

Ondu Tundu Godae

(A Bit of Wall)

○Bolwar Mahamad Kunhi

Translation from Kannada by C . Vimala Rao

*Burning the house with my own hand
I now go carrying the ashes;
If you want to burn your own house
You too can come with me. - Kabir*



Two near the bus stand and three near the mound close to the masjid – to these five “military” hotels roti-Phatumma was supplying rice-rotis patted by her own hand and was making her living, when Devraj Urs appeared to her in a dream and said, “What is this about you, Phatumma? Although eight years have passed since a plot was allotted to you , you don’t ever seem to have thought of building your house? Others who had received their title-deeds along with you - Kamalakka, milk vendor Karminabai, fishmonger Podiyatta – tell me, how many years is it already since they completed their houses? If you continue to show this kind of indifference I might write off that site in someone else’s name – hah!”

When Devraj Urs himself had given Phatumma this warning, she awoke with a start and sat up.

Ever since she had received the papers of the deed for that residential plot measuring five cents near the sloping right-hand side of the mound close to the Muthupadi masjid from the auspicious hands of the then Chief Minister, Devraj Urs, at that grand

ceremony held eight years back in the Nehru maidan in Mangalore, several people had been prodding roti-Phatumma to have her house constructed.

As for the village accountant, Sitaram Baipadithai, he had said strictly, “If you sit back believing that you are safe with the D-notice in your hands you are mistaken; if tomorrow Maanku or Mammooty stick four poles in the ground, hoist six palm-fronds as thatch-roof, arrange three stones and start a fire for cooking you will have to throw your D-notice into that very fire. If you don’t start constructing your house even now I am going to write a report to the Deputy Commissioner. After that you are not to blame this Sitarama about losing that site, do you understand?”

Phatumma was about forty and she was a widow with no one close enough to support her. To her distant relative Casim Byari in whose backyard her roti-roasting “fyactory” had been constructed by extending the low roof of his house she was paying a rent of Rs.15 per month. To Casim Byari’s younger sister Saramma’s son, Samad, who had

joined her as an errand-boy six months back she was paying a salary of Rs.7 per week.

As long as she kept up her daily routine of grinding five or six seers of rice per day for the roti flour and prepared the rotis by patting them evenly on the thin muslin cloth she had spread on a wooden plank and roasted them on the red hot embers in time to be delivered piping hot to the hotels by evening time, there was no dearth of money for meeting her needs of food and clothing. In the event of marriages, festivals, and family banquets taking place in the town, the summons would arrive for roti-Phatumma. Those rotis that had been expertly patted by her own hand and roasted to a hot, rising puffiness were soft as flower petals and sweet as jaggery chunks. It was for this reason that the townspeople identified her as “roti-Phatumma”, conferring on her a sort of Padmashri.

Although some out of concern and some others out of jealousy had been pushing her every now and then about her constructing a house, she had not been unduly worried. But when Devraj Urs himself came in her

dream and delivered a warning she shook herself and got up.

As soon as she rose she had a wash and performed the early morning namaaz. She then took out a copy of the Koran from a niche in the wall, brought out the two ten-rupee notes she had secreted inside her pillowcase, placed them between the pages where the “Yaseen” stanzas began, shut the Koran, deposited it in her lap and then recited the entire length of the “Yaseen” stanzas from memory. After she had finally said her prayers she took up the Holy Book and without opening the pages again she replaced it inside the niche in the wall, and began her work for the day.

That evening after delivering the rotis to all the hotels, on her way back home she doled out seven rupees and purchased a porcelain pot, the kind used for making pickles.

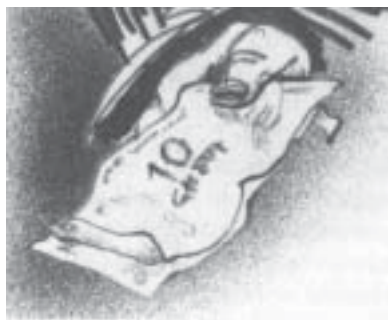
That night, after she had assured herself that all the neighbours were fast asleep, she lifted her sleeping-mat and dug a hole measuring about one and a half hand-spans in breadth and two hand-spans in depth. She adjusted the pickle-pot inside the hole and after satisfying herself that it fitted well she washed her hands and took out the two ten-rupee notes that she had placed inside the copy of the Koran.

She pressed the two notes to her eyes reverentially, murmured a prayer, “Oh merciful Allah! Help me to save some money every week so that these twenty rupees grow into a thousand rupees!” and slid the two notes into the pickle-pot. Closing the pot with the lid she covered up the hole with a square piece of tin-sheet that she had procured in readiness after much search earlier that day. She then replaced her mat over it. That night in her dream appeared the vision of

a beautiful mansion similar to the one that the miserly shopkeeper, Annu Gowda, had built.

Thereafter, every Monday, roti-Phatumma dropped into the pickle-pot ten or twelve rupees that she had saved from her weekly earnings and vowed to herself, “Even if it takes a hundred thousand years, by the grace of Allah I shall, without fail, build a house of my own!” From that time onwards not only did she reduce the circumference of the rice-roti by a finger-breadth and the thickness by a nail-paring, but she also began to toil for two extra hours every day besides cutting down her own meal by a mouthful.

As a result of all these transformations by the time the next Ramzan festival came round the total



number of rupee-notes concealed inside the pickle-pot crossed the three hundred and fifty rupees mark and shook the heart of roti-Phatumma.

As the one and two-rupee denomination notes exceeded over tenfold the five and ten-rupee ones the pot was almost filled to the brim with money. After she had discreetly distributed all the smaller notes among three different shops and obtained from them in exchange three one-hundred rupee notes and one fifty-rupee note, rolled them up with the few odd notes remaining, secured the roll with a piece of thread, placed it in the pot, and seen that her savings of one full year seemed to stick to the bottom almost

invisibly, all kinds of dreadful thoughts came crowding upon her.

When she felt convinced that someone, somehow, would definitely break into her house when she was not there and steal the pickle-pot, her legs started to tremble whenever she crossed the threshold. More than anything the behaviour of her young errand-boy, Samad, who came daily to help her in her work, started to manifest one suspicious sign after another. In this difficult situation a brilliant solution flashed to roti-Phatumma: she should convert all the money that she had saved up to now into a gold ornament and attach it to her body.



After he had lit an incense stick to goddess Dhanalakshmi who was showering a smile from the “Parimala Agarbatthi” calendar in the very likeness of the cine-star B. Saroja Devi, and prayed with folded hands, Srinivasacharya brushed the *tijori* reverentially with both hands, solemnly pressed them to his eyes and at last opened them. The first person who floated into his vision was roti-Phatumma.

Roti-Phatumma was not entirely a stranger to Srinivasacharya. He still remembered that it was he who had crafted for her about twenty years ago all the five gold *alikhatts* that even now adorned her ears. When her husband who was working in a timber-mill was killed instantaneously when he was caught between two wooden logs, she had pawned those same *alikhatts* for a sum of fifty rupees and had later repaid the borrowed money ahead of the stipulated time in order to recover the five *alikhatts*. How could he ever forget her so easily?

Be he a king or a beggar in “Muthuppadi Acharya’s Kattae” the treatment given to everyone was

the same. Whoever came to the shop for whatever work, it was only after they were seated on the wooden bench lined up against the wall near the entrance that any talk would begin. The first customer to appear early that evening soon after the light was turned on was roti-Phatumma.

“Be seated,” Achar pointed his finger towards the bench and settled himself down behind his desk.

She continued to stand even after Achar began his work and got immersed in it.

Not just in Muthuppadi but even in places within a radius of fifty or sixty miles “Acharya’s Kattae” was famous. If ever there is such a thing as honesty in transactions of gold that honesty is to be found in “Acharya’s Kattae”. Without profit Achar will not do any business, very true. He might even quote the price as being eight paise more but as far as the weight was concerned there would be no deceit even to the extent of a small grain. He could not stand any argument or haggling. If the customers talked unnecessarily he might even say with curtness, “The ornaments in our Kattae might not suit you. You can try at some other Kattae.”

During all negotiations concerning marriages in the town discussion about Achar’s Kattae had to enter inevitably. If the bride’s father dropped a word that the gold ornaments would be prepared at “Acharya’s Kattae” then surely the horoscope of the girl would suit the bridegroom’s to a T! . . .

Roti-Phatumma coughed softly.

Without lifting up his head Achar said, “Be seated.”

Perching herself on half her backside at the edge of the bench hesitantly she took out the folded rupee-notes from a small bag tucked at her waist, placed the wad on the glass-top of Achar’s desk and said,

“Give me some thing for this.”

“Some thing!?” Achar’s eyebrows shot up.

In his forty years’ experience as a jeweler no one had come to his Kattae, talked in that off-hand manner and displayed such haughtiness but this woman who sold rotis!

Achar looked at roti-Phatumma as if taking her measure. Inside her black *burqa* all that could be seen were her soot-blackened fingers and equally soot-darkened oval face – teeth stained red permanently from constant chewing of betel leaves and arecanut, and eyes that were totally innocent of any guile.



Ayyo *paapa*, pitiable one! he thought to himself.

He took the rupee notes that she had placed in front of him and counted them. There were four hundred and ten rupees.

Taking out a silver anklet from the cupboard to his left, turning it in his hand as if examining it, then wrinkling his face as if dissatisfied he replaced it in the cupboard. If it were for a child the money might even fetch a gold ring, he murmured, then suddenly looked up as if just roused and then turned to roti-Phatumma questioningly,

“For whom is this?”

“For myself,” she answered readily, “I don’t want a ring, it will turn black on my hand. Give me something else,” she said.

Perhaps it might even cost ten or twelve rupees more... ..? he wondered, and without waiting for her answer took out a double-stranded silver waist-chain from the *tijori* to his right, held it up to her and asked,

“Would this do?”

Roti-Phatumma’s eyes widened with pleasure. Just as well it were a waist-chain! If secured round her waist and covered up by her sari no one would know about it! Even if we suppose that it could be visible it was not stolen goods, surely? This year she would purchase this chain, next year something else. Or this could perhaps be returned and out of the total sum available at that time even a gold chain could be purchased. Speculating in this manner, she asked doubtfully,

“If I return this to you next year will I get back all the money that I have given now?”

“How can you get back all that? As this is made of silver, if you sell it again, you will recover only about half the cost,” Achar answered truthfully.

That waist-chain suddenly seemed to have changed its shape and it now appeared like a cobra with its hood raised and ready to strike at roti-Phatumma!

“Then I don’t want this. Give me something that will not make me suffer a loss when it is being returned,” she said.

“Why? So that it can be sold next year?” Achar’s question came with subtle sarcasm.

Roti-Phatumma’s face fell.

As for Achar, he was caught between Scylla and Charybdis. Here was the very first customer to arrive after the evening light was on, the notes have already been counted – there was no question of spurning goddess Lakshmi.

“Look, woman. Whatever you purchase even if you return it tomorrow you will not recover the full ‘rate’ at which you purchased it. There will surely be some loss incurred in the form of depreciation and wastage. If you want the full sum that you have given then all this money will have to be put inside in an envelope and placed in a ‘tjori’ like this, that’s all,” Achar pointed his finger towards the “tjori” to his left and smiled.

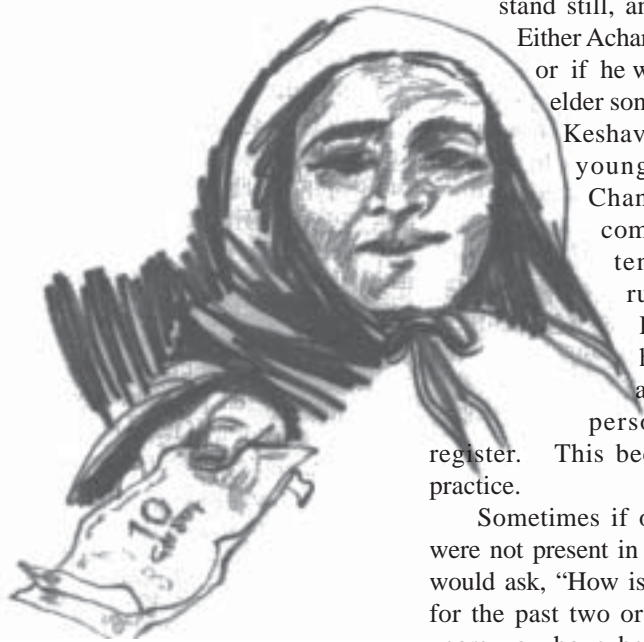
Roti-Phatumma’s eyes immediately opened wide. She cast an eager look at the *tjori* that was capable of solving all her problems and replied,

“In that case you do like that. Keep this money in it; I don’t want any ornament now. If I want something I shall come and ask you. If you return the money to me, that would be enough.”

“Oh-ho! Is that how it is!” Achar sighed with relief. He nodded his head knowingly. There was nothing new in someone or the other from the town bringing a little money to be deposited in the “tjori” for safe-keeping. But when roti-Phatumma explained the whole story starting from Devraj Urs handing her the letter of allotment and ending with Samad’s suspicious behaviour, Achar brushed aside her request preemptorily.

“That can’t be done, I tell you. To keep someone else’s money for years together – that is not possible now. There is a rule at present which says that a license is required to do so. You have the bank for such transactions, go and get a pass book issued in your name. They will even give you interest on your money,” he replied.

It looked as though roti-Phatumma had already taken a decision. She conveyed what was in her mind without hesitation – that to her more than her own community,



her kith and kin, the *tjori* in Achar’s Kattae was the most trustworthy – she repeated this more than once – also that as she was a widow it was Achar’s duty to stand up as her father and help her – she dropped similar implications in her volley of words and thus stopped Achar’s mouth.

“Agreed, then, woman! If I can be of some help to you then I have no objection to keeping your money.” So saying he counted the notes again, locked them up in the *tjori*, and then entered the amount in his personal accounts register.

After secretly depositing her load of worries inside the *tjori* in Achar’s Kattae and returning home roti-Phatumma again turned up the following Monday evening with a ten-rupee note saying, “Keep this also with the others.” Although Achar’s eyebrows went up, he only muttered under his breath, ‘here is a ticklish situation now!’ and kept quiet.

Following that a certain routine was established. Every Monday at evening time roti-Phatumma would climb up the steps of Achar’s Kattae,

stand still, and cough softly. Either Achar, if he was there, or if he was not there, his elder son Keshava, and if Keshava was busy his younger son, Chandranna, would come and take the ten or fifteen rupees that roti-Phatumma gave him and enter the amount in the personal accounts register. This became the usual practice.

Sometimes if other customers were not present in the shop, Achar would ask, “How is it, woman, that for the past two or two and a half years you have been coming and giving me money, but you have not asked even once what it has all added up to, have you? Today I am myself going to give you the up-to-date details regarding the account. If tomorrow this old man here kicks the bucket, your money also should not kick the bucket, don’t you agree?!”

Roti-Phatumma’s answer was right at the tip of her tongue, ready to bounce off.

“Until I build a house that I can call my own no god will come to trouble you. Is it not for this reason that before bringing the notes to you I place them between the pages of the Koran to sanctify them and then bring them here?”

Even when much later Achar’s Kattae changed its façade and became “Srinivasa and Sons” roti-Phatumma’s Monday routine did not change.

The elder son, Keshavacharya, was a skilled goldsmith, just like his father. He had already won renown as a designer of blackbeads-encrusted bangles. As for the younger son Chandranna, his tongue was sharper than his fingers. It is for this reason that when he

started sitting in the shop from the very evening after he had finished his P.U.C. exam, by dint of his tongue and his smile within just a year he had become “Chandranna” to all the townspeople.

By the time the Lakshmi pooja festival came round, Chandranna, who had transformed the very ‘shape’ of the shop had hung a name-board, “Srinivasa and Sons, Jewelers,” at the shop-front. Achar’s Kattae, which during his father’s time was familiar to all around a radius of fifty miles had now spread its fame even up to Coimbatore. As if resulting from this, the offer of a bride came from an important goldsmith’s family of Coimbatore for elder brother Keshava. On the whole there was now no work for Srinivasachar in Achar’s Kattae. If he dressed up finely and came and sat in the shop for an hour or two everyday that itself sufficed to brighten the jewelers’ store.

If Srinivasachar had agreed to become an informal banker to roti-Phatumma just to help a widow, the hundred per cent businessman, Chandranna, adhering to the business rule – “every rupee that comes to the hand without interest is invaluable,” started welcoming her as a much-respected customer.

Whenever she came to hand over the money he would say a few words, like, “How come, you are a little late today!” or “Any time that you need the money you just tell me, I shall finalise the accounts. You don’t have to worry in any way. If you give a few days’ notice it would be even better.” At the same time he would count the money that she had given and enter the amount against her name in the accounts register.

On her part roti-Phatumma too had not shown any curiosity even once to know how much her savings had totaled up to, though every Monday in the evening, she would

bring the money that she had been able to save from her previous weeks’ earnings, submit the sum at Achar’s Kattae and return home free of worry.



It can be said on an oath on Sri Ramachandra that Chandranna was not the sort of person to have gone to Ayodhya for *karseva* out of his own free will. When Ramadas Kini had discussed the matter with him he had declined politely,

“I have no time to spare for all such activities, ma’arayarae!”

As for his father, Srinivasachar, he had told him in a cut and dried manner,

“Look, Chandru, these things are not meant for business people like us. For us, in our trade, there cannot be any discrimination against this or that kind of individual. There should not be. If the truth be told, in our shop it is from the womenfolk of their families that a few more rupees come in. If they discover that even you have been involved in something like this, then tell me, whose loss will it be?”

But god willed something else altogether. When only three or four days remained for the departure of the group of three people selected to go from Muthuppadi, one of them slipped away at the last minute. When this R. Sadashiva, who, even though he had passed B.Com. in II division was for the past two or two or two and a half years working as the Manager of “Bhagavathi Kalyana Mantapa”, “managing” his living on three hundred and fifty rupees as an “unemployed graduate”,— when he was suddenly called to Muscat on a salary of eight thousand rupees, as if this were the result of the blessings coming directly from goddess Bhagavathi, how could he ever reject the offer?

Not only had Kasim Bawa of “Mubarak Tours and Travels” come all the way engaging a taxi from Kasargod to Muthuppadi equipped

with a xerox copy of the official document pertaining to Sadashiva’s appointment as Junior Accountant in the “Al Mustapha Hi-Tech Nursing Home,” as also the visa in the original thus doing justice for having obtained an advance of forty-two thousand rupees from Sadashiva, but he had also given a warning before leaving, that if within six days he, Sadashiva, did not submit six thousand rupees more as commission, reach Bombay by “plane,” finish his “Medical” and within another two days emplane for Muscat, he, Kasim Bawa, could not be held responsible for the advance that he had already been given.

Ramadas Kini’s head was eaten by worry. He could neither go forward nor backward. The list of three delegates has already been sent. Details regarding who’s who has also been despatched. In this last minute with what face could he say, “it’s not three but only two from Muthuppadi?”. This would certainly be a “black spot” on his “organising capacity.” What was he to do?

Once more the summons came for Chandranna. In the office of the “Bhagavathi Kalyana Mantapa,” until half-past one in the night everything was explained to Chandranna. Under such tight circumstances it was the primary duty of young blood like Chandranna to safeguard the honour and good name of the town, he was prevailed upon and convinced. After Ramadas Kini had repeated many times that if only his own son, the sixth one, had not been at the crucial point of writing the P.U.C. examination he would not have begged the mercy of anyone, and then when he had entrusted the task of obtaining permission from Srinivasachar to the temple priest, Subbaraya Tantri, nothing more was left for Chandranna to say.

On the day Chandranna was to leave his father did not say anything.

His *athigae*, - his elder brother's wife – had called Chandranna aside before his departure in the evening and talked to him secretly about the matter. She had counted one thousand rupees and given them to him saying, "Anyway, I understand you are all first going to Kashi. Benares saris are available at a very cheap rate there. Please bring two or three of them, won't you?" and then taken leave of him.

When the group from Muthuppadi reached the railway station in Mangalore they were joined there by the group of seven delegates from Shimoga. After Ramadas Kini had assisted them to board the train and then seen them off, he returned to Muthuppadi with a gratified feeling and soon immersed himself in his textile business.

By the time they reached Kashi by a circuitous route which also involved many inter-rail changes, six days had been wasted. The next six days passed away in awaiting further instructions from Headquarters.

In Shambunatha Panda's impressive two-storey *kothi* which was on the way to Birla Mandir, in the company of the delegates from the Poona group, conversing with them half in Hindi and half in Kannada, and bragging to each other about their prowess, "awaiting further instructions from above" itself became the main occupation.

Faizabad was not too far from where they were staying. For the two Matador vans which were stationed behind the *kothi*, frozen cold as they waited to convey them, it was just a run of three hours. But these people had no permission even to cross the threshold and step out. Staring at the TV, waiting, waiting on tenterhooks, — this became the daily routine. To add to this there was the chill of December.

At last the orders came.

"Greetings to everyone! Your

mission has been accomplished. You may return to Delhi tomorrow itself!"

Chandranna was so angry that he was almost in tears. If Ramadas Kini had been present at the spot there would have been a big furore. Chandranna, who was reminded of a similar incident about Venku when he had gone to Penambur, did not find the time even to buy a sari for *athigae*.

After reaching Delhi they had to spend two more days in a DDA flat owned by one Rajinder Singh in Tilaknagar—undergoing the punishment of shivering cold nights. Just when it had been decided that they were to leave for Mangalore the



next morning, an incident occurred that night.

One of the delegates of the Poona group who had observed, Chandranna seething in frustration for the past two days took him up to the terrace of the *kothi* after dinner. In that bone-chilling night following his new acquaintance up the steps, Chandranna was assailed by a hundred and one questions in his mind.

Darkness enveloped the terrace.

Taking out a lump of stone weighing about half a kilo from his shoulder bag and thrusting it into Chandranna's hands his acquaintance said,

"You must not feel disappointed! Whatever work was expected from whoever was involved in the job,

each one of them has fulfilled his task. Even you have satisfactorily fulfilled the task that was expected of you. This bit of stone is for you. You should regard this as a symbol of your victory!"

Chandranna was electrified!

As they descended the steps his Poona-friend whispered, "Keep this as a secret for a few days. Don't divulge it to anyone!"

Having kept his mouth shut over the secret until the second day of the journey Chandranna, blurted it out to his two companions. That he had kept "it" safe inside his suitcase and that he would break it into three pieces and give each of them a piece, he gave them his solemn word.

When the train reached Mangalore, Ramadas Kini's car was waiting for them. That same evening at a reception in "Bhagavathi Kalyana Mantapa", in the presence of a specially invited audience they were felicitated and garlanded.

His father had not questioned him much after his return but his *athigae* had upbraided him, "All right, you people were not allowed to go up there. That may be so. But what were you doing in Kashi for one full week – singing bhajans?"

Chandranna laughed uneasily.



As he had promised within a week of their returning to Muthuppadi, Chandranna took out the piece of wall that he had concealed inside his suitcase, broke it into four pieces and gave one fragment each to the two who had accompanied him. One other fragment he gave to Ramadas Kini and also described to him the manner in which he himself had acquired it.

When in a doubtful tone Ramadas Kini observed,

"This is a little 'dangerous'. Don't tell anyone regarding this piece – not even about giving this fragment to me. All kinds of news items are

appearing in the papers. If this fragment is treated as 'material evidence' we are as good as being done for. What do you say?"

Chandranna threw a disgusted look at him and questioned point-blank,

"If you are so afraid why then did you send us?"

Quite piqued, Kini dropped a proverb vaguely,

"It's not like that, Chandru! Just because your head is hard do you have to smash it against a rock?"

Kini just let his words float away.

"I'm not at all frightened. Why should I be frightened? Anyway I didn't go as far as that place, did I?"

When Chandranna had posed that question Kini had jumped up in alarm exclaiming,

"*Ooi! Ma'araya!* Don't ever say that you people had not reached up to that place at all, *ma'raya!* Already the impression has been created that even from our town they had gone as far as that destination.

Now if we say, 'no, no, there is no connection whatsoever between our boys and that,' then what will happen to our 'prestige'? In case such a contingency arises and there is absolutely no way out except by giving such a statement then, may be, the truth can be revealed. What do you say?"

Chandranna had laughed in confusion saying, "I just don't understand anything," and returned home.

Although the other two in his group had, like him, taken hold of the piece of wall with enthusiasm at the beginning Chandranna now started noticing their miserable state of uncertainty as they were assailed by doubts – whether to tell or not to tell? To show; or not to show?

"Without telling any one or without showing it to anyone, hiding it like a secret pregnancy – there is no fun at all in this, Chandru!", one of them

had lamented and the other one had exclaimed irately, "Having travelled such a great distance and suffered the misery of that bitter cold – what kind of Fate this was I still haven't understood! Admitting to some that I had touched that spot, to others denying – 'no, *ma'rayarae!* We turned back halfway,' – this double-talk is throwing me into a fever!"

At times when people came to Chandranna to congratulate him, Chandranna himself would reply,

"No, *ma'rayarae!* Do I really have such courage as you believe me to have? Some incident took place. It is better if we don't talk about it any more," like one sitting on a fence. Those who heard him would be overcome with respect for



Chandranna's humility.

"No need for your play-acting in front of us, Chandranna! What you did there, what you brought from there – we know the complete story – ha . . . haaaa . . . ha!" When some one or the other spoke in that manner Chandranna would befittingly act modest, as if acknowledging their approbation.

As the days rolled by Chandranna's zeal also diminished. Amidst the rush of his business whenever he happened to cast an eye on the newspapers and read the statements of the Opposition members questioning the Prime Minister, although he was seized by some anxiety at that moment, the very next minute he would forget everything.

In the meantime whenever he

observed roti-Phatumma, as if by force of habit, bringing her fourteen or twenty-six rupees every Monday evening, handing it over, and going back with a free mind, he would wonder – wasn't this old woman aware of his having gone for that *karseva*? "Poor woman! At the time of returning her money we'll give her an additional hundred or two hundred rupees," he would tell himself to salve his conscience.

On a certain Monday evening, when Chandranna, who had been describing his recent pilgrimage to an elderly visitor to the shop, was just about to take out and display the bit of wall that he had wrapped up in a piece of paper and kept inside the desk-drawer, when he suddenly caught sight of roti-Phatumma climbing up the steps. He recoiled as if he had stepped on a cobra! Her visit on a Monday evening was nothing unexpected but Chandranna had been thrown off balance because her usual smile was not there.

Generally she used to draw his attention by coughing gently as soon as she had ascended the steps. But today she had walked right up to the desk. Then this might mean that she had heard all that he had just been saying! She might also have become aware of his having that Piece of Wall!

Filled with all kinds of doubts he looked up and met her eyes.

"This week I could not save any money. The wooden plank that I had for making rotis is broken to pieces. I have to get it repaired. I came now just to tell you not to wait for me. I shall come again next Monday."

When roti-Phatumma had spoken those words in a hollow tone and gone away Chandranna had been stunned. He felt ashamed of his own suspicions.

Chandranna turned towards the old gentleman who sat waiting to

see with his own eyes the trophy that he, Chandranna, had brought back at the end of his exploits. Pretending as if he was searching inside his desk-drawer, he said, "Oye! I had completely forgotten! That fragment is now at home! Last week I had taken it to show it to a friend and I haven't brought it back. I shall show it to you some other time," and packed him off.

As though he had been waiting for the visitor to leave, Keshavacharya, who was sitting nearby, burst out laughing. Understanding the reason for his elder brother's laughter Chandranna also started laughing.

An incident that had occurred a few days back making it impossible for him to keep the piece of wall at home was the reason for their hilarity.

The day on which he had presented a fragment of that wall to Ramadas Kini happened to be a Sunday – a holiday. Chandranna, uncertain as to where he should keep his own piece had deposited it in the pooja -room where the family gods were kept, next to the incense-sticks on the stool.

This was the cause for that recent mishap.

At evening time, *atthae*, his father's elder sister, going into the pooja -room to light the incense sticks, and seeing the lump on the stool, picked it up in her hand out of curiosity. As she was coming out of the room she met Keshavacharya near the door itself. She held out the rock-like thing to him and queried, "What is this – a kind of stone, or is it a lump of frankincense?"

"This is the 'medal' our Chandranna got in Delhi!"



Keshavacharya had laughed and called out to Chandranna who was listening to music in the next room,

"Look here, Chandru, your *atthae* wants you to describe to her the *mahathmae* (greatness) of your rock!"

Atthae, who was all that time examining the piece of wall and turning it this way and that in her hand had asked Chandranna as soon as he had come near, "What kind of stone is this? Why was it kept in the pooja-room?"

Although nonplussed in that instant, Chandranna recovered himself quickly and in a tone that pretended to be nonchalant replied,

"Oh, that! You remember my going to that place some time back? This was brought back from there as a reminder of our breaking down the wall!"

Atthae's face immediately got distorted, as if she had stepped on shit,

"Ayyo . . . oh! Rama – Rama! . . . Will anyone place a piece of wall from their masjid inside the pooja-room? Are you in your senses or not?", she cried shrilly and dropping the stone into

Chandranna's hand ordered, "Throw this accursed stone into some well far away, take a bath, and then come inside the house!"

Chandranna's face crumpled like that of a monkey who had bitten into a gob of asafoetida! All the bravado of his adventurous escapade had turned to water. But still, as if wishing to assuage *atthae*, he said,

"It isn't like that, *atthae*! This is really the piece from our old temple."

Atthae's face suddenly blanched. Beating her brow as if the sky had fallen on her

head,

"Ayyayyo . . . o h ! What is this Chandru saying ? Then you people went with all that bustle and fanfare and what you destroyed there in the end was our own temple!" she cried.

Chandranna, who was floundering in shock at the new twist that the matter had acquired on *atthae's* cry turned towards his elder brother for aid, only to find Keshavacharya holding on to his beard and laughing !



"Ahmed Bawa has arrived from Bahrain, did you know that ?"

When Keshavacharya who was chiselling and polishing a bangle heard his younger brother questioning him, he looked up in surprise and asked,

"Is that so? When did he come?"

"I've not met him to talk to him. Last week I just saw him near the bus-stand getting into a rickshaw," Chandranna replied,

"Is that right? One week back?" Keshavacharya drew out his question and continued doubtfully,

"Then why didn't he come to the shop?"

"I was also wondering about that. Until now every time he made his

annual visit to the town he would come to the shop the very next day, to exchange news. Why did he not do so this time?" Chandranna said. He opened his mouth to say something else, then fell silent.

"He must have been busy with some urgent work. Perhaps he couldn't come here because of that,"

Keshavacharya appeared to be allaying his own misgivings.

Chandranna did not break the silence. Keshavacharya himself continued,

"If he comes here before he again leaves for Bahrain that is enough."

"Somehow I don't believe he will come here and see you. If he really wished to come then he would have done so by now," Chandranna said with a knowing air.

"Why do you say that? I have known him for the past thirty years or so. We've grown up playing together. Even this watch on my wrist, he brought it for me. I haven't given him any money, have I? He must have had some work, that's why he may not have found the time to come here," Keshavacharya said, fixing his eyes on Chandranna.

"I have my own suspicion," Chandranna said shortly.

"Why suspicion? Just because you went with the *karseva* group will he abandon my friendship? He is not such a fellow! You seem to be starting to doubt everything. If one of them comes to the shop you seem to treat him more cordially than is necessary. Even while quoting the price you mention three or four rupees less. Why? What has come over you? You seem to be in some torture, like someone who has committed a crime. If you are so bothered about it all then why did you go on that trip? Now you have gone and come back. What is the use of fretting about it at this point? Suppose we take your words to be true and he did not come near the shop – then what would happen? What do we lose? If



you are so suspicious then why do you keep that stone and boast about it to all and sundry who come to the shop? As *athae* said, why don't you take that to a well and throw it in, once and for all?". Keshavacharya had let off a volley of questions at Chandranna.

Chandranna did not even attempt to answer.

Both of them continued to work in silence for some time.

"This afternoon when you had gone for lunch *roti-Phatumma* had come here," Chandranna started a new topic for discussion.

"Had she come today!? Why? Today is not a Monday! How much did she remit today?" Keshavacharya showed some curiosity.

"She had not come to give any money. She had come to ask for the return of her money before the coming Friday. I believe she is going to start the work on her house on Friday," Chandranna replied.

"Is that so!" Keshavacharya exclaimed. "That is all for the good! We too shall be rid of a bother," he added.

"Will she really get the work on her house started on Friday?" Chandranna mused in a doubting tone.

"Now there you have started again!" Keshavacharya said impatiently. "Whether she builds the house or throws the money into a well, what do you lose? She wants her own money back. All these days

she had trusted us and brought the money. Now she is saying she wants the money to be returned to her. We can calculate the amount and return it. Have you totalled the amount to see what it adds up to?" he had asked Chandranna, looking steadily at him.

"Yes. It has come to a grand total of four thousand two hundred and seventy-two rupees. I have asked her to come tomorrow evening. The money may have to be drawn from the bank tomorrow morning," Chandranna returned.

"All right. Do that. When you are giving her back the money add two hundred rupees more to the amount as our contribution. What do you say?"

When Keshavacharya threw the question at him Chandranna replied,

"I too was of the same mind. Even if we had to calculate the interest it would add up to five or six hundred rupees."

Keshavacharya was absorbed in his work.

After a while Chandranna floated another question,

"When she comes tomorrow to take the money how about my asking her if she knew about my going on the *karseva* expedition?"

"If she says 'Yes, I know about it' then what will you do?" Keshavacharya asked.

Chandranna's mouth remained shut.

When, during dinner that night Chandranna informed his father about *roti-Phatumma* asking for her money back his father commiserated and added approvingly,

"*Ayyo-paapa!* — the poor creature! All these years she kept her faith in our shop and saved up her money! Not once did she enquire how much the amount had come to!"

Then as if resolving something in his mind he continued,

"Chandru, do one thing! Tomorrow after you total up and

'settle' the matter you take it as our own reckoning and add five hundred rupees more to the amount that you have to give her. By the way, don't mention it as interest-this-and-that! People of her community should not accept any interest, I understand. When she is building her house let there be some kind of help from us also!" Although it was at the tip of his tongue to say that he too had thought on the same lines Chandranna only nodded his head silently.

Getting wind of his having gone on the *karseva* trip had she asked for her money back out of despondency? Chandranna, undecided as to whether he should ask his father or not about this question, glanced at his elder brother, Keshavacharya, for direction. Keshavacharya had silently indicated to him with his eyes--Keep quiet !

The next day, first thing in the morning a Bantwal-party had come to the shop and had made a cash transaction of seven to eight thousand rupees and so there was no need to go to the bank to withdraw any money.

That afternoon after finishing lunch Chandranna took out the accounts- register and again totalled up the savings that roti-Phatumma had turned in. It added up to seventeen rupees less than the previous day's calculation. He started to re-total. Halfway through the work he gave up and shut the register. He wrote down the previous day's total as the "Final total" on a piece of paper, took out the money from the safe, counted the amount, tied up the notes with a rubber-band and put it aside. He counted another five hundred rupees separately and tied them up with another rubber-band. He placed both the wads inside the envelope and secured the envelope with another rubber-band. Then he sat still for a few minutes.

As Chandranna sat there, listlessly

staring at the street with vacant eyes, Keshavacharya, casting a compassionate look at him, asked,

"I understand Father will be coming to the shop this evening. When that woman comes don't you think it would be good if Father himself hands over the money to her ?"

Chandranna nodded his head as if in agreement. He did not turn even to glance in his brother's direction.

Half an hour went by. Watching his younger brother from the corner of his eye constantly, Keshavacharya had continued his work. When Chandranna quietly removed the bit of wall from the desk-drawer, stuffed it in the pocket of his pants and rose to his feet Keshavacharya asked in alarm,

"Why ? Where are you going?"

"That old lady's money and the five hundred rupees that Father had



instructed me to give her -, I have tied them up separately and kept them inside that envelope. In case she comes when I'm not here you give the envelope to her. If Father himself is in the shop at that time it's even better, don't you think ?" Chandranna said as he went out of the shop.

But where are you going now?" There was not just enquiry in Keshavacharya's tone - he seemed to be implying, "don't go!"

Hesitating for half a second as though wondering whether he should tell or not,

"I have to see Ramadas Kini also and finalise his accounts," was all that

Chandranna replied.

Before his elder brother could shoot another question in his direction he had gone down the steps and mounted his bicycle.

He parked his bicycle in front of the "Kalpana Sari Centre." Even as Chandranna was climbing up the steps Gopalanna, the shop-salesman, greeted him, saying, "He has gone for lunch and hasn't yet returned. At the time of leaving itself he had indicated that he was feeling feverish. It is doubtful whether he will come back to the shop today."

Chandranna remounted his bicycle and pedalled in the direction of Ramadas Kini's house. When he was passing the "sarkari" well that was round the corner near his old school-building which stood on a small hillock, suddenly his childhood memories swept over him.

When they used to play cricket in the sports field of their school which was situated on the hillock right next to the "sarkari" well, every time the ball bounced and fell into the well there would be half an hour's rest for the game. Remembering the way Adram Byary — although he was a rotten player who would be bowled out in the very first round — would corner the captainship of all their games by wielding his singular power of being able to bring a rope and bucket with which to fish out the ball from the well as he just happened to live in a house that stood close to the "sarkari" well, Chandranna smiled to himself at the memory.

When that same Adram Byary had jumped into the well and killed himself in a fit of rage at his father's beating him up, Chandranna was a pupil in the eighth class. For a few days after that incident none of his friends had gone near the vicinity of the "sarkari" well. Although it was well-known that people of Adram Byary's community would not turn into ghosts after committing suicide still

there was some lurking dread about going near that well. If Adram Byary was alive at the present time he would have been his own age. How would he have reacted if he had come to know about his own going for *karseva*? Would he have cut off his friendship with him?

Chandranna got down from his bicycle and rested it on its stand. As it was October and the time of the Dussehra vacation the school sat closed up in its own silence.

Chandranna walked up to the well and peeped into it. The waters deep down looked quite black.

When he was young just to throw a stone into the water and listen to the gurgling sound that it made was itself a kind of fun.

Chandranna picked up a small stone lying nearby and threw it into the well. When he did not hear a clear ringing sound he felt frustrated. Perhaps if a bigger stone is thrown in the sound would be clearer?

He looked around. Suddenly he removed the bit of wall from his pocket and flung it into the well. When he heard a deep gurgle — gll-uu-mm-m — he felt an immeasurable peace!

Like one deeply satisfied he sat down on a washing-stone near the well and started watching the small children who were playing on a slope near the sports field of the school.



By the time Chandranna came back to the shop the sun had set. Elder brother was sitting in his usual place, deeply engaged in his work. Father was not to be seen.

“Did you meet Kini?”

“No, I did not go there,” Chandranna, replying briefly, sat down in his chair and questioned,

“Didn’t Father come?”

“Father had come. That woman also had come. She took the money and left. When she was receiving the amount that was given as our share

there were tears in her eyes, poor creature !” Keshavacharya replied.

Chandranna did not say anything.

Keshavacharya himself continued the conversation, “Did you hear the story of our Ahmed Bawa? Roti-Phatamma herself told us. I believe the last time he was in town he had told her that he would give her some help when she was building her house.



But this time during his visit he did not stop at home even for a day. His sister, who had been married into a family in Kasargod, had been admitted to a nursing-home there for the delivery of her baby. The very day on which he arrived here there was a phone-call from Kasargod saying that his sister’s condition was ‘serious’. He went to Kasargod immediately and has not returned from there, I believe. The baby had died at birth and the young mother’s condition had become

‘hopeless.’ I believe she has now been shifted to Mangalore.”

As Chandranna realised that Keshavacharya was unnecessarily detailing his narration in order to justify Ahmed Bawa’s failure to visit him, and as he did not want his elder brother to feel hurt, he kept exclaiming sympathetically, “is that so? Tche, Tche!” throughout the account. He even added, “and I had myself misunderstood him so !”

“Do you know another thing”? Keshavacharya paused for a second after his question, as if to prolong the suspense and deliberately attract Chandranna’s attention. Then he continued, “That old one of yours, I believe she is coming again tomorrow evening. She has said that you should not go anywhere, that you should be in the shop when she comes.”

“Why? Why come again? Does she say that there is a miscalculation in my accounting? If there is any miscalculation I must say that ten or fifteen rupees more have been added in my totalling,” Chandranna returned testily.

As if mollifying him Keshavacharya answered,

“It would have been better if it had been a question of your miscalculating the accounts, Chandru. But the reason why she is coming is altogether different. You won’t believe if I tell you . . .” and again pausing for a second he continued in one breath,

“I believe the day after tomorrow, Friday, she is going to start work on the construction of the walls. She says you should give her at least a tiny fraction from the bit of wall that you have. She says that for the past one full year she has cherished a desire to include a little bit of that Wall in the construction of her own house.”

Adram Byary appeared to laugh resoundingly from the depths of the *sarkari* well.

Chandranna did not laugh. □