the battle. Chellatha Gounder must get the reign of Valanadu again. His regime must become the sole regime of the Kongu clan. What is the way for this prayer to fructify? Conspiracy has germinated - the means of implementing it must be sought out.

They called the Amman temple priest Chembakulan who could serve them as the assistant brain to their treacherous brains and talked to him.

Only if news spread that Thalaiyur Kali invited Mayavar for talks, conspired and got him eliminated would Ponnar-Sankar rise like a volcano - a war would break out - and the lost regime could be regained!

They knew that Kali was rearing a wild pig and it was under the care of Chembakulan. If a bag of gold was given he would throw the burden on Amman and undertake any nefarious job. Didn't they, in order to get rid of Ponnar-Sankar when they were just babies, concoct a story of 'Amman's Prophesy' with his assistance? So now also they enlisted the help of that monster of bribes very easily. They decided to bribe Chembakulan and make use of Thalaiyur Kali's wild pig to carry out their wicked plan.

A hundred pigs were always with that wild pig. Kali's foster pig was the king to all of them. All those hundred pigs followed it wherever it went. If any farmer was charged with sedition, Chembakulan would let those pigs loose in his fields and they would destroy the crops in no time under the leadership of the king pig. It was a usual practice and an entertainment to the state officials!

Chellatha Gounder got Chembakulan ready to send those pigs in the path of Mayavar and complete the job. The same night he drove the pig force to the Madukkarai area in between Thalaiyur and Valanadu.

Kali got up early in the morning and was getting ready to receive and play host to Mayavar. He summoned Chembakulan to know from him whether everything was ready for the pooja in Kaliamman temple. The soldier came back with the news that the king's foster pig and the other pigs had run away from the pen in the night and Chembakulan had gone in search of them. The king was stunned to hear this reply. To manage the situation, Chellatha Gounder said, "The famine in our country has left no food even for the pigs. So they should have broken the enclosure and headed for crops somewhere."

As he said, the herd of pigs was destroying the fields near Madukkarai. When the pigs were enacting their frenzied dance among the almost fully grown crops in the fields between the eastern bank of the river Amaravathi and Madukkarai the chariot of Mayavar arrived there. Veeramalai was driving it. On both sides of the chariot there were two soldiers on horseback with spears for protection. Mayavar squirmed in anger on seeing the pig herd destroying the crops when there was so much famine.

"Alas! What an atrocity this is! Aren't there men in Thalaiyur to protect the crops even?" lamented Mayavar. Veeramalai replied, "After all it is an enemy country ... what if it goes to ruin?"

"Don't speak like that Veeramalai! The government may be our enemy - but people everywhere are our people. This crop is the succour for their survival. Pigs are destroying it. Can we watch it idly? Drive away these pigs at once!"

Mayavar shouted in a loud voice. He ordered to stop the chariot, got down and began chasing the pigs along with others. The pigs did not run away. The enraged Mayavar went closer to them. Even then they stood the ground. That moment a terrible noise was heard from a large bush nearby. It was the sound produced by the priest Chembakulan - the type of sound he usually gave to drive the pigs into frenzy. Before Mayavar could spot the place from which the sound emerged all the pigs pounced upon him in unison. The king's foster pig dashed against Mayavar and pushed him down. Quite unexpectedly his sword fell down and Mayavar fought with the pigs bare-handedly. Veeramalai sensed the danger to Mayavar and rushed into the pig herd and killed many of them by tearing their intestines or breaking their heads with his sword. Following him the two horsemen also killed a few pigs with their spears. As Chembakulan made the inciting sound without let up it was an impossible task for Veeramalai and those soldiers. More than fifty pigs croaked and lay like rocks amidst the crop. But the king pig was not ready to let Mayavar off. At one stage Mayavar lay helplessly on his back and the wild pig was rolling on him like a hillock. Veeramalai noted it, snatched the spear from a horseman and hurled it exactly at the pig's loin. The pig was hit by the spear and its roar shook the entire area. It bled profusely, yet it leaped and dashed against the chest of Mayavar with all its might and fell down dead.

Veeramalai and the soldiers rushed to Mayavar and cried, "*Ayya*!" Mayavar cast his graceful eyes on them. His lips mildly uttered the words, "Long live Ponnar-Sankar!" Soon his eyes also closed to keep company with his lips!

46 Reception to Mayavar!

Veeramalai was stunned at the sudden and unexpected demise of Mayavar. He was certain that the attack of the pigs was a planned one and so ran with his sword towards the bush from which calls were given to egg them on. Chembakulan shivered on seeing him rushing like that and yelling as if possessed. He feared that he would be smashed to pieces if he were caught and hence leaped over his horse in one jump and flew off. The horse carried him over fields, ridges, forests and all kinds of ups and downs speedily.

Veeramalai was disappointed as the cowardly miscreant had escaped and returned to the place where Mayavar's body lay. One of the soldiers who came to assist him was bleeding from his ribs and was slumping on the chariot. With the help of the other soldier he lifted Mayavar's body, and placed it in the chariot. He then sat there with the body on his lap. Sparks of anger flew in his eyes. He ordered the wounded soldier to get into the chariot and the other soldier to drive. That soldier asked him very sorrowfully, "To Valanadu, is it not?"

"No! Not to Valanadu! Drive to Thalaiyur! What will be the answer of king Kali to Mayavar's end? I must find it out!"

That soldier said, "It doesn't seem proper to go there alone in a situation like this."

"How can I go back to Valanadu and face Ponnar-Sankar? Thalaiyur Kali had conspired to kill Mayavar under the pretext of inviting him for talks. And he has succeeded also. I who had failed to save the life of Mayavar must get back with the

head of Kali or my dead body should fall in Thalaiyur itself! Don't be afraid! Drive the chariot to Thalaiyur."

Veeramalai bawled in high-pitched emotion. The soldier understood that it would be of no use to talk to him any further. So he drove towards Thalaiyur.

"Please excuse me. Shouldn't we inform this to Thalaiyur?"

"We can. But through whom?" He looked at the wounded soldier. Both felt that he was not fit for the journey.

"What would happen if he were fit and the news is sent to Valanadu? Sankar will start a war against Thalaiyur immediately. If it is hastily done without any preparation the result may be disastrous. Let anything happen - let the news of Mayavar's death reach Valanadu along with the news that Veeramalai paid his life as the cost for demanding justice for Mayavar."

Veeramalai took this vow without caring a jot for his life. His eyes viewed Mayavar's lifeless body in acute sorrow.

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Chembakulan ran out of the bush and escaped death fortuitously. He rode fast into Thalaiyur and reached the house of Vadivalagi. He tied the horse in a covered area near the entrance and went straight to her room. The door was kept ajar. Vadivalagi's dress also was like that. Manthiappan was lying on her lap and taking sips from the wine cup in her hand. So Chembakulan could not get a full view of her in that posture. She did not get up embarrassed or ashamed. Bashfulness was something she put on. It might have been a natural trait with her when she was a little girl! Manthiappan was thick-skinned and Chembakulan was more so. So shame was ashamed of standing in front of those three and took flight.

Manthiappan pressed his cheek on Vadivalagi's and asked, "Chembakula! What happened to your task?"

"Wherever Chembakulan goes he wins! Pity the king, both the pigs reared by him have died!"

"What do you say? The king reared only one big wild pig."

"What I say is right. The king actually reared one pig. He brought up a wise minister, Mayavar; isn't that also a wild pig?"

"Splendid! Splendid! Chembakula, you said it right!" So saying he bit the bare shoulder of Vadivalagi.

"Have both those wild pigs died? Has our plan succeeded?" Manthiappan got up from the lap of Vadivalagi and began dancing.

"For your wonderful achievement take her tonight as a gift!"

Chembakulan did not seem to grin from ear to ear at that prize.

"I don't want woman. All I want is gold! Gold! Give me that; that will do!" he grinned.

Manthiappan knitted his forehead, thought for a while, patted his shoulder and said, "The first part of our plan has come to an end victoriously. The next part must begin from here." He then told Vadivalagi, "Wait outside. I must talk to Chembakulan in private."

She twisted her waist and began measuring her steps to the next room. Even while leading her to the next room Manthiappan clung to her and showered kisses. Chembakulan enquired, "What did your father say? Has the gold due to me reached my home?"

"That was done long ago. See, as per my father's idea the next job is awaiting you. As an advance for that he has given you a hundred sovereigns."

Manthiappan handed over a small bag full of gold and Chembakulan grabbed it with all rapaciousness. Strangely, saliva did not drip from his mouth. Aren't men who strangulate anybody's neck for bribes and are proud about it more despicable than dogs that run after bones?

"What is the next job? Tell me that."

"Chembakula! It's a job for which you must use your entire skill. As soon as the news of Mayavar's murder reaches Ponnar-Sankar they will invade Thalaiyur. If both jointly lead their forces it will be difficult to overcome them."

"How can we divide them in the battlefield? We will have to face them."

"Your intelligence and cunning must be used to divide them. Just wait. The instrument for that is ready." Manthiappan opened a small box kept in that room and took out a casket. A resplendent parrot shone brightly inside a beautiful cage.

"What is it? What is it?" Chembakulan opened his eyes wide; drowned in surprise.

"This is the emerald green ruby parrot! Did you notice the body? The whole of it is emerald. Beak, toes, nails and tuft are all made of rubies. This cage is not an ordinary one; but made of gold and etched with diamonds. The casket is silver. Rockiannan kept this in a secret place. But can his trick pay off with my father? He unearthed it somehow! Keep it with you."

"What? Are you giving it to me? I don't know what to say."

"To explain it clearly my father is waiting in his palace. Take it to him now itself. He will tell you everything."

"Emerald! ruby! diamond! gold! You entrust such expensive articles with me; I can't believe myself!"

"Yes! They are very expensive things indeed! We trust you - meet my father and you will get the answer."

Manthiappan put the parrot inside the cage, the cage inside the casket and the casket inside the wooden box and handed it over to Chembakulan. From the sound of the horse hoofs Vadivalagi knew that Chembakulan had left and came to Manthiappan swaying and swinging her waist. He pushed her and she pulled him to her side and both fell on the bed.

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Evening time daubed the sky in red. Clouds of various hues such as black, white, yellow and red were sailing across the firmament like huge bales of cotton. The chariot carrying the dead body of Mayavar was about to enter the main gate of the Thalaiyur palace. Nobody could guess that inside the chariot a lifeless body was stretched out. It appeared as if Mayavar were very tired and fast asleep. The soldier who was wounded was not there. Only Veeramalai and the other soldier were there.

The fort guards of Thalaiyur saw the chariot with Valanadu flag. They went near it and enquired very politely without stopping it.

"Are you coming from Valanadu?"

Veeramalai answered patiently and with composure. His heart was a burning cauldron. He suppressed his indignation and spoke.

"Mayavar has come on the invitation of the king of Thalaiyur. Inform your king."

"Mayavar? Don't we know Mayavar? Yes, it is Mayavar! But why does he look so worn out? He never used to sleep like this."

The fort guards showed eagerness to get more information.

"Yes, Mayavar won't sleep like this. His order was: 'But whatever it is, there is the age factor. Journey weariness - so let me sleep for a while - wake me up only after you have met Thalaiyur Kali' - if you say that you will allow us in only when he is awake I'll wake him up without minding his physical discomfort."

"*Ayyo*! No, no! Drive the chariot slowly. We will inform the king. He is waiting to welcome him." Soon two chief guards hurried to the palace on horseback. Eight guards among the remaining ones mounted their horses, formed a cordon on both sides of the chariot and kept pace with it.

The chief guards bowed their heads respectfully in front of king Kali. The king who was waiting for a long time asked them, "What, has Mayavar arrived?"

"Yes! He has come - he has crossed the facade of the fort and is approaching the palace."

"Is it so? I will come immediately - let the palace choir get ready to welcome him. I have already told that women must stand on either side of the corridor and shower flowers as Mayavar walks up to the hall. Ask all of them to be ready. Let the auspicious drum sound in the palace. Where is the garland of pearls made for him?"

The pearl garland was given to Kali on a plate. He took it in his hands and came to the palace gate. He was ready to wear it around Mayavar's neck and receive him.

Auspicious instruments and trumpets sounded!

The drums reverberated to welcome him!

The chariot arrived at the palace gate.

47 Another Peace Delegation

Veeramalai saw Thalaiyur Kali at the entrance and got down from the chariot. With great effort he hid the volcano that was exploding in his heart.

He introduced himself as Veeramalai, the general of Valanadu and said, "It seems you are waiting for the arrival of Mayavar!" Thalaiyur Kali nodded his head with a smile and looked into the chariot.

King Kali was shocked as Veeramalai said curtly, "I have come to deliver Mayavar as you wished!"

"What? You have come to deliver Mayavar? I don't understand your language!"

"King! You can't understand, yes, you can't understand! I have heard many stories about palaces turning into hotbeds of intrigues. I have also known that the Thalaiyur palace is capable of raising a tomb over ethics and conspires sitting on that tomb. But I never expected that you will gleefully target and strike down dead the man from whom you learnt the art of politics and from whom you learnt how to wield the sceptre and govern – and the man who was so much anxious that you and your country should not go to ruins because of vain shows of bravadoes and feelings of animosity!"

On hearing those fiery words from Veeramalai, king Kali was astounded. He enquired again and again what had happened, stepped into the chariot and touched the body of Mayavar in trepidation. The body which had been propped up slumped. A thousand hammer stokes on the centre of his forehead! Thunder, lightning and storm in his mind!

"Veeramalai! How did this happen? Is Mayavar really dead?"

"What else? Do you think he has jumped from one body to another? You conspired to do away with him on the way itself and you are now acting very ably!"

"No! Not at all! Veeramalai! Believe me! No such plan at all. I agree there was bitterness in our relationship - and because of that he joined the enemy camp - but on no occasion did I fail to honour him, nor did I ever think disrespectfully of him! Even now I only wanted to get rid of the enmity between the two countries and did not have the cruel mind to dispose him of."

"King of Thalaiyur! If your ambition was the death of Mayavar you could have pierced your sword into his chest during your talks with him or you could have mixed poison in his food while hosting a feast in your palace. When there are scores of ways to kill him in your fort, why did you unleash wild pigs on him and finish his life? Can there be a more cowardly act than this?"

"Wild pigs? And I let them loose on him? No! Definitely not! Veeramalai, what you say is a puzzle to me! What happened? Please explain!"

"King! I know that you know how to swallow a mountain and pretend to have swallowed just a rat! Your dissembling drama - your cunning speech fit only for a cheat - you cannot fool me with these! Is it not true that you asked your men to set wild pigs at Mayavar in the forests near Madukkarai? Is it not true that you wove a plot to get rid of a good man - an able man - an eminent statesman - and throw the blame on wild pigs? You are a spider that traps an insect and makes a meal of it without even moving from its place! You should certainly answer for this cruelty! Tit for tat! Blood for blood! I who could not take Mayavar back to Valanadu safely will meet Ponnar-Sankar with the head of Kali! If not, my dead body will fall on Thalaiyur soil like Mayavar's."

Veeramalai roared like a lion, unsheathed his sword and jumped at Kali. Before he could do anything the Thalaiyur soldiers formed a circle around both and pointed their swords at the chest of Veeramalai.

Kali did not lose his composure. He waved his hands and asked his bodyguards to be patient. But Veeramalai's rage did not subside, it only multiplied. He shouted, "I don't care even if countless men surround me. Now I am a jungle flood.

I will break any barrier! King Kali, I will rest only after breaking your head!" He kicked and pushed the soldiers and tried to advance.

"Veeramalai! Listen to me. If my explanation doesn't satisfy you, let our swords settle the dispute!" said Kali loudly. But Veeramalai was not in a mood to heed it.

"You wove a net of conspiracy under the guise of peace talks! Are you now brazen enough to give advice? If you are manly, draw your sword." He thundered like this and again tried to have a run at him. Kali's bodyguards feared that something terrible might happen and quickly pounced upon Veeramalai. He attacked them with his sword as if he anticipated their move. Their grip slackened. They fell down and lay scattered on the ground. Other soldiers and also those who fell down closed in on Veeramalai in no time like a swarm of bees flying out of the hive. Kali feared that all their swords might pierce his body and fell him. But Veeramalai exhibited his unique fighting skill and sent all those swords flying in one sweep. Even those who lost their swords did not leave him. They were unmindful of the lightning sword thrusts of Veeramalai and surrounded him still closer risking their lives even. To escape from that precarious situation Veeramalai pressed his feet hard on the ground and jumped high in the air above all their heads. Kali pitched a rope noose accurately in his direction and it fell around his body. In no time the Thalaiyur soldiers tightened the noose's grip and made him immobile.

King Kali advanced towards the bound Veeramalai in slow and steady steps.

"I can make the general of Valanadu a victim to my sword now itself! But my loyal adherence to the ethics of war prevents me. Can I kill a person whom I have invited for peace parley?"

Veeramalai listened to the king nonchalantly. He stamped his left foot heavily on the ground and roared like a wounded tiger.

"War ethics! Have you read that? Did your diligent study of war ethics incite you to kill our cultured Mayavar on the way by employing pigs?"

"You are not able to understand the truth, nor are you ready to listen when I explain but go on saying the same thing again and again. Talking to you is waste of time. No more discussion. Take him to the prison and keep him in safe custody. See that he is given the respect due to him as the general of Valanadu."

The bodyguards gripped him strongly and led him to the prison.

"King Kali! This is going to be your last command! The day you will find yourself in the same prison is not far off!" Veeramalai shouted and his words shook the ramparts of the palace.

Kali did not give any reply, but watched him keenly as he walked towards the prison boldly like a bull. Veeramalai and the soldiers disappeared from his view.

With a sorrowful face he trudged up to the chariot in which the body of Mayavar was lying and beckoned to the man who was holding the pearl necklace in a plate. Kali took the necklace. His hands could not function normally. Somehow he adorned Mayavar's neck with that pearl necklace. Tear drops peeped out of his eyes.

Something that ought not to have happened had happened without his knowledge. In that mental confusion he stumbled and flinched. He felt that he had become utterly helpless and could not even think about the next course of action.

Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan came there putting up a show of excessive perturbation. Gounder first went straight up to the body of Mayavar and stood there silently with his head bowed for a short while. Closed his mouth with one end of his silk shawl and pretended to cry in spasms. Manthiappan lowered his poisonous eyes and stood there motionless as if struck by deep sorrow. King Kali did not take note of their acting but kept watching the face of Mayavar which shed plentiful grace even after death. Gounder put his hand over his shoulder and shook him mildly. Kali set his eyes on him as if he regained his sense only then. Gounder hugged him and spoke in a manner of sharing his sorrow.

"We proposed something but God enacted something else!"

Sighs and speech commingled. Manthiappan said with intense emotion, "*Appa*! It is better you explain how Mayavar's death occurred." Kali looked up to Gounder as he was very eager to know the cause of Mayavar's death.

"Nothing! Fate has played its role! We took a rare decision with the good intention that Thalaiyur should settle its disputes with Valanadu amicably and both the Velalars and Vettuvars should live well in peace. If only Mayavar had come to Thalaiyur palace alive everything would have gone on well as desired by us. But fate has played its game in a way nobody expected. What to do?"

Kali heard this and asked agitatedly, "How did fate interfere? What actually happened? Tell me that."

"I'll tell you. Just for that I came here hurriedly. Is it not my duty? When Chembakulan was busy making preparations for the performance of pooja and the reception to be given to Mayavar at the temple, our wild pigs in his custody broke the pens and ran away. He went in search of them but could not locate them. So he came back and went in another direction. Within that time the pigs had gone as far as Madukkarai and began destroying the crops in the fields there. Mayavar who came that way saw this and got down from the chariot to chase them away. Will our palace pig remain idle if attacked? Being wounded it hit back, killed Mayavar and died on the same spot. It's a pity! Mayavar was moved to pity on seeing the destruction of crops. The same pity turned into Yama's noose rope for him!"

King Kali felt comforted to some extent. From Gounder's explanation he concluded that there could be no conspiracy behind the death of Mayavar. His conscience told him that neither he nor Thalaiyur was responsible for Mayavar's death and he felt relieved. He wanted to know a little more.

"How did you come to know this?"

"A Valanadu soldier was wounded in the same encounter. Veeramalai had come here after putting him in the house of our Thalaiyur doctor for treatment. I enquired him. He told me all that happened on the way and how fate had played its game. Had Mayavar desisted from chasing the pigs that were destroying the crops this terrible accident would never have happened!"

"Something happened - but Veeramalai thinks differently! The death of Mayavar and the imprisonment of Veeramalai - if Ponnar-Sankar come to know about them they will rise in bubbling anger and definitely start a war!"

"Yes! But one thing - before anything amiss reaches them we must send them the correct information. Not only that, we must tell Ponnar- Sankar in definite terms that even now Thalaiyur wishes to make peace with Valanadu."

"We sent a missive and invited Mayavar. If we send an emissary now and say that we are ready for conciliatory talks will they accept it?"

"We must inform Ponnar-Sankar immediately that the killing of Mayavar was something unexpected, that the end came to him because of himself, that they should not misconstrue it, that we had no other way but to imprison Veeramalai who was roaring like a lion for revenge and that as the first step towards peace talks we are ready to release him."

"Through whom can we inform them all these? Who will they trust? I don't get the drift of anything. I am still worried that my name is tarnished by the stigma of behaving contrary to the ethics of war."

"You need not have that kind of fear. We have a very suitable person with us to inform Ponnar-Sankar that there is no need for war and to get their concurrence for flying the flag of peace."

"Who is that?"

"You will be surprised! Instead of sending a friend we can send somebody whom they consider an enemy. That Ponnar-Sankar will treat that person politely is a certainty."

"Whom do you suggest?"

"We can send my son Manthiappan!"

"What? Did you say Manthiappan?"

"Yes! Let him go as the emissary of Thalaiyur and meet Ponnar-Sankar personally. If he tells them that they can keep the regime of Valanadu with themselves and that we don't need it at all they will think the whole trouble is over and give their acceptance for peace talks. We can also send word through Manthiappan that if they are agreeable, the body of Mayavar will be kept here embalmed until they come here after the parleys are over. Manthiappan can give them the assurance that Veeramalai will be released before they come here for Mayavar's funeral."

"Everything is all right! But sending Manthiappan doesn't seem proper to me. If any untoward incident happens to him?"

Manthiappan intervened immediately, "Don't worry about me. I won't hesitate even if I were to lose my life for Thalaiyur Kali's sake. After all, what is between us and Ponnar-Sankar is a usual quarrel among agnates; if we meet face to face the enmity will disappear. Only the agnate bond will rule the roost. So I myself will go to Valanadu. It is my responsibility to see that no new enmity crops up between the two countries because of Mayavar's demise and to work hard so that new friendship blossoms. For that, if I have to give my life as prize, it is God's will! Let it be so!"

Manthiappan said this and wiped the tears from his eyes.

Thoughts about righteousness - the attitude of tricksters - Thalaiyur Kali was swinging like a pendulum between these. Finally, he accepted the suggestion of Gounder.

Kali entrusted the job of embalming Mayavar's body with Gounder and left for the palace with Manthiappan to give him the missive meant for Valanadu. Gounder looked at his son from the corner of his eyes. That conveyed to him a lot. He held his head high and marched victoriously behind the king as if he was determined to do everything according to his father's wishes.

48 Victory to First Effort

Before Manthiappan could depart for Valanadu with the missive of Thalaiyur Kali, Chembakulan had stepped into Valanadu with the emerald green ruby parrot. His appearance was not that of the priest of Thalaiyur Kali temple. He was in the guise of a hunter. The typical turban of the hunters around his head and a garland of conches around his neck. A bow hung from one shoulder and a quiver from the other. In his hand there was a cloth bundle with the cage in which the silver casket containing the emerald green ruby parrot was kept. Nobody could recognise him even in Thalaiyur. He had disguised himself so well. His horse galloped fast up to the border area of Valanadu. He then got down and began walking towards the town like a hunter emerging from the forest.

His mind bore the imprints of Chellatha Gounder's treacherous schemes. First, he must succeed in his plot to separate Ponnar and Sankar. How could he show his skill in achieving that? They do not part from each other whether they are in the palace or go out for a stroll. If a war is declared against Thalaiyur such persons will definitely be together all the time. But the victory of Thalaiyur hinges upon their plan to separate them before the war starts. He was determined to execute the plot by following the instructions of Chellatha Gounder meticulously. First, he set out for the Periyakandiamman temple.

He knew that the temple was a little distance west of the palace. Yet, to be sure, he enquired one of the passers-by. He shot back in surprise, "You look like a hunter. What have you to do in the temple?"

Chembakulan retorted. "Why? Aren't hunters allowed into the temple for worshipping the Amman?"

He said, "Why hunters? Be it anybody; if he is born a man he cannot enter that temple nowadays! Ponnar-Sankar alone can go – it is an order from the palace."

Chembakulan stopped and thought for a minute. Could anything obstruct his brain which was made of thousands of scorpion stings? An involuntary smile! He walked fast in the path leading to the temple.

A female voice sounded angrily, "Eh! Who are you? Stop!" It was the voice of a virgin standing at the doorstep of the temple. Chembakulan was not unaware that she was the sentry posted for preventing men from entering the temple in which Arukkani Thangam and her friends stayed. Still, he deliberately walked past her and tried to enter the temple. That girl who did not expect it stretched out her sword and prevented him from going further. At the same time she gave a loud call and Arukkani and her friends rushed out with weapons in their hands.

Chembakulan was not startled; but stood there with straightened chest. Arukkani said in a rebuking tone, "Who are you? Why do you intrude into the temple?"

"Periyakandiamman is a mother to me also. I have come to carry out the vow of worship made by me."

"What's the vow you made? After knowing that women only are staying here you have come with the intention of doing some mischief."

"No! *Amma*! Not at all. I promise. I vowed that if Amman graced me with this emerald ruby parrot I would give one of my eyes as an offering. My request has been granted. I have come to donate one of my eyes to the Amman and fulfil the vow."

Arukkani was terribly shocked to hear this.

The secret note given by Rockiannan describing the place where he had hidden the emerald ruby parrot was safely with her. Then how could this ordinary hunter get at it? This question needled her mind.

Chembakulan sensed that she was drowned in surprise and considered it an opportune time to unfold the cloth bundle. First, he took out the silver casket. Then he opened it and showed the parrot. The parrot, the cage and the casket dazzled in the light rained by the brilliant stones and captivated the eyes of those girls.

"Why did you go in search of this? Why did you pray and promise an offering to get this? And how were you able to discover it?"

Arukkani listed the questions eagerly.

"I was one among those who listened to the reading of Rockiannan's will on the day his last rites were performed. I always had regard, respect and devotion towards him. When I was young I learnt archery under him. My wish is that this

parrot must be kept in his Marigounden Palayam barracks itself as a memorial. I was determined that I should find it out and install it in Rockiannan's barracks before Ponnar-Sankar could get it and gift it to their sister. I toiled tirelessly in search of it whenever I went to Veerapur forest and the nearby places. Only later I took this vow. Devi took pity on me and fulfilled my wish. I must fulfil the vow I made. Please let me go!"

"Would anybody give an eye for this?"

"*Amma*! There are people who cut off their heads and prayed to God!"

"Hunter! I appreciate your fortitude. What's your name?"

"People call me Velappan - because the spear I throw will never miss its mark!"

"All right Velappa! First, we will go to the palace with this parrot and meet my brothers."

"*Ayyo*! No, no! They will seize it, thrash me and drive me out."

"Don't think badly of my brothers. They won't have any objection to install this parrot as a memorial in Rockiannan's barracks. In fact, they will be very glad. Come with us. Let us go to the palace."

"I won't move even a foot from here without paying the promised offering to Periyakandiamman. Devi's wrath is very vicious. She will blind both my eyes!"

"We will perform a special pooja and carry out the offering ritual tomorrow. Let my brothers see the parrot first."

Chembakulan thought for a while. Then raised his hands above his head in supplication, faced the deity and cried aloud in a voice and manner that displayed his ardent piety, "Ambige! Please forgive me! I have to obey the palace order. I will come tomorrow and submit the offering at your feet!"

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The emerald green ruby parrot was kept on a silk covered pedestal in the palace hall. Ponnar-Sankar appreciated its beautiful craftsmanship very much. The eyes of Arukkani Thangam, Muthayi, Pavalayi and Arukkani's friends were riveted on the parrot. Chembakulan, in the guise of hunter Velappan, stood behind a curtain in the most obsequious manner. Ponnar said to him, "Velappa! You have taken extraordinary efforts to discover this wonderful parrot. We are doubly happy that you wish to install it as a memorial to Rockiannan in his barracks. The reason is we are indebted to him as much as you - in fact more than you. So let the parrot be kept in the barracks. But one request. Please change your vow that you will give one of your eyes as an offering."

At once Velappan put up a show as if he was terrified and panic-stricken. He screamed, "Oh! What a pretty job you want me to do! Can I cheat Periyakandiamman? That sin will cling to me in all my seven births! I am going to offer my eye only - you need not worry."

"You are jumping in high-strung emotion. Listen! To say that Ambal receives eye or arm or leg as an offering is an insult to her. Amman, who occupies the position of a mother to everybody, will never like her devotees to undergo this kind of bodily suffering. Please listen to me! Tell me what you want to be done to the Amman in lieu of the vow you made for this parrot. We are ready to recompense it with another offering however big it may be, tomorrow itself."

On hearing this request of Ponnar, Velappan walked up and down, wrung his hands as if totally upset and shouted, "Devi! Devi!"

Sankar also pressed him, "Velappa! Don't turn a deaf ear to my brother's words. Ambal won't get angry." Velappan pretended to ponder over it seriously.

He shouted again, "Ambige! Please forgive me! I am going to suggest an alternative to my vow to offer my eye!?" All of them attended to his words keenly.

"Since both the rulers of Valanadu command me I bow my head in agreement. You have said I should not give my eye as an offering to Periyakandiamman. In lieu of that will you accept my request?"

"We will accept whatever appeal you make. Our government also will not permit gouging the eye for an offering or any such thing! Tell us something else and we will do it." Sankar declared assertively.

"Then - if it is acceptable to Ambal - give me the price of this emerald ruby parrot. I will use that amount for performing *kumbabishegam* in Ambal's temple."

The faces of Ponnar-Sankar and others gleamed in happiness. Velappan was not going to lose his eye and they felt relieved!

"What is the price of this parrot? Tell me and I will pay it."

"*Ayyo*! Do I ask for me? Am I not asking it for renovating the Periyakandiamman temple and performing *kumbabishegam*"

"I know that. That's why I ask. What is its price?"

"How can you and I determine that? Ask the goldsmiths in the palace to assess the value of it. There is no hurry - we can do it tomorrow."

"That's right. We will determine the price tomorrow morning with the help of our goldsmiths. Tonight, you can stay in the palace itself. Keep the parrot with you safely in your room."

"No! How can you speak like this? Let the parrot be in your custody. I am dead tired after searching for it so many days. Tonight, let me sleep peacefully."

Ponnar nodded his head in agreement.

Arukkani said, "If only Mayavar were here he would have assessed the value of this parrot. There will be no need for goldsmiths."

"Yes! But why is there no news at all about him and Veeramalai from Thalaiyur?"

This was the moment he was so eager to grab. At once he intercepted in a very sad tone, "I beg your pardon! I may be wrong also. On the way somebody said that they are lying unconscious near the man-bewitching rock."

"*Thambi*!" called Ponnar.

"*Anna*" Sankar got up in trepidation.

He said agitatedly, "Go at once and find out whether what Velappan says is true."

Sankar left the place so quickly that none knew when he left.

Velappan had scored his first victory in his plot to separate the brothers. But he concealed his smile and stood there like an innocent cat that would not drink milk even stealthily.

49 The Trapped Tiger

Sankar mounted his horse in one leap and it began to fly fast on all its fours. Its hoof-sounds thundered on its way to the man-bewitching rock. The citizens of Valanadu who were walking along the roads and streets watched their young king riding at hectic speed and wondered where he was going. They looked enquiringly at each other but could not know the reason The man-bewitching rock was not new to him! He did not fail to remember rescuing Kuppayi near that rock from Thalaiyur soldiers.

Could what the hunter heard be true? Could Mayavar and (Sankar) Veeramalai have drunk the water of that rock to quench their thirst? How could Mayavar, who had known the entire area thoroughly, have been unaware of the potential danger of that water?

Sankar reached the rock in such a confused state and found the whole area enveloped in jet darkness. He got down from the horse and searched the surroundings keenly for Mayavar and Veeramalai. He could not find any sign to indicate that they were lying unconscious there. He led the horse with one hand and searched the area very close to the rock for some clue.

A streak of light flashed through the darkness and Sankar's legs treaded in that direction. He could understand that the light came from a flambeau. He advanced towards that. In the rough single tack thickly covered by tall bushes the flambeau changed direction.

Sankar shouted, "Who is that? Stop for a while!" The streak of light did not move after that. Sankar reached it quickly.

That figure had covered its head and body with an ashen blanket. The face was grotesque. White beard accentuated the weirdness. The appearance was that of an aged recluse. The back bent like a bow made the figure look uglier still. The figure raised the flambeau a little and responded, "Who's that?" The voice did not just lack sweetness it was horrible to hear.

Darkness all around - in its midst flambeau light - in that light the face of a terrifying old man shone bright - to Sankar the face was repulsive. Without showing it he enquired, "*Ayya*! I think you live in this area. If so, can you tell me whether anything important happened here today or yesterday?"

"*Thambi*! How can I answer such a general query? I live in a small village nearby. Yesterday in our village the Mariamman festival was celebrated very grandly. I don't follow your question."

The shivering old man's stuttered reply in faltering voice did not satisfy Sankar. He asked him the name of his village.

"Should you know it? A tiny village near the town called Venmudi. We call our place also Venmudi. Aren't my head and beard white? So don't they and our village name match well?

"Of course, a fine match! But what I want to know from you is important. Did you hear anything about Mayavar and Veeramalai going to Thalaiyur?"

"Yes, I heard. Nowadays I forget whatever I hear immediately thereafter. But this news shocked me a great deal! What is this big farce... Why have the tigers Ponnar-Sankar, who have taken a vow to take revenge upon Thalaiyur Kali and Chellatha Gounder and his son Manthiappan who make this Kali dance to their tunes, turned into worms? How and when? It was a big surprise. I was worried inconsolably. I concluded that Ponnar-Sankar - since they have attained positions, since they have got the chance to govern Valanadu - have decided to enjoy the benefits of power and not to do anything to show their valour and suffer in any way. I felt ashamed of myself for having respected them."

"Respectful elder! What you think is a big mistake. Ponnar's valour or Sankar's can never be bought for a price. The invitation was sent by Kali. Mayavar accepted that invitation just to know what is in the mind of Kali. Veeramalai went to assist him. Because of that the aims of Ponnar-Sankar will never suffer even an iota of damage! The vow we undertook will be carried out at any cost!"

"You say it in such definite terms. May I know who you are?"

"I am Sankar!"

"Ah! Is it Sankar? I have heard that there is a tornado like younger brother to Ponnar! Is that you?"

The old man's body shook convulsively. He dragged his feet unsteadily and reached up to Sankar. In unbounded joy he stroked Sankar's cheek with one hand and held the flambeau in another hand. Sankar was touched by the emotional outburst and took his hands softly.

"I was distressed as I could find nobody to send information about what happened here. It is our good luck that God himself has sent you! Oh, God! A good thing in that bad also. Sankar coming here is like the arrival of the Almighty Himself!"

"What do you say? Come on, tell me quick!"

"Sankar, haven't you come in search of Mayavar and Veeramalai?"

"Yes - a hunter told us that he heard from somebody that they were in some danger near the man-bewitching rock."

"Oh! Did a hunter say like that? Did he say that his name was Velappan?"

"Yes! Is there any mystery in it?"

"Isn't this illusionary world replete with mysteries! He who introduced himself as Velappan is not a hunter at all! It is a disguise. Do you know who is in that disguise? You would have heard of one Chembakulan, the priest of Thalaiyur Kaliamman temple."

"What? Is it Chembakulan?"

"Yes, the same fellow! With his help only Chellatha Gounder and his son Manthiappan conspired to kill both of you in your childhood itself. Now also they have sent him to you. And he has come to Valanadu in the guise of a hunter."

Sankar was shocked to hear the old man's words.

He said, "Let me go at once and mete out the punishment he deserves." He hurried to mount his horse.

"Wait Sankar, wait! You have forgotten your immediate job. Shouldn't you know what happened to Mayavar and Veeramalai, and where they are?"

"Respectful elder, tell me at once! Where are they?"

"I am coming to that. I will not only tell you but also lead you to that place. Before that I'd like to clear another doubt. Hasn't Chembakulan come there with the emerald green ruby parrot?"

"Yes - he has brought the parrot with the cage."

"It is neither emerald nor ruby! It is a fake parrot! The net woven by Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan to separate you and Ponnar and incite Kali to invade Valanadu is becoming bigger and bigger! Both of you have been duped!"

"Dear elder! You are telling me shocking news one after another. I must go to Valanadu immediately and inform my brother everything."

"When you say everything - do you exclude what happened to Mayavar and Veeramalai? It is important that you must go to Valanadu - but it is more important to know what happened to Mayavar and Veeramalai."

"What happened to them?"

"They wanted to take a rest near the man-bewitching rock. They drank too much of the water gushing out of that rock. The result - Mayavar, Veeramalai and the soldiers who came with them are in a severe unconscious state."

"Where are they now? I must see them at once"

"A few villagers and I saw them lying in a stupor near the rock and were distressed. We feared that if they were to be unconscious like that the whole night they might be harmed by some animals and took them to a nearby mandapam for safety. I came here at this time of the night only to pluck a few herbs needed for their treatment." So said the old man and showed the herbs in his hands.

Sankar was impatient, "I must see them at once!"

"Follow the light of my flambeau. You can see them in that mandapam - if you are lucky they would have come out of the stupor by this time."

The old man walked in the front clearing the plants and bushes that had grown on either side in the light shed by the flambeau. Sankar led his horse and followed him.

They reached the mandapam. It was where Parakiraman had locked up Kuppayi. But Sankar did not know that.

Sankar left the horse and entered the mandapam following the old man. But before that he looked around carefully. The noise of a few persons trying to hide themselves in the thick foliage of the bushes around the mandapam was heard intermittently. Some strange feeling disturbed the mind of Sankar and so he went in with his sword raised and ready. As light from the flambeau spread inside the mandapam the bats resting in the nooks and corners flapped their wings and flew hither and thither.

"Respected elder! Where are Mayavar and Veeramalai? In this dark mandapam they cannot even breathe!"

Before Sankar finished saying this, the old man began to laugh in a horrible manner and the mandapam was closed from the outside. Sankar sensed that he was caught in a conspiracy and rushed to the door with his raised sword. Before he could kick the door open an iron chain pressed heavily on his body and pushed him backward. As he threw away the sword and tried to break the binding chain with both his hands another chain bound him. Like this chain after chain fell on him. Only when he tried to use his full force to extricate himself did he see that fifty soldiers were chaining him tightly to a pillar. Soon a large number of soldiers

entered the mandapam with swords, spears and lances through the back entrance and surrounded him. That old man laughed in his thundering voice and approached the chained Sankar.

"Sankar! Don't you know me?"

"Why not? I understand very well that a coward who cannot fight with me openly has come in the guise of an ailing old man and duped me!"

"Look here! You will understand clearly. You addressed a 'respectful elder' kindly. Do you know who that elder is? You bloke, I am Manthiappan!"

The old man removed his beard and the paint daubed on his face, stood erect and again laughed horribly.

"Fool! Didn't you believe me and get beguiled? Aren't you now wondering how I could tell you about Chembakulan's disguise as hunter and the secret behind the emerald ruby parrot? You believed me only because I told you that! I was sure that once caught in my trap you couldn't go back and disclose the trick of Chembakulan. So I used that one fact as bait and trapped you inescapably!"

Sankar felt that there was no use talking to him, So he laughed at Manthiappan derisively and said, "Aha! I appreciate your wonderful valour!"

In glee over his victory Manthiappan looked at the Thalaiyur soldiers arrogantly and screamed the orders exultantly and left: "Hum! Be careful! He must not be allowed to escape! If he tries to escape his head must not be on his neck!"

Sankar's horse which was tethered at the entrance of the mandapam sensed that his master was in danger. It thought it should somehow escape and go to Valanadu. If it reached Valanadu without Sankar the people there would understand that Sankar was in danger! So it tried hard to untie the knot and run off.

Though it tried all through the night it could not.

50 Risky Venture in Vellangulam

It was daybreak. But the sun was hesitant to come out. Its rays started dissipating the darkness; yet they were inexplicably disinclined to come out of the jet black clouds that had spread through the eastern sky and emit light.

Seven goldsmiths were seated in the decorated hall of Valanadu palace and hunter Velappan stood in a corner most obsequiously. Ponnar entered the hall with Arukkani Thangam. Muthayi and Pavalayi watched from a curtained balcony. Soon the casket containing the emerald ruby parrot was brought to the hall from the private chamber of Ponnar.

Ponnar said to the goldsmiths, "The parrot in this casket is made of gold and inlaid with emerald and ruby stones. If you assess its value and tell me the amount I will pay this hunter Velappan. He will perform *kumbabishegam* to our Periyakandiamman temple with that money."

The goldsmiths got up, paid their obeisance to Ponnar and opened the casket. On seeing the brilliantly shining emerald ruby parrot they exchanged glances in surprise.

"Don't quote a lower price in favour of the palace. Tell me the exact cost."

"It will be done as per your wish!" All the goldsmiths said in a chorus and began to examine the parrot. One goldsmith rubbed the nails of the parrot with a piece of

dog hide. Another scrutinized the stones inlaid in the body of the parrot through a magnifying glass. Yet another lifted the golden cage half a yard above the floor and assessed its weight. As they were examining it, they looked at each other in surprise and exchanged notes. Then all of them together directed their glance at Velappan who was standing in a corner with a smile. Ponnar noted this, laughed and asked, "What? Do you wonder how this hunter got an article of so much value?"

The goldsmiths again exchanged glances among themselves and nudged one another by gestures, "You say it! You say it!"

Ponnar compelled them, "Why do you hesitate? I don't mind the cost. I'll pay whatever it is. Tell the price." The oldest among them thought that it might not be proper to be silent any more and came forward to answer Ponnar:

"King! This parrot is made neither of emerald stones nor of rubies! Everything is a fake! Cheap stones have been polished and silver has been gilded with gold!"

Ponnar got up angrily and roared, "What do you mean?" He then looked enquiringly at others. They also said, "Yes king! What he says is right. We can assess the value for silver only. Beyond that, there isn't emerald or ruby or gold! It is pure humbug!"

Ponnar stamped his feet angrily on the floor, advanced towards Velappan and bellowed, "Eh! What is this intrigue?"

"Intrigue? This hunter knows no trick or stealth. Intrigue is something he can never learn, not even if you were to burn him alive. *Ayya*! The parrot and the cage I gave you yesterday are original emerald! Original ruby! Original gold! Respected goldsmiths! Please examine them again. Don't come to any hasty conclusion! What I gave and what the king received from me is invaluable emerald ruby parrot! That too, in a golden cage and silver casket! Please verify again! You will be blessed!" Chembakulan enacted a drama in that hall.

The aged goldsmith opened his toothless mouth and asserted loudly, "Will brass turn into gold if you rub it ten times on the touchstone? Our conclusion is the same. This is a fake, fake, fake."

"Then where is the original I submitted to the king?"

To this question of the hunter Ponnar's answer was: "This is the parrot and the cage you entrusted with me yesterday."

"No, king! Respected goldsmiths! You tell me – is this the parrot I gave? That was a beautiful one. In perfect symmetry! Everything green emerald! Alluring ruby! Gold burning bright!"

Velappan cried bitterly. The aged goldsmith could not see through his acting, but bawled at him. "We don't know anything about the parrot you gave the king. But this one is neither emerald nor ruby! It is useless mud!"

Velappan jumped up as high as to hit the ceiling with his head and yelled, "King! You are trying to rob me of my parrot? How did you manage to make a replica of my parrot within one night?"

"What did you say? Do you say that I am a thief? Do you call me a trickster?"

"King! I don't say that. But you have made me suspect. King! There was a time when the family of Kundrudaiyan enjoyed the reputation of being highly cultured! Can you now sin against a pitiable hunter?"

"Don't incite me! The parrot you gave me is this."

"No king, no! You have hidden my parrot somewhere and are defrauding me with this fake one. King, I don't mind being cheated. By preventing me from fulfilling the vow I made to Periyakandiamman you are unnecessarily getting into serious trouble!"

"Hunter! I promise in the name of Periyakandiamman. This is the parrot you gave me yesterday."

"I also swear in the name of Periyakandiamman. This parrot is not the one I gave you!"

"Are you trying to question my integrity and honesty and present me as a depraved miscreant in front of my country's goldsmiths?"

The aged goldsmith intervened, "King! What is the use of swearing on a par with an ordinary hunter? If what you say is true why don't you thrash the fellow and drive him out? Or, why don't you clap him in jail?"

Ponnar calmed down a little and told the goldsmith, "I can do like that in a second! But you yourself may not come out of the doubt he has raised about my integrity. That's why I hesitate."

Velappan sensed that his case was gaining strength and felt happy and emboldened. But he pretended to be imposed upon and aggrieved.

He yelled, "You goldsmiths! I have sworn on Periyakandiamman and the king also has sworn. But the fact is, I am the one who had lost his belonging. The king stands accused with the crime of having stolen it. So the king alone must prove that he is not guilty."

"I am ready to subject myself to any test and prove that I am not guilty." Ponnar said angrily and slapped his hand heavily on a huge pillar. Arukkani rushed to him in one jump and said, "*Anna!* What is this? Why are you in such a hurry and acting unthinkingly? A crook, instigated by somebody, charges an innocent man

like you with a trumped-up charge. To steer clear of it you ask the same swindler the way out! *Anna!* Is it proper? Don't! Don't!" she cried. Ponnar hugged her and said calmly, "Arukkani! Don't worry. Cooked up or real, a charge has been levelled against me! Though all these goldsmiths may not believe it, at least one of them will have a nagging doubt. It is my duty to remove it. Please don't stand in my way." He then turned to Velappan and asked, "What do you say?"

"This is not the parrot given by me. That was original! This is a dupe! I am ready to swear on my word in any number of temples. If the king insists that he did not rob me there is only one test!"

"What is the test? Tell me."

Velappan pretended as if he was figuring it out only then and said, "You must go to the bronze sluice of the Vellangulam lake and from there enter the inner spring and come out through the outer spring. You must swear on the Periyakandiamman before you enter the inner spring. After that you must come out of the outer spring. If you make a false promise the inner spring itself will take your life." At once Ponnar straightened up his chest and set off with the words, "See! I have started!"

"*Anna!*" the astounded Arukkani tried to prevent him once more.

He pacified her, "I will definitely get through the test Periyakandiamman has set for me to establish my integrity." He then looked at Muthayi and Pavalayi who stood there like the very epitomes of sorrow. He waved his hands to them as if to say, "Don't be afraid" and stepped out like a lion.

The hunter Velappan and the goldsmiths followed him.

Muthayi and Pavalayi came running to Arukkani who stood there weeping and watching his elder brother leave. Tears welled up in their eyes also and trickled down.

"We are terribly scared. Your brother has unthinkingly fallen into the trap set by that hunter."

She tried to console Muthayi who began to weep. But she herself was smarting under an inexplicable fear. The inner spring in the bronze sluice of the Vellangulam lake was capable of swishing and sucking anybody to extreme depth. She was certain that there was a big conspiracy behind making Ponnar brave such a terribly powerful inner spring of that lake. But she did not want to tell her sisters-in-law anything about the danger in it and scare them further. She somehow managed to calm down and then consoled them.

"You need not worry! Periyakandiamman will see to it that we don't suffer. Sankar *annan* who went in search of Mayavar will return soon. As soon as he

arrives tell him all that happened here and send him to the Vellangulam lake. I am going to Periyakandiamman temple. I will fall at the feet of the Amman and pray for my brother."

Muthayi and Pavalayi closed their eyes, folded their hands in supplication and prayed, "Amma! Our mother Periyakandi Devi! Protect him!" Tears flowed copiously from their eyes. Arukkani wiped her tears and left for the temple.

As soon as she entered the temple she cried, "Amma!" and fell down in front of the idol of Periyakandi.

51 The Grateful Being

Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan were immeasurably jubilant over the victories they were scoring at every stage of their conspiracy. They hid it like the parched earth hides the underground water deep and wove their net of treachery very cunningly. But in front of Kali they pretended to be most innocent and weighed down by sorrow.

"King! In addition to the explanations given by you in your letter, I gave innumerable ones. That Sankar told me that they did not have any ambition other than waging a war to get rid of Kali and raze down Thalaiyur, and pounced upon me with his sword. But you know that Ponnar, though wicked, can act well as a man who upholds patience. So he reigned in Sankar. Like the Dharman of *Mahabharat,* he lectured to his younger brother on the ethics of sparing an emissary. But do you know what he added with his typical cunning diplomacy?"

As Kali had been mesmerised by the words of Manthiappan like an insect caught in a spider's web, he asked eagerly, "What did that Ponnar say? What did he say?"

"You want to know what he said? My heart cannot bear the agony of saying it. I was horrified to know that he could even think of me like that! Like a monstrous rake grinning before a chaste woman for carnal pleasure with her just once in return for a paradisiacal palace he challenged the very loyalty my father and I have for you!"

"Why are you beating about the bush? My body is heating up! What was his challenge that tested our loyalty? Tell me quickly!" Chellatha Gounder prodded his son angrily.

Kali who could not see through the well-rehearsed drama being enacted before him awaited the words of Manthiappan with keen excitement.

'Manthiappa, who are you and your father? Aren't we agnates! Because of the jealousy among agnates and the enmity that grew during my father Kundrudaiyan's lifetime the Kolatha Gounder family which flourished so famously in his time had divided and met with grave setbacks. Let us forget all that at least now. I ask you and your father to join us. We will divide Valanadu and its dependent regimes between us and rule. If we unite, we can make that Kali and his clan an ash pile - what do you say?' "Alas! This is what that Ponnar asked me, oh! My king!"

At once Chellatha Gounder sprang up and down as though thrown into a boiling cauldron and roared in dismay, "Eh, sinner! Did that Ponnar think we are ungrateful wretches? You are a coward, that's why you have come back silently! Had I been there I would have cut his tongue and feasted it to a dog!"

Both joined together and did not allow Kali to think even.

Kali twisted his moustache and asked, "All right! What did they say finally?"

"Let me repeat their own words. Though Ponnar-Sankar alone are the proprietors of those harsh and jarring words my heart doesn't permit me to utter them here. Still, shouldn't you know how intense their frenzied anger is? So I tell you. 'How obtuse must your Kali be to put our Veeramalai in jail? How arrogant he should be to kill Mayavar and then invite us to his funeral? There is absolutely no room for any peace treaty with him. We know that he is a coward. We also understand that he is an imbecile king who doesn't have the capacity or the courage to meet us in the battlefield. Tell that rotter to get the last rites done for him in his home before he leaves for the battlefield, because he is going to quail and shrink like a tortoise at the tip of our swords and cringe for his life! We will vanquish him in the war in no time - arrest him - shave his head and blotch his body with black and red dots - parade him on an ass - after the people had jeered and scoffed at him we will cut his body into pieces and dry them in the streets of Valanadu!' When Ponnar-Sankar said this to me and guffawed thunderously all my nerves heated up like a furnace! But as I had gone there as an emissary I desisted from doing anything outrageously without your permission. Otherwise, I would have killed at least one of them and become a corpse there itself!"

The father himself was surprised to watch the lifelike drama put up by his son. Gounder felt gladdened in his heart to see his son excel him in the art of treachery! Still he put up a show of being excessively furious. Kali's feet were not on the ground. He moved up and down the hall as if he had stepped into a thorny jungle. His heart flared and crackled like a bamboo forest afire!

"They called me a coward! They called me who had pounded many a fort to pieces a coward! They ridiculed me who had reduced to heaps many a palace and made many a chieftain kneel in front of me an imbecile! Am I, who had kicked palaces like balls, a tortoise? Am I, who had in the battlefield made corpses of a thousand soldiers without dropping the brandished sword even once and floated them like rafts in a river of blood, a rotter? They will worst me - they will arrest me - they will set me on an ass - they will cut me into pieces - will they? Those haughty rascals who don't know the prowess of my shoulders must be taught a fitting lesson! I wished to follow the path of righteousness but it was a fault! No more hesitation! War! War! War by all means!"

As if to make a mark of his ripe experience even then, Chellatha Gounder said to Kali in the manner of Saguni, "Though we cannot avoid war, will it not be better to take some time for preparation? I also think that, for what it is, we can apprise the Chola king of all the happenings and request him to intervene. Perhaps, we may get a chance to enlist the assistance of his army also?"

Manthiappan refuted it immediately. He told Kali, "In this matter we must not accept the counsel of my father to be patient. Whatever it is, the Chola king will always be on the side of Ponnar-Sankar. Until now he may not have known anything. Perhaps, Ponnar-Sankar may overtake us and attack Thalaiyur with the assistance of the Chola army first. So we must march our army towards Valanadu without even a moment's delay."

"We must surround the Valanadu fort when Ponnar-Sankar are inside. Our forces must secure the siege before they get ready for the battle and lead their forces out of the fort." Manthiappan completed his task of emptying the mustard sack in a burning cotton storehouse.

"Beat the war drum! I will lead the archery. Chellatha Gounder will lead the chariot division. And Manthiappan, the infantry. Our forces must get ready now itself. We will surround and destroy the Valanadu fort today itself." He roared like a lion and beat the war drum in the hall.

On hearing the drum sound, the archers, the soldiers and the charioteers assembled in front of the Thalaiyur fort like winged white ants. Just at that time the spy who used to give Kali the exact information at the right time dismounted from his horse at the fort entrance. He had come to inform Kali about the machinations of Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan.

As he was climbing the steps of the fort, he was noticed by Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan who came there after taking leave of Kali to get ready for the war.

Chellatha Gounder signalled to Manthiappan and both hid behind a pillar at once.

"Manthiappa! If this fellow meets the king everything will turn topsy-turvy! This wretched spy might have known all our conspiracies. And if he tells Kali all those things it will be disastrous for us. So he must be prevented here itself from going to the king." Before Gounder could finish saying this, Manthiappan drew his sword and pierced it through the chest of the spy. They gagged his mouth, wrung his neck and deposited the body in a nook behind the pillars and went away as if they were unaware of anything.

Kali came out in war outfit. The true information that should have reached Kali through the loyal spy was rendered dumb like a treasure that surfaced out on its own accord when the earth suddenly exploded and was again buried deep by a sudden quake! King Kali, Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan led their respective divisions. The archers with sharpened arrows in their quivers mounted their horses and marched first. The swordsmen held their swords high and spurred their horses. The chariot division, under the leadership of Gounder, marched in between the other two forces!

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The Valanadu general Veeramalai in Thalaiyur jail! Mayavar's body embalmed and kept in Thalaiyur fort! Ponnar, caught in the trap of Chembakulan, on the bank of Vellangulam lake! His brother Sankar bound by chains in a dark cave! Sister Arukkani Thangam at the feet of Periyakandiamman! Thalaiyur forces on the way to Valanadu to capture it!

In such terror-filled and pitiable circumstances a solitary horse is running, be it jungle or barren land or field or mound or land full of stones and thorny bushes. Nobody is on its back! It is running of its own accord. It is none other than Sankar's horse. It is running towards Valanadu hoping to intimate by its arrival the information that Sankar is in danger. When it tried to jump over a small channel situated among boulders it fell down and bruised its front legs. Blood is oozing out of the wounds even now. The horse does not seem to mind it. Man has the sixth sense! Aren't a few species of speechless animals endowed with a noble sense of gratitude to compensate that? As an exemplar of that this horse is fervent to carry out its duty. It could not run through certain narrow paths. The wounded legs suffered excruciating pain. Yet, the grateful animal did not lose heart. It ran, ran, kept on running.

It saw the Valanadu flag fluttering atop the fort from afar, and became hopeful of reaching its destination soon. But the condition of its body was not conducive.

Determined to complete its work it trudged on holding its breath and bearing the pain.

Beyond the Periyakandiamman temple the Valanadu border was only a couple of miles away. But as it reached the temple its legs began to dash against one another.

It stopped and looked around. As it saw the temple a new idea struck. It could just slog up to the temple. When it reached the temple entrance the friends of Arukkani saw it. They were shocked and rushed to it. The horse shook its head on seeing them. Kicked the ground again and again. One of the friends ran into the temple and Arukkani came out at once. But before she could come near the horse it fell down. She shouted, "*Anna!*" and hugged its neck. Tears flowed copiously from its eyes.

Arukkani understood that Sankar was in danger. For a while she forgot that the horse could not speak and asked weeping, "Where is *anna*? Where is Sankar *anna*?" The horse looked up at her. Tears did not stop flowing from the eyes of that grateful being!

Arukkani hugged the horse, cried bitterly and asked again and again, "What happened to Sankar anna? Please show me where he is?" The horse could not bear the sight of Arukkani in such agony and that helpless feeling seemed to give the horse new strength. It managed to get up with great difficulty. Arukkani became confident and ran back into the temple.

She and some of her friends came out with weapons and their horses. Arukkani mounted her white horse and told one of the few friends who were asked to stay behind, "Go at once and convey the matter to my sisters-in- law. Console them and request them not to fear anything. Make arrangements to inform Ponnar anna also if he doesn't return from Vellangulam. I'll come back after knowing what happened to Sankar anna. Nobody need to fear for my safety. Tell Ponnar anna and sisters-in-law that my friends are with me. I feel intuitively that something terrible is going to happen. Tell them that I asked them to be very cautious!" She then cringed the horse with her eyes to lead them from the front. She need not go.

The horse which had become tired, limp and emaciated began to retrace its steps holding its breath with extreme difficulty. The horses of Arukkani and her friends followed suit.

52 The Stone Aimed at the Head

The friend urgently sent by Arukkani Thangam reached the Valanadu palace very quickly. She saw a chariot standing in front of the palace where Muthayi and Pavalayi were staying. She knew that it was the chariot belonging to Arichampatti Maniankurichi. From the chariot driver she found out that Chinnamalaikolunthu and Vaiyamperuman had come there. She entered the palace without any hesitation. In the palace hall Muthayi and Pavalayi were standing like epitomes of sorrow. Chinnamalaikolunthu and Vaiyamperuman were consoling them.

Muthayi said while all the time weeping, "*Appa!* We are afraid that both of them are in some danger. We can remain alive only if you and our brother go and find out where they are and how they are and tell us about them immediately, please." Pavalayi also began sobbing continuously.

So the entry of Arukkani's friend in such an agitated manner shocked all the four of them even more.

"Definitely there is some danger! The horse on which *chinna anna* left has come back wounded and alone. *Anna* is not to be seen.

Arukkani has gone in search of him taking that horse with her." Before that friend could complete, Pavalayi cried, "*Akka!*" She hugged Muthayi and wept.

"*Amma!* Don't be afraid! I will go to Vellangulam lake immediately and see Ponnar. Vaiyamperuman will go in search of Sankar at once." He told his son, "Start from here with a battalion of soldiers and go where Arukkani has gone. I'll leave for Vellangulam with another battalion."

Ponnar was not there - Sankar was not there - Veeramalai was in Thalaiyur jail - in such a situation Chinnamalaikolunthu, with the concurrence of Muthayi and Pavalayi, asked Vaiyamperuman to beat the war drum. The moment they heard the war drum Valanadu soldiers assembled in front of the fort with their weapons, horses and chariots under the leadership of their vice generals. The people of Valanadu sensed that there was a sudden calamity and assembled there in hundreds with whatever weapons they could collect. One division under the leadership of Chinnmalaikolunthu and another under the leadership of Vaiyamperuman started from the fort of Valanadu raising war slogans uproariously.

In that excitement and tension the only ruling concern was rescuing Ponnar-Sankar from whatever perilous situation they were in. Hence, nobody bothered to see whether there were adequate forces to protect the Valanadu fort. As a result, less than a hundred soldiers stood guard at the fort.

The division led by Chinnamalaikolunthu hurried towards Vellangulam lake. The bigger force of Vaiyamperuman, since it did not know where exactly Sankar was, followed the hoof-prints of the horses of Arukkani and her friends.

Meanwhile, a large regiment of Thalaiyur Kali was marching towards Valanadu from another direction like the waves of a tumultuous sea.

Sankar's horse which led Arukkani was struggling for life. But it slugged on as if it had made a vow to do its duty without fail. When it sensed that the mandapam in which Sankar was bound and locked up was only a mile or two away there was a confident spiritedness in the tottering trot of that grateful being. Seeing the unbearable pain endured by the horse, Arukkani wept and teardrops hung from the corner of her eyes like dewdrops clinging to grass tips.

At last the horse somehow came within the precincts of the mandapam. It neighed only once to indicate that the mandapam was close by and Sankar was locked up there. But its loud neigh and the hoof-sounds of the following horses jarred the ears of the soldiers who were guarding the mandapam. They immediately jumped and surrounded the bushes with weapons and got ready to attack.

Arukkani Thangam brandished her sword and dared them bravely. Seeing this her friends also wielded their weapons like tigresses and began striking down the guards.

Like an arrow released speedily from the bow Arukkani got down from her horse and stormed into the mandapam like a heroic fighter.

In her hurry she did not notice the soldiers of Manthiappan who were hiding behind the door on both sides. Her eyes spat fire on seeing Sankar bound to a pillar with iron chains. So she failed to notice the hoodlums hiding behind the door. Those soldiers caught hold of both her hands in tight grip. Two more soldiers came running and bound her legs.

A rhino-like figure – with the face of a crocodile and the head of a wild buffalo – held Arukkani by her hair and shook her. At the same time he stared at Sankar who was chained to the pillar and burst out a devilish guffaw.

"Eh! You fool Sankar! Lion cub! Now you are going to be put to shame and disgraced even more – I am going to molest this deer fawn, your sister, in front of you!" That human beast roared and tried to strip her of her clothes!

Arukkani piled up all her strength, released herself and also knocked down with her sword the two soldiers who were holding her down. Still she could not free herself completely. That terrible thug laughed like rocks crumbling down and tripped up her sword. When she bent down and turned a little to pick it up that whale of a fellow fell on her and rolled her on the floor!

She realised that she could not at all escape and worse than death was imminent. In that deathly anxiety she screamed loudly, "*Ayyo! Anna!*"

Sankar heard that scream – right in front of his eyes his sister's honour was going to be wrested in a second – he bellowed a sound that seemed to split the mandapam into pieces and hurl them far off! At the same speed with which he exulted and yelled, "Arukkani!", he broke the iron chain that bound him to the pillar into bits and fell on that thug like a rolling rock. In the war he fought with them like a spiritedly leaping lance and a sword of mighty force none survived! Corpses fell down in sets and slews. The enemy soldiers were tossed about like balls! He did not need sword or spear! With the bits of chain that bound him he sliced their heads off. The crocodile thug tried all his tactics to fell Sankar. Both grappled each other and wrestled. During that time Arukkani and her friends disposed of the remaining soldiers. At last Sankar finished off that mountain flesh and dissolved his final breath in that jungle breeze.

Arukkani ran and hugged him. She told her '*chinna anna*' the details about the visit of her 'periya anna' to Vellangulam. He was shocked to hear that and at the same time he felt like having stepped on fire to see his horse walking towards him. He ran to it. The horse, unable to stand, caressed his body with its head and lay down.

Arukkani told him with tearful eyes, "*Anna*! Our horse only brought us here from the Periyakandiamman temple." Sankar kept his face close to the horse's. Tears welled up from its eyes and wetted his face. The body of the horse trembled. All were distressed. The grateful being breathed its last!

In Sankar's face a quiet that bespoke the depth of his grief! He sat there staring at the affectionate animal that had taken leave of him! He then stood up slowly. Bent in front of the horse and worshipped it. Like him, Arukkani and her friends also offered their prayers as though it was a god.

The loud sound of a large regiment approaching them was heard!

Sankar, Arukkani and her friends drew their swords and watched the direction from which the sound came. Arukkani looked at her brother enquiringly. Her question was whether they could fight against a battalion.

"In the battlefield, death is the bouquet offered to great heroes. So, there is no need to fear!" Sankar said and he alone stepped forward.

As the battalion crossed the bushes and reached them, they were surprised to see Vaiyamperuman in the front.

On seeing Sankar, he got down from his horse a little distance away, came running and hugged him.

He could understand that Sankar had emerged victorious from a small battle. Sankar addressed both Vaiyamperuman and Arukkani.

"Vaiyamperuman! You have come at the right time. And it is very good that you have come leading a large force. Both of us will start for Thalaiyur immediately. We must find out what happened to Mayavar and Veeramalai. A big conspiracy has been in the making. Every second we delay will turn beneficial to Kali." He then turned to Arukkani and said, "Thangam! You go back to Valanadu palace at once. There you are responsible for the safety of both your sisters-in-law. As soon as *anna* Ponnar returns from Vellangulam tell him that Vaiyamperuman and I have left for invading Thalaiyur and explain how it was unavoidable."

Arukkani intervened and said in a cringing tone, "*Chinna anna*! Why don't we go to Vellangulam first and see *periya anna*?"

Vaiyamperuman intercepted, "My father has gone there with a regiment like this; so there is no need for us to go. As I can understand, it is important to take the forces to Thalaiyur!"

Sankar said, "That is the right course of action! Arukkani! Return to Valanadu with your friends. We will come back with victory!" Fire blew in his eyes.

Arukkani noticed blood oozing out of the finger of an enemy soldier wounded in the fight. She pressed it against the forehead of Sankar as victory *tilak*.

During the time Arukkani and her friends were returning to Valanadu, Chinnamalaikolunthu and the regiment led by him reached Vellangulam.

But a vice general of Valanadu who was standing on the bank of the lake along with the goldsmiths and about a few hundred soldiers came in front of Chinnamalaikolunthu and signed to him with great respect not to go beyond that.

Chinnamalaikolunthu asked a little angrily, "Why do you prevent us? Where is Ponnar? What is this drama?"

"Please excuse me! He and the hunter Velappan are in Vellangulam only. To establish his truthfulness he is going to enter the lake through the inner sluice and get out through the outer sluice. So he is near the inner sluice. The hunter is standing near the outer sluice to watch whether he comes out through the outer sluice. Ponnar has accepted the condition of the hunter that nobody should come there and has ordered me not to permit anybody inside." Chinnamalaikolunthu was satisfied with the vice general's explanation and began watching carefully what was happening.

The hunter stood on the opposite side near the outer sluice and keenly watched Ponnar's movements.

Ponnar tucked only his sword to his waist, folded both his hands in supplication, looked at the sky and prayed, "Mother! Periyakandi! You are the witness to my truthfulness!" So saying he jumped into the inner sluice.

Chinnamalaikolunthu, the soldiers, the goldsmiths and the local people stood on the edge of the inner sluice and their eyes were focused on the lake.

It could be seen from the pattern of the waves appearing on the surface of the water that Ponnar was swimming below and advancing towards the outer sluice on the other side.

Chembakulan kept a large block of stone ready to throw it on the head of Ponnar and take the life out of him. He was watching for the exact time Ponnar's head would show up out of the water.

Ponnar swam below the water and finally reached the outer sluice. The moment Ponnar emerged out of that sluice exactly coincided with the moment Chembakulan lifted that block of stone in lightning speed.

53 The Head Escaped - But...?

Chinnamalaikolunthu and others saw Chembakulan, in the guise of hunter Velappan, about to throw the block of stone on Ponnar's head and yelled involuntarily, "*Ayyo!*" Ponnar noticed the stone about to fall on his head. But before he could lean and duck his head, his right hand functioned instinctively, raised the sword and instantaneously punched the stone hard. The stone crashed into pieces. Because of the speed with which it hit the stone the sword bent. Ponnar threw away the bent sword and shouted at Chembakulan while wringing his hand, "Eh! Who are you? Tell me the truth!" At once he fell on his knees, caught hold of Ponnar's legs and cringed,

"King! Please forgive me! I was sent to kill you. Please give me time to catch my breath. I will tell you everything."

"Tell me! What are the facts you are going to relate?" Though Ponnar berated him he remained silent. Chinnamalaikolunthu and others hurried towards them from the other bank of the river.

Chembakulan said now, "King! You cannot believe what I am going to say. Yet, it has happened!"

"Let me see how you are going to cheat me further! Tell me quickly! What happened? Who induced you to kill me?"

"Who will do it? Only the person interested in coveting the regime, and is fervently trying to become the absolute monarch of this land - he only sent me on this errand!"

"Why are you keeping that secret in the dark? Bring it to light!"

"King! I will tell you. But I don't know how to. See, my whole body trembles!"

"Now, are you going to say it, or not?"

Chembakulan continued to tremble and said,"I'll tell you! I'll tell you!" He then took the bent sword of Ponnar and criede his eyes out, "King! I cannot be alive even a second after revealing that secret! Your brother Sankar will put me in a brick kiln and bake me!"

"Why should my brother put you in a brick kiln?" asked Ponnar. Chembakulan held the bent sword in his hand and said, "King! Sankar will go into a rage for letting out the secret and punish me summarily!"

"Whether he punishes you are not, I will punish you now itself! Tell me the truth at once. What is that secret? Who induced you?"

"Is not the regime of Valanadu shared between you and your brother Sankar! 'If elder brother is finished off, the whole regime will come to me.' Your brother thought like that and devised this conspiracy with my assistance."

When Chembakulan said this, Ponnar did not show any surprise and shouted "Ah! My brother, did he?" Ponnar's firm conviction was that even God could not force such a treacherous thought into his brother's heart. The excruciating pain he suffered was because of the charge he levelled against his brother. So he roared, "Ah! You wretch! Did you say that about my brother?" and glared at him fixedly. Chembakulan made use of Ponnar's momentary perplexity and raised the crooked sword to pierce his chest. Ponnar who did not at all expect this tried to evade the sword by bending his hand. But before that Chembakulan screeched, "Ah! Amma!" and slumped on his back.

Hit by an arrow, Chembakulan fell down and blood oozed out profusely from his chest. He held the arrow in his hand and writhed and rolled in a pool of blood.

Who shot that arrow? From where did it come? Could it be the arrow shot by Chinnamalaikolunthu who was hurrying towards him? Or could it have flown from the arrow of a vice general of Valanadu?

Whose work was it? Who thought I was incapable of knocking this fellow out? Who underestimated my skill? These questions worried Ponnar and his eyes became red hot with anger. Everybody including Chinnamalaikolunthu noticed it and looked at each other amazedly.

"It was me who struck that reprobate dead." A voice arose from behind the rock. All turned in that direction. It was a woman's voice!

Ponnar reached that rock in no time and shouted in quick succession: "Who's that? Who? Who?" The woman responded again, "It's me!" Since the voice was that of an old woman, without batting his eyelids he very eagerly watched her emerging out of her hiding.

An old woman with gray hair like a dollop of white cotton peeping out of a seed that ripened and burst on the tree itself - and the owner of a figure with nerves alone holding on to the bones like climbers entangling and spreading over supporting poles - in one hand a bow and in another hand one or two arrows - such an aged woman came and stood before Ponnar.

Ponnar enquired that old woman very politely, "Amma! May I know who you are?" In her eyes sparks and tears! Yes, fire and water! They neither burnt nor wetted each other - but were in perfect balance!

The moment Chembakulan saw that old woman he felt a torment more painful than the death pangs inflicted by the arrow that tore his heart. He wept and wailed, "*Amma!* Is it you? *Ayyo!* Is it you that killed me?"

"Yes! It is me only! Your mother who forewarned you not to think of any evil to the family of Kundrudaiyan! Yes! Your mother who told you not to harm the house that provided succour to the land! Why were you, a wretched sinner, born to me as a child? Yes, your mother who asked you like that! Why were you, a damned sinner, born to me as a son? Your mother who cursed you to vanish without a trace; yes, the same mother! The very same mother who destroyed you!"

All of them stood still listening to the words that fell from her mouth with brave frenetic spirit and with the energy of a raging storm. The body of Chembakulan became permanently still.

She noticed that her son's life had come to an end. She wailed, "*Ayyo* my son!" Fell on his body and rolled all over. The son's blood stuck to her face and body and made her look horrible.

Ponnar put his hand on her shoulder and asked, "*Amma!* What is this; I don't understand anything? You call him son and cry - but it was you who put him in the cradle of death and rocked it - what a perverse wonder it is!

Chinnamalaikolunthu and others suspected that a conspiracy might have been hatched through that old woman and were very cautious.

"Yes, I am his mother! He is neither a hunter nor Velappan! He is my son Chembakulan - the priest of Thalaiyur Kali temple and also the palace goldsmith. Though we belong to the Vettuva clan, we have been loyal to the family of Kundrudaiyan through generations. My husband - his father - had tremendous love for Kundrudaiyan. But my son became a henchman to Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan and lured by money and gold turned into an enemy of your family.

I tried to prevent him ever so many times. He did not listen to me. Chellatha Gounder conspired and made my son utter a prophesy purported to be Kali Madevi's that both of you should be killed in your infancy itself, lest Thalaiyur Kali's life would be in peril. I told him that our family, particularly Chembakulan, grew eating the food got from the ten acres of land given to us by Kolatha Gounder out of mercy and so he should not contemplate any evil against that family. People must at least desist from doing harm to those persons who helped them and their families eat and survive even if they do not repay by doing something good. But there are ungrateful beings who constantly harm those persons from whom they got assistance for their living and access to food. Chembakulan turned into one such. I wonder whether he was conceived in my womb! My husband will not think of beating even a snake that spreads its hood and comes to bite. The blood coursing through this sinner's veins – is it my husband's? King! Even such a filthy doubt occurred to me. If Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan prepared the venom to poison the good intentions of our king Thalaiyur Kali, my son was the underling who assisted them to mix that poison with milk! They used him to attack Mayavar with wild pigs and killed him!"

Before she could complete, Ponnar straightened up and shouted, "What? Have they killed Mayavar?"

"They did not stop at killing Mayavar, they have also locked up Valanadu general Veeramalai in jail. Their plan was to divide you and your brother who never part with each other so that it would be easy for them to defeat you and capture Valanadu. Chembakulan was entrusted with that job and sent to you as hunter Velappan. I entreated him not to go and even cringed holding his legs. Since he was lured by his lust for gold he beat and pushed me aside and embarked upon this treacherous job. Conspiracy upon conspiracy, cruelty upon cruelty – I concluded that it was impossible to reform my son. Since I did not have any other alternative I followed him. Anger and anxiety over his plan to extinguish the lights of the Kongu Velala clan troubled me acutely. At times Mother Earth, who gives birth to crores of children and provides them with sustenance, quakes and indulges in destruction without differentiating between the good and the bad. This thought emboldened me to kill my one wicked son! I am going to tell you more shocking news. In a cunning manner they have imprisoned your brother Sankar."

As Ponnar heard that his brother had been put in jail his blood veins heated up and boiled.

He cried aloud, "Sankar!" It could not be known whether it started from the pit of his stomach or split his heart into two and started. It not only shook the entire Vellangulam lake but also made the overflowing lake water swell like sea water when a hurricane strikes.

"Let our forces start! Let the war drums beat all over Valanadu! Take the oath that you will return only after razing Thalaiyur to the ground and start!"

Chinnamalaikolunthu intercepted the brave command of Ponnar hesitantly, "Vaiyamperuman has set off with a large regiment to liberate Sankar."

But Ponnar did not at all listen to it.

"They have killed Mayavar! They have clamped Veeramalai in jail! They have plotted and trapped Sankar! They tried to slay me! There is nothing to think about patiently! One should think and act before losing anything! But when honour is at stake, it must be protected at any cost! There is no need to think at all!"

Ponnar leaped and mounted a horse! The war drums reverberated!

In front of the large regiment that started from the banks of the lake kicking up a dust storm, came a Valanadu soldier riding fast on a horse. He saw Ponnar in the forefront, got down and rushed towards him.

"What?" Ponnar roared like a tiger.

"King! The enormous regiments of Thalaiyur Kali have entered Valanadu like three swelling seas!"

The moustache of Ponnar straightened up like swords held high!

He shouted, "Follow me!" and spurred his horse.

Arukkani Thangam and her friends sent Sankar and his regiment to Thalaiyur and returned to Valanadu. There they saw a big battle going on. She was shocked to know that Ponnar had not yet returned from Vellangulam.

All on a sudden a bright light! It appeared as if she was surrounded by a forest of fire! In front of her eyes the Valanadu fort and the palaces inside were ablaze! Arukkani shuddered to think of her sisters-in-law. She cried, "*Ayyo!* Whatever might have happened to my sisters-in-law?"

54 She Walked! Kept on Walking!

If the numerical strength of the forces inside the Valanadu fort was compared to that of the Thalaiyur army it would be a surprise that the forces of Valanadu could hold up for such a long time. How long could a few hundred soldiers, be it by risking their lives or by using their bodies as barriers, stand up to the Thalaiyur soldiers who entered the fort from all sides like a flood which had breached its confines? Still, a large number of Thalaiyur soldiers was mown down inside the palace. Finally, victory was with the Thalaiyur forces.

Muthayi and Pavalayi understood that within a short time the whole fort would come under the control of Thalaiyur forces and the enemies would gain entry into the palace. In their efforts to prevent them from entering the palace a large number of soldiers lost their limbs and a few their heads. Even such a war of sacrifice proved to be of no avail. The Thalaiyur army surrounded the palace also. Muthayi and Pavalayi shuddered at the frightening thought of their fort of chastity crumbling just as the stone fort had crumbled. They ran to the upper balcony of the palace. From there they viewed the fort façade and saw Manthiappan cutting down the flag mast and ordering the soldiers to burn the flag. They were aghast at the sight of that brave and victorious flag held high by Ponnar-Sankar burning. They did not know what to do and stood there stunned.

The eyes of Muthayi took the colour of the red evening sky as if the whole flame that consumed the flag swept over them. "Pavalayi! There is only one way out for us! Somehow my husband and your husband have been duped by the enemy's conspiracy! But one thing - they will certainly come back and prove their courage! There is no doubt about it! But it is doubtful whether we will be good enough to face them when they come back! Once the enemies have entered our palace the implication is that our honour is lost! So... so..." Muthayi wanted to say something; but her tongue would not rise and she faltered.

Pavalayi hugged her elder sister and cried, "So, what shall we do? Akka! I am ready to do anything!"

Pavalayi caressed her sister's head and said, "Do not worry! I know a way out! Our Valanadu fort should not get into their hands - nor should our honour be put to test in front of them! The only way for that - is this!" With the speed of eyelids closing and opening she grabbed the flambeau fitted to the pillar in one jump and set fire to the curtains hanging there. Were they one or two? A dance of fire on the hundreds of curtains that were beautifully hanging and swaying in the breeze! She set fire to all of them, all by herself. The fire spread to all parts of the palace and then to the fort.

The Thalaiyur soldiers who had surrounded the palace could not bear the heat! They began moving backward. They had to get out not only from the palace but also from the fort into which they had entered at tempestuous speed.

Outside the fort, a little distance away, Thalaiyur Kali and Chellatha Gounder had halted the chariot division. Both were seated in a chariot and watched the Valanadu palace burning. Manthiappan emerged from the burning palace on his horse with his large regiment behind and reached that chariot.

"Unable to bear the defeat, the fort and bastions of Valanadu are bathing in fire!" Manthiappan laughed loudly and beat his chest.

"God probably thought that the palace which could not be of any use to us should be destroyed like this! God is always on our side. It is all right. Let everything burn and cool down. After that we will hoist our flag to declare that Valanadu is under our control and leave." Chellatha Gounder said in a jeering tone.

Fire ravaging with a hurricane's sweep - the terrible sounds of building structures breaking into pieces - the pitiable whining voices of those vainly running this way and that way to escape becoming feeble and dying down - amidst this scene two horsemen came riding fast to the chariot in which Thalaiyur Kali and Chellatha Gounder were seated.

Kali raised his head like a lion in the arrogance born out of his victory over Valanadu and asked them nonchalantly, "What's the urgent news? Why this frantic hurry?"

"King! Sankar entered our fort with a big regiment and not only killed many of our soldiers but also freed Veeramalai from the prison."

Before they could complete the details, Kali gave vent to his rage by slapping hard on their faces and shouted, "What? What did you say?"

The soldiers did not mind the pain. They continued, "Yes, king! We tell the truth. Sankar and Vaiyamperuman led a large force and attacked Thalaiyur suddenly. Because of the shock our guards got terribly upset and sprinted away. Sankar broke the prison door by kicking it hard and released Veeramalai. Then all the three slaughtered most of our soldiers. The remaining guards are lying scattered on the ground either without limbs or severely wounded. They then shifted the body of Mayavar kept in custody to their chariot and are now on their way to Valanadu. We feel ashamed to say - now the flag of Ponnar-Sankar is fluttering on the façade of Thalaiyur fort!"

Thalaiyur Kali could not bear the news that the flag of the enemy country was fluttering in his strong fort. He jumped out of the chariot. Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan looked at each other amazedly.

"I had bound Sankar with iron chains and had posted very strong security so that he could not escape. How did he come to Thalaiyur?" asked Manthiappan.

"Now there is no time to find explanations for that. Let us surround Sankar while he is on his way to Valanadu dreaming that he has captured Thalaiyur. Let us punish him suitably for his crime of hoisting his flag in Thalaiyur fort. From now, Valanadu is a heap of ashes! Our next target - Sankar's head! Start, all of you!"

Following the brave roar of Kali the war drums reverberated! Kali rode in the front row and led the forces. Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan were in the next row. They were happy that they got an opportunity to fulfil their insatiable desire to end the life of Sankar through Kali

Soon after the Thalaiyur forces left for intercepting and attacking the forces of Sankar, Arukkani reached the Valanadu fort. Unmindful of the raging fire she entered the fort crying aloud, *"Ayyo!* Whatever might have happened to my sisters-in-law?" But she was prevented by one of her friends who rushed out with burns all over her body. She shouted "Arukkani! Don't go! Don't go inside!" and fell at her feet.

Arukkani lifted her up very gently, placed her on her lap and asked with both tears and rage in her eyes, *"Amma!* What happened? Where are my sisters-in-law? Could they escape?"

"In order to protect their chastity and to prevent the Thalaiyur soldiers from entering their private chamber Muthayi and Pavalayi set fire to the palace! Our stone fort got destroyed - but their fort of chastity was protected!" Arukkani's friend uttered these words falteringly and could not say anything more. She sobbed continuously.

"Don't cry! Where are my sisters-in-law now? You be here. I'll go and find out." She got up hurriedly after placing her friend's head gently on the ground.

The friend got hold of her hand with a firm grip and screamed, "Arukkani Thangam! There is no use going! Don't go!"

Arukkani screamed in reply, "Why? Why?"

"After setting the palace ablaze, both your sisters-in-law closed their eyes and sat down inside the palace itself like anchoresses. I begged them as much as I can to come with me, so that we can escape to safety. I cringed. But they were afraid that if they came out of the palace they would get into the hands of the enemy. They didn't listen to me at all. I had no other way. I rushed out to see whether there were any of our soldiers. But none was there. Everybody was dead. I tried to get back into the palace again. But couldn't. Fire had engulfed all the doors of the palace. Arukkani, how can I describe that horrible scene! With these cursed eyes I saw Muthayi and Pavalayi remain still with their hands folded while fire burned and reduced their bodies to ashes." The friend screamed and slapped her face again and again while saying this.

The sorrow over having lost both her sisters-in-law - the feeling that the enmity that caused their deaths must be avenged - both competed with each other to overwhelm her. She grabbed the hand of her friend who was still violently slapping her face. Holding her hand, the friend slumped like a tender plant that had wilted and withered.

Inside, her sisters-in-law had been consumed by fire. *Ayyo!* They were married! But had never known the sweet fragrance of conjugal life! Her brothers were not aware that fire had charred those flowers to death - they had promised that they would not live as man and wife until their vow was fulfilled - now they could hug only those heaps of ashes - now Arukkani Thangam herself became fire! At her feet the dead body of one of her friends!

Why do such things happen? Is there not an end to all these? Only if these little-minded men, who ruin the lives of their own people and their country in order to carry out their wicked intention of destroying our family, are finished off will there be a good end to everything!

Like rumbling volcanoes that clash against one another and pump out lava all over, there was wrath and fury in the mind of Arukkani Thangam!

She looked intently at the dead body of her friend. She bent down and kissed her on the forehead. Tears rolled down from her eyes and fell on the face of her friend like flower buds!

She ran into the palace. Even the fire that consumed those virtuous lamps was cooling down as if it mourned for them! She stood outside the palace facing the burnt down area where her sisters-in-law used to live. Prayed and fell prostrate on the ground!

She then stood up majestically – now there was no sorrow on her face, no tears in her eyes – and drew the sword from its sheath. The softness typical of femininity took leave and manliness occupied that most delicate flower-like face!

With her sword held high she started walking from the Valanadu fort! Her friends walked behind her with swords in their hands!

She walked as if a deluge took the shape of a woman!

She walked in a manner that made everybody wonder if women could turn into tremors!

She walked as an example of breeze turning into apocalyptic fire!

She walked – walked – kept on walking!

55 Sankar Ensnared by Intrigue

The fort and the bastions had burnt completely and the debris was cooling down. Muthayi and Pavalayi, who came there as the clan lights of the family, got reduced to a handful of ashes and became exemplars of the philosophy that stresses the evanescence of life. Flowers not used for adorning! Fruits not tasted! They had vowed to wait any length of time for their hubbies to sip the honey of love – to drink the ambrosia of life - to fly like birds of spring in the sky of conjugal bliss. Alas! Cursed time had, with hands of fire, crushed and thrown out those flower bunches!

Ponnar did not have the mind or the time to weep for the fort that had become embers or lament disconcertedly for his consort and the consort of his brother who had fallen into the mouth of fire!

Revenge, an eye for an eye – the enemy's country must be mown down like wasteland reeds – the enemies who had razed down the Valanadu palace and had thrown a challenge to his bravery and honour must be put to death even before they get back to Thalaiyur, on this side of Madukkarai itself!

Sparks of anger flew from the eyes of Ponnar like sparks flying from red-hot iron beaten with hammers in the forge. His words that danced wildly in his tongue could turn tortoises into lions and worms into tigers!

"Warriors with swords held high! The sweet time when we should consider our lives worth nothing and protect the reputation of our Valanadu has finally arrived! I who pacified my brother with the words 'wait! wait!' whenever he avidly shouted 'war! war!' am calling you now! The traitors of our clan, those who had vowed to destroy the family of Kundrudaiyar and betrayed us to the enemy, must be annihilated even before the enemies are done away with! I believe that the right time has come to tear to pieces the cunning, the treachery, the conspiracy, and the wicked activities of those miscreants! Our Mayavar – our venerable elder – ripe in wisdom – great in capabilities – storehouse of experience – treasure-house of peace – has been done to death in the enemy's fort! Veeramalai, the epitome of loyalty is in Thalaiyur jail! The fate of *thambi* Sankar is unknown! Every second we delay will give the enemies opportunity to escape from our hands! Let us start! Let us make the place where we encounter those petty rogues the battlefield!"

The stately horse on which Ponnar was seated raised its forelegs high, neighed loudly and began galloping. All the battalions followed him at the same speed like a flood that had breached the banks. The thunderous roar of the war drums seemed to form the background for the uprising of the Valanadu fort, now lying like an ash-heap, to revenge upon Thalaiyur!

Ponnar was on the hunt after the Thalaiyur forces. *Thambi* Sankar, Vaiyamperuman and Veeramalai who had hoisted the Valanadu flag in Thalaiyur fort were on their way back.

Kali had already been informed that Sankar's forces were after them. He now got the information that they were very close behind. Kali who was riding fast stopped suddenly and ordered his troops also to halt by raising his hand. Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan went near him to find out the reason. They asked, "What! What! Any sudden idea?"

"Nothing! I am wondering what to do in case we are unable to win Sankar in a straight fight!"

Manthiappan saw that Kali himself was jittery. He asked agitatedly, without any hesitation, "Then, shall we go in a different path?" Kali noticed the tremor in his voice and laughed derisively. But he thought the time was not proper to ridicule his cowardice and so diverted the conversation to another direction.

Kali was not unaware that only chicken-hearted fellows would be adept in conspiracy and treachery! Whenever he was firm that he should accord importance to morality, justice and integrity in his heart, Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan shattered it for their selfish ends. He would understand it but soon forget under the pressure of circumstances and get upset over his inability to execute his intentions. This had become a habit with him; his political life had been

like that. Now things had gone out of control. Why should he bother about the means? Kali thought that it did not make any difference and asked Chellatha Gounder, "Now, what is the way to defeat Sankar and his forces and score victory without meeting them in a straight fight?"

Chellatha Gounder understood that Kali reposed unwavering faith in his capability and war strategy and felt very proud and happy. Thalaiyur Kali keenly watched him without batting his eyelids.

"King Kali! I congratulate you on not underestimating the strength and prowess of Sankar's shoulders and having wisely decided to employ cunning to worst him! In the *Ramayana,* what did Raman do when he realized that he could not defeat Vali in a straight fight? He did not mind the stigma that would attach to his bravery and war ethics. He attacked him from behind and defeated him. Didn't he manage the situation with an evasive reply when Vali asked him how Ramachandra Moorthy, the very incarnation of Lord Vishnu, could hide himself and shoot an arrow to fell him? Didn't he argue that ethics of war were not violated? When Raman himself, the incarnation of God, had employed intrigue in the battlefield it is not a sin on the part of ordinary men like us. At least now we must put an end to the waves of thought that confuse your mind in the name of morality, justice and such."

Kali felt that Chellatha Gounder was unwittingly indulging himself in sermonising. He asked him wearily, "All right! What can be done now? Tell me."

"The warriors of Valanadu are experts in fencing, lance-fight and personal combat! But our Thalaiyur soldiers alone are well-versed in archery." Gounder started with a preamble to his expertise in war strategy!

Thalaiyur Kali put the counter-question: "What you say is absolutely true! But haven't we heard that Sankar has the power to block even a thousand arrows with his shield and successfully confront with his sword arrows shot at him like a cloudburst?"

"King! I didn't forget to take these facts into consideration! I am now going to explain the scheme that has struck my brain."

"Explain quickly!"

"We have now come to the central area of Veerapur forest. In a short while the forces of Sankar will reach this place. Before they come, we and all our forces must hide behind the bushes and rocks! We must do this very cunningly with the least noise! As a preparatory measure our cavalry and the battalion of charioteers must take a different route to Thalaiyur. Sankar will definitely get the information through his spies that we are on our way to Thalaiyur in a different route. Believing that, Sankar will arrive here with his forces and get trapped in the net we

are going to spread in the Veerapur forest. If our archers hide behind the bushes and shoot their arrows in all the four directions, what can the enemy do even with countless shields? Sankar's regiment will struggle vainly in Veerapur forest like an elephant caught in a pit. Elephants trapped in pits at least will be starved for a few days, controlled, lifted up and trained! But what we are going to lift is the dead body of Sankar! The lifeless bodies of Valanadu soldiers!"

Chellatha Gounder devised such a plan and presented it with frenzied laughter!

Thalaiyur Kali was again confused - they could set up an ambush concealing their soldiers behind bushes and rocks, attack suddenly and drive away the Valanadu forces; but could they single Sankar out, hem him in and kill? It did not appear ethical - he grumbled under his breath.

Chellatha Gounder was particular that Kali must not be allowed to think for a long time and so he retorted at once hotly, "King Kali! Don't forget that our flag mast has fallen in our Thalaiyur fort. Also don't forget who cut it down. If you decide that you, the people of your country, Manthiappam and myself who remain with you all the time and bear all the trials and tribulations for your sake, shall become the slaves of Ponnar-Sankar - I don't have anything to say!" Like the molten lead taking the shape of the mould into which it is poured Kali's brain turned as per the skilful manipulation of Gounder!

As per the strategy worked out by Chellatha Gounder the archers were asked to hide behind the bushes. The other regiments lined up and marched towards Thalaiyur to the accompaniment of drum beats. Kali hid himself in a rock hollow so that he could not be seen by even a single soldier of the enemy forces. Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan posted hundreds of archers around them and hid behind huge rocks. The arrangement was that the moment an arrow flew from the bow of Gounder the archers should rain their arrows on the Valanadu forces from the bushes! Like the pointed heads of their arrows peeping out of the bows, the keen looks of the archers covered the entire area of that terrible valley.

The glee over the victory in Thalaiyur - the pride over having released Veeramalai - the sorrow over the death of Mayavar - the anxiety over the situation in Valanadu - with all these mixed feelings Sankar was leading his forces towards Veerapur forest. At that time a Valanadu soldier came there on his horse traversing through narrow tracks and fields with great difficulty. He waved a flag which identified him as a Valanadu soldier.

"Spy! What's the matter?" enquired Sankar. He was one of the spies sent to reconnoiter and report on the obstacles to their onward march. Spies are also human beings! They are trained for this special purpose. Yet, at times they may also misjudge. This spy was an example of that. He saw the forces sent to Thalaiyur

for putting off the scent and was deceived. He told Sankar, "King! The entire Thalaiyur regiment is proceeding towards Thalaiyur taking the circumlocutory Mylampatti route instead of passing through Veerapur forest."

Veeramalai asked him in surprise, "Why? What for? Why should they avoid the short forest route and take the longer Mylampatti route?"

The spy attempted a guess: "The Thalaiyur king might have been scared to oppose our forces and selected that route." Sankar could not accept it fully. He said definitely, "No, it can't be like that! There is a conspiracy behind it. They have only put up a show of sending a section through the Mylampatti route and another through the Mayanur route. Their plan is to come back suddenly and inflict on us a tongs-like strike from both sides."

Though Sankar was better than the spy he also did not assess the situation exactly. The general Veeramalai gave the command, "What Sankar says may be true. Let our soldiers plan their strategy in order to counter their plan of a tongs-like strike." But Sankar thought of something suddenly.

"We can counter their tongs-like attack! We will fell the enemies or we will drive them out! There is no doubt about it! But one thing - if the lances they hurl or the swords they brandish or the arrows they shoot fall on the golden body of Mayavar and mangle it - what to do?" he asked.

Veeramalai replied immediately to remove the anxiety of Sankar, "We will have to give up the idea of taking his body to Valanadu and interring it there in a tomb."

"General! What do you say? Do you suggest that we can drop this good man on the way and leave?"

"I don't say like that! My suggestion is that we can inter his body here itself in a suitable place before we leave."

"That's a good idea! Let us find a large banyan tree in the Veerapur forest itself and build a tomb for him under it! The reason - he shone like a sprawling banyan tree with his vast knowledge! Not only that, only a banyan tree will keep the tomb under its shade and protect it from the sun's heat for ages!"

As soon as Sankar's decision was announced his soldiers rushed into the forest and identified a sprawling banyan tree which had shot out a large number of aerial roots. It was to Sankar's liking.

"This is a very suitable place! Dig a deep pit under the tree," ordered Sankar. Veeramalai and Vaiyamperuman attended to the work of carrying the body out of the chariot. Sankar was standing near the pit they were digging. His heart lamented. He was very much worried that the last rites were to be conducted without the presence of his elder brother Ponnar. Yet, he consoled himself with the

idea that he could bring his brother to the tomb some day and ask him to pay his respects.

The soldiers were digging the pit deep. Suddenly there was a clinging sound from the depth of the pit.

Sankar shouted excitedly, "Stop! Don't dig fast or roughly! Scoop out the soil slowly with your hands and find out what is inside!"

The soldiers dug slowly and something white shone brightly in that place.

Sankar called in a loud voice, "Vaiyamperuman! General! Come here! Come here!" They immediately rushed to the pit leaving the body of Mayavar in the chariot itself. Before they could reach the pit the shining article had been lifted out.

A silver casket - the soldiers handed it over to Sankar. Veeramalai and Vaiyamperuman looked at it avidly. Sankar opened the casket, and when he opened it?... when he opened it? Hey, presto!

The same emerald green ruby parrot mentioned by Rockiannan in his will!

Everybody, including Sankar, was tongue-tied for a little while!

But one thing, they were still unaware of the Thalaiyur soldiers hiding around them in bushes!

56 The Battle Begins

Chellatha Gounder decided the moment suitable for attacking and slaughtering the forces of Sankar and drew an arrow to aim it from his taut bow against the sky. Was it not already agreed upon that the Thalaiyur forces should start the attack on seeing the arrow take its flight in the sky? Noticing Chellatha Gounder ready to release the arrow, Kali raised his hand and ordered him to be patient. Like a cuckoo seated unruffled on a tree branch and singing to itself amidst a forest burning in raging fire, in Kali's heart which was aflame in the fire of hatred his regard and respect for Mayavar hummed like the bird's song. The Valanadu soldiers are getting a tomb ready for Mayavar. If the attack is launched before the body is interred into the pit, in the crossfire of the two opposing forces Mayavar's body will be harried about like an orphaned corpse. Though Mayavar was advocating the cause of the enemy camp and had identified himself with their country he could not forget the benefits accrued to the Thalaiyur regime because of him. The intimate friendship he had developed towards him had not been totally rooted out by the meddling intermediaries. Some told him discreetly and some told him with poisonous intentions that whatever might have happened he ought not to have joined the side of Ponnar-Sankar. On such occasions, it was true, he got angry with him. But very often he grieved over the loss of Mayavar.

Since he had such feelings in the bottom of his heart, the thought that no injury or blemish should befall Mayavar's body occurred to him and asserted itself. That was why he decided to wait until Sankar and his soldiers completed the interment of Mayavar, an intellectual genius and a great storehouse of experience. Chellatha

Gounder sensed that Kali was very firm in his decision and so lowered his bow and the arrow which he had directed against the sky.

King Kali and the soldiers hid behind rocks and bushes and watched everything eagerly with extreme caution.

Sankar, Veeramalai, Vaiyamperuman and others placed the emerald green ruby parrot on a sand mound and brought the body of Mayavar to the pit. A few soldiers hurriedly brought handfuls of forest flowers. Sankar showered some of them on Mayavar's body. Veeramalai, Vaiyamperuman and the vice generals followed suit.

The mortal remains of Mayavar were slowly lowered into the pit. Sankar took Mayavar's sword, kissed it, kept it on his left side and stood praying. Tears gushed out from his eyes. Veeramalai and Vaiyamperuman could not put up with the sorrow. Thalaiyur Kali also.

The mortal remains of that highly esteemed great man Mayavar who worked hard to end hatred and the harmful effects of jealousy among agnates, to safeguard good behaviour and etiquette from running to seed, to get rid of the hostility and enmity between the Velala and Vettuva clans until his last breath slowly disappeared from view as Sankar pushed down the soil mixed with his tears. A makeshift tomb was put up. Sankar then told himself that he would construct a beautiful marble tomb for Mayavar if victory were on his side! Thalaiyur Kali also stood there thinking about constructing the tomb of Mayavar like a small palace if he were to get victory.

Sankar and his forces stood around the tomb of Mayavar and paid their last respects. Thalaiyur Kali stood at a distance and paid his respects with his eyes closed.

Chellatha Gounder promptly decided that he could not get a more opportune moment. His lips muttered that though the enemies held their weapons in their hands, the moment they were keeping their eyes closed and offering silent prayers was the time fixed by God for him to attack and defeat them. Kali might tell him that they could wait for some more time! There is no need to seek his opinion! If he gives the order for starting the war this instant and gains victory, Kali wouldn't question it.

The next second his arrow whizzed fast in the sky and the Thalaiyur warriors, thundering like a suddenly swelling sea let their spears and arrows fly at the forces of Sankar.

Sankar, Veeramalai, Vaiyamperuman and others who did not at all expect this sudden attack lined up their forces hastily. Even in that hurry Sankar did not forget Arukkani's parrot. He put the emerald green ruby parrot in the hands of

Vaiyamperuman and said, "Among the three of us whoever remains alive will hand over this parrot to my sister. Keep it in the chariot." So saying he pounced upon the Thalaiyur soldiers like an eagle circling in the air nosediving straight on the prey it had sighted on the ground.

Since the Valanadu soldiers could not spot for a little while the locations from where the arrows and spears were hurled at them they had to hit against the rocks and bushes only. But this situation did not last for long. Nor did it take much time for Sankar to find out that Thalaiyur Kali, Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan were directing their forces to trounce them. He leaped and mounted his horse. He positioned his horse on a rock, held his strong shield in his left hand, brandished his sword and from there thundered his rousing speech that shook and reverberated through the entire forest.

"Accept unashamedly that the goddess of victory is spitting upon you - you who are unable to fight against this Sankar face to face and are fighting like cowards under cover! This Chellatha Gounder is a past master in treachery! This Manthiappan is an expert in betrayal! Only they could have devised such war tactics! I am certain about it! But how did Thalaiyur Kali who used to bluster about himself as a hero with a fearless heart - a bull raring to fight - endowed with the power of elephant and the power of leopard - agree to this kind of disgraceful battle? *Chi*! What a shameful humiliation! When a lion walks along the embankment of a field the crabs living in the holes there peep through from their hidings! Hasn't such a pitiable condition come upon the Thalaiyur forces! You have chalked out a backstabbing strategy like this emboldened by the impression that you are more skilled and experienced in archery! I will prove now - this minute - that my warriors and I have the power to outmanoeuvre even this!"

Even as Sankar was addressing his soldiers in this heroic manner, Kali came out of his hiding from the rock and sought to fell him with his arrow. Vicious arrows flew from the bow of Kali and targeted Sankar.

Sankar not only blocked the arrows that flew at him speedily like fire but also smashed them into pieces. He swung his sword and stormed into the thick of the battlefield on his horse.

Apart from mounting on the Valanadu warriors a sudden attack and surprising them for a moment, the Thalaiyur soldiers could not remain under the cover of rocks and bushes for long. They had no other alternative but to come out and encounter them in that forest area.

Some directed their arrows against the enemy; some who did not have arrows wielded their bare bows. On such occasions the arrows of the enemies pierced their chests. They pulled out those arrows, fitted them to their bows and hit back the

enemies. The battle that raged in the Veerapur forest was comparable to the battle eulogised in *Kalinkattupparani.*

Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan presumed that if they each held on to Veeramalai and Vaiyamperuman in different parts of the arena and segregated Sankar it would be easy for Kali to take on Sankar. Their plan stuck. Sankar and Kali engaged themselves in a fierce fight at a far-off point. In the brisk swiftness at which Sankar wielded his sword the arrows of Kali broke to smithereens and fell like dust on the field.

Chellatha Gounder had chalked out his tactics under the assumption that Veeramalai and Vaiyamperuman could be easily overcome but he struggled extremely hard. Manthiappan was nonplussed at the lightning speed with which they attacked. He looked at his father and cried in fear, "*Appa*! It seems we are caught in a dangerous situation!" Gounder who sacrificed many of his soldiers and at the same time slaughtered many Valanadu soldiers advanced fast and had to face Veeramalai straight. But instead of taking up arms against him, he sat without moving on his horse and signalled by lowering his sword. Veeramalai understood it as a signal for truce, ordered the suspension of hostilities and asked him the reason. Soon Manthiappan also came there with several wounds on his body!

Vaiyamperuman asked both of them very nonchalantly, "What, is it the chapter of surrender?"

Chellatha Gounder bared all his teeth and said with an ingratiating grin, "No! An understanding between us!" Unable to grasp the implication, Veeramalai and Vaiyamperuman looked at each other.

Chellatha Gounder extended the puzzle, "Let us come to an understanding among ourselves."

Veeramalai asked, "The war is between Thalaiyur Kali and Sankar! How can we come to an understanding without their approval?"

"Sankar and Kali are not concerned about the lives of their soldiers. It is enough if they are able to save their individualistic honour and the pride of their clan. Why should we get into that worthless problem? Manthiappan and I will join you with our forces. Let us wait and watch who wins, whether Sankar or Kali. If we join the victorious side we will have nothing to worry about! What do you say, Veeramalai?" Gounder toadied to him unashamedly.

"*Ayya*! Won't you be loyal to even a single person? In this world Kali is the sole human being to whom you must be absolutely grateful with a pristinely pure heart. He is so much better than you. He is so loyal to you that he puts up with all your immoral activities. He is facing ruin because of you. You now tell me that you are ready to let him down in such a calamitous situation and align with the

winning side. Even the grass under your feet will smoulder and singe!" Veeramalai burst out passionately in uncontrollable anger.

There was a conspiracy behind the truce talks also! As Veeramalai and Vaiyamperuman were answering Chellatha Gounder, Manthiappan stealthily raised his sword and pounced upon Veeramalai to slay him in one stroke. Vaiyamperuman, anticipating such a dangerous move, darted in front of Veeramalai and sprang at Manthiappan to knock down the sword from his hand. In that speed not only Manthiappan's sword but the fingers which held his sword also were knocked off. He trembled at the thought of losing his life and at once mounted his horse in one jump and sneaked away from the battlefield. On seeing the right hand fingers of his son lying scattered at his feet, the enraged Chellatha Gounder pounced like a wounded tiger and thrust his sword into the chest of Vaiyamperuman. Veeramalai roared like thunder and tried to shield him but was immediately surrounded by the Thalaiyur soldiers. Vaiyamperuman slumped down shouting, "Long live Valanadu! Long live Ponnar-Sankar!" The Thalaiyur soldiers and Valanadu soldiers again began to fight fiercely and several of them stamped upon the body of that young hero. Chellatha Gounder fought with Veeramalai with all his might and main and at the same time fired up his soldiers to fight vigorously. But Veeamalai, the general of those great matchless heroes Ponnar-Sankar, was not at all scared of Gounder's frenetic attack.

Sankar and Kali in another part of the battlefield! The bodies of soldiers belonging to both sides, limbs chopped off or heads cut off, floated in a pond of blood. The loud noise of spears colliding with rocks! Noise rising from clashing swords! The bustle of arrows whirring fast from bows! The vibrant tremors of war drums stirring up the spirit of the warriors! Not concerned over any of these, eagles, crows, foxes and vultures were joyfully feasting on the corpses. They were very watchful to grab the limbs of fallen soldiers with their beaks or mouths and fly or run away.

As Jayangondar has mentioned in his *Kalinkattupparani,* a poem which describes the successful invasion of the Kalinga country, how the world was deafened by the arrows whirring past the bows and the commands for spurring the horses and the elephants into action, the entire Veerapur forest became a battlefield. In that poem there is a description of soldiers lying in the battlefield with spears stuck up in their throats. They are trying to pull them out with their hands. The poet says that it appeared as if they were blowing on their bugles. Such scenes in Veerapur battlefield also!

What was the result? Thalaiyur Kali could not match the spirited and brave attack of Sankar person to person. Having no other way, he pretended to step back

and again hid behind a rock. At that time there arose a tumultuous noise from the place where Veeramalai and Chellatha Gounder were fighting. The Thalaiyur soldiers witnessed the brave death of Chellatha Gounder and at once started to run away from the field. That commotion dazed Kali. Sankar was immeasurably happy to see the victory flag rise high in the hands of his general Veeramalai. He forgot that he was the King and Veeramalai was his general! The open-hearted Sankar bellowed, "Long live general Veeramalai!" and congratulated him. All the warriors of Valanadu greeted him! A stunning blow amidst that great flood of joy! Kali, who was hiding behind a rock, set off an arrow from his bow and it hit Sankar on his forehead. Since it pierced right through the temple of the forehead he fell from the horse upside down - Veeramalai rushed to him fast and lifted him up.

57 Alas! the Battle Continues...

The arrow aimed by Kali struck Sankar right in the middle of his forehead and remained there. As Veeramalai was lifting him up, Kali made use of that time and hit as many arrows as he could on Veeramalai. Though so many arrows hit him and made holes all over his body, Veeramalai shielded Sankar so carefully that not a single arrow fell on him. Kali himself was amazed to see this affection of Veeramalai for Sankar. Valanadu soldiers noted the rock behind which Kali was pelting the arrows and set off in that direction furiously.

Kali, in his young age, had heard about the fury of the sea at the time of apocalypse – but had not seen it! Now, as he saw the Valanadu soldiers rushing towards him he could visualise the apocalypse. More than half of the Thalaiyur forces had been destroyed. If he were caught in the hands of the Valanadu forces hurrying towards him in such passionate ferocity, his life would be in grave danger. Dreading the risk, he mounted his horse and fled from the battlefield.

Kali rode in the direction of Thalaiyur faster than the wind. His plan was to collect the forces of all the eighteen chieftains under him and redeem the Thalaiyur fort first – after that he would defeat the Valanadu forces and capture Valanadu. Sankar had been wounded, but not killed. Ponnar had not yet arrived on the war arena! To take on them, he must first go to Thalaiyur. As if it understood the intentions of its master, his horse ran fast like an arrow flying from the bow.

Veeramalai fell on the ground holding Sankar close to his body. Like the sharp thorns thrown on the dice board for playing the blind game of chance, the arrows let off by Kali hit and stuck to Veeramalai's body. Though blood was pouring plentifully out of the wound on his forehead, Sankar watched Veeramalai's life slipping away silently and bravely and shuddered at it.

Sankar could not bear the sight of Veeramalai, his most intimate friend and the progeny of the Cholan Thotti family that had shared in equal measure the fortunes and disasters of their family, lying dead on his lap. The bond between the two families had its origins quite a few generations earlier. They were not just two brothers Ponnar-Sankar; hadn't they been proudly saying that they were three brothers including Veeramalai! Arukkani - wasn't she a sister to all the three of them! And one of those brothers was now a corpse! Lost his life in the war arena and climbed the heights of bravery like a tiger male!

"Oh! The general of Valanadu! An intimate brother all through our lives! Did you give up your life to protect me? Why did you wish that I who was wounded in the battlefield should live? Is it proper for heroes to live after getting wounded in the battlefield! I cannot console myself saying that it is shameful to receive wounds only on the back but not on the forehead! Why should I live after the demise of Veeramalai who was life to my life, the protective fort of our family, a mother who looked after me as she would take care of her child she had borne in her womb for ten months, a father who guided me in the right path, a mentor who trained me, a friend to a friend and a brother to a brother? That too, after being wounded on the forehead? Our enemy Kali had shamelessly bolted away from the battlefield and gone into hiding! Alas! Veeramalai who got this great victory for us is not alive to celebrate it! What can I do? How can I bear this loss?" cried Sankar. Veeramalai lay in the battlefield without a wife to weep and mourn his death rolling over his body. Sankar hugged his body and wept as if to make good the absence of a wife!

Sankar suddenly shook off his sorrow, stopped offering his tears for the death of a brave leopard in the battlefield and stood up. He pulled out the enemy's arrow from his forehead and threw it off. The warriors of Valanadu stood around the body of Veeramalai like epitomes of sorrow.

Sankar told them, "I name this spot, where Veeramalai, who was one with my brother Ponnar and me - no the Veeramalai who was one with all of us - and attained heroic death, 'Veeramalai'. This area around Veerapur forest will hereafter be called Veeramalai!"

Before Sankar finished uttering these words the Valanadu warriors shouted the slogan 'Long live Veeramalai!' with overflowing emotion.

"Warriors! All of you return to Valanadu! Tell my brother Ponnar what happened in the battlefield! Tell him that Kali deserted the battlefield and escaped to Thalaiyur! The victory we have got now is only a temporary one! To make it permanent Thalaiyur Kali must be trounced! There is absolutely no justification for sparing his life any more! I don't know what plans my brother may have! Perhaps, he may need more soldiers to carry out his war strategy. So it is better for all of you to return to Valanadu. It is enough if four or five soldiers remain with me! All the Thalaiyur soldiers, terror-stricken after seeing their captain's flight, had run away! So it is enough if four or five soldiers stay behind. I will perform the last rites to Veermalai here itself with their help!"

The vice generals and the warriors heard the command of their king and got ready to join their superior king Ponnar in Valanadu. At that time two soldiers came there carrying the severely mangled body of Vaiyamperuman. He had attained heroic death caused by a spear-wound on his chest.

"Vaiyamperuman! You too had attained heroic death?" lamented Sankar and beat his chest heavily. After a brief silence he turned to the soldiers who had lined up and stared at them. The implication was, "Haven't you started yet for Valanadu?"

Sankar mused within himself! "Under the joint leadership of Veeramalai, Vaiyamperuman and I the forces embarked upon this war. Excepting me, the two others had died in the battlefield and had hoisted their flags at the summit of glory. They used to say that battlefield death is something one must beg for! But I was not fortunate enough to get that! Contrarily, I am wounded on the forehead and alive! What is more, I am alive after the demise of Veeramalai and Vaiyamperuman! And that too, how? After having been wounded by the enemy! This is not in consonance with my tradition of honour! I must finish my life before my brother Ponnar asks me, 'Where is Veeramalai?' - before my uncle asks me, 'What happened to Vaiyamperuman?' - before I am charged with the accusation, 'You who could not save the lives of two persons, what did you achieve by leading the forces along with them?'

Sankar's thoughts went deep and expanded like the sea.

"The glory of heroic death in the battlefield that those two and other innumerable soldiers of both sides have attained should accrue to me also! If it doesn't come of its own accord I must go in search of it!"

Sankar's words came out strongly and in clear-cut terms as if carved in hard core timber. He cast his glance at the soldiers standing around him. They stood dumbfounded on hearing his words.

"Warriors! I started for the war after vowing to myself that I would either win or attain brave death! I got victory with your able assistance! I have driven out Thalaiyur Kali! But he is an injured snake! I haven't forgotten that! I have a share in the duty of wiping him out completely! But I realise that I who got wounded in the battlefield and fell had become a blemish to the reputation of my brave clan! So I am now ready to face heroic death of my own volition!"

The soldiers were badly upset on hearing Sankar roar like that. They fell at his feet, wept and cringed, "King! Have you forgotten the vow you took along with your brother? Can the vow you made that day to carry out the command of your mentor Rockiannan to revenge upon Thalaiyur Kali and the traitors who stood in support of him vanish like words written on water? Wasn't that promise made in the presence of Mayavar? Don't you remember that? Is it not selfish on your part to ignore all these and wish for heroic death?"

"I who was wounded in the battlefield should have killed the enemy who inflicted it. Had I done that the wound I suffered could be glorified as a heroic one. Alas! I had let him off the hook! In a sense, is it not a great defeat to me? That's why; in order to wipe out that blemish I seek heroic death."

Sankar said this emphatically in a clear-cut manner.

"King! Please excuse us! In a war, at times, victory may not be on our side. There may be defeat even! Is it right to consider a lapse as a total defeat? More important than that; can you be indifferent to the task of fulfilling the vow you undertook? In no way can we accept your decision to attain heroic death on your own accord." A vice general and a few soldiers made this request in a most importunate manner. But Sankar was adamant in rejecting their request.

"Do you want me to believe that my brother cannot carry out the vow? He will definitely carry it out! I know, as a *Tirukkural* couplet says, 'One must rack one's brain and find out who can successfully complete a task and with what means and then entrust it to him'. I know very well who has the capacity, intelligence, bravery and the valour to accomplish this task. It can only be my brother Ponnar! It should be! I lost my general Veeramalai who came in support of me! I lost Vaiyamperuman! After having allowed the enemy to escape and also after having been wounded on my forehead I don't want to live even for a second!"

After listening to Sankar's final word all of them shouted in bewilderment, "Oh, King!"

"There is no time to exchange advice or to argue! I bring to my mind the courage of Nedunchelia Pandian of Thalaiyalankanam who in his childhood fought against five enemy countries and was victorious! I think of Raja Raja Cholan who defeated Ceylon with his forces and Rajendra Cholan who went up to Kadaram with his

naval forces and hoisted his victory flag there! Nor have I forgotten the history of the king Cheran Chenguttuvan who took his forces up to Kuyilaluvam in the Himalayas, defeated the kings Kanaga and Vijaya and brought from there a block of stone to carve the statue of Kannagi! In the Tamil soil where these men of intrepidity were born and earned glory for themselves let me be remembered as a man who felt ashamed of himself - not for a wound he got on his back but for a forehead wound - gave up his life in the battlefield and attained glory for his courage! Won't future history record my name in glorious terms as Sankar, the brother of Ponnar, the son of Kundrudaiyar, the grandson of Kolatha Gounder and the great son of the Kongu clan? That is enough for me!" So saying he picked up his sword.

The vice generals and the soldiers were shocked to see this and cried aloud, "King! No, please don't!"

Sankar responded angrily, "We have argued enough! Now it is your duty to obey me!" All of them became silent like moulded dolls.

Sankar ascended a rock, spread a silken cloth, sat on it and shouted three times: "Long live Valanadu!" and stated majestically in a loud voice, "I bow my head and pay my respect to those who sacrificed their dear lives to protect the reputation of Valanadu and to establish its rights." He then lifted his sword high! Stood erect and looked up at the sky! Bent back and removed the armour from his chest and threw it away! Swung the sword he held in his hand above him and tossed it high in the sky with a peculiar sleight of hand!

The way he tossed the sword was very strange! The sword went straight above and came down like monsoon lightning! Sankar lifted his chest up and received the sword unerringly in the middle!

The bold glance he cast at the sword while it pierced through his chest with a smile should alone be cited as an example of bravery.

After that there was no speech - no breath! Sankar slumped on the rock a corpse! The soldiers who witnessed that scene looked like living corpses!

The life of one of the two brothers who surged like a hurricane came to an end! He who was the seat of courage could not bear to see that courage suffering even a blemish smaller than half a mustard seed and wrote an inerasable history in that battlefield! The trees which were fluttering in the breeze till then maintained silence, the boughs and leaves became stock-still! The crows, eagles, kites, dogs and foxes that came there to feast and make merry sat stunned in a strange manner!

A golden page of courage and valour from the historical records of the Kongu clan was read and put an end to!

The palace had burnt down and cooled off - the sisters-in-law Muthayi and Pavalayi who were there had burnt themselves in that fire - and Arukkani Thangam had turned into a flaming fire more vigorous than that fire and was on her way to Thalaiyur through the Veerapur forest!

The tears rolling down her cheeks fell on the ground and splattered like iron bits burnt in a smithy!

The jungle path in which she and her friends were walking in war gear was a single track overrun with thorns and stones. As the woman force was spitting sparks of anger and marching in that short route, Manthiappan was riding fast on his horse in the opposite direction. His fingers were still dripping blood. In front of him the silver casket containing the emerald green ruby parrot was tied to the horse! His eyes spotted Arukkani Thangam!

58 Girl on Her Way to the Battlefield!

While escaping from the battlefield, Manthiappan took the emerald green ruby parrot with him. In the battlefield the warriors of both sides were engaged in a war risking their lives. Who would have bothered to note a treacherous-hearted coward indulging in theft! So he could finish the job easily without any hindrance.

He had escaped from the Valanadu warriors. He did not expect that he would be surrounded by the armed women warriors of Valanadu under the leadership of Arukkani Thangam!

He did not like to show himself as their enemy. His sudden idea was to escape for the time being by pretending to have completely wiped out all feelings of hatred and put up a show that he was ready to shower love and affection on her and her brothers.

Arukkani and her friends were not inclined to show him mercy. They pushed forward majestically, surrounded his horse and glared at him with their scorching eyes.

"Why do you look at me like that? Even before you could burn me by your fiery eyes and convert me into refined gold, the sorrow over the misery that befell the Kongu community because of jealousy among agnates had burnt me and made me as pure as ornamental gold. That's why I hurriedly left the battlefield to search for

Ponnar. My wish is that I should hand over to you this parrot which is your property before I ask Ponnar to go to the battlefield and accompany him. It is my good luck that you have come! Accept this, the emerald green ruby parrot!" He grinned and stretched out the silver casket without dismounting.

He expected her to reach for the casket excitedly and thank him kindly. Contrary to that, she knocked the casket with her sword. It broke into pieces! The golden cage splintered to smithereens and scattered over the ground. The emerald parrot alone fell away as a whole! Arukkani Thangam picked it up.

It was not the fake parrot brought by Chembakulan. Arukkani was certain that it was the parrot mentioned by Rockiannan in his will. But she was not ready to trust Manthiappan on that score!

She berated him, "I don't know what special taste you and your father have for betraying without any hesitation anybody you dislike, whether he is an elder brother or younger brother. You behave as if you have taken a vow to covet everything and you don't mind even if the enemy gains. Though Thalaiyur Kali is an enemy of Valanadu, I must say, he doesn't have wicked intentions as you the natives of Valanadu have, treacherous intelligence as you the members of my own clan have and revengeful motives against agnates born in the same family. Even if he has any, it should be the venom injected into him by you in small doses!"

"Do you still refuse to believe me? This world is always like this. It will not accept a reformed person!" Manthiappan showed extreme tenderness in his tone. His immediate need was to escape from those angry girls somehow or other.

"See here, I have lost my fingers in the Veerapur battle! I have come running with the conviction that remaining with that Thalaiyur fellow even after this is perfidy to our clan."

"Does the datura plant, when stripped of its thorn, lose its venom? You are like that. We are not ready to believe that you would have lost your feelings of hatred just by losing your fingers!"

"Alas! Arukkani Thangam - I swear on the deity of our Kongu Velala clan. Believe me! Now I am a reformed Manthiappan!"

"*Chi*! What merit have you to talk about clan and swear on clan deity? You know how we are related to one another - yet you dared to behave with me like a mass of flesh singed in the fire of lust in violation of all morals. Do you remember what you did in Chellandiamman temple or have you forgotten it because such bestial activities are your daily routine? There cannot be anything more foolish than offering pardon to you and your father. Both of you had not only turned willing tools to destroy your clan but also, for your selfish ends and for enjoying cheap pleasures, had become hooded snakes determined to revenge yourselves upon agnates in intense enmity!"

Arukkani's sword rose above her head and dazzled. Her eyes spurted sparks of fire!

"Amma Arukkani, please listen to me! Do you know why I took this decision? I dithered just because I thought you would be totally upset. Let me tell that also now. I got frustrated over killing each other among ourselves and gloating over it as victory and so left the battlefield. Still I stood a little away and watched the happenings. I saw the slain Vaiyamperuman falling down dead. Before I could recover from that shock Veeramalai's dead body fell on the ground. The final victory was your brother Sankar's, But Thalaiyur Kali, while fleeing after his defeat in the field, hit Sankar's forehead with an arrow. So Sankar being alive is doubtful! In this war I lost my father Chellatha Gounder also. After seeing all these harrowing consequences I have come rushing to save the reputation of our clan. Is it just to abuse me instead of appreciating me?"

Howsoever Manthiappan might talk as if a rock melted like cow's butter, Arukkani was not ready to trust him or his words.

"Understand that your ingratiating oration will cut no ice with this girl on her way to the battlefield! To make me believe that my relatives, my dear brother Sankar, our intrepid general Veeramalai are all dead or wounded you are adding up the story that your father is also dead. You must be aware that a Tamil girl will not get disheartened on hearing the sad news that those who went to the battlefield fell. Don't you know that she has the character of a tigress and will send those who are left behind, even a toddler, to the warfront? Why are you acting in front of me? Your body is trembling! Your life is going to quieten! Renegades have never prospered, nor will we allow them to live!"

Arukkani pounced upon Manthiappan with her sword raised high. But he spurred his horse and it galloped away. His life was saved thanks to his horse. Noting that he had escaped the tip of her sword, she ordered her friends to encircle him immediately and hack him down.

As the friends hurled their spears and swords on Manthiappan, his horse began to run amuck. But they did not spare him. They chased him relentlessly. Eyes bubbling with anger, Arukkani held the emerald parrot in one hand, her sword in another hand and watched her friends fencing in to knock down Manthiappan.

Manthiappan's horse got out of his control and ran distractedly! It jumped high and low. It teetered badly and tried hard to shake him off and somehow escape. The master escaped from the battlefield to save himself and his horse also had the same motive!

Arukkani's friends were determined to knock him down and were not in any way unnerved by the rocks, bushes, stones or thorns on the way. One or two spears

hit the horse on its flanks. It got completely out of control, ran up to the top of a rock and unable to get a foothold rolled down along with Manthiappan.

The carcass of the horse - the corpse of Manthiappan tightly embracing it!

Arukkani Thangam saw him floating in a pool of blood and his eyes closing finally. She laughed loud and ringingly. The trees and rocks echoed the sound of her laughter!

A question amidst that laughter! Could what Manthiappan said be true? Could general Veeramalai have attained heroic death? Had Vaiyamperuman also left this world? Alas! Did an arrow pierce the forehead of my brother Sankar? If all these are true, what can I do? The whereabouts of brother Ponnar are also not known! Arukkani started marching towards the battlefield with her friends!

Her friends also trudged along tirelessly towards the battlefield!

Arukkani who lost her sisters-in-law is walking towards the Veerapur battlefield. Ponnar, on his way to the battlefield with his forces, gets the news that his loving brother - his dearest brother - his precious brother who would not be away from him even a fraction of a second - had hugged heroic death of his own volition to validate the aphorism that the descendants of valiant kings who considered honour alone as a mark of good life are not cats but tiger-like Tamilians!

"Let it be brother or sister, I will attend to them later on - the forces will now march towards Thalaiyur," ordered Ponnar.

Meanwhile, the forces of all the eighteen regions under the reign of Kali converged in Thalaiyur.

First, the capital of Thalaiyur region must be protected! The invasion of Ponnar's forces must be thwarted! Following that Ponnar and his forces must be made to pull back and run away! Ponnar on the run must be given a relentless chase! He must be eliminated! The whole Valanadu region must be brought under the flag of Thalaiyur!

The chieftains of all the eighteen regions confabulated and chalked out a war stratagem to trap Ponnar.

Ponnar's forces were on their way to Thalaiyur with a single frenetic aim, 'An eye for an eye!'

The girl Arukkani, like gold wrought in fire, plodded her way towards the battlefield!

59 Thalaiyur Battlefield!

As Arukkani and her friends were furiously heading towards the battlefield, Thalaiyur was getting ready to hit back at Ponnar's forces. As per the summons issued by Kali, the battalions of all the eighteen regions owing allegiance to him entered Thalaiyur like a river in spate. Together all the chieftains devised plans and strategies to overturn the invasion of Ponnar and to drive him away. Their crafty plan was that every chieftain would lead his forces and line them up all along the banks of the river Amaravathi and would strike at and destroy Ponnar's forces even as they were crossing the river and float the dead bodies in the river itself. But Ponnar figured out the war stratagem of Kali and so instead of taking his entire forces to the Amaravathi sent only a section.

The Amaravathi was brimming over the banks. The Thalaiyur citizens had pulled down the long wooden bridges that had been put up across the river. Ponnar's forces could enter into Thalaiyur only by getting into the river and swimming across it. Meantime they must ward off the arrows and spears aimed at them by the Thalaiyur forces. They must contend with that and also cross the river. Ponnar did not fail to see that it was almost an insurmountable task.

Still, to counter intrigue with intrigue, he ordered only a fraction of his forces to swim across the river and reach Thalaiyur. The forces of all the eighteen regions posted on the northern bank of the Amaravathi began bombarding those who got into the river with arrows and spears. The soldiers of Ponnar kept on swimming and attacked the enemies by hurling their spears at them. As a result the river turned red. Since the generals and the king of Thalaiyur were keenly engaged in holding the enemy forces at bay, they failed to notice Ponnar storming into

Thalaiyur with the rest of his forces through a different route. His own forces struggled hard to keep pace with Ponnar as he flew on his horse.

Ponnar had just a single aim! He must revenge himself on Thalaiyur Kali who had destroyed Valanadu completely and ruined his clan. He must raze down Thalaiyur! Anybody who opposes this, whoever it may be, will be cut down to pieces by his sword. Thalaiyur soldiers expected Ponnar to get into the river with his forces. They swaggered that they would swarm him easily and float his dead body in the floods. Ponnar's horse hoodwinked all of them and was fast approaching Thalaiyar from a different route like a missile of fire.

Ponnar harvested victories in heaps. Outwitting the army that was stationed like a fence all along the Amaravathi bank in Thalaiyur region, the forces of Ponnar advanced in all other directions and reached the other side of the river. For that a large number of soldiers had to be offered as sacrifice to the river Amaravathi! Thalaiyur soldiers who were highly proficient in pitching their arrows like a cloudburst and overwhelming the enemy were unable to counter the multi-pronged attack of Ponnar and struggled frantically.

A volcano is not a matter of concern until it is just rumbling; but when it begins belching out fiery lava up in the sky who can go near and contain it? The fight that Ponnar put up was exactly like that!

Soldiers pounced upon Ponnar with their horses - but they and their horses got cut into two and fell down dead. Arrows flew at him in tens, fifties and hundreds; but all of them at the touch of Ponnar's sword broke into pieces and disappeared in the dust. That great hero Ponnar ignored the swords and spears aimed at him as if they were flowers showered on him in a reception and swirled round and round.

The cruelty inflicted upon Kundrudaiyar's family - father's agony - mother's misery - the promise given in the presence of Mayavar - the vow undertaken - brother Sankar's affectionate countenance - Veeramalai's majestic figure - the fall of Vaiyamperuman - the demise of Kuppayi - the tears of Arukkani - all flashed again and again in the heart of Ponnar! Later, they did not at all disappear! They stuck to his heart for ever!

As the forces of Valanadu and Thalaiyur were kicking the heads of enemies like balls, chopping and tossing the legs and floating the lifeless bodies in the river, Ponnar reached the Thalaiyur fort itself, with a scanty cavalry to assist him.

They used to say 'apocalyptical end'; Ponnar's wielding of the sword epitomised it and none could stand up to it. Kali heard that Ponnar was about to enter the fort and at once ordered the eighteen chieftains to shift the warfront from the river bank to the fort. The entire forces turned towards the fort.

But before that, in a way nobody could guess whether it flew or jumped up straightaway, Ponnar's horse ascended and stood on the bastion of the fort. Seated on the horse and with his sword raised high, Ponnar laughed victoriously! But it was not the echo of joy gushing from the bottom of his heart! It was the loud clamour of anger! The mighty sound of furious rage!

What a wonder! Thalaiyur Kali and his eighteen chieftains are standing around the fort! Ponnar, seated on his horse over the bastion, trumpets his triumph!

Kali and the eighteen chieftains roared their brave command, "Hm! Fence Ponnar in! Leave him not until his body and his sword are cut into pieces!"

But Ponnar began to address the soldiers who encircled him!

"I am not afraid of fighting you! I will leave Thalaiyur only after annihilating all of you! Don't forget that my heart is mightier than my sword! I have the strength to pounce upon your forces a billion times faster than my horse and pummel you. Do you ask how I got that power? Not by magic - nor by witchcraft - I am just human! Then how did this one man get this much of power? This power is the result of putting up with everything patiently for a very long time! This power has exploded after having endured to the utmost and realising the futility of enduring anymore! Aren't you aware of the hardships my father bore ever since he came of age to tackle the jealousy of the agnates? Against our aspiration that the Velala and Vettuva clans of the Kongu region must bloom and flourish like two flowers of a bough and two fruits of a branch the traitors of our clan held selfish interests, enjoyment of worldly pleasures, position, status and authority as their guiding principles! They used Thalaiyur Kali who would assent to anything like a puppet! These miscreants wish to blind the enemy's both eyes even at the cost of one eye! Aren't their atrocities continuing through generations? Those incarnations of evil, yes, my agnate group incited Kali to finish off me and my brother in our childhood itself! Rockiannan, the mentor of our clan, sacrificed his children to save us! Mayavar struggled hard to avoid the hostilities between the two clans and to direct the reign of king Kali in the right path. He has now become the ever shining beacon of both the clans! But his wish did not fructify! Now I am not addressing you to plead for justice and stop the war! I cannot stop this war at this stage! The wicked renegades of our clan, Chellatha Gounder and Manthiappan, blocked and closed all the avenues of peace and had sought and hugged their destruction. The Vettuva clan which has hunting as its profession and the Velala clan which has agriculture as its profession and the other clans which pursue other professions are all one clan, the Tamil clan! Not only my clan, but people of all clans got training in Rockiannan's barracks. Both the chiefs of the Valanadu forces and the Thalaiyur forces which are now pitted against each other regard Rockiannan as their mentor!

But who double-crossed the noble principles of that great mentor even? Weren't they Chellatha Gounder and Manthiapan? And king Kali who abided by their words and refused to think for himself? My questions are not mean implorations craving for your mercy! A warning to all the eighteen chieftains before I embark upon my final war! Wage a war against me only if you are ready to get lost along with king Kali and see the annihilation of your forces, your lands and your people! Had king Kali pondered over this at least in the last minute, he could have saved the people of his eighteen regions from destruction! He failed to do that and has become the cause of the total annihilation of his own Vettuva clan! If he is prepared to earn that bad name and get the wrath of future inscribed in his life history, I am not at all concerned about it! I am ready! Attack me! I will bear up against all the eighteen armies single-handedly! I will grind you all into powder!"

Ponnar finished his oration in the manner of a proclamation by the deluge itself. But none among the eighteen chieftains realised his folly, bowed his head in shame, contained his anger and retreated! All of them turned on him in intense fury to exterminate him.

But before they could swing into action Kali rode fast and stood in front of them.

"All the eighteen chieftains! Listen to me! All that Ponnar said are acceptable to me! I don't have the daring to deny anything – I respect my conscience! Let not this war be the cause of the total annihilation of the Vettuvas and the Velalas! There was a little enmity between the two clans! From Ponnar all of you heard who had the honour of blowing that into huge hatred! So, all the eighteen chieftains and their forces shall lay down your arms! One thing is definite! Don't think that I am going to kneel down and beg Ponnar to spare my life! I don't lag behind Ponnar in power and ability! This war must end with a personal combat between Ponnar and me. We two alone will fight – if I fall let the flag of Valanadu flutter in Thalaiyur! If Ponnar falls let the flag of Thalaiyur flutter in Valanadu! In no way can the fight between us be avoided! Peace at this stage will call my honour into question! Ponnar also – in order to fulfil his vow – is duty bound to fight with me. So, we will decide our destinies here! All the others belonging to both the groups shall step aside! From now, only the weapons in our hands have any work!"

King Kali shouted like this and spurred his horse in the direction of Ponnar.

Both the warriors fought with their swords. After some time they got down from their horses and fought with all kinds of weapons in the bastion. Later, without any weapon they lifted and hurled each other on the ground like balls. At one point the Valanadu warriors let out a shrill cry fearing that Kali was going to strangulate Ponnar and roll him down the façade of the fort. But the end was quite contrary to that! Ponnar gave Kali a kick and pushed him down. Kali got up with a

sword and pounced upon Ponnar. Within that time a sword in Ponnar's hand also! That sword pierced the chest of king Kali deep! His head tripped! He floundered! His eyes began to sink! His sword slipped from his hand! Before he breathed his last, king Kali extended his hand slowly and shook Ponnar's hand! Ponnar also, with tears in his eyes, shook Kali's hand! Both hugged each other! Ponnar laid Kali who had become a corpse on the pedestal of the bastion!

60 The End of the Battle!

On reaching the battlefield, the eyes of Arukkani rolled in all directions to spot her brother Sankar. She saw Vaiyamperuman lying dead in a gruesome manner and was stunned. Though she did not wish to marry, she felt as if something choked her chest as she saw the man who wished to marry her not dressed as a bridegroom but stripped of his life! She walked further and saw the lifeless body of Chellatha Gounder. As she thought that everything was the product of the fire of betrayal that blazed glaringly in his heart only a blistering sigh came out of her lungs. She screamed involuntarily at the sight of Veeramalai lying far away with spears and arrows struck all over his body. The affection she had for him was in no way less than the affection she had for her brothers.

Were not his father Cholan Thotti and his grandfather, the great Adi Dravida men, devotedly affectionate towards Kundrudaiyan and his ancestors?

It appeared as if Veeramalai was sleeping peacefully with the satisfaction of having done his last duty to the Kundrudaiyan family!

A little away from Veeramalai on a pedestal-like slope of a rock, Sankar lay hugging death with the sword that had pierced into his chest and a smile on his face!

"*Chinna anna*!" Arukkani yelled desperately. Her friends also wept bitterly. There wails echoed through the entire Veerapur battlefield!

She fell on Sankar's body and wept. Her lamentations are still reverberating in Veeramalai area – in the Veerapur battlefield.

An inexplicable determination in the mind of Arukkani - yes- the determination that it was needless to live any longer. Whoever might come and console her with

the most soothing words, her heart was not strong enough to bear the loss of her affectionate brother Sankar! Compared to that, she had the courage to end her life. That determination took enormous magnitude in her mind and strengthened itself unshakably.

To prove that he was an honourable warrior Sankar had bared his chest straight and offered his sweet life as a gift to his sword. Now that great hero lay there as a corpse on that silk-spread rock. This scene moved Arukkani Thangam immeasurably.

Amidst her lamentations the hoof-noise of several horses approaching them speedily shook the Veerapur battlefield. The horses kicked up a lot of dust and so she could not identify the persons. She took her sword and got ready to fight. Her friends also readied themselves for a battle.

They were all inconsolably immersed in sorrow. Still, to prove that they were bold warriors who would save the honour of their clan at any cost, they stood there with spears and swords to put up a fight.

The hoof-sounds tore their ears like a series of continuous thunder roaring a thousand times! The approaching army must be a large one and triumphing over it would be impossible. Yet, Arukkani was very much satisfied that she was going to die heroically and fall down beside her brother Sankar!

The noise heard at a distance came closer and closer. Arukkani exhorted her friends, "Hm! Get ready! Victory or death! Fight bearing in mind the fate of a woman who doesn't get either of them and falls into the hands of the enemy!"

Since they were watching the approaching cavalry, they failed to notice a solitary horse galloping towards the battlefield. For that, the horse did not sidestep the battlefield.

Ponnar was seated on that solitary horse! The horse entered the battlefield! Arukkani saw her brother Ponnar! Now her attention was not on the fast approaching cavalry.

The moment she saw Ponnar, she cried, "*Anna*!" She jumped at him and caught hold of his legs. Ponnar lifted his loving sister up, held her close to his chest and surveyed the battlefield. He did not shed tears at the cruel sight of Sankar, Veeramalai, Vaiyamperuman and ever so many other warriors of both sides lying there dead. If he were to show his grief, his sister Arukkani's heart might break. He was not prepared to lose her also! He pressed his face on the crown of her head and comforted her with soothing words:

"Arukkani! It is not at all imperative that royal families should fight! They can definitely rule without any need for that. But the war we consider unnecessary may at times become inevitable. In such situations brave warriors cannot ignore

wars and keep away! Warriors are not paid employees in some section of the army! In their lives they give utmost importance to feelings of honour and reputation! Such persons will not get terrified when wars are forced on them. Should not be! In such wars even victory and defeat are not important. In the battlefield the display of bravery replete with a sense of honour alone is important! Thalaiyur Kali has embraced such a brave death! Victory to the war I waged! Victory to the vow I undertook! Still, we should not fail to respect and praise the courage of Kali who faced defeat and fell in the battlefield! In a war - for victory or defeat - innumerable lives have to be paid as price! When looking at the fallen heroes of both the sides, I must consider Sankar as only one among them! I must consider Veeramalai and Vaiyamperuman also like that! Among the names of the soldiers who sacrificed their lives for our Valanadu - many names may not be popular! But I consider all the warriors who gave their lives to protect the honour of their motherland as my brother Sankar! Arukkani! You must also think like me! When the bodies of so many warriors are lying around in this battlefield, it is not proper to single out Sankar's body for special attention and weep and wail over it. By saying this, I don't mean that - whether it is Sankar, or Veeramalai, or Vaiyamperuman - you can consider them on a par with average soldiers! My brother Sankar was endowed with enormous strength and so only he was able to drive away Thalaiyur Kali from the battlefield! Yet, he finds a place only in the list of soldiers who sacrificed their lives for our country! If you and I give him special importance and lament his death, who is there to lament the death of ever so many other soldiers? So, take heart and console yourself! The vow that he swore to fulfil along with me has been accomplished! That must be a matter of consolation to you, Arukkani!"

The face of Ponnar who was talking like this was suddenly gripped by fear. He lifted his head and looked at her sister's face keenly. He loosened his hands which were holding her slowly, not fully. Arukkani was slipping from his hold. Again he held her tightly and called softly, "Arukkani!" Ponnar could now only understand that her life had left her body the moment she shouted, "Anna!" and embraced him!

He consoled Arukkani with so many words. Now, who can console him?

No tears in his eyes - but his face darkened. He looked at the golden face of his sister lying on the ground, the face of his brother, the face of Veeramalai, the face of Vaiyamperuman, the faces of soldiers lying all around the battlefield. He patted the horse that stood near him. Took out his sword and planted it in the ground at a little distance. The hilt was buried in the ground and the tip pointed to the sky.

He then walked a little distance - "All is lost! All is lost because of jealousy among agnates - in the treacherous drama enacted for the sake of position!" So

saying, he pounced upon the sword tip. But before he could fall on it Akkaladeva Cholan stood in front of him with that sword in his hand!

They recollected the hoof-sounds heard by them earlier and understood that it was the noise produced by the cavalry of Uraiyur Cholan!

"Oh! The Chola king? What is it? Why do you prevent me? Why should I live after all these?"

"Brave younger brother! Had you explained the situation to me and sought the assistance of the Chola army, we could have very easily subdued Thalaiyur! So much loss would not have happened! Never mind, it has happened and inexorably! I came straightaway with my forces only to prevent any further calamity. In this war your relatives, your brother, your sister and so many soldiers have died! Don't forget that your people are depending on you! The Chola kingdom will always support you in your efforts to earn the goodwill of all the eighteen Vettuva chieftains and continue the rule of the Kongu Velalas in Valanadu! Thalaiyur is the place which makes a public proclamation of your victory! This battlefield proclaims the reputation and valour of your brother, the capability of your warriors and the kindness of your sister! To protect and cherish these memories for ever, your reign must continue! This country and I will not address you by your single name 'Ponnar' but only as 'Ponnar-Sankar'"

Ponnar, without giving any answer, stood like a statue.

"Long live Ponnar-Sankar!" The warriors of the Chola kingdom shouted very loudly!

61 Old Story and New History!

Dear readers!
Greetings!

The serial *Ponnar-Sankar* (*Annanmar Varalaru*) I have been writing for over a year in the periodical *Kungumam* came to an end last week. Now I wish to present before you the sources of the story available in *Annanmar Swamy Kathai* written by Pulavar Pichai and edited by Kavignar Sakthikanal, and *Varagunna Perungudikkoottam - Ponnar Sankar Varalaru* written by Vettambadi Thiru. A. Palanisamy. I have elaborately presented the background notes and ideas for this history in my preface given under the title 'Nuzhaivayil'. I am now presenting to you the gist of the old story which was in circulation in Tamilnadu before I wrote this historical novel as a serial for over sixty weeks. The combined story given by Thiru. Vettambadi Palanisamy and Thiru. Sakthikanal who edited and published Thiru. Pulavar Pichai's *Annanmar Varalaru* is given below.

* * *

Kolatha Gounder ruled the region with Vangalai as the capital. He lived like a chieftain. The name of his wife was Pavalatha. He built a temple for Chellandiamman in Madukkarai and also the Vellangulam lake. At that time there

was a border dispute among the Chera, Chola and Pandiya kings. The three kings sat in the Madukkarai Chellandiamman temple and held discussions. It was Kolatha Gounder who talked to them and settled the dispute.

The Chola king is pleased and gifts Kolatha Gounder seventy large segments of land near Thirukkambuliyur and makes him the *maniyam.*

His son Nelliangodan is born as a gift for his penance. He is very calm and unselfish. For his extraordinary patience he is called 'Masachamy'.

The parents are very much worried to see their son very naïve. So Kolatha Gounder calls his younger brother Chellatha Gounder and Cholan Thotti who is taking care of the family affairs, and gets from them the promise that they will bring up his son up to his manhood and marry him to Thamarai Nachi of the Maniankurichi (Arichampatti) family. As his mother Pavalatha was born in that family, Nelliangodan has the customary right to marry Thamarai. Later on, Kolatha Gounder surrenders his authority as *maniyam* to the Uraiyur Chola king and dies.

Soon all the agnates join together and give Nelliangodan all kinds of trouble. Unable to bear the troubles, he escapes to Maniankurichi. There he is taken care of kindly. His job is to herd sheep and lock them up in the pen at night. One day a lamb is lost and for that the agent whips him. Nelliangodan runs back to his agnates and they also thrash and drive him away. Finally, he goes to the house of a Chettiyar in Athichettipalayam.

The agnates conclude that Nelliangodan is lost for ever and appropriate his properties. Nelliangodan's paternal uncle Chellatha Gounder decides to marry his son to Thamarai Nachi. Malaikolunthu Gounder also agrees to give his daughter in marriage to Chellatha Gounder's son.

As this news reaches Cholan Thotti he meets Nelliangodan and informs him. At once both go to Maniankurichi. Nelliangodan goes to the house of the bride and begs for alms. His aunt bids the maid to give him one measure of bulrush millet. He tells his aunt that he did not come to beg for grains but to conclude his betrothal ceremony with Thamarai Nachi. When Malaikolunthar comes to know this, he beats him severely and orders his men to lock him up in a cell infested with white ants and termites. Thamarai Nachi becomes furious at this and swears that she will marry only Nelliangodan, her rightful bridegroom. She removes all her bridal jewels and hurls them away.

At last Malaikolunthar marries Thamarai Nachi to Nelliangodan. Chellatha Gounder knows this and gets terribly angry. When fisticuffs are about to be exchanged Malaikolunthar dispatches all of them to their town.

Nevertheless, Malaikolunthar's wrath over his daughter's obstinacy does not subside. Thamarai gets vexed with her father's attitude and vows, "I will conceive two lion-like sons. In your house two granddaughters will be born. My sons will marry them and put you in jail." Nelliangodan explains his plight to Uraiyur Cholan and makes a plea. He gives him a very bad and absolutely rugged piece of land full of surges and thorny bushes and tells him to live on its yield. Thamarai, with her husband and Cholan Thotti, makes that land cultivable.

It rains well and maize crop grows lustily. The land abandoned as barren turns into a maize field.

Nelliangodan becomes enormously wealthy. He becomes the landlord of many rocky regions and is given the title "Kundrudaiyan'. Though they are endowed with all wealth they don't get any children. For this, there is not a single god they leave unworshipped. They make a chariot for the Madukkarai Chellandiamman temple and perform a chariot festival. Even then no child is born! They are told that if they go to Chidambaram and worship Natarajar they will be blessed with a child. They plan to leave their lands and jewels under the custody of the king of Menadu and approach him. That Vettuva king plots to seize for himself Thamarai and her jewels and also to kill Kundrudaiyan. When they come to know this they demand him to return their lands and jewels. But he beats and tortures them. Thamarai vows that for this breach of trust she will kill them all and make a heap of their corpses. Thamarai and Kundrudaiyan go to Chidambaram.

God showers mercy on her and she conceives. Knowing this, the agnates send a midwife with the direction that if a male baby is born she must strangle it to death and if it is a female baby she must bring it up with proper care. Ponnar is born from Thamarai Nachi's right loin and Sankar from her left loin. The babies kick out the midwife who is waiting to finish them off. Later, Ponnar-Sankar are lost to their parents. During this time two daughters and three sons are born to the wife of Chinnamalaikolunthar. Veeramalai Sambuvan is born to Cholan Thotti.

Later, Thamarai gives birth to a female baby and it is named Arukkani Nalla Thangam. One day, she puts Arukkani on her lap and tells her about her brothers and laments their loss. At that time Ponnar-Sankar come out of the cellar in which they were hiding till then and stand in front of their mother.

Thamarai senses that the agnates will harm her family and so shifts to Athichettipalayam with her husband and children. There the children grow into adults. Ponnar-Sankar have their education and training in fencing, *silambam* and such martial arts under Rockiannan in Marigoundenpalayam. Arukkani is taught by her mother. After completing their education, Ponnar-Sankar join their mother in Kudaiyur. One day, she tells her son the sufferings she underwent in the hands

of their agnates and weeps. They are enraged and beat the agnates with a five-stringed rope whip. They punish the wives of their agnates also. After this the agnates conclude that they cannot win over Ponnar-Sankar. To secure his safety, Chellatha Gounder seeks asylum with Thalaiyur Kali, the chief of the Vettuva clan. With Kali's help he causes trouble to Ponnar-Sankar continuously.

There used to be hot contests between Ponnar-Sankar and the youths of the Vettuva community. In every contest the Vettuva children incur defeat. Because of this, bitter hatred grows between Thalaiyur Kali and Ponnar-Sankar and Kali considers them his inveterate enemies. He challenges them to a cock-fight. Arukkani can divine the future through her dreams. She warns her brothers about this cock-fight. Moreover, the cock given to them with her blessings wins the fight.

Ponnar-Sankar return to Valanadu with their parents. There they collect taxes and submit them to the Uraiyur king. They build a palace for themselves. Both Kundrudaiyan and Thamarai pass away at the same time. Arukkani is very much distressed at the loss of her parents. As per her wishes and to make her happy Sankar brings for her a macaw and a few other birds. Arukkani pulls herself together and spends her time in religious austerities. Through these she gets the power to know the past, the present and the future. Sankar, when he goes for hunting, kills a tiger. On knowing this Thalaiyur Kali gets angry as the area in which Sankar killed the tiger belonged to Kali. He arrives near the border of Valanadu with his forces and indulges in atrocious activities. Kali's men mistake Kuppayi, the daughter of Pachana Mudali, for Arukkani and abduct her. Sankar sets off with his forces and brings back Kuppayi. Out of shame, Kuppayi commits suicide when nobody is around.

Thalaiyur Kali again gives trouble to the people of Valanadu. They go and complain to Uraiyur Cholan. The king who has heard about the exploits of Ponnar-Sankar invites them to his palace and they go. The king recognises them as chieftains. Arukkani counsels that the marriages of her brothers must be conducted as per the vow of their mother. Accordingly, they marry the daughters of Chinnamalaikolunthar. (Ponnar marries Muthayi and Sankar marries Pavalayi.)

In the course of time, the reputation of the brothers spreads among the people of the Vettuva clan. Kali is incensed with hatred and decides to revenge himself on them. With the help of Chembakulan, a goldsmith, he foists a false charge on Ponnar that he stole a golden plate. The village panchayat upholds it. Ponnar says that he is ready to subject himself to any test and prove his innocence. Chembakulan says that Ponnar must enter the Vellangulam lake through the inner sluice and come out through the outer sluice. Before departing, Ponnar tells his brothers-in-law, Veeramalai Sambuvan and Sankar not to leave the fort as Kali

may attack with his forces at any time. As warned by Ponnar, Kali invades in Ponnar's absence. Four of them, the three sons of the aunt and Veeramalai, take part in the war. They make Kali's forces retreat in disgrace and are returning merrily over the victory. On the way they feel thirsty and get into a pond to drink water. As the men of Kali have mixed poison in it all the sons of the aunt die. Veeramalai Sambuvan alone escapes. Sankar knows this and sets off furiously. At that time Mayavar, the avatar of Vishnu, disguises himself as Kali and attacks Sankar from a hideout. The wounded Sankar is too disheartened to live any more. He sits facing the north, flings an arrow on himself and dies. Veeramalai Sambuvan is greatly upset on seeing this and he also falls on his sword and dies.

During the same time, Ponnar enters through the inner sluice of the Vellangulam lake and comes out. Chembakulan squabbles pig-headedly that the promise will be brought to completion only if he gets in and comes out of the outer sluice. As Ponnar is about to come out of the sluice, his mind absorbed in the drum sound produced by Veeramalai Sambuvan, Chembakulan throws a Vinayaga statue on his head. Ponnar notices it in the nick of time and kills Chembakulan by throwing his sword on him.

Ponnar comes to know about the death of Sankar, his aunt's sons, Veeramalai Sambuvan and others. He goes with his forces, kills Kali and scores victory. Unable to bear the loss of his brother Ponnar also dies by piercing an arrow into his chest. On knowing this, Arukkani gives a call to her sisters-in-law. They say that though they got the sacred *thali* tied around their necks, they did not begin conjugal life. Arukkani is very much dismayed and sets fire to the palace by turning her tears into fire. Both her sisters-in-law are consumed by the fire. This is mentioned in a song in the book written by Pulavar Pichai.

But in the book written by Vettambadi A. Palanisamy it is mentioned that the sisters set fire to the palace and died in order to escape from the hands of Kali and to protect their chastity.

After that, Arukkani goes to the battlefield. Weeps and wails. Periyakandiamman appears before her in disguise and consoles her. She goes to the spot where Sankar died using (of) his own sword. She stitches the wounds on his body with thread. She then chants an incantation, sprinkles water on him and he gets up alive. In the same way she raises Ponnar, Veeramalai and others.

But Vettambadi A. Palanisamy tells us in his book that Ponnar later on came riding on his horse. According to him, Ponnar is not dead, but alive. Afterwards, Ponnar announces that the task for which they took human birth and came to earth has been accomplished and so they will raise sacrificial fire in a consecrated pit and enter it to attain salvation. When he attempts to do the same Periyakandiamman appears in her true image and blesses.

The Chola king of Uraiyur knows that Ponnar-Sankar waged a war of truth successfully and attained divinity. He ordains that a temple must be built for them. He gives gold and all that is necessary to Eluvakariyan, a recluse who was doing penance there and asks him to build a temple and perform pooja.

*** *** ***

I have mixed many imaginary anecdotes with the above mentioned story hints and finished writing this long historical novel. Your blessings have always been with me. My greetings and gratitude to the great reading public that continuously supports and encourages me.

Lovingly,
Mu. Karunanidhi

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.

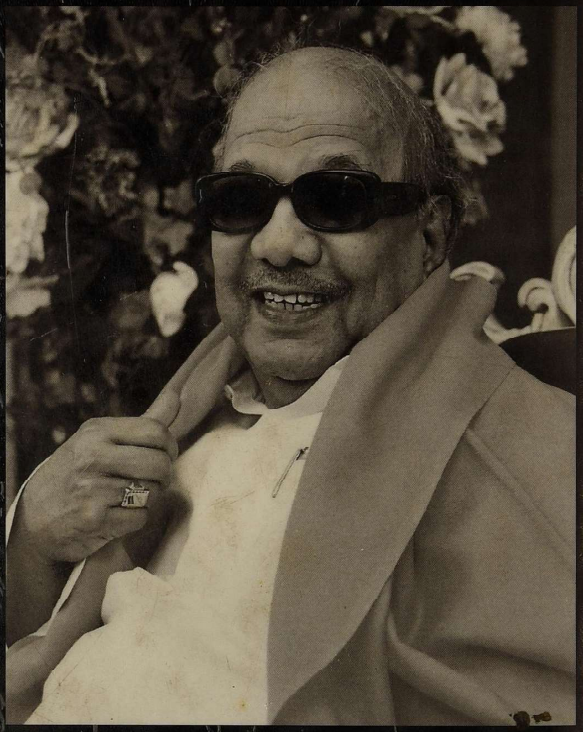
The late **Dr S. Agasthialingom,** a renowned linguist and former Vice Chancellor, Tamil University, **Sirpi Balasubramanian,** a highly decorated poet in Tamil, **Prof. Tamizhachi Thangapandian, Poet Kayalvizhi Venkatesh** and **Dr N. Ramani,** members of the Expert Committee, whose learned counsel, 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

True to his commitment to the Tamil language and culture, Kalaignar portrays Ponnar Sankar as the two typical Tamil heroes who evoke heroism and chivalry as is portrayed in the Tamil classics such as Purananuru, Cilappathikaram, Kambaramayanam, Kalingathupparani, etc. And many times, the novel reads like a fictional exposition of the tenets of the chosen distichs of Tirukkural, a monumental classic in Tamil, in the same way as many a character in the novel looks like an exemplar of the ideals, positive and negative, treated in this masterpiece.

Kalaignar has so skilfully blended his political principles as well as his cultural values into the texture of the novel that they remain integral to the fictional scheme. That he exploits this historical tale to propagate the values such as rationalism, communal harmony and sexual equality, and his deep-rooted indignation of superstitions and casteism without losing sight of the demands of art and without allowing this work to degenerate into a piece of propaganda is an extraordinary feat given to artists of a superior kind.

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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