

The Three Daughters of Matsendra Nagaswamy

One

The great river flows. For thousands of years civilisations have existed on its banks. It rises in the mountains of Tibet and flows one thousand seven hundred and ninety miles to the Arabian Sea, and at a place nine-tenths into this incredible journey it passes a man who is slung in a hammock in a tamarisk tree. It is not possible to put an age on this man, but it is accepted he has occupied this tree for as many years as is needed for the waters flowing passed him to fill an ocean. Well, this is what the man believes, this is his endeavour—the meaning of his life. When it is divined that enough water has passed he will set sail on a spiritual journey, which if he reaches journey's end he will have become enlightened in this world and will not have to wait until the next. He knows it is a bit of a short cut, this sailing idea, to become one with the Absolute. Being a holy man he is mindful that more than lying in a tree must be accomplished if he is to achieve his goal. Self-abnegation is a means to this end, but implanted in his mind is a barley seed of optimism that dictates that of the countless thousands who have renounced the world in search of Spiritual Enlightenment he may indeed be one of the very few to be called.

The great river is the Indus, and the man is Chandrakant.

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For as long as many can remember Chandrakant has suspended himself in the tamarisk tree from dawn until dusk. He has become a beacon in the flatlands for those who fish for palla in the great river and for those who redirect the great river's water for the irrigation of their crops. But above all he is a beacon of hope for the Nagaswamy family who keep him alive. He has become the pivotal rationale of their

existence because they perceive in return for supplying him with food a shower of spiritual favours will descend on them when he becomes one with the Absolute.

Beside the tamarisk tree is a hut made from mud bricks and roofed with palm fronds. Chandrakant built this himself. It has one room with one piece of furniture—a charpoy on which he sleeps between dusk and dawn. The hut and the tamarisk tree stand alone beside the river. The village in which the Nagaswamy family live is on raised ground about a mile away. Twice a day a member of the family, usually one of the daughters, journey from the village to Chandrakant's hut to waken him at dawn and to bring him food at dusk.

Apart from trinkets around his neck and the rosary in his hands Chandrakant has one other possession: it is a black umbrella that protects him from the sun. He acquired it in Karachi before he became a sadhu, a holy man. On the handle are the words *Made in England* inscribed on a metal ring, and because of the manner with which Chandrakant secures the umbrella to the tree he can see these three words, which are the only written words with which he is now accustomed. It will be no surprise to learn that the sounds of these three words, if chanted, might become text to a man in search of holiness—provided they are associated with the sound of his God, *Shiva*, and the most sacred of sounds, the syllable *Om*. It may also not be a surprise that this temporary diversion Chandrakant has facilitated by habit, for if a man who is suspended in a tree for twelve hours every day can chant *Shiva Om* ten thousand times he might well feel the occasional need to chant something different, like *Made in England*—providing he is overcome by a drift from devotion.

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Matsendra and Kamna Nagaswamy have four children. A boy named Sudarshan, who is the eldest, and three girls called Hita, Sarita and Tanushri.

One day Matsendra summoned his daughters. They had been expecting a summons.

'It has been a great hardship for us to keep sadhu Chandrakant in food all these years, and I pray to Shiva that our sacrifice shall not have been in vain. Since you became old enough twice daily have you walked to Chandrakant's hut, and have not complained. Food that would have satisfied you ... you have given to him and gone hungry yourselves. Yet it is with a purpose that I have asked you to do this, and have drained the depository of our wealth. As this depository was never big enough to provide baits sufficiently tempting for each of you to land a suitable husband I

reinvested it in the holy man so that when he has become enlightened he will ask Shiva to provide generously so that each one of you can attract a most worthy, and a most wealthy, husband.'

'Will God send rupees down the great river for us to collect, or will they fall with the monsoon rain?' asked Tanushri, the youngest.

'Indeed, neither! God does not use common currency. No, he does not! He is more subtle than that, more useful ... much more wise. He will make our buffalo, our bullock and our donkey have babies, all the time he will make them have babies until such time that we have enough buffalos and bullocks and donkeys to attract the most worthy, and the most wealthy, bridegrooms. Goodness me! Three of you! As many as that?' And Matsendra counted his girls again, and shrugged his shoulders in despair.

'Will not that take some time for we are ready now, so to speak?' said Sarita, blushing.

'Be patient. Shiva works in wondrous ways ... providing Chandrakant does what is expected.'

'Sadhu Chandrakant has been in the tamarisk tree since before we were born. Surely it is time that he was sharply on his way,' said Hita mockingly.

'Children, it takes many moons to fill an ocean.'

And the daughters of Matsendra and Kamna Nagaswamy were downcast for although they wanted very much to believe their father they imagined themselves old maids before the family livestock could produce the grand herds necessary to attract worthy, and the most wealthy, bridegrooms.

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That night Matsendra dreamt the dream for which he had long waited.

He summoned his son, Sudarshan.

'Sudarshan, you who are the best of all possible sons, go to Mr Harshad Engineer and persuade him to sell his boat.'

'Mr Harshad Engineer fishes from his boat to feed his family,' said Sudarshan.

'I know this, and it hurts me to send you on such a delicate mission.'

'What do I tell him?'

'Tell him Matsendra Nagaswamy will feed his family until the great day comes when his old boat shall be replaced with a shiny new one ... outboard engine, plenty of speed, envy of the flatlands, colour of his choice.'

‘With what do I pay him, now?’ asked Sudarshan.

‘With this,’ replied Matsendra.

Matsendra handed his son a handful of tired looking rupees and paises, all that Matsendra had been able to save, nurture and hoard over a lifetime of frugality.

‘Will he part with his boat for this?’ said Sudarshan looking with compassion at the chickenfeed coins that lay in his hand.

‘Such a good-looking boy as you will find a way.’

*

It is a summer’s day, and very hot. The tamarisk tree has shed its leaves to avoid loss of moisture. The black umbrella is up, and beneath its shade the sadhu is suspended in his hammock. He is reciting the name of his God, which so concentrates his mind that of the threatening dust storm he is unaware. No fishermen fish for palla, and no farmers come to the river to check the supply of water for their cotton and rice. The wild cats are lying low. It is desperately quiet. The only sound is the sadhu’s recitation and the murmur of the great river as it glides gracefully carrying silt and debris.

Chandrakant resembles his God, Shiva, by adopting what popular legend would have him believe to be a likeness. So he is naked, apart from a loin cloth, his hair is long, matted and reaches down over his upper body, in his ears are two large rings, around his neck a rope of trinkets and between his fingers a rosary of fifty beads, which represent the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet. Around his head he wears a length of red material that is very much Chandrakant and not Shiva. Sometimes he rubs holy ash onto his body as a symbol of death and rebirth. Matsendra collects the holy ash from the temple in the village.

The dust storm passes. It was no different from the countless dust storms that have preceded it.

The bells of the temple ring.

The Nagaswamy family, except Sudarshan, are walking silently one behind the other along the path that leads from the village to the tamarisk tree. Matsendra is leading, and his wife is at the rear. Between them, by age, are their three daughters. They carry food wrapped in leaves. Kamna carries a chatty of clean water and a coarse woollen jacket. Matsendra keeps a steady, resolute pace. He is empty-handed. As he nears the great river he hears Chandrakant’s recitation through the descending dusk.

Shiva, Shiva, Shiva. Om, Om, Om. Shiva, Shiva, Shiva ...

Shiva, Shiva, Shiva. Om, Om, Om. Shiva, Shiva, Shiva ...

It is a homing device above the murmur of the great river.

Sudarshan, too, hears Chandrakant's recitation. He is guiding Mr Harshad Engineer's boat slowly down river towards the tamarisk tree.

Shiva, Shiva, Shiva. Om, Om, Om. Shiva, Shiva, Shiva ...

Shiva, Shiva, Shiva. Om, Om, Om. Shiva, Shiva, Shiva ...

'Chandrakant, I have brought food.' Matsendra interrupts.

The recitation ceases.

Chandrakant furls his umbrella, unwinds himself from his hammock and climbs down unsteadily from the tree. His joints are stiff. He accepts the food wrapped in leaves from Hita and disappears into his hut. Nothing is said: nothing is ever said. This dusk by the tamarisk tree is like the countless dusks that have preceded it—yet this one is different because this is the last.

After Chandrakant has withdrawn into his hut Kamna, Sarita and Tanushri, place the food, the water and the coarse woollen jacket at the foot of the tamarisk tree, and Sudarshan ties up the boat. Then the Nagaswamy family steal away back along the path to their village.

'How long now before our bridegrooms call?' demand the three girls as soon as they are home.

'Many moons have passed, the oceans are full,' replies Matsendra Nagaswamy confidently.

'But how long?' demand his daughters.

'Until our cattle multiply, that is how long, that is what I have said.'

'But are we not all pretty? Surely, we should not have to wait that long,' they say.

'Pretty? I'd say pretty! Pretty bloody poor,' says their father.

Two

While Chandrakant slept he too dreamed the dream for which he had long waited. His God was summoning him. Yet his God seemed to be trifling with him, almost teasing him and would not divulge that which only He must know. Although his God made true statements that were music to the ears of the sleeping sadhu He dodged the details of transition.

Chandrakant, you who have renounced the pleasures of the world and have forsaken its possessions, you who have relinquished ties of family and have devoted your years to meditation, you who have faith and have witnessed the waters of the king of rivers fill the oceans of the world, you who are deserving of Spiritual Enlightenment are being called.

Chandrakant, while he dreamed, recited.

Shiva, Shiva, Shiva. Om, Om ,Om. Shiva, Shiva, Shiva ...

As he recited thus his God beckoned.

Chandrakant, you who have suffered discomfort whilst those around you have cosseted themselves, you who have accepted celibacy whilst those around you have fornicated, you who have eaten only enough to give you the strength to worship me whilst others have grown fat on the fruits of the earth ... your time has come. The king of rivers shall take you, so follow its waters as you have followed its voice.

As his God beckoned the mind of the sadhu struggled to find out what was now expected of him. He became fearful that the benefit for which he had devoted his life might be forfeited by accidental default. His God proffered enlightenment, but would not divulge the details of the journey to obtain it. All He would say was:

Chandrakant, collect the food and the water beneath the tamarisk tree and allow the great river to carry you. This is the first step. To be enlightened is never to doubt. It is enough that the waters that have passed you since you renounced the world will deliver you.

By dawn Chandrakant's had absorbed what his God had said: and his physical being had become absorbed and all his senses deadened. He was unaware that one of the Nagaswamy girls had failed to wake him or the fishers of palla were already at their stations or the farmers were checking the irrigation of their crops.

The fishers and the farmers were aware of Chandrakant—and they spread word the sadhu moved like a wraith.

Chandrakant put on the coarse woollen jacket, stowed the food wrapped in leaves and the chatty of water in Mr Harshad Engineer's boat, then using the paddle he eased the boat into the river where the sluggish current gained control and took it leisurely, sedately and effortlessly in the direction of the Arabian Sea. He lay down beneath the canvas canopy. The fishermen and the farmers watched the boat float away, watched the boat become a speck in the great river, watched the boat until the speck became one with the river—watched it as it vanished from sight.

This news they spread abroad.

'He has forgotten his umbrella,' remarked a fisherman.

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It is not known whether the fishermen and farmers were the last to see the little boat that carried the sadhu, but once it had reached the wild, wider wastes and the empty landscape of the great river's vast delta other witnesses would have been unlikely. None came forward to say the little boat had been seen to enter the Arabian Sea, or whether it turned eastwards towards the Gulf of Aden or westwards towards the Indian Ocean. Thereafter the three daughters of Matsendra and Kamna Nagaswamy measured the waists of the family's buffalo, bullock and donkey in the hope of signs that would confirm future increases to the small herd: and every day they were disappointed. And this disappointment did not diminish with familiarity for their happiness depended on it.

'Father, you have gambled our savings on a man who never did a day's work,' said Tanushri.

‘Father, you have gambled our savings on a man who slept all the lifelong day in a tree,’ said Sarita.

‘Father, you have gambled our savings on a man who sailed away without so much as a thank you or a forwarding address,’ said Hita.

‘Children, Shiva is a busy man and cannot attend to all the world’s needs at once. Be patient. By now Chandrakant will have surely mentioned us to Him so I expect our buffalo, bullock and donkey are already in the perceptual queue waiting for His benevolence.’

‘Father, what is the meaning of perceptual? Is that a quick queue that our animals are in?’ they asked.

‘Oh, yes indeed! It is the very best queue, so I am told because it leads directly into the infinite wisdom of our God, and it is amongst His infinite wisdom that His sense of benevolence is to be found.’

The three girls left their father, and as they were no more assured than when they had come to him they stopped measuring the waists of the livestock.

Hita said to her sisters:

‘Let us go to Karachi and find for ourselves husbands. Why wait for our livestock to produce herds? Are we not already attractive enough to lure from mothers bridegrooms who would suit us just fine?’

‘They say Karachi is full of such bridegrooms waiting for girls like us,’ said Sarita.

‘And they say also that Karachi is full of foreigners who take girls away to other lands where finding husbands is as easy as pulling palla from the great river.’

They discussed this between themselves, but were fearful of the consequences of committing themselves to the Karachi enterprise for fear of losing the security of their father’s roof. In Karachi God alone knew under whose roof they might be forced to dwell. Many seasons came and went, and with their departures the years slipped by. The Nagaswamy daughters continued to deliberate whether it was better to be safe and barren under their father’s roof or to take the bus to Karachi and chance it. Surely, they argued, if Shiva Himself had failed to send respectable bridegrooms to them how could they, impoverished peasant girls, do any better. Ever since they had thought of leaving home they had listened closely to those who had been to Karachi, and whilst they could not make themselves believe every lurid anecdote about the place unease crept in from the very wealth and breadth of the tales. The good tales suggested paradise: the bad godlessness.

The water levels of the great river whose current had taken away their savour continued to rise and fall depending on the seasons. Fishermen fished and farmers irrigated and the years went by. The promised herds never materialised, Chandrakant became a memory best forgotten and the daughters of Matsendra Nagaswamy feared the worst—that by holding out for the pick of the litters they had left themselves available for the runts.

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It was at this point in the life of the Nagaswamy family, that is when it was at its lowest in its fight against impecuniosity and its highest in its daughters' frustrations, that the letter arrived addressed to Matsendra Nagaswamy. It was splashed airmail blue and had stamps portraying a distant queen. It had been franked many times as it had passed through national and international post offices, and though it looked important it had not travelled well. The envelope was decidedly grubby. It appeared to Matsendra Nagaswamy that someone had already peeped inside because it had not been properly stuck down. Nevertheless, the family's raptness at its arrival was not lessened by its appearance because it was the first letter it had ever received from another land. Kamna Nagaswamy and her four children gathered around Matsendra as he examined the envelope. It was a moment for him to savour, this head-of-family stuff, this examining.

'There are too many postmarks for me to read from where it has come.'

'It has come from England, Matsendra, we know that,' said Kamna impatiently. 'Just look at the stamp!'

'I know ... but where in England?' said Matsendra holding the envelope up to the light and placing his eyes within an inch of it. He moved the envelope this way and that, then pushed a finger in where it had not been properly stuck down. 'Someone been in here, that is for sure.' He continued to examine it refusing to hurry this unrehearsed ritual, which heightened suspense. He conceded eventually. 'England very small country ... so perhaps it does not matter in which town it was posted. Yes, indeed, you are probably right Kamna, it does not matter.' Then he drew out from the envelope a single sheet of lined paper written on both sides. This he began to read to himself, mouthing each syllable. His family watched and waited as he methodically, uncertainly, worked his way through the letter, which was written in pencil.

‘Well, who is it from, Matsendra? You can tell us that by now, surely?’ asked Kamna.

‘Do not disturb me with questions, woman ... I am trying to make head and tail of it.’ Matsendra continued to mouth the syllables occasionally rolling his eyes towards the heavens as if seeking God’s help.

‘Here, give it to me, Matsendra. Let me try and make head and tail of it,’ said Kamna seizing the letter.

‘Why, it is from Chandrakant!’ she exclaimed waving the letter in front of her children. ‘Let us see what he writes.’

Kamna read aloud. Not once did she roll her eyes towards the heavens.

‘If this finds you, greetings from Chandrakant whose body you nourished. I found Spiritual Enlightenment and I am certain Shiva is aware this could not have been achieved without your kindness. I should like to imagine that marriages favourable to your children have taken place, and that the next generation is secured because it is not Shiva’s wish that families wither. Well, that is what I have come to understand. I should like to tell you how I got where I am, but I cannot, except to say that virtues were necessities. You see, I sailed seven seas and as I sailed I dreamed until there were no more seas to sail and I was cast ashore. Then the dreams stopped and I awoke. My new sanctuary is beside a hole in the ground from which trickles a constant supply of beautiful water that is clear, cool and without interference. A spring no less. Where I am it is called a ffynnon. The great river Indus began its journey from a spring as discreet as the one by which I now sit and write to you. Now I am enlightened many wish to talk with me.’

‘Well, this is something we did not expect,’ said Sudarshan, breaking the silence.

‘Now we know that our generosity to the sadhu was not a complete waste of time, for he has remembered us,’ said Matsendra, without enthusiasm.

‘I do not understand how you can say that, father, because our livestock produced no herds and we remain unmarried. It seems he very much forgot. So he likes to imagine that we made favourable marriages, does he ... well, that is rich coming from him!’ exclaimed Hita.

‘We gave him all we had,’ sighed Sarita.

‘And all we get back is this letter,’ interrupted Tanushri.

‘It is many years since he left us in search of Spiritual Enlightenment and we have waited for recognition. Matsendra, I see this letter only as a late acknowledgement of the debt he owes us, but not a return on our investment,’ said Kamna stretching out her arms and encompassing her three daughters. ‘So, best you girls hurry now and catch the bus to Karachi. You still not too old to find decent husbands.’

Three

We were sitting on a rock beside the spring, the sun was shining, the air was fresh, and the hills were alive with colour, history, and tradition. Dry stone walls that marked man's passage to heights from where he might scrounge from the earth sufficient to compensate for his labour rose like trellis on distant hills. Water from the spring bubbled clear and cool before running free over time-washed stones. This is how it was when the holy man asked me to record his journey from the great river to the spring.

As Chandrakant spoke I wrote:

'As I dreamed I thought I was dead. When I ceased to dream I thought I was alive. Now I no longer think about death and life as I am suspended between the two and raised by enlightenment. No longer do I feel pain in my body, and my heart thanks Shiva for his wisdom. It was of Matsendra's faith that I dreamed as Mr Harshad Engineer's boat rode out from the estuary of the great river and turned resolutely westwards into the Arabian Sea. Then I dreamed as a dead man dreams and was as grateful as a dead man is grateful for his life's journey, whatever its length. While this gratitude echoed within me Matsendra's faith shone bright across the heavens resembling a vast sepia picture from which his family looked down at me in expectation of a debt to be repaid. His faith covered the sky as the mighty Shiva's wind and current sped me towards the Gulf of Aden. Oh, yes, it was Matsendra's faith that fed my being as I journeyed.

'As I was passing through the Gulf of Aden the single voice of a fisherman called to me across the water. "Ahoy, sailor, where are you going?" I called back. "I am no sailor! I am Chandrakant in search of Spiritual Enlightenment." The voice answered. "Don't let me discourage you, holy man, but I have fished in these waters all my life and have not yet pulled from them Spiritual Enlightenment. It is with hope I fish for mackerel, tuna and sardine for they will reward me, God willing, sufficient enough to repay the loan on my dhow." To which I called back. "I shall pay homage

to your hope that your dhow shall be filled with fish.” Oh, yes, it was the Adeni’s hope and Matsendra’s faith that fed my being as I continued my journey.

‘I dreamed the Red Sea was not red. I dreamed it was bright turquoise, like temple tiles. As I dreamed huge ships bore down upon me creating waves over which Mr Harshad Engineer’s boat rose and fell on the bright water. While it rose and fell I felt Shiva’s guiding hand touch mine. Then skimming across the turquoise water like a flat stone flung from a hand came the call: *Ata Allah-----Ata Allah----Ata Allah---Ata Allah--Ata Allah-Ata Allah* until the stone touched the side of the boat with a thud. I understood the call was intended for me. A man, an Arab, shouted from a way off sandy foreshore. “Save yourself while you can. I offer you transport, shade, milk, meat, wool and hide ... indeed, all that I own, which is God’s Gift, if you will quit the shipping lane in that ridiculous little boat.” I replied. “That is a generous gesture, stranger, to offer me all that you own, yet I am bound to refuse for I am destined to travel in order to receive Spiritual Enlightenment from my God, Shiva, whom no doubt you do not worship. But tell me, what is this God’s Gift, which is yours?” The stranger called back: “My camel is God’s Gift ... *Ata Allah*. I give you my camel.” And as I sailed the Red Sea the skimming sounds of the charitable stranger’s words resounded on the side of Mr Harshad Engineer’s boat. Oh, yes, it was the Arab’s charity and the Adeni’s hope and Matsendra’s faith that fed my being as I continued my journey.

‘So I entered the Mediterranean Sea where the winds from mountains fell upon Mr Harshad Engineer’s boat and urged it westwards. There appeared in my dreams, at this time, the figure of my God, Shiva, and His wife Parvati by His side like statues carved from pure white alabaster. Well, they were not quite like statues because they smiled, kindly. Parvati held the balanced scales of justice. This is it, this really is it, I thought. I am at my Judgement Day. And Shiva acknowledged that my renouncement of the world had been rewarded, that my search for Spiritual Enlightenment was coming to an end and that absolute contentment awaited me at journey’s end. God’s Justice: none sweeter. I reached up in thanks to touch the feet of Shiva and Parvati, but whether my hand touched them I cannot say. Oh, yes, it was Parvati’s justice and the Arab’s charity and the Adeni’s hope and Matsendra’s faith that fed my being as I continued my journey.

‘Having received Shiva’s blessing my conviction was strengthened. As I passed through the Strait of Gibraltar and looked up at the mighty Rock I dreamed of the fortitude it must have witnessed as nations struggled for it, captured it and defended it. I dreamed of the Moors, the Spanish and the English as I slipped through

the Strait, which was calm, peacefully sinister, expectant of other armies, other apes, other scorpions. Oh, yes, it was Gibraltar's fortitude and Parvati's justice and the Arab's charity and the Adeni's hope and Matsendra's faith that fed my being as I continued my journey.

'The Atlantic Ocean, my friend and scribe, has many currents and into one of these Shiva directed Mr Harshad Engineer's boat. The boat turned northward where I was adrift in seas so mighty that to reach secure landfall seemed in doubt. However, the little boat was directed to the calmer waters that lay closer to the lands of Portugal, Spain and France whose ancient maritime adventures in navigation must have resembled my journey to enlightenment. Those early mariners must have relied on the prudence of their Gods for safe passage, as I relied on Shiva's. Yet it was not to Shiva's prudence that I raised my hand but to Mr Harshad Engineer's, in praise of the robustness of his little boat. Oh, yes, it was Mr Engineer's prudence and Gibraltar's fortitude and Parvati's justice and the Arab's charity and the Adeni's hope and Matsendra's faith that fed my being as I continued my journey.

'Then I came to an estuary smaller in size to the one from which I was released into the Arabian Sea, but an estuary nevertheless. It gave warning of my journey's end as land closed in on both sides. I thought of the self-restraint of the three daughters of Matsendra Nagaswamy, for now my journey was ending I wanted theirs to have begun. So, as I was taken up the Bristol Channel, my heart cried out in praise of the temperance of Hita, Sarita and Tanushri Nagaswamy. Oh, yes, it was the temperance of the daughters of Nagaswamy and Mr Engineer's prudence and Gibraltar's fortitude and Parvati's justice and the Arab's charity and the Adeni's hope and Matsendra's faith that fed my being as Mr Harshad Engineer's boat came to rest on the channel's bank. I determined later that I had abandoned Mr Harshad Engineer's boat and had travelled by foot beside a river until I had come upon stream that entered the river from the hills above. This stream I followed up, and up, guided by Shiva until it was no longer a stream but a trickle. At the spring where we are now seated Shiva left and I awoke and dreamed no more.'

Four

The spring by which Chandrakant spends his days is accessible by a lane, which leads on up to a tiny church. The spring provides water for a nearby well, which tradition claims is a Holy Well and once a place of Christian pilgrimage. Beside the church is a stone structure that was originally a stable into which Chandrakant withdraws to sleep at night, and when bad weather makes his existence outside impractical. He has a reputation of being a source of wisdom that encourage people to travel great distances to obtain from him the secret of absolute contentment. However, most of the travellers are prepared to settle for less than absolute contentment when they learn of the magnitude of the personal sacrifice necessary to achieve it. Then they seek only to find out how to remove from their lives those intrusions that impede upon ephemeral happiness.

‘I am placed here by Shiva for the benefit of all peoples,’ Chandrakant replied when I asked him why he was living alone on charity, and at the end of a lane seven seas from India. Realising he had no possessions I enquired if there was anything he wanted. “I have all I need ... save man’s greatest invention, an umbrella.” When I said I would pleased to get one for him he was gracious for my offer, whilst implying that though kindness should have no strings attached would it be possible to get one that was black and made in England. I obtained just such an umbrella, since when our friendship became so unfettered he had been able to ask me to record his journey, which as the reader is aware, I did.

It was Chandrakant’s habit to sit robed in white and crossed-legged beneath the umbrella allowing the sound of the trickle of water from the spring to lubricate the meditations of his mind. Sometimes he would chant: *Shiva, Shiva, Shiva ... Om, Om, Om. Shiva, Shiva, Shiva ...* to remind him of the time when he was a true mortal and experienced the pains of body and soul that afflict many of those who seek him. They carry food and flowers and candles, and sit with him for hours, and sometime days, listening, asking, being soothed by words of wisdom, all of which words had one thing in common. They were gentle words.

Chandrakant had no idea for how long he had existed by the spring. If he measured time at all it was simply either day time or night time, which were both painless and uninterrupted. I know that many years have passed since his God guided him to the spring, though Chandrakant appears not to have aged.

One lazy, bright December day when the Christian world awaited the arrival of Christmas a heavenly, peaceful and a momentary silence bore down upon the hillside of Chandrakant's habitat. No pilgrims clustered around him. The lane, as far as he could see, was free and empty—yet there came to his ears sounds from its winding, climbing, emptiness, and these sounds were the sounds of tongues native to the land of *his* fathers. As Chandrakant listened his mind was filled with illuminations of his other life, the one spent in the tamarisk tree beside the great river. He began to chant: *Shiva, Shiva, Shiva. Om, Om, Om. Shiva, Shiva, Shiva ...* slowly whilst his being absorbed these illuminations, which reached back to a time when mortality was a burden to be borne, and the spiritual apprehension of divine truth was a thousand times more difficult to grasp than an eel outside a trap.

Chandrakant waited, chanted, and while he waited and chanted the sounds reaching him became louder and were sounds made by the tongues of women. First he saw the tops of three heads coming up the lane, then the three faces chatting and closely bonded before their whole female selves came into view. Chandrakant's eyes fell upon the brilliance of their dresses—saris that displayed colours as heavenly as a man such as he could ask; beautiful colours and beautiful textures, whose subtleness western senses failed often to appreciate. Purples and deep reds in crepe-de-chine, hand-embroidered blues in shamoos satin danced before his eyes and filled the lane. Single, pale flowers adorned the ears of the approaching women. They were happy women, and this happiness was reflected in the ease of their strides and in their faces and in the flow of their saris. When they saw Chandrakant they fell silent, paused, before coming forward with their hands in prayer and their heads bent. They sat squatly in front of him, and for a while they stayed with their heads bowed and were silent.

'We are the daughters of Matsendra and Kamna Nagaswamy who, if we are not mistaken about your person, carried food to you when you were sadhu in the tamarisk tree beside our great river. If you are not this person our long journey has not been wasted for we have felt the spirit of this land, which is reward enough for the discomfort of our travels,' said Hita, the eldest.

Chandrakant closed his eyes, lifted his face and contemplated.

When he opened his eyes he said:

‘It is I. I am that person known to you as Chandrakant.’

‘Our father, Matsendra Nagaswamy, extends his best wishes to you. He continues to enjoy the remembrances of those days when you enriched his existence and gave him hope,’ said Sarita.

Chandrakant closed his eyes, lifted his face and contemplated.

When he opened his eyes he said:

‘As I travelled it was the remembrance of your father’s faith that inspired me.’

‘We have come to offer thanks for seeking Shiva’s wisdom to direct us to the very best husbands. So now we are blessed with husbands on whom people remark most favourably, and we tell those who envy us that it was Chandrakant’s intercession with Shiva that made these things possible,’ said Tanushri.

Chandrakant closed his eyes, lifted his face and contemplated.

When he opened his eyes he said:

‘It was the self-restraint that you bore without bitterness that drew Shiva’s attention to your wishes.’

‘And there is more. Our father, Matsendra Nagaswamy, asked us to tell you that Mr Harshad Engineer has a new boat, all shiny with outboard engine, plenty of speed, envy of the flatlands and coloured English pillar box red ... his choice,’ said Hita.

Chandrakant closed his eyes, lifted his face and contemplated.

When he opened his eyes he asked:

‘Tell me, how was it that Shiva made things possible for you?’

‘He inspired our mother, Kamna, to tell us to catch the bus to Karachi, and be quick about it! This we did, and soon our future husbands held out beckoning hands, which we gladly took,’ said Nita.

‘We had no dowry because our father’s tiny herd remained a tiny herd. As we had only our good looks to barter for worthy husbands we were married for what we were, not for what we brought. We thank Shiva for his wisdom,’ said Sarita.

‘Our worthy husbands have become wealthy husbands. They said it was right we should travel and offer thanks to the one who made marriages beyond wildest dreams. So we are here, Chandrakant, at your feet. Because of limitations within our inner selves we cannot conceive of a contentment to surpass that which we already enjoy. Shiva has taught us that contentment does not travel comfortably without the companionship of humility,’ said Tanushri.

Chandrakant reached forward and placed gently the palms of his hands in turn on the foreheads of the daughters of Matsendra Nagaswamy.

‘I am visited by many in search of Shiva’s wisdom. I say to those who desire absolute contentment that the shortest and swiftest route to it takes all ones life. Those that understand leave disappointed, and those who do not understand go happily away. Self-abnegation is part of the journey that is charted not by place names and conventional signs, but by the seven virtues ... faith, hope, charity, justice, fortitude, prudence and temperance. Each of these has to be witnessed, and a disposition to accept that without any one of them absolute contentment can never be obtained. Shiva has looked favourably on you, and in my humbleness I look favourably on you for I am indebted to the labours of your childhoods. Take with you some water from this spring and anoint your loved ones for then our beloved Shiva may recognise them from amongst the host for whom He is always the watching one.’

‘Can we return with some of Shiva’s wisdom for our father, Matsendra Nagaswamy, who grows old without advantage?’ asked Hita.

Chandrakant closed his eyes, lifted his face and contemplated.

‘Tell Matsendra Nagaswamy, your father, that the noblest tributes are those that are awaited.’

The daughters of Matsendra Nagaswamy stood up, straightened their saris, touched with their slender fingers the water from the spring, steadied themselves and stared into Chandrakant’s ageless eyes. Chandrakant stared back and then, as if recording their images on camera, he closed the lenses of his eyes.

‘To remember times past and be fearful of times to come is to moderate the present, which is everyday and should not be lightened. Go in peace,’ he said to them.

Hita took a pale flower from behind her ear and laid it in Chandrakant’s hand.

When Chandrakant opened his eyes the daughters of Matsendra Nagaswamy had gone, and the lane was as silent and empty as if they had never been. He placed the flower in the little stream, which was fed from the spring, and he watched the flower take strength from the trickle before beginning its long journey.

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