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THE HEADMAN OF THE LITTLE HILL

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English Rendering

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THE HEADMAN OF THE LITTLE HILL—A novel in Kannada by Dr. Kota Shivarama Karanth, of rendered into English by H. Y. Sharada Prasad and Published by P. N. Kamat, IBH Prakashana, Gandhinagar, Bangalore 560 009. pp. 201 + viii

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PREFACE

I am happy to see the English translation of my Kannada novel, 'Kudiyara Kusu', written some thirty years ago, appear in print now. My friend Mr. H. Y. Sharada Prasad translated it as long back as in 1951. I then passed it on to two foreign publishers, but without success. One sent it back saying it had no high-lights !

But the script attracted the attention of Dr. Von Furer Haimandorf, the famous anthropologist, then the Head of the Department of Asian and African Studies of London University. As this novel is based on the life and problems of a very small tribal group living on the Western Ghats of South Kanara, Dr. Haimandorf was very keen on visiting the tribe. A year or two later he did visit the region, with his wife Betty, and I had the privilege of taking them to the mountain tract covered with thick forests.

In 1949 or so, I spent a few days studying the ways of this small tribe. A friend of mine owned an extensive cardamum plantation there. These people called the Kudibis or Kudiyas are an aboriginal people, who had been living there long before wild cardamum plants attracted the attention of people living below the ghats. They went and claimed the mountain tract for themselves.

The Kudiyas lived in small groups. Dr. Haimandorf observed that they have 'Chenchu' like features. They were a self-contained group. Though they served in cardamum estates in actual life they were free and independent. They could catch fish or trap and hunt wild life in ever so many ways. They

were accustomed to hewing down and burning trees to clear land for the cultivation of paddy. As for food, they were self supporting. From their landlords they wanted only cloth and salt.

But now things have changed completely. They live as coolies in cardamum and rubber estates which replaced much of the forest area.

What made me write my novel, were the social problems they faced and the outside interference which they could no longer withstand. There are more men than women in this tribe. But I met one Subba, who in spite of this drawback had three wives. There was no inter-clan marriage in the early days. But rivalry among the owners of the estates prevented these people, from seeking spouses from other Kudiya groups so much so that when Dr. Haimandorf visited them, they told him that they had forgotten their clan names.

I could easily discover in the facial features of their children that outside influences had already begun to poison their domestic lives.

Dr. Haimandorf was able to visit their early rock shelters, and collect wooden implements which they used for cultivation.

A few years later, I even heard that the male folk of one Kudiya tribe had to flee from home, leaving the women folk to the tender mercies of the forest contractors and their unscrupulous servants.

So much for their past history.

I am grateful to IBH Prakashana for bringing out the English version of this work and to Mr. Sharada Prasad for the translation.

Saligrama, S.K.
8-5-1979

K. S. Karanth

THE HEADMAN OF THE LITTLE HILL

CHAPTER I

"Come, child, let us go."

"Where, grandfather?"

"It is a bad habit to ask people where they plan to go. There is no time to lose."

The boy leapt to his feet. He wrapped his little palm around his grandfather's forefinger and went with him. The descent was quick, though the forest path was stony. The track led towards a cleft in the hills. After a while the Headman took another trail which went up, and he had to cut down shrubs and creepers to clean a path for the two of them. "Child," he said, "I am taking you to a new place, which I have not shown you all these days, the place where the God of our house lives."

It was a steep, hard climb. They had to struggle through thick growth. Any time one might come across a leopard or a bear, for which the hills were known. Karia, who trailed a couple of steps behind, broke the silence and asked: "Where is the cave of bears, grandfather? The boys say it is somewhere here."

"The bear cave? O yes, I know, but I shall take you there some other time, when the bear is away."

But that was indeed where they were going. The Headman did not want to let out the secret. That was the place where his people had lived long years ago. That was where he, the

Headman, had been born. He remembered those early days, more than sixty years ago, but somehow he could not recall why his elders had abandoned it and moved to the Little Hill. Something terrible must have happened. Once or twice a year, some member of the clan carried a rooster and killed it at the foot of the holy stone in the cave and lit an oil lamp. All that was long ago. No man on the Little Hill remembered it except himself, the oldest.

"Grandfather, have we come there yet?" Karia asked after they had climbed for a full hour.

"We are almost there. No more climbing. In fact we shall have to go down a few steps. But there is some crawling to do along a difficult edge of a rock. Luckily there will be no elephants to trouble us."

"Bears?"

"No, not even bears."

"The boys say the bears climb jack trees and eat the fruit. Is that true, grandfather?"

"Bears like everything they can get."

They had descended hardly forty steps when a huge rock came into view right ahead of them. It was a curved cliff some fifty feet high, with beehives hanging here and there. At the centre of the rock there was a crevice so narrow that one could only struggle through it. The Headman walked on his toes, clutching a root here and a creeper there, with Karia close behind him. In a few moments they were in a large cave which opened out. Its top was a jutting crag from which trickled the water of a spring. The sides were two other hulking stones. The floor was somewhat level. Whoever stood there looked down into a deep gorge not far away.

It took them a few moments to regain breath. The Head-

man led the boy to a corner of the cave as bats flew away in soundless flurry. Far back was a small dark opening, passing through which they came across smaller hollows in the rock on both sides, carved by no human hands but by wind and water.

Karia was still recovering from the awe of the place. But the Headman's eyes were dull. He had come there with a purpose : he was there to plead with the King of the Mountains, who dwelt in the cave taking the form of a lighter streak in the rock. To the gazer it looked like a huge image. That was He, Maleraya. Grandfather fell before him and asked Karia to do so too. He then made a light from some coconut fibre and fat that he had brought.

"Shall I take the lamp nearer Maleraya?" Karia asked.

"No, It is not done. Have we not had a death in our house? The unclean days must pass and then we may go near."

"Grandfather, how did mother die in that well? It was a place where she went everyday." The boy's mind had harked back to his mother.

"It is God's will, child."

"Which God, not this Maleraya?"

The old man was silent. Karia knelt before the image, pressing his elbows of eight summers and touching his forehead to the floor. In the light of the burning fibre, the granite streak that was Maleraya shone. He was now blue, now violet, now red. At one moment it looked as though his brow was lightning and his eyes were fire. But in another, he had a faint smile on his mammoth face.

The Headman stood still, all meekness. There were tears in his eyes. "O King, save this little life. Protect him from

the wrath of Kalkuda. Do not love us the less because my father and his father left this place. As long as there is breath in this body, I shall come here every year and bring you offering. When this calf grows into a bull he too will do so," he prayed.

Karia heard this last sentence. He understood why his grandfather had brought him there. They were there in appeal from Kalkuda to Maleraya.

Kalkuda of the Little Hill was not like other deities. He was not placid like the Gods and demons down the valley. Delay of a day or two in celebrating their feasts would not annoy them and they were ready to forgive little lapses in the rules of worship. But Kalkuda was not a spineless deity. If he were, he would not have held sway over the ravines where men were afraid to step, would not have ruled over the distant hills and demanded tribute from the Kudia tribe. In the days before the Company Government, Kalkuda had even received a human head once in five years.

Grandfather was Headman of the Little Hill where there were some twenty houses of Kudias. More Kudias lived on the Big Hill and on two or three other hills. All of them were liegemen of Kalkuda but, grandfather mused, they had become remiss in their worship and he had to pay for all their faults. He and he alone.

Why Kalkuda had singled him out for punishment, the Headman was not sure. But he was convinced that it was Kalkuda who had taken away his son and struck again now to kill his daughter-in-law. His son, yes. How sturdy and strong and yet how nimble in climbing trees and palms he was! He could leap to the top of a palm and slide down with a pot of toddy in the twinkling of an eye. On that bad day

when they had all held leaf cups in their hands to drink the frothy toddy, his son had screamed and reeled from the crown of the palm. Four drops of blood, just four, oozed out of his lips and he was dead. Grandfather was convinced that it was the work of Kalkuda.

That was eight years ago. When the son died, the daughter-in-law was with child and within weeks Karia was born. Grandfather thought that the deity had given a life where it had taken one.

But now the young woman had slipped and fallen into the village well. He had sat up all night, grieving and thinking, and had finally decided to go to Maleraya.

It was midday. Against the burning rays the water which dropped from the roof of the cave looked like chains of silver and the pond in front glistened like molten metal.

"Grandfather, I am hungry," Karia said. A smile flitted across the old man's face. "All right, let us go back" he said.

"No, let us stay here till evening. Give me your knife. I shall cut a palm and we can eat its stalk."

"No, child, we have to go home or the people of the village will search for us."

After they re-passed the huge rock, grandfather cut down a tiny palm, ripped its bark, took out the core, cut it into pieces, gave some to the boy and kept some for himself. His soul was weary but there was a hungry boy who had to eat. Karia munched the pieces as though they were sugarcane.

The way back was easier. The boy, his hunger appeased, walked friskily behind his grandfather.

It was a summer day. The Kudias of the Little Hill had not wasted time talking of the previous day's tragedy. They could not afford to. Come sorrow, come death, the land

must be tilled and the crop tended. The men and women had all been up with dawn and gone to their common paddy-field at the foot of the nearest hillock. Soon after the cold season they had cleared some twenty acres of forest and shrub, labouring for more than a month. They had set fire to the trees and ploughed the ash into the soil to add to the land's richness. They did not know the use of ploughs, but dug with sticks, or with pickaxes, which they had learnt to use in cardamom gardens. What was grown was shared among all their homes. And they never raised a second crop where they took a first.

After digging the field the Kudias had to protect their crop from herds of elephant and bison. Within a month of the sowing the Ghats became the playhouse of monsoon clouds. To guard the fields was no sport. The Kudias could not stay in their village and visit the field as the tracks would become unpassable. Before the rains broke every year the Kudias built huts near the community rice field.

The clan had another hard day's work. When they returned from the field the sky was red with evening rays. As they passed the place where Karia's mother had died the chatter grew low. Soon they came to their tree of paradise, the toddy palm. One of them clambered up the tree. Tired from the day's strain, they sat on their haunches in a half-circle. Someone brought a few leaves which they shaped into cups. Each held a cup and the young man who had brought down the toddy pot poured the liquid into it.

Tukra had a cup in his hand but he did not seem to want the toddy. The group was surprised. Tukra refusing toddy? But seeing how depressed he was, they did not force him. The others drank their fill and there was still some toddy left

in the pot. By custom what was left belonged to the Headman. But how could they call on the old man on such a day? So they dispersed. Tukra said to his two wives: "Go home both of you. I see that the Headman is alone. It is wrong to leave him to his sorrow."

When Tukra called, the Headman had just boiled his gruel and was about to sprinkle water on the embers. Karia was asleep in a corner.

The Headman saved Tukra the embarrassment of starting the conversation. "Tukra, will you hear? My days are numbered. Till this boy grows up you should bear the burden of our village. Tukra, I am telling you," he began.

He spoke of the arrangements for his daughter-in-law's last rites and of the feast that had to be held for Kalkuda. Tukra nodded assent to every sentence but his thoughts were elsewhere. A pain rose deep within him. He could not tell others the reason and he could not bear it alone.

CHAPTER II

The last rites for the dead woman were over. Tukra was restless the whole day, fear added to his grief. The woman had died with a life in her womb eight years after her husband's death. Tukra knew that the seed was his and the death was the fruit of his deed. The Headman, a few weeks earlier, had narrated to him a vision of Kalkuda that he had had, in which Kalkuda had proclaimed that he would claim a young life. The woman had overheard her father-in-law's conversation with her lover. Tukra had later told her the story in detail, little suspecting the effect it would have. He now knew that fright had driven her to death.

It was Kalkuda's law that life should claim life. Hence Tukra's dread. But was it his fault if women sought him out? The Headman's daughter-in-law was not the first. Was he to blame if he was regarded as a young elephant? Was it wrong to be a good hunter and a good climber of trees? The very fact that he had two wives, Chinni and Kempi, while many other men went without even one in the woman-scarce Kudia tribe, made him a prize. The envious said he was showing off when he tied a narrow cloth tight round his waist and secured it with a bamboo belt from which dangled a vicious-looking knife. But even they did not deny that he was the only man among the Kudias who had killed a bear with his hands all by himself.

That was sixteen years ago. He was twenty-five and had married Chinni a couple of years before that. He remembered the grassy knoll they had sat on when returning from the Big Hill where Chinni's parents lived. Not far from there was a rock, half leaning over as though ready to roll over. "Chinni," he had cried, "Let us go there." She had followed him. It was she who had pointed out the beehives that hung from the rock's side, like giant bats asleep in the dusk.

Tukra had calculated that three of those hives would yield a whole pot of honey. But they were at some six men's height above the ground. It would be difficult to climb to that place, difficult even to reach them with bamboos. The only way to get at them would be to climb to the top of the rock and slide down its sides with the help of a rope. With Tukra a thought was as good as a deed.

He had told Chinni to wait below and had clambered up a giant tree behind the rock. Like a fly moving on the back of a toad, he had gone on all fours and crawled to the edge of the rock.

He peeped down the edge, his hair flying in the wind. He could not see much, and so he stretched out on his belly and crawled forward lizard-like inch by inch. The rock sloped in concave fashion and after four feet of crawling Tukra could see only one beehive beneath him. The others were still hidden. He found that he could reach the hive only in the way he had first thought of. He should drag a rattan creeper over the rock and slide down the twine from the edge of the rock to get what he wanted. He pulled back his shoulders and sat up.

Chinni had got tired of waiting. So she had wandered near the foot of the rock eager to count the number of beehives. She raised her eyes and saw the cluster of hives, but only for

a moment. The next instant she screamed and there was a thud.

Tukra heard it and jumped from the rock all the way into the grass and ran to where the scream had come from. He could not believe what he saw Chinni was sprawled on the ground face down, pressed down by a bear. With the bear forcing her head into the grass, Chinni could hardly breathe. The first scream was all that she could utter. Tukra drew out his knife and rushed forward with a wild yell. The bear turned on him but he fought like eight men. The bear struck his chest but Tukra gripped the knife like a man possessed and wielded it with certainty. The thrusts of the knife had their effect. The bear fell and Tukra ran to Chinni, whose back was a blotch of torn flesh. Tukra had saved her from death. But he knew there was no time to lose. They had disturbed a bear's lair and that was not safe, for a companion might be around. He took Chinni in his arms and ran to the hamlet.

There was a celebration in the village that evening after the men carried back the bear. And how the girls envied Chinni !

It was the bear fight that had brought Kempi to him as his second wife. Kempi was the real beauty of the clan, and her eyes were like two lakes. Wherever she moved, with a sari draped tightly round her hips and the end of the upper part tied in a knot to the string of beads round her neck, she stirred up passions. She spurned her suitors with scorn and had treated even Tukra lightly, but now she wanted him. From her home on the Big Hill she came to the Little Hill set on his conquest. If Tukra was in the cardamom garden she strutted about there and threw smiles at him, suggesting, with the turn of her hip, that she was the only one good enough for him.

If Chinni had possessed a little tact she could have prevented the coming of a second wife to the house. Her taunts and tantrums only hardened the hesitant Tukra. He married again and Kempi, the belle of the Big Hill, came to the Little Hill as the bride of its hero.

The bride brought Tukra many enemies. Two of them, Booda and Thimma, had remained unmarried. Both had sought Kempi's hand. They had even taken gingelly oil to her father's house and come back rejected.

Tukra recalled too that it was around this time that the Little Hill had been sold to Bhatta.

The Kudias had been tenants of the Ballals. It was an unspecified relationship: no law had laid down the duties of these men, who were not exactly slaves, or the responsibilities of the landlord. Once a year, when the present Headman's grandfather was a young man, all the Kudias went to the house of the Ballals with loads of wild cardamomand other forest produce and returned with a dhothi and a blanket each. The Ballals, kindly people, also gave the Kudias bags of salt to last them through the year. In that corner of the world man needed only two things which the forest did not provide: salt and cloth. The men and women who went to the house of their master at the Corner Village would on their way back make a detour and attend a fair at a Shiva temple and take part in the festivities there. As times changed, they came to love beads, bangles and other knick-knacks sold by pedlars at the fair. They would take honey and soapnut from their huts and bring back bits of glass or black beads or iron bangles. They even made the acquaintance of soap and matches, those marks of civilisation.

The old owners had run into debts and the property chan-

ged hands. Bhatta was an entrepreneur of the kind that had supplanted traditional landlords. He not only owned coconut gardens and paddy fields but had also mastered the secrets of sowing, rearing, reaping, storing and selling of cardamom in Coorg. It was from the money he made there that he bought the forests of the Little Hill. Within six months, Bhatta not only reigned but ruled over the place. He brought carpenters and masons from Vitla and had a house built for himself on the Hill with the help of the Kudias. Whenever Bhatta came there to pass a few days he brought his gun, the first that the Kudias had seen. He looked a prince when he arrived on the back of a brown horse with a retinue. His coming added new graces to the lives of the Kudias. From him they learnt the use ot kerosene and tobacco. He also taught them the systematic cultivation of cardamom by laying out an estate. He even let some of the young enthusiasts learn to use the gun. "Throw your bows and arrows into the fire," he often told them.

Among his favourites was Tukra. They exchanged many confidences. Despite the disparity in their station they went out together into the forest. Tukra had even seen the house of Bhatta's mistress. When Bhatta came to the hill, it was with Tukra's help that his bed was not lonely.

Tukra's reverie returned to the woman who had died. More than even her loss, fear of the unknown alarmed Tukra. She had died with a life within her and Kulkuda had exacted what he had threatened. But he might hunger for more, and who knew where his cruel gaze might turn next? Tukra could confide in nobody. In the field the pickaxe fell from his hand. He stood rooted to a spot for minutes on end, with a far-away look. He had only one thought now: to go to the Big Hill,

fall at the feet of the men there, and persuade them to join with the people of the Little Hill to hold a feast for Kalkuda.

In the week after his daughter-in-law's death, the Headman had aged ten years. Tukra had assisted him in all the little things connected with the rites but the Headman was uneasy about him. His instinct told him that no good would come from him for his little grandson. Karia would take at least ten years to grow up and be a man, and Tukra was not the quiet, retiring sort. He would, no doubt, pretend friendship but he was a man of ambition and had supporters.

The Headman sought other allies. Before he left on his journey beyond the hills he sent for Booda, who had been an old antagonist of Tukra. Time and again the Headman had had to restrain the two from fighting it out. The Headman poured out his sorrows and fears to Booda. He told him of his terrible dream. The only way out, he told Booda, was to visit Subramanya, so that another death might be averted.

"I cannot take everyone into confidence. Nor can I go away without word. If they should begin looking for me, tell them that I have gone to Vitla to see the landlord and that I took the little one with me. Tell them I am getting master to bring pressure on the people of the Big Hill to hasten Kalkuda's feast. On my way back from Subramanya I shall in fact see the landlord. Well, it is a long way. There are so many hills to climb and forests to cross," he said.

Booda concurred. He had heard that Lord Subramanya was the master of all the smaller deities like Kalkuda and that the final recourse was always to him.

Soon after midnight Booda woke up the Headman and the boy and all three left. After the jungle path was lost in the underbrush, Booda lit some rushes. They walked by that light

for a few more miles before Booda bade them goodbye and returned to the hamlet even as dawn broke.

Another day, and the Kudias as usual drank their morning gruel and left for their fields. Tukra looked careworn. He hacked bamboo bushes mechanically and helped in placing bundles on the heads of whoever wanted to carry them home. At nightfall no one bothered to go and look up the Headman.

These eight days Tukra had rarely exchanged a word with his wives and children. This had upset Kempi who wanted to pay him back. Not even noticing that he was drunk and dangerous, she said : "Excellent man ! Does not even care to speak to his wives after coming home. That woman died, so what ? Are we not alive, two of us ?"

When she was about to speak again, Tukra thought he would silence her by asking her gruffly, "What did you say ?" Kempi repeated slowly and deliberately every word she had said. The anger rose in Tukra. He caught hold of a crowbar from the corner and hurled it at Kempi. She had expected some such thing and ducked. The crowbar hit a wall, fell on the ground and rolled on the floor and hit a child who was asleep. The boy howled and the elder wife ran in. Tukra was now like a tiger aroused. He rushed at Kempi but she met him like a tigress. They grappled with each other but Kempi was more agile. She bit him, freed herself from his clutch, and ran into the street screaming at the top of her voice.

There was commotion in the hamlet. Everybody came out and gathered round Tukra's house. Kempi told a disconnected story amidst splutters of anger and sobs, the gist of which was that Tukra had killed his son. Nothing had happened to the child, nor to her. But on Tukra's left shoulder the mark of

Kempi's teeth could be seen. He squirmed with pain and shame. As in all quarrels, the people were on the woman's side. They held Tukra against the wall. That made Kempi more reckless. To mark her victory she turned towards her neighbours and said : "Do you know how that woman died? This my husband seduced her, and when she was big with child he pushed her into the water and killed her. And now he does not want us!"

The villagers were stunned. It was a wild allegation made by a woman in anger, and it would be unwise to meddle in the affair and one by one they went home. Kempi spent the rest of the night in a neighbour's hut, and went away to her father's home in the morning.

CHAPTER III

It was a blow to Tukra's prestige. Anger welled up in his heart but revenge was not easy: Kempi's father was an important man on the Big Hill. Tukra's male pride would not allow him to make up with a woman who had left him at dead of night, after calling him a seducer and a murderer. He drew his blanket over his head and tried to sleep. But sleep evaded him. It was a relief when at long last he could hear the sounds of morning. The elder wife left for the field earlier than usual. Tukra told himself he was a fool to marry Kempi, except that the memory of the rapturous days he had spent with her tugged at him. She was made for love and if she had come back at the moment he would even have knelt before her and begged for forgiveness.

He got up, threw a shawl around his shoulders and went out. The Headman's hut was empty, which meant that Kempi had not taken refuge there. He wandered in the village, thinking of all the likely places his shameless wife might have passed the night. She might be in the field, he thought, and went there. She was not amongst the women who were cutting shrubs or amongst those who were carrying bundles of firewood on their head. He turned his steps towards the Big Hill.

It took him a couple of hours to reach his father-in-law's house which, too, was empty. They had all evidently gone

out to work. Tukra waited, his hunger and temper rising. He had not eaten anything in the morning and it was nightfall before his in-laws returned. Not only was Kempi not among them but, to Tukra's bewilderment, her father asked him about her. His silence was puzzling. "What is this, Tukra? Anything wrong with Kempi? You look downcast. Come on, tell me what happened," his father-in-law pressed him.

It occurred to Tukra that this was a good opportunity to be complainant rather than defendant. Without a word he pushed aside his shawl and showed his right shoulder, swollen and purple. Meanwhile Kempi's mother had brought out some betel leaves and nuts on a wooden platter. She was startled and exclaimed: "What is this? Another fight with a bear?"

"Tell me, mother, is it a bear's teeth or a tigress's teeth?"

"What! A tiger bit you?"

"You be quiet, woman," said Kempi's father who had by then guessed the truth, "Does not your daughter have teeth in her mouth?" Turning to his son-in-law, he said: "Tukra, tell me everything. If she has failed to show the respect that is a husband's due, I shall take her to task. I shall teach her the lesson of her life." It was reassuring to Tukra. Like all complainants, he narrated the story in a self-serving manner. Kempi's father responded by saying: "Well, let us first have food and then continue the talk. It is already dark. In the morning I shall also go with you and deal with her. After all, you as a man must make some allowances. She is foolish, like all women."

They had a frugal meal, and Tukra felt he must speak of other things. "Mava, I have yet another thing to tell you. Kalkuda of the Hills is angry as never before. He appeared in the Headman's dream and demanded human sacrifice. He

took one too. Our Headman's daughter-in-law died two days ago," he said and enlarged on the incident with all the terror-evoking eloquence he could command.

In the deepening darkness their conversation grew more languid. They spread two mats and stretched themselves.

The silence was broken by a rap-rap on the bamboo wall. Someone was calling. The elder man recognised his daughter's voice. "Who is there? Kempi? At this hour?" He shuffled towards the door. Tukra sat up with a jolt. He was glad it was dark. Father met daughter under the stars. "What have you done, Kempi? You came all the way in this darkness? Your husband also is here. Good thing."

A sudden low wail escaped her. She had not expected Tukra there. She said she would go back, and began to sob. Her father had to use all his cojolery to make her enter the hut. They could not speak loud for fear of neighbours. There was no lamp in the house and there was no question of borrowing one. Kempi went into her mother's room and began a long tale in whispers. The ache in her heart made her garnish her story.

Neither Tukra nor Kempi's father could sleep. Across the bamboo screen they could hear what Kempi was saying. Her father decided it was best to mediate before daybreak and keep the villagers out of the dispute.

He asked Tukra: "Do you hear all that Kempi says? Is it true? Do not think I am partial to my daughter. She was completely wrong in biting you and all that. But tell me what else could she have done? True, she was rash. But you are older than she. Instead of advising her, why did you hurl that rod at her?"

Kempi entered the room where the two men sat. The

confidence of being in her parental home gave her tongue free rein. She lost no time in speaking of the drowned woman and declared that if Tukra fancied another woman he could have told his wedded wife and not try to break her head.

Tukra lacked in neither vanity nor anger. "Look here, you need not bring in that woman's name and mock me. Tell me if, because of her friendship, I have ill-treated either of you. The elder wife has no complaint. You have made vile charges before the whole village. Can you stand before the people and swear that I did it? I swear by God that I have not done it. I am not here to beg you to return. Not until you ask for pardon in the presence of the elders will I take you back."

He sat back, his hands on his chest, and did not speak another word. Kempi's father turned towards her. She said : "I cannot now recollect what I said. But this is a fact : not my eyes alone but the entire village could see that woman was big with child. Surely she would not have slipped and fallen in a place which she knew like the palm of her hand? Somebody has killed her. This is a fact. Who did it, I do not know. For my part, I am fed up with my husband."

Evidently there was little likelihood of reconciliation. They had talked long, and in the east the new day's light was already showing. Tukra forgot everything about Kalkuda and his feast. "Mava, I am going now. Keep in mind what I have said. She is not a child. Let her do as she chooses," he said and went away.

The visit had been profitless. Back in the Little Hill he told people unsolicited : "Kempi has gone to her mother's house. I shall take her back only if she falls at my feet."

Kempi stayed on in the house where she had been born. But the charge she had levelled clung to Tukra. First the

people talked about his sin in whispers and then made bold to speak aloud. Many believed it; among them Booda. Here was his opportunity to take revenge on Tukra for all his arrogance.

In any other place this would have been a matter for the police and Government. But the hills were beyond the reach of the arm of civilisation. Not courts but Gods and spirits tried people here.

Within three days of all this, Bhatta, the landlord, arrived on the scene. It was a sudden visit. As usual the first thing he did was to send word to the Headman and to Tukra. Tukra hurried to him and explained that the Headman had gone to Vitla for the very purpose of meeting him.

"But I did not pass him on the way. But why bother? If he has gone there he will return."

Tukra gave Bhatta an account of the events in the Hills and of the spell of terror that Kalkuda had cast.

Bhatta was not too greatly impressed by devils and deities but he knew what they would do to those who believed in them. "Very bad, very bad. Did the old man's daughter-in-law also die? Poor fellow! At his age he will find it difficult to look after that brat his grandson. Should he go all the way to Vitla for this?.....What will you need for your feast? Fix a day and make all arrangements. I have not seen this show before. I shall stay and find out what you do."

But the feast could not be held in the absence of the Headman. The old man had reached Subramanya on the third day and prayed to the Lord to protect his grandson. After spending the day at the temple he took the child round the town in the evening. What caught the boy's fancy most was the temple elephant saluting the Lord, its knee bent and trunk

lifted skyward. Karia had seen wild elephants from a distance but not a tamed one. To him it was astonishing that the beast which Kudias feared allowed itself to be ridden and ordered about.

"Grandfather, we have so many elephants in our forest. Why should we not catch one and ride on it?" he asked.

They spent three more days in the temple town and watched the festival of lights. On the way back they went to Vitla. On learning that the landlord was away, the Headman spoke with the lady of the house and ate the food he was given. It took him three more days to return. His heart was lighter as were his steps. His only worry was that Bhatta might have left the Hill by some other path.

It was evening when he reached his hut. The villagers gathered to greet him. Some said : "Headman, why should you have taken the child with you? Would we have starved him? In fact your going was unnecessary. The master himself is here." Booda waited for the others to leave, so that he could tell the Headman all that had happened in his absence. While the chattering continued he went into the kitchen and made some porridge for the foot-sore travellers. One by one the villagers left. Booda was preparing to broach the topic when who should come in but Tukra, bringing the landlord's summons?

Tukra and the Headman went to Bhatta in the night. It was a brief talk and it was all about the feast for Kalkuda. They agreed that the Headman was to take the initiative and call the people of the Big Hill. All the expenses were to be borne by the landlord.

Booda meanwhile had sat in the Headman's hut and telisned to the little boy babbling about the wonders of the

temple town. Booda himself had never gone more than ten miles beyond the Little Hill. When, he mused, would he see all these strange and busy places? "Uncle, do not worry. I shall take you there when I grow up," Karia consoled him. While his ear listened to this tale, Booda's mind was occupied with one question : should he or should he not tell the Headman what Kempi had said? Slowly it occurred to him that sorrow was bearable but not shame. The wise way would be to let the past bury itself.

Next day the Headman left for the Big Hill, taking Booda with him. While he talked things over with his brother headman, Booda went to the priest, who also lived in the Big Hill. They decided that Sankranthi was the most propitious day for the worship.

From there Booda strolled to Kempi's house. There was no occasion for him to go there, for she had once rejected him. But a new hope flickered in his simple heart. He wanted to know three things: whether Kempi stood by what she had said; whether she had any thoughts of going back to Tukra; and whether there was any chance for him at least now.

They met in the courtyard. She opened her eyes wide for just a second and smiled and asked him when he had come and why. Booda felt shy. "Is your father at home?" was all he asked. Kempi's father who heard him came out and took him inside. His daughter's quarrel had caused him not a little anxiety. He wanted to know how other people viewed it. He offered him betel nut and leaves and asked him : "Tell me as a friend, Booda, what happened that night. Is it true that he beat her with an iron rod?" Booda noticed that Kempi stood there listening. He told the story in a way that she would not disapprove.

"Let that be. But how did that other woman die? Do you know anything about it?"

"I was not around when she fell in the well."

"But you must have heard. Will not the ear know what the eye does not?"

"But what can I say? There are different versions. I do not know which one I should believe. This I can say — that Tukra is not the man to be Kempi's husband. Also that the drowned woman had no reason to kill herself. Forget it all. The dead are dead. Whoever has sinned and caused death will come to grief. There is God above us and His will is everything."

He left it at that and spoke about the coming feast.

But Kempi's father could not leave it at that. Her happiness was uppermost in his mind. She had had no children. So children could not repair this bond that had snapped. Tukra's children were the elder wife's. Kempi had refused to step into her husband's house again. But she was still young. "Tell me, Booda, do you think Kempi should give him up?" he asked. "What can I say? Each person is the best judge of his or her happiness."

"But she does not want to go back. She is firm."

"Can you compel a husband and wife to be happy?" Booda poured all his hope into that one sentence.

CHAPTER IV

Came Sankranthi, the harvest festival, the day for which the feast of Kalkuda had been set and the whole clan of Kudias had waited. Most agitated of all was the Headman. Would Kalkuda relent ? Would he lift the curse ? Or would he show more anger at the pilgrimage he had furtively undertaken to Subramanya ? After the deaths in his house, the Headman was not too enthusiastic about Kalkuda. But to antagonise him and still live amidst the hills was unthinkable. Maleraya and Subramanya were there, no doubt, higher in hierachy. But the immediate ruler was Kalkuda.

The Kudias rose early and after a bath in the stream assembled at the appointed spot much before daybreak, bringing garlands of scarlet hibiscus and pink oleander. For sacrifice there were chickens and full-grown roosters. The Headman's offering was to be weightier than others' and he brought a hog.

The men chatted with an animation which they had not felt for months. The youngsters were busy collecting honey from the hives that bees had built on rocks and trees. The quieter ones sat and talked of old days and new. The few yards of clearing in front of the shrine looked clean and bright. The priest had an elaborate ritual bath. He wore a white piece of cloth round his waist and a deep red cotton shawl over his shoulders. His hair was damp and uncombed. As

he stood before the image a dozen Kudias played on drums, making a tattoo that no city ears had heard.

Bhatta, the master, arrived, picking his way carefully along the slippery hill slopes and holding a silver-topped cane in hand. Behind him came Tukra. Young and old in the group stood up and folded their palms in respect.

The drums sounded again. The Headmen of the two hills offered a mumbled prayer to the image. As the tempo of the drumbeats quickened, frenzy seized the priest whose limbs quivered and whose eyes widened until the eyaballs seemed to fall out. As he passed yellowed rice to his forshead, the Headman of the Little Hill handed him a sword as dictated by custom and the priest gave out a scream which reverberated in the hills. The Kudies watched hypnotised. They knew that Kalkuda would now speak through the priest. This was the time to appease him. Knives were taken out and birds' heads rolled in front of the shrine. The blood of the hog made a turgid puddle. The elders of the two hills went on their knees and pleaded with Kalkuda to compose himself and to show them mercy.

But a fiend is a fiend. Bow to it and it will hit you on the back. Kalkuda, now inhabiting the priest, threatened to lay bare everybody's secrets and bade them to be faithful. The Headman of the Little Hill waited with bated breath. Would the demon refer to his visit to the God beyond the hills? Luckily for him, Kalkuda spoke of other matters, listing at length some offences that had been committed. At the end of the catalogue his eyes rested on Tukra. "You sinner!" he was called but the sin went unspecified, for the way of demons and deities is to make the guilty confess on their own. In a voice which sounded as though it came from the bottom of a

deep well, Tukra pleaded : "Everyone is a sinner. I own what I did but do not thrust upon me what I have not done. You are exalted, I am lowly. It is your dharma to bear with me."

There was one person who heard this colloquy intently. That was Kempi's father who scanned Tukra's face and needed no further proof of his guilt.

Now the spirit turned to the Headman. "Have no fear and answer me truthfully. You are ageing. Have you thought of who will succeed you ?"

"Command me, Lord."

"Mark my words. Bring up your grandson who shall take over from you."

That was the last coherent sentence the spirit uttered. What followed was a jumble of shrieks and yells which by degrees yielded place to a low moan and to silence. But that forthright sentence had brought Booda a surge of happiness and blasted the ambition that Tukra had nursed.

The drums sounded again. At this signal the women of the two hills came forth and lined up, with flowers in their hair and garlands round their necks, which hid their black beads. As the drums grew steadily louder, the priest sprang into the air with a drawn cutlass and on touching the ground raced along a narrow mountain path up the Little Hill.

It was an act of no mean expertness, for the smallest slip would have taken the priest down a precipice. In a moment the priest was lost in the forest.

After the runner returned, the dancers took over. A dozen men picked up swords and simulated a fight. Karia, who hid behind his grandfather's back, admired Booda's dance the most, for Booda was indeed the most accomplished and tireless dancer amongst the Kudias. He danced in rapture, with

his feet stamping out an impeceable rhythm, and made a great impression on the women. In turn he was pleased when Kempi's look of nonchalance had changed into approval.

The puja was over. Bhatta, being a Brahmin, did not stay for dinner. Tukra saw him off and, while doing so, shot a look at Kempi only to find no forgiveness in her eyes. Bhatta was surprised at Tukra's abrupt silence. But following the line of Tukra's gaze he noticed Kempi. He had seen her during the worship and felt a stirring of his blood, but did not know who she was. He could have asked Tukra but desisted from doing so.

The next day he set about finding out. He had thought of her during the night. Although he spent full two hours going round the hamlet and the field on the pretext of inquiring about the welfare of his tenant, he was not rewarded with a glimpse of the woman whom he sought. For, unknown to him, Kempi had gone away to the Big Hill with her parents.

It was a disappointment. But Bhatta had no time to prolong his stay and continue his search. In the evening he sent for the Headman and asked him what the tribe needed for the monsoon. If he gave them enough kerosene, salt, tobacco and chillies he did not have to return during the rainy months. During such meetings with the Headman it was customary for Bhatta to exchange chitchat about the domestic affairs of the village. This year's news was of course Tukra's quarrel with his second wife. Bhatta asked the Headman in a confidential tone : "By the way, what is this about Tukra's home ? Just because in some bad moment the husband and wife had a row, is it right that you should leave it at that ? As the village elder, you must call that woman and advise her."

"What can I do, my master ? She is a headstrong girl. I pleaded with her father last night. She was also there yesterday".

"Was she ?"

"Yes, yes. She was there among the women. You did not probably see her. She wore a red sari and looked as though she had no worry at all in her life. She did not even seem troubled living away from her husband. When I asked them they gave a definite no to me. I hear they are thinking of a new marriage for her. Surely Tukra cannot beg her to return ?"

Booda had a busy time that season. He had persuaded the Headman to move into his house, with his grandson. There was no reason why the old man should cook his own gruel at his age. Booda's aged mother did not feel it a trouble to boil some more gruel. Karia also could have a playmate in Booda's nephew, his dead sister's son. Both became Booda's devoted disciples. They followed him with wooden spears, when he hunted tortoises. But the game they liked best was deer–catching. Booda had shown them how to detect their spoor. The boys learnt all about the habits of barking deer and stags and mastered the art of laying snares. The secret of a good snare, Booda taught them, was that it should be unknown to others. One night a little wild boar had fallen into a snare that Booda had arranged for barking deer. It squealed and wailed and Bodda decided it must be brought away before the others in the village got up. When he left the hut with knife and spear, the boys also got up. They followed him despite his remonstrance. The boar hung like a jackfruit in the trap which he had tied to the strong branch of a tree. With one stroke he lopped off its head. When they

reached home with the booty the village was still asleep. "Good job and none knows of it," Booda thought.

But in the morning some people recalled that they had heard some howling at night. They searched the forest but saw neither footprints nor trap. No blood was seen, for some more rain had fallen since. They were sure that a boar had squealed in the night. The sounds had stopped suddenly. What could have happened? Each had a theory, but Booda kept counsel with himself. Pork was a delicacy most prized by the Kudias, and it was not every day that a boar was caught. The unwritten rule was that whoever trapped a hog must share the meat with the whole village but Booda was reluctant to do so.

Not that he was selfish; he had other plans. In two hours after sunrise he was on his way to the Big Hill with a basket under his arm. He did not tell his mother where he was going but asked her to cook the remaining meat for the night. He went straight to the house of Kempi's father. He had already paid six or seven visits that season to the Big Hill and made it known that he was a suitor to Kempi's hand. They had a fine meal that afternoon. Kempi's father had a special fondness for pork. It pleased him to have a good hunter for his daughter's suitor. That evening they decided that Kempi's marriage should be held soon after Navaratri.

Booda was back in his hut by night, flushed with a sense of triumph. He had only one dilemma; should he tell the villagers first and then marry or marry first and then tell them?

"Did not see you the whole day," the Headman said.

"Oh, nothing. I had laid another snare near the river. I waited and waited without success. I was bored and came away".

After they retired for the night Booda felt that not to take the old man into confidence would be wrong. He worked out several openings in his mind, cleared his throat many times and began : "By the way, I went to the Big Hill today and saw Kempi's father. Nothing that I should hide from you. Shall I tell you ?"

"Go ahead.....I thought nobody had yet crossed that new bridge."

Booda giggled. In the darkness of the night he told the Headman his story in hushed tone. "They have agreed. You must also consent. I am afraid of only one thing : whether Tukra will be reconciled to this. But you know all. Did I not go and plead with him ? When there are so few girls in the Hill, is it right he should have two wives ? Just because he has left Kempi she does not become a bad woman."

The Headman felt it was not a thing to hurry through. Booda, he knew, should have married years ago. The Headman had yet another consideration. Bhatta, their master, had told him that as the Headman of the village he should bring about a reconciliation between Tukra and his hot-headed wife. He had tried once, without success. He now lived with Booda. If Booda married her there would be tales in the village that the Headman had engineered the alliance. He said : "Booda, it is your problem. I have nothing to say."

"That means you are against it ?"

"No, it is not so. Let us be certain that Kempi will not return to Tukra. You can wait till then, surely ?"

"Is that all ?"

"What does that mean ?"

"Then it is a simple matter. It is not I alone who crossed that bridge. Tukra had also gone to the Big Hill, hardly three



days after the new bridge was thrown. They tell me he went there, made a scene and declared that his marriage with Kempi was at an end. I am even told he is on the lookout for a new bride''.

''Is it hearsay, or is it the truth ?''

''It is what I heard, and what really happened. Kempi's father himself told me''.

''If so, go ahead. But do not tom-tom it. There is no knowing which way the mind of the village will turn. Do it before the master comes back, for Tukra might turn his mind. Go, marry, come back. But have you told your mother ?''

''Not yet; I will''.

''Leave that to me. After all, what will she do but agree ?''

On a good day that the Headman prescribed, Booda set out to the Big Hill and offered the customary betel leaves and gingelly oil to Kempi's father. They were accepted and Booda and Kempi were married.

But she came to the Little Hill only after the clan had returned from their monsoon homes in the field. Harvesting was over. The crop had been brought to the village and shared out among the houses. The entire village was surprised to see Kempi nonchalantly threshing paddy in the yard of Booda's house. ''How now ! What a schemer this Booda is !'' they said, mobbing him and pestering him with questions. When Tukra heard the news, he said : ''No man who feeds milk to a serpent will ever be happy. Booda will learn the lesson that I learned. He does not know it now.''

But these philosophical reflections were only for neighbours' ears. He vowed revenge and went from hill to hill in search of a bride who would put Kempi to shame. If Kempi could find another husband, could he not find another wife ?

CHAPTER V

The rainy season went by and Navaratri drew near. Th return monsoon was a few weeks ahead with promise of a fe more showers but right now it was sunshine. In the sun the Littl Hill looked like a young wife at siesta time. The leaves of th banyan were fat and lazy and aglow like rich damask. T lookers-on, the nearest hill was green and those behind were of varying shades of purple and blue. The sky was a dome of sapphire. The hill ranges looked like the waves of a strange sea struck into immobility at the word of an unseen wizard. The valley down the Little Hill was a carpet of green. Rivers moved indolently like overfed serpents. Above the valley, tier after tier, rose the forest. Where the trees were close a deep green slumbered; where the grass grew a light green frolicked. The moss-grown crags and rocks were more black than green. From chinks in the mountain-walls, springs leaped and danced. From a distance they looked like white gossamer clothes spread out to dry or like jasmines falling from giant baskets. Their murmur in the breeze was like the incantation of a thousand devotees far away.

The bright months after the monsoon are also the time when little white clouds stray into the sky above the hills. A little breeze, and these cloud-fairies become enchantresses. A stronger wind, and they are transformed into foaming white

steeds rushing at full gallop with their tails whipping the wind. It was the year's playtime.

Karia was delighted to have the company of someone his own age in Booda's nephew. Often they got up even before twilight, tied a piece of cloth round the waist, covered their shoulders with blankets and set out to a rock which was their favourite perch from there to see sunrise. They wandered around in the woods, picked berries from the bushes and practised the hunting tricks they had seen the elders employ. They laid snares for birds, for barking deer and for monkeys. Spending time was not a problem to them, for the clock, luckily, had made no slaves of the Kudias. The lads waited for hours on end, hoping for a hog to walk into their trap. If they were tired of this game they went hunting tortoises. If the tortoises failed them, there were always crabs in the streams. Snatching fish from the water was another sport they liked. Karia was also a good hand at bird catching. He improvised cages for them, but sooner or later they found their way to the kitchen.

One day Karia and Booda's nephew went out on their usual morning round. As a macebearer goes before the king, Karia's dog pranced in front of them. They looked for tortoises, but got none. They grew tired and sat down to rest, plucking leeches one by one from their legs and applying the juice of some leaves to stop the bleeding. Suddenly the dog leapt forward. They raced behind it. When they managed to overtake it, the dog did a jig around a particular spot, barking exultantly. The boys soon discovered that above their heads a young deer was swinging in a net from a tree. There was terror in its dark eyes and with every bark of the dog it started. Karia dragged the branch down and Booda's nephew cut it

with his knife. The deer, now on the ground, tried to jum
out of the trap but Karia caught hold of it. They took it hom
on their shoulders and tied it to a peg in a dark corner of th
house. The rest of the day was spent in feeding the deer wi
tender leaves and grass. They were happy but they were afrai
For it was not into their snare that the deer had fallen.
belonged to the person who had set the trap, whoever it wa

In the evening, when Kempi returned with her mother-i
law, Karia ran out and told them what they had done. Kem
knew that the affair would cause a quarrel. When Booda ar
the Headman came home a little later, she told them the stor

The old man was disturbed. He declared that the anim
should be delivered to the man to whom it belonged. Kar
knew that there was no appeal and that his brief friendshi
with this creature of the forest was at an end.

The Headman went to every household making enquiries
He asked them to claim the animal and save him from sham
None came forward.

In the evening Tukra went straight from the cardamo
garden to the place where he had set the trap the previou
night. He was annoyed to find the tree cut. This was th
first time anybody in the village had stolen what was trappe
by another. He swore by Kalkuda and cursed the thief. H
went home in such a temper that none ventured to speak t
him. The next morning he got to know what the whole villag
knew. He was furious. "What! Has Booda come to this
What would not Kempi make him do!" he yelled.

"No father, it seems Booda's n and Karia brough
it from the forest. G ther ng everybody las
night. He wanted to ya dren said. Tukr
maintai as no da's. He wante

to have it out with Booda. He dared not go straight to Booda's house, afraid of a tongue-lashing by Kempi. But the Headman who by then had come to know that the trap was Tukra's met him half way followed by his grandson carrying the animal.

"Tukra," he said, "What these children have done is unpardonable. But take my word for it, they will not do it again." He told the two boys to fall at Tukra's feet. Karia felt a dozen daggers at his heart. But orders were orders. Even after they had done it the Headman was not at ease. He kept on mumbling about boys' play turning into a noose around their elders. Tukra put on a show of being forgiving and asked him not to take it to heart. He even said that if the boys liked the deer so much, they could have it. But the Headman would hear of no such thing.

Tukra's children had a pet to play with for three or four days. Before the week was out, Karia learnt it had gone the way of all flesh. He was dejected for many days after that. His grandfather did not understand what a wound it had left. The yearnings of the young heart were beyond his ken. How could he guess that a child of hunters could develop love for the creature that is hunted?

One result of the incident was that Karia began to hate Tukra with the intense hatred of boyhood. He had an ally in Kempi. She told him her own story of how the man had not hesitated to break her head. "Yes, he will eat a deer today, and his own wife tomorrow," she said. The fact that Booda and Kempi never spoke of Tukra except with scorn fed the fire in Karia's heart. He even began saying : "Do you know what I will do when I grow old? I will lay a snare, catch Tukra, kill him and eat him."

The incident thus brought Kempi and Karia closer. How she might treat Karia was a thought that had rankled Booda as well as the Headman. But she had taken an instantaneous liking for Karia because she thought he was the rock on which Tukra's ambition had to knock its head. She had always wanted children and had bemoaned her childlessness. When she lived with Tukra she had had many quarrels with the first wife but never had she shown anything but love for the first wife's children. She now had a new husband. Might she not have children too? She prayed to all the Gods she knew, and on the Headman's advice she had made a vow to Subramanya.

Tukra's own days did not follow an even tenor. Soon after Navaratri, Bhatta had returned to collect the harvest from his cardamom estate. His first question on arrival was: "By the way, Tukra, what happened to that saucy wife of yours? Has she come back?"

"Let her drown herself, the shameless one," Tukra had said.

"Did she refuse to come or did you give her up?"

"I thrust her away. Do you think she has a speck of self-respects?..... She has come to this same village. She has now married Booda. Likely husband and likely wife!"

"In this village, did you say?"

The days that followed were busy days. Going to cardamom gardens, collecting bunches of the spice and spreading them to dry on a heated floor took the entire time of the villagers. Kempi did this work better than others. Her ability and her self-possession caught Bhatta's eye. But somehow or other she did not seem to notice him or to know that he was eyeing her.

Bhatta stayed for two months more before leaving with his cardamom caravan. The year's work was over and months of

leisure followed. Tukra's new resolve was that before the next fair at the Corner Village he should bring home a new wife. Ready to go anywhere and pay any price as bride-money, he was away from home for days. All the pleadings of his first wife were in vain.

He succeeded in impressing the headman of a distant Kudia settlement whom he brought home and treated to dinner and toddy. Thus he won a girl of sixteen, and the Little Hill had a new queen.

"If I had failed, it would be like cutting my nose in front of Kempi. Here is a girl who is four times a better beauty," he boasted and strutted like a peacock.

CHAPTER VI

It was autumn, some years later. Karia and Booda's nephew had become adepts at hunting. Rabbits and deer no longer satisfied their appetite for adventure. They were after greater challenges. One day they made up their mind to discover the hideout of bears. Armed with bamboo spears they went to the region of Maleraya's cave, scaling rocks and crawling through bushes. At last they reached a stream which flowed between two rows of large boulders which housed several caves. The first two held nothing special but the third showed tell-tale marks which looked very much like prints of bears' paws. This was what they were looking for. Karia was about to say something but Booda's nephew signalled him to be silent. They moved forward noiselessly, crouching. It was dark but in a distant corner, a little above ground level, there were two points of light close to each other. Booda's nephew who saw them first, retreated, dragging Karia with him out of the cave.

The sun was still high in the sky and the two did not feel like returning home. Karia spoke : "If there are bears here, the place must also have wild-date palms."

"Why date palms?"

"Because bears love dates."

"Oh no, honey is what they like most."

"Honey to drink and dates to eat. Let us find out, having come all the way. We have plenty of time."

"Not today, Karia."

"Ah, you are afraid."

Booda's nephew could not take that; so he agreed to go with Karia. The hill was almost vertical but steepness held no terrors for them. They cut some bushes whose leaves had turned brown and placed them on the ground at distances so as to be able to find their way back. The climb was hard but with the help of protruding roots they reached the top of the hill. Whatever they had eaten in the morning had long ago been digested and the date palms for which they had come were nowhere to be seen. But they recalled Booda having told them once of having seen some palms on the crest of the hill and Booda was never wrong in such matters. After more reconnoitring they finally found, down a flank of the hill, a cluster of eight or ten palms, which bore bunches of brown fruit.

The dates were sweet, and they reminded them of their original mission. Karia expounded a new plan to Booda's nephew. Acting on it, they fashioned loops and nooses out of cane and tied them to the stumps of the palms. Cutting a couple of bunches of date they placed them near the trap, certain that a bear would fall for the trick.

What next? Should they wait for the bear to appear? The bear might get scent of them and keep away. Best to go home. But how would they know whether their plan had succeeded? The shadows were lengthening and they thought it best to return. They noticed a palm with its top cut. This meant that somebody from the village had already been there; which again meant that there must be a footpath leading to the

village. With a little more search they came across the forest path. Though steep, it was not as formidable as the road they had taken to come up.

In the morning they did not wait for the gruel Kempi boiled but raced to the top of the hill taking the new path. They were in for a disappointment and a surprise. The snares and knots they had laid were intact, but not the bunch of dates. They were convinced of the legendary cleverness of bears. But could they not outwit them?

At night Karia plied Booda with questions, taking care not to mention their own plans to catch a bear. "Uncle, how do the people below the Ghats trap tigers? You once said they built a special type of cage. How do they make the cages?"

"You silly boy, of what use is a tiger? Can you eat it?"

"I am not trying to catch tigers. I thought that with the same type of cage we could catch barking deer."

Long ago Booda had heard how the people of a nearby village had caught a leopard in a cage. He told that story to the boys and said tigers and leopards were lured with the help of a dog or goat kept inside the cage. The hint was enough for Karia.

The next morning Karia and Booda's nephew ran again to the hill-top. They lopped off straight branches of trees and fashioned a cage, tying the poles together with creepers. They also made a door which closed with a flap. Then they went in search of a big beehive. They burnt dry leaves and the smoke drove the bees away. They fastened the cage firmly to a tree. They broke the honeycomb in two and kept a half in a cage. The other they made into smaller pieces which they strewed all the way from the clump of date palms to the cage. They felt confident that their stratagem this time would succeed. Spend-

ing another sleepless night they hurried the next morning to the place, armed with a knife and a wooden spear. After the climb there was a track of thick forest beyond which was a meadow. Even from there they could see a large bear romping frantically from date palm to date palm.

They could hear their own heart-beat. Booda's nephew whispered in Karia's ear : "Shall we go and call Tukra? He knows how to kill a bear." Karia would have none of it. His guess was that a bear cub had fallen into the trap and its mother was trying to rescue it. To catch the cub the mother must be got rid of. They ran back home. Booda and the Headman were getting ready to leave for their day's toil. The Headman fumed at them : "Eh Karia, where did you rascals run away without even drinking your gruel? What about your share of house-work? Come and take some firewood home." Karia meekly followed him, but knew that if Booda cared he could somehow get him the cub. He begged him. Booda and the older man put their heads together. They were proud of the boys' pluck but they knew of the risks of bear-hunting. There was only one way out, and Booda adopted it. He went to Bhatta's house and borrowed a gun and a few bullets. The Headman and he climbed the hill with the two lads. Booda knew the forest in and out. He asked the others to stay back and made a detour which took him as near the bear as possible without being seen. He hid behind a bush, took aim and pulled the trigger.

He was too close to miss. The bear sank to the ground. At the shot the boys prepared to rush there but the Headman held them back. There might be another bear, and it was best to be careful. Booda too took cover and all of them watched in silence. But there was no sign of any other bear. Booda

then called out to them. All three drove their spears into the bear, even as its life ebbed away. Then they hurried to the cage. Pulling aside the leaves used for camouflage they gave a scream of joy. As they had guessed, a little cub had been trapped. The honeycomb had done its work. Fortunately the cage had been too strongly tied together to be crushed by the young beast and its frantic mother. Karia had a moment of repentance when he saw the orphan but his qualms were lost in his thrill. They took the cage home and came back with other men to transport the bigger animal. They had a celebration that night and the bear's skin was sent to Bhatta's house as a trophy.

Karia gave all his time to taming this child of the forest. He tied a rope round its neck and made it obey him as a dog, though his mastery was achieved the hard way. He spent whole days looking for beehives and dates. Booda got a ring made which he put in the bear's snout. Most happy of all were the urchins of the village. They devised many games in which bears figured. The most ingenious of them was one in which boys and girls covered themselves in black blankets and posed as the little bear's family.

Meanwhile Bhatta had hankered after new kingdoms to conquer. Cardamoms brought him a steady yield but he wanted more. He thought of the timber business. The forest was all his. If only he had an elephant, the success of his new business would be assured. To buy an elephant was foolish when there were so many roaming the forests. He toyed with the idea of catching one in his own forests. When Karia heard of his decision he felt that the heavens had opened their gates for him.

It needs elephants to catch an elephant. Bhatta hired a

pair from a temple and engaged a mahout from Kerala. He chose a spot near the foot of a hill for Khedda. A deep pit was dug, which was covered with a screen made of bamboo slivers. On it earth was spread and plantain stalks grown. While all this work was being done. Karia hovered around. But he was too young to be noticed by Bhatta. One night a herd of elephants came that way. One of them was tempted by the thick plantain bush and fell into the pit. Karia was the first to discover it, and the discovery came in a thrilling manner. From a distance he saw a sight which made his hair stand on end : several elephants were kneeling down and with their trunks trying to drag their companion out of the pit. Karia ran back and gave the news to Bhatta. Bhatta set out with his men. The party sounded drums and indulged in all kinds of yelling in order to drive the animals away. One or two men carried loaded guns. But to their surprise they found no elephant. Bhatta concluded that Karia had told a lie. But on closer scrutiny they found out what had happened. A herd of elephants had come ; one had fallen into the pit ; but the others had trampled on the sides of the hollow and formed a ramp for the fallen elephant and dragged it. Then they had all marched off.

Bhatta decided to make another attempt, this time at a place where the ground was not soft. The attempt was successful. They caught a young elephant which the others in the herd could not rescue. The Kerala mahout had it pulled out of the pit with the aid of the tamed elephants. Bhatta left it to his men to tame it and train it to carry timber and returned to his town.

The place that Bhatta had chosen for the lumbering work turned out to be malarial. Where the Kudias lived there was no fever, for there was no chance for water to stagnate. But

down here at the foot of the hill no workman could stay for more than a week or two. Fever drove them away. Mahouts came and went. Karia had hoped their work would one day be given to him but Bhatta assigned Tukra to the task of looking after the elephant. The result was that Tukra had to stay away from his home. It was torture to him to live away from his new wife and spend his time twisting an elephant's tail. He had of course stolen visits home. After one or two such visits he had found that though left to its own the elephant had not run away. Even a buffalo could not be as quiet as this elephant, Tukra thought. One day when he had climbed a tall tree to cut leaves for his charge, he saw a herd of elephants at play in a lake a few hundred yards away. It was a fascinating sight, this sport of the mammoths. Suddenly an elephant trumpeted, to which the captive elephant gave reply. Tukra had not anticipated this. Before he could slide down the tree, the young elephant had begun to run to join its kin. He ran after it, but the elephant was too quick for him. No sooner had the young elephant joined the herd than all the beasts got out of the water and disappeared into the forest. Tukra returned with a heavy heart. He went straight to Vitla to give the news and receive a tongue-lash. Karia was happy and unhappy at what had happened. Unhappy because the animal he had wanted to tend had run away; happy because Tukra had been humiliated. The incident only served to increase his desire to have his own elephant some day.

Months went by, without any change in the Kudias' routine. Karia was now seventeen. He was any man's equal on the farm and his prowess in hunting was acknowledged by all. When others went to the cardamom gardens to pick the crop, he went too. The Headman was past seventy now. He was

racked by asthma every monsoon. One rainy day he was drenched in the field. He went home with a fever and was bedridden. All the care that Booda and Kempi and Karia bestowed on him was of no avail. There was pain in his chest and his eyes grew dull. The herbs they knew did not help. One evening he called Booda to his side and said: "Son, all this nursing is of no use. My time is up. I have only one thing to ask you: be my grandson's guardian."

In the night he again called him and in a low voice said: "Son, there will be no tomorrow for me. Have you thought who should be Headman after me?"

"Who but your grandson? Did not Kalkuda decide it long ago?"

"Yes, the deity said so. But Karia is yet a slip of a lad. This hill has a master as well as a deity. Who knows how the master feels? It is no secret that the master trusts Tukra."

"Everybody knows why."

"Whatever it is, master is master. and man it is man. You should do what he says. And take care to avoid a split..... As for me, take a coconut every year to Maleraya, and another to Subramanya."

The old man's fever rose that night. He was too weak even to cough. He spoke only one more sentence. He told his grandson, "Child, be true to God."

At daybreak the Headman was placed on a pile of firewood in a corner of the hill to become smoke and join his fore-fathers.

CHAPTER VII

The old man had been gathered to his fathers and the village had to choose a new headman. The oldest among the Kudias now was Chania. Booda went to his house to sound him. Chania maintained that the position was Karia's by right and there was no need to depart from what custom had decreed.

"I know that", Booda replied, "but will the village accept a stripling as headman ? Then there is the landlord to think of. Tukra has his backing and is already giving himself the airs of a headman. If we do not settle the matter among ourselves before the master returns, Tukra will have won and will twirl his moustache. Once that happens, nothing can be done even when Karia comes of age."

Chania was too simple to understand how that could be. The clan deity had pronounced long ago in everyone's presence that Karia should succeed his grandfather and how could any body, even Bhatta, set it aside ?

"Chania, the past is past. People will not choose to remember what is inconvenient. Karia is still a boy, without the authority of age. Who will obey his words ? Listen to what I suggest ; before Bhatta returns the village must decide the question. Until Karia comes of age, you who are the eldest among us must manage things."

Chania would not hear of it. He did not covet the position

or the burdens that went with it. It was not in his nature to order anybody about.

To which Booda said, "Suppose Bhatta says that Tukra should be the headman and the entire village mutely assents, what will you do ? Will you take orders from that upstart ?"

Chania at last agreed to call the others to his house to talk things over. Karia took the message to Tukra who sat on the verandah of his house with his younger wife chewing betel. He spoke first : "What Karia ! First time you are coming here after the Headman's death. Rare man he was. We were all unlucky to lose him." Karia merely told him that a meeting of elders was being held in Chania's house. Tukra was surprised. He wanted to know what the purpose was. Karia said he did not know. In a loud whisper Tukra said : "I see, Chania wants to crown himself." He stopped abruptly, realising he had made an imprudent remark.

Chania sending word, and to him of all people ! Tukra was not prepared even to concede that Chania was elder to him in age. This surely was impertinence. He planned his strategy swiftly.

He gathered his billhook, betel pouch and blanket and set out. At the doorstep he signed to the younger wife and told her : "Look here, I am going to Vitla. But keep it to yourself. If anybody asks you, tell them you do not know. If they insist, say I have gone to your father's house."

Karia went again to Tukra's house that evening. The younger wife who sat at the doorstep said her husband was away. Would he be coming to the meeting, Karia enquired. She did not know.

The village elders were assembled in Chania's house. Booda spoke first. He said that though the headmanship was

Karia's by right, because he was young, some older man should look after the responsibilities. It was the duty of all of them to see that things were done properly. After a pause he added : "It is a pity Tukra is not here. He should have come."

Thimma, who was one of those who could not stand Tukra, asked : "Was he not told ?"

"Word was sent to him, but he has kept away."

"That makes no difference," Thimma went on : "I suggest that Chania, who is the oldest of us; should take up this responsibility. Everybody likes and respects him. Also, there will be no trouble when he has to make over to Karia." Chania protested but the others succeeded in persuading him.

The customary betel leaves were offered to Karia and Chania to seal the decision. Booda went home a happy man.

"Was he not there ?" Kempi asked.

"Who ?"

"The man you loathe."

"Oh, you mean Tukra ? Seems he has gone somewhere. Let him die, who cares ?"

But Kempi's mind worked at lightning speed. "You think you have settled everything by what you did today ? Take it from me. He will upset all that. Shall I tell you where he has gone ? He has gone to Bhatta's house. Mark my word : he will bring him here tomorrow and crown himself headman."

Booda realised this was a clear possibility. He gulped down his food and ran to Chania. Chania had only one reply. If they stood together nobody could force them. Bhatta might be master over the garden, but not over the clan. He had no right to interfere in clan customs.

Tukra was soon in Vitla. So deftly did he handle his mission that Bhatta thought that the clan wanted him. He had

no intention of visiting the Little Hill that month, but Tukra made it appear that disaster would overtake the Kudias if he delayed. It was not long before the news of their coming spread in the village. Without wasting a moment Chania and Karia went to Bhatta's house. When Bhatta came out they bowed low to him. "What is this, why these fruits?" Bhatta asked, feigning surprise. Chania explained that it was the honour due to him from the clan. As the new headman Karia had come to offer him his allegience. There was humility in Chania's voice as he pleaded with Bhatta to treat Karia with the same kindness as he had treated his grandfather. But Bhatta was upset. At first he wondered why Tukra should have brought him all the way here for nothing. But it immediately occurred to him that the election had taken place when Tukra was away. Giving his seal to what the villagers had done would mean letting down his man. Chania, moreover, was little known to him. He had thought of him all these days as one of the ordinary labourers on the field. He did not have the looks or the bearing of a headman. He decided that firmness was the best stand.

"What! Why did you do things in such a hurry?"

"We had to do something after the headman died."

"This was a small thing, then?"

"All the men of the clan met and decided."

"Was Tukra with you?"

"We sent word but he did not come. Could the entire village wait for one man?"

"You seem to have forgotten that you have a master. When the old man died, it was your duty to have told me before choosing a new man. Tukra acted correctly in running all the way to Vitla. Everything must be done in my presence."

"But the headman's place may not remain vacant for more than seven days. There was no other way out."

Chania's words only irritated Bhatta further. He insisted what had been done should be undone and the matter settled anew. In a deliberate voice Chania answered back: "Master, you must not get angry. Ours was a meeting of the clan. It took place in accordance with time-honoured custom. No outsider may have a say there. The village has taken a unanimous decision and it has given Karia and me the betel leaves. I have undertaken this work only because Karia is yet young. The day the clan so tells me, I shall relinquish charge. But the honour done to Karia is his by family right. There is no question of setting it aside."

Bhatta now lost his composure. "Is that so? Then you need not come to me, and you need not bring me this present." He turned his face and walked inside his house. Chania and Karia waited till the evening without food or water. But Bhatta did not reappear. Hardly had they reached their huts when word came that Bhatta wanted the village to assemble at his house. Tukra himself had brought the message.

When they were all gathered, Tukra, with the aplomb of a practised master of ceremonies, began to explain why they had been called. He told them of the death of the headman, and of the need to nominate a successor, as though the village was unaware of it. He wound up his short speech, saying: "And now here is our master who gives us food and cloth, and let every decision be taken in his presence."

Among Tukra's inveterate opponents was Thimma. Their rivalry dated back to the time when they both had wooed Kempi. He had not forgiven Tukra his success. He was the prime mover also in choosing Chania as headman. Chania's



silence now annoyed Thimma. Unmindful of consequences he burst out. "Eh Tukra, that is all done and settled. Who asked you not to come when the council met? You skulked away like a thief even when we sent for you and today you are taking cover behind the master and speaking like a very innocent man. Do not involve him in our quarrel."

Tukra would have replied equally vehemently but he thought quiet words were better weapons. He wanted to give Bhatta the impression of being a very reasonable man. He told Thimma that he had acted only as a messenger and the rest was between them and the master.

Bhatta pulled up Thimma. Addressing the others he said he had been pouring money into the hill and after all they were his labourers. They should not think that the sun rose in the east only because of them. He told them of his cardamom estate in Coorg which was ten times the size of the garden on the Little Hill, and how he had once taken men from Vitla to work there in order to teach a lesson to recalcitrant labourers. No bluster or bravado would work with him. The headman was dead, so what? The hill was not the headman's. It belonged to him, the master. If he told them to stay, they could stay; if he said 'go', they had to pack off. Without asking him, they had no right to choose a new headman. He was not a man to be browbeaten in that manner. Now that they were all gathered, they could go ahead and choose whom they liked, under his eyes.

They looked at one another. None found tongue. There was disquiet in every heart. The older men felt it was wrong to have taken this matter to the master at all. But they did not have the courage to say so or to meet word with word. Obedience to the man who took work from them and gave

them salt and raiment was in their blood. Tukra quickly sized up the situation. This was his opportunity, and he said: "Why? If you have anything to say, tell the master. If not, accept the man he names, whoever it is. That is the best course. The word of the master is like an order from the deity."

This was too much for Thimma. He could not suppress the surge of anger in his heart. It was always so with him. What he felt he spoke out, and when he hit he hit hard. He whispered some words into the ear of the man who sat next. Bhatta saw it and shouted: "Eh, Thimma, come here and stand here like a dog." Thimma could not swallow it. He exploded: "Master, if you are in the right, I do not mind your spitting in my face. But the moment you overstep the limits, I am not the man to obey. You must not interfere in clan affairs. Marriage or funeral, punishment or expulsion, we have our own rules. In cardamom-picking and all such things we will obey whomever you appoint as foreman, even if it be Tukra. But as for other things, no. We have our Karia and we stand by him."

All eyes were turned on Thimma and then on Bhatta. Most felt that Thimma was right. Chania and Booda openly said so. Bhatta took this as an affront. In high rage he shouted: "Scoundrels! Have you the audacity to tell me what I should do? I appoint Tukra to be your headman from this moment. If you listen to him, good; if not, you will repent. Know one thing, whoever wags his tail will get thrown out of the hill." The final words were uttered as in a fit. For some time there was a hush, as after the roll of thunder. Bhatta began again: "Did you hear? If you try to play any game behind my back I shall have you skinned – every one of you."

No one had imagined that the affair would reach such a pitch. Chania, always a diffident man, kept silent. But Booda came forward to say that the whole question would have to be referred to Kalkuda. Till then they were not permitted to remove Chania or Karia. There was a general murmur of approval. Bhatta in a final outburst of impatience said : "Tukra, let them do what they like. Whoever obeys you, stays. The others quit." He went inside the house. The assembly dispersed. With downcast faces the men went back to their huts. This was an indignity, but they did not know what to do. Never before had they experienced the waywardness of authority so personally. The saddest man was Chania. He knew the village was now divided. Booda also knew this and after hours of thought he convinced Chania that they should arrange a 'puja' for Kalkuda and seek his verdict.

But Thimma refused to be humbled. Even if the hills crashed on his head, he told himself, he would not take orders from Tukra. He was ready to quit the hill and begin life anew in an another place. Bhatta might own the hill, but the deity was above him and the deity had already spoken. That was Thimma's argument. After all the hill had seen many masters. Whoever the master, the hill belonged to the Kudias. Maleraya, the Lord of the Hills, had given it as a gift to his children. Nobody could drive them away. If he could not live in a hut he would live in some cave. He was ready to try anything to fight Tukra. Booda knew the danger of allowing this reckless man to go unchecked. He put a restraining hand on his shoulder.

CHAPTER VIII

Bhatta stayed only a week this time. On the third morning after the village meeting, he came across Kempi as she sat in a small hut weaving a basket of rattan. He knew it was not Booda's hut and he was surprised why Kempi should be there. Yielding to the urge to speak to her, he asked : "Who is there ?"

"Me, master", Kempi replied and rasied her head. She had not expected Bhatta to be so close. She quickly lowered her head and continued her work.

"Is Booda at home ?"

"I do not know where he has gone."

"Is this your house ?"

"No."

"Then what are you doing here ?"

He asked question after question and she gave half answers, not looking at him straight. Bhatta could not keep up such a conversation. But on his way home he turned his head back many times to look at Kempi. She kept gazing at his receding figure and the urban grace of his gait did not fail to make an impression on her. Half an hour after he was gone, her stock of reeds and creepers ran out. She went to the woods, hatchet in hand, to bring back a fresh supply. She walked slowly, scanning each tall tree for the creepers which clung to it. She climbed one of the trees and was cutting off lengths of creeper when she heard a voice.

"Who is it that is cutting the branches ?" It was Bhatta again and he was standing a few yards from the foot of the tree. He had evidently followed Kempi. From her perch she naively replied : "Me, master. I came here to cut some creepers for my baskets." Bhatta surveyed the trunk of the tree and then the fair climber. Slightly abashed at his fixed gaze, Kempi came down, collected the tree-twines and walked away. Bhatta stood without moving. When Kempi passed by him he lunged forward and held her by the shoulder.

She was startled and let out a shriek.

"There is nothing to be afraid, of," he said.

"You, you, touched me.....I am unclean," she said and hurried away. Bhatta thought at first that it was a fumbling excuse for fear somebody had seen them but he soon realised that she had not protested.

That gladdened him. He pretended to do some more inspection of the forest and reluctantly went homeward. On the way he met Booda's mother who was taking water from the stream. "You are from Booda's house, are you not?" he asked.

"Yes, master."

"Who is it that was carrying some creepers just now ?"

"My son's wife."

"Booda's wife !" He showed surprise, though he knew it very well. "But why does she live in a separate house ?"

"Separate house ! Why, she lives with us," she said, and realising what might have made Bhatta ask that question, added : "Oh, that house; that is where our women sit out during their unclean days."

Bhatta left the village this time with a sense of pleasant things to come. He told Tukra he would come back quite

soon. Tukra went with him some distance. On the way he said: "Master, you are going away after making me headman. Who knows what might not happen behind your back? I have my own fears."

"Do not wail like a crone, Tukra. What can they do? If they want to stay they will obey you."

But Tukra was more masterful than he had represented himself to Bhatta. After being named headman, he was up earlier than usual every day and went round the village giving orders who should remove the weeds from the cardamom plantations, who should hew trees and who should carry loads of firewood. Nobody disobeyed or even grumbled. But their sullenness was apparent. Knowing Thimma well, Tukra refrained from giving him any orders directly. But Thimma did an honest man's work, whether it was the field, the cardamom garden or the forest. This gave Tukra more confidence but he received a jolt when he learnt that the clan was preparing to have a feast for Kalkuda. Nobody had told him or asked him. The news had passed from the brats of one house to those of another and Tukra heard it from his children. He also came to know that Thimma had visited the Big Hill with Karia, and that Booda had also gone there. Why not go there himself and forestall their arrangements, he thought. But after the Kempi divorce his stock was low on the Big Hill.

The feast was fixed for Sankranthi. On the night before Chania went to every house and invited people. He met Tukra also. "Tukranna, God's will should be done. The worship is to take place tomorrow. Join us, and see that everything goes all right." Tukra rankled. They had gone ahead without caring for him and now at the last moment, were inviting him

as a formality. Tukra spent the night in misery. He felt as though some powerful hands, those of Kalkuda, shook him. He could not guess what would be the word of the deity. If only this rite had been held in Bhatta's presence, the master would have managed it smoothly. It was too late. He could not but go there.

The sun rose in a cloudless sky and the hills glistened like a carpet. Every man from the village hastened to Kalkuda's creek carrying flower, fruit and fowl. The last to go was Tukra. People of the Big Hill had assembled in strength. The worship began at the appointed hour. The priest stood on the platform ready to invoke the spirit. He waited for the headmen to approach him. The chief of the Big Hill walked up, flanked by Chania and Karia. Tukra refused to be ignored. He stood in front of the other three. The headman of the Big Hill placed two marigolds in the priest's hand. He then gave flowers to Chania and Karia and led their hands to the priest's. But before the priest could take them Tukra sprang forward and the flowers fell down. At this the headman of the Big Hill curtly told him: "Who are you to offer flowers? Stand back." Tukra pursed his lips and offered flowers again to the priest. The priest did not touch them.

Soon the priest's limbs stiffened. The crowd remarked that the spirit was descending on him. As the drums sounded he took hold of a torch which had been lit by the headman of the Big Hill. He thrust the flaming torch right into his mouth and took it out after extinguishing the fire with his tongue. This was a special feature of this year's worship and was intended to convince even the smallest sceptic of the might

of Kalkuda. When he did it a second and a third time, the Kudias felt Kalkuda was more displeased with them than ever.

The man who was the vehicle of the spirit began to speak.

"Who is now headman of the Little Hill ?"

"We do your bidding," Chania submitted.

"Do you say you have had nodody all these days ?"

Booda meekly said: "You had once made your wish known that the old Headman should be succeeded by his grandson. We have chosen accordingly. But because he has still not come to age, we have asked Chania, the eldest among us, to do the work."

Tukra intervened: "What, Booda, why are you keeping back the full story ?" He flashed eyes of hatred at Booda.

"I shall come to that...We of the village have made these arrangements but our master has ordered that Tukra should be the headman."

"Master ! Which master ? Whose master ?" Kalkuda bellowed.

Tukra explained: "The master of the garden, he who gives us salt and cloth. Do we not have to obey him ?"

"Master, Master, Master !" Kalkuda repeated.

Chania was alarmed. "You must not get angry. We are ignorant men. If we are wrong, forgive us. Show us the mercy due to your children. Show us the way out," he implored.

"My children ? Then will you listen to me or do as you please ?"

To which the headman of the Big Hill made reply: "Patience, patience. These hills are yours. This is your kingdom. Your writ runs here. Who among us would be so

foolish as to flout your wish? Order, and you will be obeyed."

Tukra too said, equally politely: "Dare we oppose our words to yours? Still consider. He whose tenants we are is a wise man. It would be better you settled the question when he was here. Till that time let things go on as now."

The demon gave a fiercer roar. "These hills are mine. They have been mine since the beginning of time. If you do not want me, tell me, and I will go. And when I go I will rain a rain of blood. But if you choose to obey me you will live and prosper."

The headman of the Big Hill took two steps forward and with folded palms entreated: "Who challenges you here? How can you leave us? What is this talk of dipping your children in blood? Will that bring credit to you? Will Karia refuse to do your behest? Or Chania? Or Tukra?" He waited for a reply.

"Headman of the Little Hill, who is he? The dead man's grandson shall be be. He is not a child. None else may usurp his right."

Chania felt a great load off his chest. "That is an order, Lord. I knew this was a burden for which I was not fit. Here, I present Karia to you."

When the rite ended the priest distributed flowers blessed by the deity to the headman of the Big Hill and then to Karia. The people of the two settlements got them in turn from their headman and then knelt before the pedestal. To Karia this was a novel experience, but being young he did not feel the weight of his new office. Chania made him declare his life-long loyalty to Kalkuda and seek his protection. Even Tukra had to accept the flowers from Karia.

Of the women who had gathered there, two were ove
joyed at the turn of events—Kempi and Tukra's first wi
Kempi exulted by what was the victory of her party and
Tukra's discomfiture. Standing by her side was Tukra's fi
wife who forgot her old animosity and joined in Kempi
mood. "He is growing more vain and arrogant. I had to
him even on that day that he should not rush headlong. W
the deity tolerate an outsider being brought to settle cla
affairs ? Fortunately Kalkuda has left it at this. Suppose
had claimed his head !" She was glad that Kalkuda had take
a lenient view of her husband's transgression.

Chania and Booda were satisfied too, but the man wh
gloated was Thimma. At the meal of the clan that night, h
addressed a question as if to the air : "Well, what we decide
Kalkuda has approved. But suppose our master disagrees ?
He uttered the word master with an ironical emphasis and
everybody knew the remark was meant for Tukra. But Tukra
held his peace. One of the elders of the Big Hill, Kempi's
father, said : "What is this, Thimma ? You speak like a child
Is there a master above our God ? He is a Brahmin and he
knows the power of our Kalkuda. You people are trying to
place the landlord above the lord."

Everybody looked at Tukra but he stared at the plantain
leaf in front of him, ate his food hurriedly and went home,
without joining in the frolic after the feast.

His hope of becoming headman had been shattered. Even
if Bhatta should ask him, he would not dare. But he knew
that though he could not be the head of the clan he could
be head of the clan's work. Their labour was not part of the
clan's custom. It was something between them and Bhatta,
not between them and Kalkuda. His manner with the men of

the village changed. He did not bother to be polite. He threw tact to the winds and scowled at old and young.

Weeks went by and Navaratri came. Bhatta returned to the hills. Tukra told him what had happened. It irked Bhatta: "Oh, your men are so defiant, are they? When the old headman was alive he consulted me before arranging a feast or fair. But these people disown me! I shall see," he said. He took Tukra's humiliation as his own. He was not ready to let Kalkuda get away with it. He claimed he could teach a lesson even to Kalkuda. He would get sorcerers from Kerala and have nails driven into Kalkuda's eyes and see that his hands and feet were paralysed. But Tukra knew his Kalkuda. He implored Bhatta not to meddle with him. The witch doctors, even of Kerala, might chase away diseases and minor spirits, but could not deal with a demon of Kalkuda's power. If Bhatta did as he threatened that would be the last of the Kudias. His anxiety now was not so much to enlist Bhatta's sympathy as to see that he desisted from any precipitate action.

Then came a crisis. The cardmom plants gave a surprisingly low yield. Bhatta had counted on a heavy harvest. But the daily baskets were not even half filled. Tukra could offer no explanation. One morning Bhatta went out early and visited every nook and corner of his plantation in search of a clue. The yield was not even eight annas in the rupee. It might be Kalkuda's work. If that were so, there should be some sign of a pest or disease. There was no such sign. The cardamom stalks were as healthy as ever and the bunches still unplucked were in excellent condition. He examined each plant as if with a magnifying glass. He found clusters in plenty at the root of one plant. But the next plant was bare. This was strange. He even noticed that some of the

plants had been freshly pulled out. So it was not any devil's or deity's handiwork but the mischief of thieves. The crop was half gone and here was evidence of thieves at work during the nights.

In the evening he sent for all the men of the village and told them that the harvest, instead of being batter than usual, was not even a quarter of the indications. No disease had hit the cardamom. Pilferers were at work, he was sure of it. He had seen nail scratches at the roots of the plants. He had found bunches scattered on the ground. It was obvious that someone among them had been stealing and selling the cardamom.

The whole village knew that something was wrong with that year's crop. Almost all who plucked the cardamom had been baffled by the mystery, but had attributed it to Kalkuda's anger. If there was a thief, would he confess in the presence of others ? Tukra suggested that all the houses should be searched. Bhatta, Tukra and Chania visited every house and turned everything upside down. They found no hidden store anywhere.

Tukra now had a new errand. He had to keep watch during the nights. The custom of the village in such emergencies was for the headman to question everybody and get replies on oath. But Bhatta would not have it. If he adopted the course, it would mean that he had accepted Karia as the headman.

Tukra caught no thief. But the affair had stirred old Chania deeply. The good name of the tribe was at stake. He felt that the offender should be punished. Could it be that people from some other village had done it ? But why should they and for whom ? He could find no answers. Finally he went to Karia and said: "Headman of our village, you have heard what the master

said. He branded us all thieves and had our houses searched. We who have lived in these hills for generations have never heard such a charge. It is for us to prove ourselves innocent. I am sure there is no thief among us. Still you must call everyone of us and ask us."

"Shall I call a meeting of the village?" Karia enquired.

"No. Call us one by one. If we held a meeting the master might think we did it only to set ourselves up as his equals."

Karia, though young, acted with the authority of a seasoned headman. He asked everyone. He asked Booda, he asked Tukra, he asked Chania. Everybody had said : "No, not I." The only ones whom Karia could not ask were Thimma and Booda's nephew. They had gone away in the evening and had not come home for sleep. When in the morning they returned and were cleaning thier teeth Karia went to them; "Thimma, do not get angry that I am asking this question. I have put it to every body and I must put it to you," he said.

"What is it ?"

"Nothing big. You see, the master said that a lot of cardamom had been stolen. He suspects we harbour the thief. It has been agreed that I should question everybody and that is why I am asking you. Have you taken any and sold it ?"

Thimma smiled. There was a knowing wryness in that smile. "Should I sell cardamom ? Tell me : was I away from the village any time after the cardamom ripened on the plants ? Last night, of course, we went to catch hedgehogs. Why should we steal and sell these things ? What do we gain ?"

After a pause Thimma lowered his voice. "Karia, you are much younger to me but you are my headman," he said. "For my wrongs and rights you are responsible. I have a confession to make. Nobody has sold this cardamom. But ever since

that day when Bhatta tried to dislodge you from the headmanship, I have not been at ease. My mind was shaken that day. You remember? He even asked us to quit the place if we would not take orders from Tukra. As far as I know, this hill has two protectors: Maleraya, who is my family deity, and Kalkuda."

"What! is Maleraya your family god also?"

"Yes. How many times have I not gone to his cave with this nephew of Booda!"

"I go there quite often myself!"

"Listen, Karia. This boy and I have carried away those missing cardamoms. Let me tell you the truth. We have done so not for profit, but from spite. You know what we have done with it? We have dumped it all in the pond at the entrance of Maleraya's cave. He is our first master. We have placed ourselves at his mercy."

As he spoke, there was pain in his heart but on his face there was a glow of triumphant hatred. Karia blinked at the two erring men and was at a loss what to say. He was a partner in the joys and jealousies of the village. He could not become judge all at once. Thimma's crime did not appear unpardonable. They had confessed and that wiped off their sin. It was no sin either, because they had not sold what they took. Still he could not openly tell them that they had done no wrong, because he was, after all, the headman. He stood speechless.

His blank gaze disturbed Thimma. "Karia, will you give us up?"

Karia was confused. He thought it over for some more time and said: "The best thing to do now is to keep quiet. You have told me, and that settles it."

CHAPTER IX

The return monsoon departed at the appointed time. Winter came in quietly and during mornings the hills and valleys wore a veil of mist. As the morning progressed the mist rose, assuming many shapes on its upward journey and merging with feathery clouds. For the Kudias of the Little Hill the season of leisure began. Work on the cardamom garden was over and this was the time for relaxation and hunting. The women, however, did not sit idle, now that they did not have to labour on the fields. Except the very old, and those who were ill, they went out to collect roots and berries after the morning's porridge. Some even climbed Bayani palms for toddy. Other looked for crabs under stones on river-banks. Most of them also did fishing—even though the forest stream did not boast of large fish, Kempi was an expert at it. In winter months she left home early and returned only after dark.

It was pleasant to bathe in the forest streams, especially where over-hanging trees parted to let the sun shine through. The water itself was chill but the bather was warmed by the sun. Kempi loved to spend her days wallowing in water. She was more in her element there than in her own home. During such hours of delight she was like a daughter of light and water. She closed her eyes for long stretches of time, listening only to the swish of the stream as it brushed past her skin.

Or she jumped from boulder to boulder or caught fish with her hands. Only when the shadows lengthened did her thoughts turn homewards.

Flowers were another of her great loves. The rainy season was the only time in the hills when flowers hid in the bud, but in all other seasons they held sway over the forests. Orchids were everywhere, displaying their proud hues and strange shapes. From crevices between rocks rose the graceful Sugandhi with its white, wide-smiling flowers. And of Kiskara there was no dearth. Even the grasses which grew around the rock bore dainty little flowers, blue, red and yellow.

Conscious of her own attractiveness, Kempi decorated herself with flowers. They renewed her youth. They were the memories of her carefree childhood. They were the smiles of the children she did not have. She crept up slippery rocks to reach for a shy purple orchid which she loved dearly. Sometimes she climbed trees that were covered with a green coat of moss to pluck a tempting bloom. She tore out the fibre of the wild plantain tree to tie the flowers in fancy patterns. She wore the garlands and peered at her face in water where the streams stood in quiet puddles. The sight of flowers in her hair and round her neck and down her bosom thrilled her. After a time she kept the garlands aside to plunge into the water, scaring the mynahs on the banks. She swam a little and idly pushed her shins against the current to feel the soft push of water. On some days the water was more than usually cold and slipping into it was like running a cold blade across the body. On such days she liked to dive from a rock into the stream, for the cold disappeared with the first plunge. She filled her mouth with water and forced it out between her teeth in a spout. She preferred going alone to her bath and

the forest gave her a feeling of inviolate privacy. After sitting idly with her feet in water, she suddenly roused herself to activity and gave her thighs and shoulders a vigorous scrubbing with a pebble. Then, growing bolder, she slipped out of her sari and spread it out to dry. Making sure that no one watched, she got into the water again and swam in the nude. When fish came to nibble at her legs, she caught them in a nimble swoop. When bath and fish-catching were over, she wrapped the sari around her once again. Then came the enjoyable finale to the bath – the drying of her hair in the sun with her back to the warmth. While her hair dried she glanced down at her bosom in self-admiration. Using her fingers as a comb she tied her hair in a bun or wove them into plaits and adorned them once again with flowers. At the end of it all she heaved a sigh. All these pleasures were routine pleasures and life had been a disappointment.

She often remembered the early days when she had come to realise that in neither the Big Hill nor the Little Hill was there anyone her equal in looks. There was a coppery glow on her skin and that was why her parents had called her Kempi, the pink one. Her large, bowl-like eyes shone like a timid deer's. After a long search in which many young men had been scored off, her father and mother had finally chosen Tukra. In that choice she had played a decisive part. Was it not she who had caught him with the bait of a tempting glance ? The first few days of marriage had been days of intense pleasure. She had a strong and passionate husband, and the presence of an earlier wife did not detract from the thrill. But years passed without her innermost desire being fulfilled. She had not become a mother. The first wife rarely let an opportunity go by without taunting her husband for bringing home a barren woman.

That was an old story. She had parted from that man. He was insensitive and, when drunk, was a brute. When she came to Booda she thought her luck had turned. He treated her with great affection but once again years passed by and still there was no child. This was as much a disappointment to him as to her. When he put his hand on the shoulder of his nephew or walked side by side with Karia, showering on them a father's affection, a sense of waste welled up in her heart. She had not known body's rapture from Booda. Probably because of this, whenever she saw a strong man, there was a tingling sensation in her mind. But she resisted temptation and her life with Booda went on for years without any discordant note. She became a partner in his friendships and hatreds. She treated Tukra as an enemy. If he passed anywhere near, she glared at him with eyes of fire.

Tukra was not the only person whom she disliked after coming to Booda's house. Another on whom her dislike rested was Bhatta. When she had first seen Bhatta at Kulkuda's feast years ago her eyes had been thirsty. His fair complexion and the golden chain round his plump neck had attracted her.

But after returning to the Little Hill as Booda's partner she identified herself with her husband's welfare. Bhatta, she felt, was a man to be kept at a distance. Unlike other women of the village she did not go to his house for work. It was only on the day when he stood for a while near the out-house that her old fugitive desire for him had revived. When he followed her to the forest she had proof of his intentions. But she had desisted from encouraging his advances.

Whatever the nature of her thoughts about him, Bhatta burned with desire for her. Her unexpectedly mild exclamation

when he held her in the forest had given him hope. This hope had now grown into a conviction of possibility. As the master of the Little Hill, he had had more than one Kudia woman. And why not the fairest of them all? He was determined not to put off the fulfilment much longer. The harvesting, drying and measuring of cardamom were over. Though the yield that season was low he was not greatly depressed. He stayed on and one day he asked Tukra in a confidential aside : "How is it, Tukra, I rarely see this Kempi of yours in the village ?

"She is a wild cat, not a woman," Tukra replied and Bhatta laughed. He could not guess why Tukra was so resentful, but it meant that he would not be of much help in his machinations. Still he brought up the topic now and again, and one day Tukra casually spoke of Kempi's fondness for crabs and crayfish which made her spend most of her time in the stream. If she was not in the village, she would surely be mooching around the streams.

Bhatta took the hint and changed his route for morning and afternoon walks. His practice had been to visit only the hamlet and the paddy fields and his cardamom garden. Now he also sauntered along the banks of the stream nearest the Little Hill. One day Kempi had gone to the stream as usual to collect crabs. She had plucked red hibiscus and milk-white jasmine and heaped them on a stone and had got into the water. Bhatta who came there as though by chance had a glimpse of this mermaid. He was hardly twenty yards from where she bathed. Bushes hid him from her view. All his awareness was centred in his eyes through which he took her in greedily. He watched her every little movement as if his very breathing depended on them. After a time he stealthily crept forward and came to the edge of the water. He plucked

a twig from a low-hanging tree and pretended to brush his teeth. She had not still seen him because a rock stood between them. Bhatta scrambled on to it, continuing to poke his teeth with the twig. Her beauty hypnotised him. He stood there like a statue in stone while she played in water. In one of her movements Kempi suddenly caught sight of him almost overlooking her. She was startled, but pretending not to have seen him she turned her face away and continued to scrub the nape of her neck. Her plan was to prolong her bath until Bhatta went away. Bhatta grew impatient. Kempi too could not indefinitely continue this game of outwaiting him. Her ruse had not succeedeed. She emerged from the water. She had to squeeze the water out of her wet sari before going home. It was not possible to do so with Bhatta looking on. There was a grove ten yards away, but to go there she had to passs Bhatta. There was no alternative. She darted forward ignoring his presence. But when she neared the rock, Bhatta said : "Oh, is it Kempi ?" She acknowledged the question with a 'hm'. She said it with her head lowered in decorum, but without her knowing it, there was a smile on her face. Bhatta noticed that the flowers she had plucked were still on the slab near where she had bathed. "You have forgotten the flowers," he said. She was in a fix. She could not leave them behind, for Bhatta would surely insist on her taking them. When she hurried up the hill after collecting the flowers, he followed her. The wet sari clung to her firm, rounded limbs. She heard his footsteps cutting the distance between them. She had not expected him to follow her but something in her told her she should have foreseen this. She moved to a side of the path, so as to let him pass. The few steps between them vanished and Bhatta stood by her side.

"What are flowers for? To be carried in your hand! You must wear them," he said, flashing a smile in which achievement blended with expectancy. Kempi smiled in return. But there was a sudden blankness in her. The next moment she noticed that Bhatta was trying to give her something. She could not guess what it was and drew back, saying: "I do not want anything." But his palm gripped hers, and when she shook off, a ring fell down. "Take it, it is for you," he said. But she did not pick it up. Bhatta did not want his second encounter with her also to be frustrated. To make sure nobody else would chance on them suddenly, he moved away into the bushes. From there he watched her. Kempi stood there with her finger in the dimple of her right cheek. As she thought her bosom rose and fell. Finally she bent down and picked up the ring. It was a beautiful piece of work, and one day she might wear it. She hid it amidst the flowers in her basket and turned her feet homewards. Bhatta saw her approach and nimbly darted forward. She was surprised to see him again, but surprised pleasantly. They smiled at each other. The bird of desire beat its wings in them. But Bhatta did not want to abandon caution. Now that he had won the first round he could wait. He contented himself with an embrace. Her damp tresses were soft to his finger-tips.

He sought her out in her nature's bath the next day. He discovered that Kempi was not deaf to words of love or impervious to hints. He could put off the harvest no longer. One day during the week he asked her: "Kempi, the huts that you people had built near the field during the last sowing season, are they still there?" She said they were. "Then will you be there at this time tomorrow?" he asked. Kempi smiled in

reply and walked away. In the flash of her white line of teeth Bhatta got the reply he had wanted.

The next day Kempi did not go to the stream but towards the field where they had sown rice the previous season, on the pretext of collecting sweet potato. She took a basket and a blunt pickaxe, and whiled away a couple of hours.

Thimma was also wandering about the same place that day, probably on one of his hunting expeditions. Where the paddy had been cut, grass had grown soft and lush, and Thimma thought stags and barking deer would come there enticed by the grass. He saw Kempi sitting in the shade of a tree doing nothing. He accosted her and she said she had come there for sweet potato. "There is no dearth of that. Every few yeards there is a patch of it. Why, have you grown tired of crabs and fish?" Thimma remarked before hurrying away. Snares are laid where no other eye sees them. He did not want Kempi to know. But Kempi watched his movements carefully for she imagined he was spying on her. Following the track by which he had disappeared, she went some distance and came to the stream. She saw Thimma farther up. He took a draught of water and disappeared in the opposite direction. Her anxiety gone, she returned to the field. It was late already. Suppose Bhatta had come. Still to pretend she had not come there by design she made a heap of sweet potatoes and began washing them in a small pond. Every few minutes she turned her head towards the path leading from the village and when she saw a figure clothed in white she forgot all her worry. She left the work she was doing and hurried towards a hut Bhatta had entered.

Thimma had found a deer track and set a trap of fibre. When returning down the mountain path, he saw Kempi sitting



on a black stone in the stream. She had just come out of water and drops fell from the tip of her nose and ears. "Hope you filled your basket with roots," he said. She smiled: "Plenty. I left them near the field and came here for a bath. It is such a hot day."

Thimma splashed water on his face, made a cup out of his palms and drank some. Then he hurried towards the village in his long firm strides. He was surprised to see Bhatta about a hundred yards in front of him walking leisurely. Why was he here, he wondered. He had no body-guards with him, and he carried no gun and so he could not have been in search of game. Thimma did not bother himself much more, but suddenly he remembered that Kempi had also been moving there all the day. Was it coincidence, he wondered, but he was in no hurry to come to a conclusion.

About sunset, he went to the field again. The snare was still empty. The night might prove more lucky, he thought, but even the next morning the snare was empty. Better to build four or five more traps, he thought, and when he was setting about to build them he saw Kempi again in the same old place. She too saw him probably, and busied herself with washing more tubers in the same old pond. Now and then she looked about her. She pricked her ears for any sound of dry leaves. She decided to change her strategy. Hurrying with the cleaning of sweet potatoes, she filled a basket with them and left in the direction of the stream. She heard a rustling in the bush and saw a vague form which she could not easily make out in the green screen of leaves. Her pace slowed. Bhatta, who had waited what seemed to him an interminable period, came out of the hut. He observed Kempi walking away towards the river. Why was she behaving like

this, he wondered, and hurried to the river. She had got into the water. He spoke to her. She made no reply but was fidgety. She got out of her bath abruptly and walked along the bank. Bhatta, more puzzled, rushed towards her. "What is this today? What has happened to you?" he asked in a husky voice, his hand gripping her arm. Kempi's heart beat fast. She was certain that Thimma from somewhere behind the shrubs was watching them. It would not do not to make a show of protest when Bhatta touched her, she realised, and screamed. Beneath her "Ayyoo," she whispered to Bhatta: "There is somebody seeing us." Without waiting for what he would say she ran. Hardly had her scream died down when Thimma leapt out of a bush. Kempi was out of sight. But Bhatta was there, totally disconcerted. Thimma went up to him and said: "Master, I heard someone scream." Though Thimma was lying in wait he had not seen what passed between Bhatta and Kempi. "It was a familiar voice," he said, but Bhatta gave him little help. Thimma went away convinced that Bhatta was after Kempi.

Thimma wanted to investigate this incident more closely. He knew it was Kempi who had scremed. He could not take Booda into confidence. Both of them had sought the same woman for years, Booda had won and he had been worsted. Her marriage with Booda did not end his desire for her. He now longed at least to earn her gratitude by playing protector. He wanted to hear from Kempi herself why she had screamed.

The following day, Kempi did not feel too eager to go back to the paddy field. She wanted to meet Bhatta and tell him that Thimma might have seen them together, but she did not get a chance. She decided to be watchful until she had shared her suspicion with her lover. She spent her time recapturing

the tenderness and artistry of Bhatta's love-making. Tukra had been powerful, and Booda tepid. She had not till then known the delicate fulness that love could give. She was proud to have won so sophisticated a man. She was a little afraid too, of what might happen if she was found out. Contact with ways of the town awakened her feminine desire for finery. She had that gold ring but could not wear it. She thought it best to wait till the fair at the Corner Village; then she could say she had found it on the ground. Another curious mental process helped her appetite for Bhatta. It was her hatred of Tukra. If she could hold Bhatta, she argued, Tukra's power would wane. Was it not because of him that Bhatta was regarded with little love in the village? She played with these and other thoughts as she sat idly at home the morning after the incident. In the afternoon she got tired of staying indoors and went to the stream on her usual crab-hunt. Once near the stream she could not but bathe. After a swim she sat on a stone drying her plaits and glanced admiringly at the arch of her thigh.

Bhatta had been really scared and did not stir out of home. The only person who set about his day's work as usual was Thimma. He always had the hunter's excuse. For a long time he wandered near the paddy field and then went to the stream on the pretext of having a bath. And to be sure there she was. He was not blind to her beauty. But he had to suppress desire. Aftar a perfunctory bath he sat on a stone honing his knife with such violence that it was a wonder the blade did not break. Kempi knew that he was there because of her. The rogue, she thought. She rose to go. When she passed by him, he was still sharpening the knife, pretending to be completely unaware of her approach. In a light ringing tone

Kempi asked him: "What Thimma, are you finding out which will wear away first, your knife or the stone?"

He turned a full glance on her and said: "Oh, you! Is it a festival or something today? You seem to have plucked all the flowers in the forest." He had his investigation to make. An abrupt approach was the best, he decided. "Kempi, I have something to ask you. I swear I shall not tell anybody else." This was too unexpected even for Kempi. "What is it?" she faltered. Thimma said: "Tell me, why did you scream yesterday? I was seeing it all." Kempi realised she could not escape with a lie. Even coquetry would not make him disbelieve what he had seen. "Yes, I screamed," she replied. Good that she had screamed, she added to herself.

"I heard you scream, I saw you run and I saw that the master was there."

"Then you know and still ask. What do you expect me to say?"

"Tell me, did the master try to lay hands on you? The villain. For two or three days I saw him hover around that place. And I had my suspicions."

She suddenly realized that he had not known. Instead of causing relief it alarmed her more, because Thimma was dangerously impulsive. With a particularly innocent look she said: "You know the master. I was scared seeing him there, and so I cried and then I ran. What else could I do if he tried to follow me?————Let us leave it at that. I appeal to you. Do not go about telling all and sundry."

Thimma did not know what to say. "If he troubles you any more, tell me and I will break his back-bone."

"Be careful, my dear man. These big people are dangerous. It is best to leave them alone." She did not stay there.

Thimma was an expert at catching stags and forest goats, but a novice in the ways of wily women and their city lovers. He stood there for some more time with a blank mind and dragged his feet homewards, munching betel nuts.

Kempi kept going to the stream, but still there was no Bhatta. She pined for him. A plan occurred to her. She cut some rattan creepers and took them home. It was that time of the month when she sat in the out-house away from her home. She wove her baskets there. Bhatta, in his rounds of the village, saw her and went near the hut. A lime tree stood there, decked with little globes of gold. He had to make conversation somehow. "What a good crop of limes! Do not know whose tree it is, "he began. Kempi looked at him and said: "Why, it is ours." Before they could make any signs to each other, they heard somebody's footsteps. Bhatta had ro retreat. Four days later, bathed fresh, with a large daub of vermilion on her forehead, Kempi went to Bhatta's house with a basket full of limes. It was afternoon. Bhatta had had his food and was leisurely munching betel and tobacco, reclining on a pillow in the verandah of his house. Kempi placed the basket a few feet from him. He was overjoyed. He looked circumspectly around; there was nobody, luckily. In a low, loving voice he asked: "Why did you scream that day?"

"I saw somebody near at hand."

Bhatta smiled: "Clever girl ! Yes, that devil Thimma must have been somewhere around." After a pause he added: "There is nobody for housework. Some wench was doing it, but I learn she has been ill these two days. Do that work until she returns."

Kempi knew what this meant, but she did not reply. She

was afraid how Thimma would view it. Bhatta did not like her silence. She looked up and said: "Tell my husband, and let him tell me," and went away.

That evening Bhatta sent Tukra to his hometown on some errand. He then summoned Booda and spoke to him about the affairs of the village. He gave him betel nut and tobacco and was particularly friendly and chatty. "By the way, Booda," he added, as though remembering something he had forgotten," the woman who was filling the water-tubs and cleaning vessels at home has not turned up. I do not know why. Send somebody for four or five days."

"Yes, master," he replied. Bhatta wanted to consolidate his advantage, and began in a confidential tone: "And Booda, you must all be quite happy now. Kalkuda has upheld what you did. I was never opposed to Karia becoming the headman. After all it is his right by birth. Still he is too young, and you agree Chania is not very smart or capable. How can he be equal to Tukra?"

"Let us forget the past, master. It is not because of any grouse against you that we chose Chania. Tukra might have easily got that post. But he was absent from our council that day. If he had asked us to wait for some days before bringing you here, would we not have waited? All this happened because we did not know he had gone to your place. There are many who are not very friendly towards Tukra."

"It may be so, but Tukra is an intelligent fellow. And how do you expect me to know the rules and customs of your clan? I was angry that day, but later I felt bad. And now everything is as you wanted it. But, Booda, in this quarrel about headmanship, the theft of cardamom has still remained unsolved. We should be careful next year."

"You still feel it was stolen?.....It might have been some pest or plant disease."

"No, I am sure of it."

"But to whom can it be sold, if it is stolen? Would not the merchants at the Corner Village ask where the undried cardamom came from? Even if it is stolen, it cannot be by people of our village."

"But who will come from other places to do this?"

"Master, we shall have the priest put a curse on some dolls next year and tie them at the four corners of the garden. Whoever steals will vomit blood and die. It serves them right."

Booda was happy that the master had been so amiable. He had never before exchanged more than a couple of words with him. Was it because Tukra was away, or had the master come to believe that after all Kalkuda must be obeyed ? When he entered his hut he had little of his old malice against Bhatta. He called Kempi and told her: "The master asked me to send somebody for work, Kempi."

There were only two women in his house. The elder, Booda's mother, grumbled: "I cannot do that work. I will not go on carrying pots of water at my age." Like the saying that when the patient wanted a diet of milk and rice, the doctor prescribed the very thing, Booda of his own accord asked Kempi to go. It was a happy week that followed for Bhatta. Kempi did the house work very well and Bhatta praised her neatness to Booda. "I never knew she was so smart," he said. That pleased Booda and he felt a proud man. Tukra returned a week later and the next morning Bhatta left for his village.

That whole week Thimma had waited at the river for

Kempi. He was restless. His plan was to set a trap Bhatta with Kempi's aid. It had failed. And when he covered her carrying water to Bhatta's house he could believe his eyes.

Without much ado he asked her directly: "What! You, are doing this?" Kempi made a grimace of disgust and sa "What can I do if he himself ordered me?"

"Who, the master?"

"No, my husband."

"Booda!"

"Hm."

"Did you not tell him what had happened?"

"How could I?"

"Yes, that is also true. Good that you did not. We have to do it cleverly. If you are firm there is always a remedy. He is leaving in a day or two. Let him. Before he returns next time let us have a fine little plan."

"Plan!" she pouted her lips and went her way.

CHAPTER X

Summer was a time of hectic work. The Kudias, their thoughts turned towards the new year's farming, cleared a fresh patch of forest, burnt tree-trunks and branches, dug up the land, levelled it and built a fence all round. The field chosen was far from the previous year's. Everybody's hands and mind were full, with no time for idling.

One man, however, was untouched by all this to-do. He did his share of work but his mind was depressed. What was all this toil for? Whom did it benefit? Life had treated him unfairly. Loneliness seemed to be his lot. When he went home there was nobody to greet him. When he caught a deer, there was nobody to cook it for him. He had to light his own lamp and spread his own mat. His joys and sorrows had to wax and wither within his heart unshared.

Everybody of his age had a wife. Not he. Why he had been singled out for punishment he could not understand. True, he was hare-lipped. But did manliness depend on the shape of the mouth or on strength of the shoulders?

This thing that Kempi had done affected him deeply. It made the wasteland of his heart more desolate. He had loved her once and had hoped to win her hand. Tukra and then Booda had been more lucky. Thimma had continued to regard her as the ideal of womanhood. But she had degraded herself. There was no doubt about it. Had not Bhatta, at the

Corner Village fair, given her a red sari with a yellow bor while he gave plain black saris to all the others? Had she n announced that she had found a golden ring at the fair a worn it? Where could she get it, if not from Bhatta?

Kempi was not the only woman in the world. He had don his best to brush aside thoughts of her, even though a voic inside him had whispered, "Why don't you try? She is n goddess on a pedestal." But he had suppressed such thoughts He would not overstep the law. He was no thief to attemp stolen love. It was a wife he wanted.

There must be a woman in the world for him. He had again sought the aid of his good friend the priest. The priest had assured him that he would do his best. He had even set a deadline.

It was during one of these days when the clan was busy with its work and Thimma set store by the priest's promise that the annual feast of Kalkuda took place. Kudias of both the hills were there as usual, but this year their kinsmen from other hills had also joined them. There was more bustle than ever before. The honour of offering the sword to the priest had devolved on Karia. When the priest in his frenzy shouted words that were the demon's own, there did not seem to be much rancour. Kalkuda seemed pleased with the way the Kudias had conducted themselves during the year. Booda went up to Karia and whispered in his ear: "Karia, ask the deity who stole the cardmom last year." Tukra added: "Yes, yes. I had forgotten to remind you." Karia was in no mood to put that question, but he could not brush aside Booda. Thimma trembled in his heart when these whispered exchanges were going on. Karia, feigning innocence, said: "Oh, deity, our master says somebody has stolen and sold cardmom from

our hill. What do you say?'' He had deliberately not stopped at ''stolen'' but had added ''stolen and sold''.

There was no scowl on the priest's face when Kalkuda spoke through him: ''Tch, tch. It cannot be. It cannot be. Will such things happen in my kingdom?'' The villagers were relieved. Thimma felt that the deity had saved his honour. When he was about to turn towards Kalkuda's shrine with gratitude in his eyes, the deity screamed. The devotees were perturbed. What was it now? After a moment of suspenseful silence Kalkuda burst out: ''Those who disown me will vomit blood and die. Let them come back and pay the penalty. I shall forgive. If they persist, I shall burn down their entire family and scatter the ashes to the winds.'' The Kudias looked at each other nonplussed. The two headmen sued the deity to explain the remarks. Kalkuda replied : ''Those who have committed the crime know it. Why should I explain? I do not waste my words.''

The rite had an unexpected end which damped many people's enthusiasm. To most it remained an unsolved riddle. The feast that night was not very jovial. The most scared of those who went home that night were Choma of the Big Hill and his wife. Kalkuda's words had pierced them like an arrow. The deity knew the secret they thought nobody knew. What their daughter had done recoiled on them. They had now to pay with their heads. But Kalkuda had also held out a promise of pardon. That was their only hope.

CHAPTER XI

Like two crocodiles lying side by side stood the Little Hill and the Big Hill, branching off from the Ghats. The Big Hill, as its name indicated, was more massive. A gigantic rock crowned it, a dark crag on which no creatures moved or nested. When water jumped from its numerous projections, the sight was suggestive of a muslin curtain held against the wind. The slopes were densely wooded. Grass grew to a man's height in the jungle. But invariably every summer, as though by assignation, it was consumed by fire, turning glory into grey. The Kudias regarded these fires as an expression of the anger of the forest spirits. In their faith, they believed that every mountain, every peak and every great stone or tree had a spirit of its own. Nature was not a friend but a lord, a driver of dutiful servants. Obedience came easily to them.

The Kudias had few contacts with the outside world. No roads led to the hills. The cart-tract to Kanara was wearisome. The path to Mysore was not any easier. Footpaths were always overgrown and difficult to make out. One could walk through hills for days together without meeting another soul. Still every year the cardamom crop was grown and taken to the market. The owner complained that the costs were rising, but so was the demand.

Although the Little Hill had for some years remained with Bhatta, the Big Hill had changed hands thrice in a generation.

Its present owner lived in a town on the plateau which was a day's distance as the crow flies but a week on foot. The owner had leased it out to a relation and was content with the annual share he received. This lessee, Valli Braganza, visited the hill at harvest-time. He knew his rupees and annas well. He did not bother to build a house for himself, as Bhatta had done on the Little Hill, and was content with a simple hut. He learnt to like what the Kudias cooked and was not averse to sharing their toddy. He came to think of the hill as a veritable paradise ; only, as difficult to enter.

But he could not stay in the hills all the year. He went there for two months after the rains, and again for the fair of the Corner Village. At the fair he had introduced a reform. It was after all a Hindu fair and how could he, a Christian, be enthusiastic? Instead of distributing clothes to his tenants, he gave them money and asked them to buy their own garments. This had resulted in a saving for himself. But one thing he did keenly feel : why should not these stupid people give up Kalkuda and Panjurli and Kalkutiga and follow the Cross? He had asked a padre to visit the fair and speak about the glories of Christianity. He even thought of buildihg a hut next to the Shiva temple, raise a cross on it and make it a church. But the preachers he knew were not very fond of malarial places. His wish had remained unfulfilled.

So what? He raised a cross on the roof of his own hut on the Big Hill and, whenever he found time, told the Kudias of the greatness of his God. Life in the forest, though comfortable, was lonely. The two months he spent there looked longer than the ten he spent in Karkala. Karkala, after all, was a town, almost a city, though it gave him no free toddy. What was there in the hills to engage him for two months? The

workers did not need overseeing; they worked hard and had no thoughts of deceit. Nor could he, by his stay, multiply his profits.

Braganza's constant companion on the Big Hill was Choma, without whom he did not venture out in the forests. When he went crab-hunting, Choma's teen-aged son kept him company. The four or five pots in his house were cleaned by Choma's wife or by his daughter, Giddi, who also filled his tubs with water. For all this work Braganza paid a four-anna silver piece each month to Choma. Though so careful with his purse, he was no miser in speech. He used gilded words with a purpose. Giddi, who was seventeen, had captivated his heart. She was not just a healthy piece of flesh but one whose beauty was burnished by her look of innocence. Every time Braganza came to the hill he brought Choma a pocket-knife or a rosary. Giddi wore a rosary from which hung a crucifix, whose meaning she did not know but which she proudly showed off. Its power made her a convert to Braganza at any rate. The result of it all was that Braganza began to feel how good it would be if people like her, whose wage was just a quarter of a rupee, could go with him to Karkala. A couple of days before he left for Karkala that season, Braganza went to Choma and said : "Eh Choma, where I live in Karkala it is very difficult to get people for work. Your children here have nothing to do. Why should you not send them with me?" He did not greatly care for the son but he knew that Choma would not send his daughter alone and had thought of this trick. Lest they should feel Karkala was too far away, he changed the topography of the region and made it a mere two days' walking distance from the hills.

Choma and his wife did not like the idea. But when the

master himself asked, it was not theirs to refuse. They wavered and put off giving a reply but when the rains were over Choma was compelled to send them with Braganza. He implored him that he should bring them back for the fair. Braganza was there but he had not brought Choma's children. His excuse was that Giddi was down with fever. But he quickly added that there was nothing to worry about. The climate of Karkala had suited her wonderfully. In fact she had gained weight. But that was no consolation to her parents. To pacify them further, Braganza placed two shining rupees in Choma's palm. The silver pleased him but his mind was not at rest. His daughter was ill and he had to see her. Ignoring Braganza's disuasion, he followed him to Karkala from the fair. The two days' journey that Braganza had described lengthened out to five.

Choma was in for a shock. Giddi was in the best of health, but she wore a strange garb and her brother had cut his long hair and evidently both had been received into the religion of the padres. His sorrow knew no bounds. He insisted on taking them home with him but they refused. He felt the sky fall on his head. He trudged home alone and woebegone. His wife shared the ache of his heart but they could not tell their neighbours. The only person in whom Choma's wife confided, unable to contain it, was the priest's wife. Little wonder that Kalkuda came to know it.

During the two months between the fair and Kalkuda's feast, Choma's sorrow had grown into anger. But neither he nor his wife could think of a way out. Not knowing what to do, Choma went to the priest and placed himself in his hands. The priest gave him no comfort. He threatened that the whole clan of Kudias would be ruined by what his chiidren had done.

In the end, however, he agreed to help. Even if it meant resort to sorcery or black magic, they decided to bring them back. Soon after the feast, Choma, his wife and the priest were on their way to Karkala. As luck would have it, when they reached the town Braganza was away. Giddi and her brother were at home with Braganza's invalid mother. Choma's wife pressed her daughter to her bosom and cried a whole river of tears. That and the priest's threats about Kalkuda's wrath did the trick. The same night Giddi and her brother fled with the rescuers.

When they returned to the Big Hill, the entire village gathered to gaze at their strange dress. They could not bring themselves to forgive Braganza's perfidy and set fire to the hut he had built. Choma paid the ritual fine to the headman and his children were readmitted to the clan. The peril had passed, but Choma was left with a worry: how to marry off Giddi. She had paid for her folly and had been accepted into the fold; but the young men of the village would not look at her.

The family's distress became Thimma's opportunity.

When Braganza returned to Karkala from Mangalore he was startled to find that the bird had flown. He had not credited the simple-minded Kudias with so much of initiative. He had thought Choma and his wife would merely shed tears and be resigned to their fate. His fault was that he had been in too much of a hurry. If he had worked more cautiously on the minds of his impressionable captives he would probably have succeeded. But within two months of taking them to Karkala he had changed their dress and religion. Giddi was made to discard her sari for a striped skirt and a red blouse. He took her to church regularly. Though her brother protested, he had had his hair clipped, on the ground that the town's climate made

long hair bad for him. He spoke to them at length on the beauties of churches and the miracles of Mother Mary. Giddi and her brother knew so little of religion that it was not hard to convince them of the superiority of the modern God over the rabble of barbarous deities. To overcome their fear of what Kalkuda might do, he tied the cross round their neck and said it was a potent talisman which sent all heathen Gods scurrying. When dress changed, should not names change too? Although he could not give them any Portuguese surname, Braganza christened them a new. Giddi became Pauline and her brother was Paul.

Braganza was earnest in his intentions. He had confided in the priest and secured his blessing. He had even ordered a silver-mounted ivory comb and a pair of earrings from a silversmith for his intended. He had formally proposed to Giddi and when she had given the expected answer without any fuss, he had counted himself a lucky man. Now that he learnt that they had run away, he hastened to the police station in a rage. The police officer heard his story in silence.

Braganza was so convinced of his own rightness that it had never occurred to him that the law might take a dim view of his bringing to Karkala two people who had not yet attained majority. When the officer learnt that the kidnappers were the girl's parents, he told Braganza to take back his complaint lest he be prosecuted for kidnapping minors and converting them by fraud to another religion. Crestfallen, Braganza approached his priest. Having known that the girl was as fond of him as he of her, the priest said : "Why do you worry? Go to the hill again, and she will run back with you. That is all".

Though every moment without his Pauline was torture, Braganza could not gather enough courage to return to the Big Hill. His mother's report of the imprecations that the tribal priest had uttered during their visit convinced him that the Kudias would not receive him kindly. He might have sent an emissary, but the monsoon intervened. The skies began to growl the very next day after Choma was back in the Big Hill. The road from Karkala to the hills was impassable during the rains. There was a layer of water on the plains and torrents rushed down the valleys. Mist covered the hills and leeches took over the entire place. Braganza sat pining for Pauline and told himself that the first thing he would do as soon as the rains abated would be to rescue her. But when the rains showed signs of relenting, his fear increased. The time came when he had to go to the hills for the cardamom. Afraid to travel alone he took two companions, two ox–like fellows with moustaches thick as coir ropes. When they reached the Corner Village, Braganza found that his stock of courage failed him. He stayed behind and sent his men onward. The two were totally new to the area, but they managed to reach the Little Hill. There they met Bhatta, who was on one of his usual visits. Without telling them all that had taken place, they pleaded with Bhatta to give them an escort. They reached the Big Hill and informed the headman that they had come on behalf of Braganza. The headman was most unco-operative. "I do not know who you are. If your master can come up to the Corner Village, can he not come here?" he asked brusquely. They said he had sprained his ankle. But the headman was unmoved. He would deal only with Braganza. If needed he would send men to the Corner Village with bamboos and a blanket to carry Braganza to the Hill in a litter. Braganza's

agents could not detect the hidden irony in this proposal. They had expected a warm welcome. Instead they were treated with hostility. Even food was denied to them. They wanted to stretch their tired legs and asked to be shown to Braganza's hut, only to be led to a charred, vacant spot. Braganza had spoken of a spacious house which could be easily spotted by the cross on the roof. Their baffled questions only elicited sullen replies. The headman said they had burnt down Braganza's house as well as the shed where his cardamom was dried. And they would burn Braganza also, if he should turn up Braganza's agents suddenly awoke to the truth. Realising that they would get neither water nor shelter on the Hill, they beat a retreat. Finding something to fill their stomach with Bhatta's courtesy, they walked back to the Corner Village the same night.

Four months' parting from Pauline had shattered Braganza's nerves. The villagers had humiliated him before friends. The report they brought infuriated him further. "If that is the way they speak of their landlord, I shall show them who I am. I shall take my friends and shoot the dogs down," he yelled. He still believed that he had only to go to Big Hill and the Kudias would pipe down and Pauline would return to him. But his agents, who had seen what was what, dissuaded him from following such a course. They said that if the Kudias killed him it would be months before the outside world heard even a whisper of it. Braganza did some hard thinking and decided that the only way to get his dues for the year was by approaching Bhatta. The three went again to the Little Hill. None of them let out the Giddi affair, but Braganza manufactured a long tale of woe of how malaria prevented him from staying on in the hill and how cardamom-picking had not even

started in his garden although on Bhatta's plantation the work had gone ahead. The upshot was that Bhatta would collect Braganza's crop also and keep a ten per cent share for his good offices. It was agreed that Braganza should meet Bhatta a month later and collect whatever cardamom was kept for him. The chance of getttng eight to ten maunds of cardmom without moving from where he sat, pleased Bhatta. He sent Booda to the Big Hill to tell them about the new arrangements. Booda returned late at night and acquainted Bhatta with the real story. "Oh, is that the matter? So that fellow kidnapped their girl? It is natural for them to be infuriated. Have they even burnt his hut? Serves him right," Bhatta remarked. Braganza took the precaution of writing to his principals in the plateau town that he had visited the gardens and that the yield was so bad that he did not hope for more than a fourth of the average.

Bhatta despatched Booda again to the Big Hill to tell the people that he had taken over the lease of the Big Hill, and that the Christian landlord would no longer go there. He went there himself one day. The headman was no stranger to him. After some higgle-haggling the headman agreed to rebuild the structure for drying cardamoms. "We are doing it only for you," he explained.

The delay in harvesting had not greatly affected the outturn. All of it came to the Little Hill and was stored. Promptly at the end of the month Braganza arrived there with a sallow face, and Bhatta told him that it had been just eight annas' yield in the rupee. Braganza had to believe it and had also to shell out the agreed commission before taking away the cardamom. On his way he had thought that he would sneak into the Big Hill some night and visit his sweetheart, but even after a few bowls of toddy he could not gain the necessary courage

After Braganza left, Bhatta went to the Big Hill again and announced that he had taken over the Hill and would extend to them all the concessions that the people of the Little Hill received. "Mark you, I am not a godless fellow, to give you just money instead of clothes during the fair," he added. Braganza's folly was his opportunity. His plan was to make the proprietors on the plateau feel that these gardens were thoroughly unremunerative, so that they would be glad to give them away to the first asker. After he sold the years's crop at Mangalore he hired a double-bullock cart to where Braganza's principals lived. Booda went with him. It was a three-day journey. The owner, Mathias, was a veteran coffee planter and cardamom cultivator. Bhatta introduced himself and enquired how cardamom was faring in those areas. That put Mathias in mind of what Braganza had written and he showed Bhatta the letter in which Braganza had said that the crop on the Big Hill was hardly four annas in the rupee of which Mathias's share would be only three-quarters. He never had had such a low return. If this continued he would have to make other arrangements. That was the opening that Bhatta had waited for, and he told Mathias that the Kudias were very angry with Braganza. After Booda corroborated the statement, Mathias wanted to know why, and Bhatta said : "Your Braganza cannot go there any more. Not only he, the Kudias will not tolerate anybody else who might go from you. For years they will remember what has happened. Why, when I went there some days ago they told me that they would harvest the crop this season only for my sake, and vowed to pluck out every cardamom plant in the coming rainy season. They will tolerate no shadow of a Christian." Mathias was too old and too busy to go to the Big Hill himself. His viceroy had

turned out to be a failure. His perturbation was evident, but he made no offer. Neither did Bhatta ask for any. It was enough to have planted the idea.

His stratagem succeeded. Mathias sent for Braganza and gave him a mouthful. Since Braganza had no alternative to suggest, Mathias decided he would hand over the Big Hill to Bhatta on lease or sale. Braganza realised that he had lost the game. Yet, he gulped his grief and managed to put off the evil day by three months through artful dodging. On one of his visits to the Little Hill, Bhatta had arranged with the headman of the Big Hill to declare to Braganza's face that next year there would not be a single cardamom plant in the garden. What had to be, had to be. Bhatta and Mathias met and completed the deal. Braganza returned to Karkala downcast and defeated. He had lost not only Pauline but his income in the bargain.

CHAPTER XII

Giddi withdrew into herself. Untrained in the art of analysing her feelings, she could not make out which was greater, class, custom and Kalkuda, or desire, love and the heart's murmur. The brief months of elation now appeared unreal and she even thought that Braganza had never existed, although deep inside her she pined for him. In summer she had revelled in a new life, wearing a new dress, like a peacock that leaves the woods to dance on the meadow. Now she was back in her parents' home, her cage. Rains and chill blasts of wind had followed. The rumble in the sky matched her mood. She had glimpsed the wide world, after which the homes of her kinsfolk appeared coarse. She was condemned to marry a Kudia and pass the rest of her life in crudeness. She might not hope for even that, for was she not an outcaste, and was not everybody sneering at her? The ritual of penitence had not put a brake on people's tongues.

Though the boys of the Big Hill looked disapprovingly at Giddi, her father believed the priest would not let him down. A bridegroom was ready, but the priest found it hard to bring him then to the hill because of the monsoon. The log bridge between the two hills had been washed away in the very first downpour that season. Thimma was impatient, but it took him three months to collect the eight or ten men necessary to fell a tree and put it across the stream. When he did go to the

Big Hill at last, he forgot the long agony of waiting. The paddy in the fields had turned a golden yellow. The priest, who had been waiting for Thimma's arrival, gave him a warm welcome and glad tidings. In winged words he described the beauty of the bride he had chosen. "But you should not betray your hurry. First let me take you to her father.". Thimma followed the instructions. At his first meeting with Choma, neither he nor the priest referred to the motive of the visit. Instead the priest held forth on what a brave hunter Thimma was and how tireless on the field. "And he is not as old as he looks, still a young bull," he added. The Kudias were not very fastidious in their arithmetic. Many of them, if asked, could not say whether twenty or forty was greater. Youth and age were a question of rough estimate. A boy, if the chin was smooth ; a young man, if the upper lip was darkened; an old man if the hair had turned grey. According to this calculation, Thimma was neither a lad nor an old man. He was in that long stretch of in-betweenness.

When Thimma next visited the priest, the people of the Big Hill had returned from their monsoon sheds to their regular homes and the harvest was safely stored in the barns. The priest took him straight to Choma's house. Thimma was treated like a chieftain. There was no need for him to tell Choma why he had come. The priest had done the groundwork, and Choma took the initiative. Betelnut and leaves were brought, and a mug of toddy, and the negotiations continued. Thimma had only one disappointment : though he had spent a whole day he did not even have a good glimpse of his wife to be. He stayed two more days with the priest, made friends with Choma's teen-age son, took him out for hunting, and showed him a [illegible] two. On the

ird day they chanced on Giddi as she waded in a stream llecting crabs. She raised her head and looked at Thimma. er glance hardened. What she had not noticed when she ooked at him from behind the bamboo screen at home, she ow did. He had a torn lip, and there was no symmetry about is moustache. By the whispers at home she had known that his was to be her husband, the man for whom she should anish all hope of Braganza, the man who would condemn er to life-long drudgery. She stared at him and he at her. f her eyes saw only desolation, his saw cheer and happiness. The priest had indeed chosen a Goddess for him.

He pestered the priest to name a date for the wedding. He was told that that was for the headmen to decide. Thimma raced home like a stag of the hills and broached the topic with Karia that very night. He could not contain himself and he expected Karia to thump him on the back by way of congratulation. But Karia grew inexplicably thoughtful at his announcement. In an embarrassed voice he asked : "Who is the bride? Booda was saying that there was a girl in that hill who had run after a man of some other religion. You remember, Kalkuda even referred to her during the worship. I hope it is not she."

It was as if a rock had fallen on Thimma's head. Was that the girl he had been betrothed to? It could not be. The priest himself had chosen her. Who would know better than he? Her people did not appear to be outcastes. The priest had accepted food in their house.

"Tell me her father's name. It is like this: Booda is compelling his nephew and me to marry. I am putting it off. But Booda is determined that his nephew should wed this year. He had gone to the Big Hill two weeks ago to settle a

match. When somebody told him that the daughter of a man called Choma was a good-looker, Booda's father-in-law, I hear, ruled it out saying that she had lost caste and a pot once broken could never again be pieced together."

"Choma's daughter.....lost caste!" Thimma muttered.

"No need to doubt it. Is it her you have in mind?"

Karia watched the onrush of disappointment. Tears flowed from Thimma's eyes. "Then, then, there is no chance of my marrying in this life..." Karia's heart went out to him. In broken tones Thimma told him of the emptiness of his life and the long series of disappointments he had met with. If this last hope should snap, why should he live any more?

Karia knew it was true. Sanction was in his power. He could save Thimma or condemn him. He might be young, but hewas the headman. And the headman's word was law. He was the arbiter of custom. After they had sat in silence for hours Karia said : "Thimma, do not lose heart. Kalkuda had said that if she paid the fine and prayed for pardon he would forgive her sin. Have they done it? They must have, for you say that the priest ate with them. It is not a big thing. I have heard it said she did not run away of her own accord but was forced by her Christian master, and that her father brought her back the very next day ... Go and marry. One cannot marry after the teeth have fallen!"

"You say I am too old?"

"Oh, no. I said that it was useless to marry in old age. That is why you must marry at once if you marry at all."

"That is what is eating me. I have one thing to ask of you. You are the headman. If you come to the marriage, all will be well. I do not know how our village will take it. But if you promise me that you will not give me up, I shall go ahead."

"You are not doing anything wrong. When Kalkuda is ady to forgive, who is the headman to prevent it? Yes."

The mention of Kalkuda brought back terror to Thimma. Vithout another word, he went home and lay down in his nely hut. Hope and despair ran a round race in his mind. ust that morning he sees a divine girl picking crabs—'just ke Kempi'—and in the night he is told she is an outcaste. f he married her and brought her home, what poison might ot Tukra and others spout? Suppose he gave up the idea of narrying her? Why should he then live at all?

The rains stopped and the cool winds of winter blew. But Thimma burned inside. He still had his doubts, but the priest's eloquence allayed them. Was it wrong to do work in other people's houses? Was it wrong to go to a new town? Were there no Kudias outside their two or four villages? Suppose she had been forced out of her caste; had she not made amends? Had not Kalkuda himself promised to overlook her wrong? He should not mistake a rope for a serpent. She was a golden girl, as quiet and good as she was pretty. And her parents were respectable people.

The priest set a day for the wedding. Thimma returned to the Little Hill. He reminded Karia of his promise. They decided that the best way to avoid scenes and complications was to keep the marriage a secret until it was over. Karia accompanied Thimma to the Big Hill and two days later Thimma brought his wife with him, his heart floating in the sky.

But the village was lukewarm. There was reason, of course. Thimma had not asked them to the marriage feast. When Booda knew of the wedding he had an argument with Karia. "Karia, why did you get entangled in this? Not only had she run away, but she had gone after a casteless fellow.

You know how I spurned the offer for my nephew.. Still you..." ha began. Karia cut him short : "When all the people there from headman downwards have accepted her back into the clan, where is the question of her being an outcaste?"

"Those people will do anything. But do we not have our honour to protect? This Thimma was like an old tiger; any woman would do for him. You should not have been a party to it. And did you have to sneak away without telling us?"

"Uncle, how can you say that we are superior and that those people are inferior? Thimma would have certainly invited everybody. But he was afraid of people who might get busy and put a stop to the marriage. Well ... remember your own story. Whom had you told when you married Kempi? Did anybody blame you? The circumstances were such, and you chose to keep it private."

"You equate the two weddings, then?"

"Well, he has now come back married. Tomorrow he is inviting all the village to a feast. I have told him to. What do you say?"

"That is his business. Those who want will go. Others will stay away."

"And you?"

"Who am I? You know we have not been particularly close friends. What does it matter whether I go or not?"

Thimma invited all the people of the village to dinner the next day. Most of them came. But not those who counted, except Booda, who was there for Karia's sake. Each went back from the feast with a different impression. Some said Thimma's long years of waiting had not been in vain and that he had a pretty wife. Others said that it was all the same whether a casteless woman was beautiful or ugly. Kempi

returned from the dinner inflamed with jealousy. She could have understood a hare-lipped man being paired off with someone deformed. But here was a girl whose looks were a challenge to her own. Added to it, her father and Giddi's father had been old foes in the Big Hill. The result was that Kempi gave a loose rein to her tongue.

"Does she not look plump like a woman with child?" she asked. The word took wing and went to every corner of the village. Within a few days, everybody knew of what Kempi had said and most them believed her. Even those who had gone to Thimma's feast kept away from him and his bride.

A sense of defeat came over Thimma. Neighbours' talk was not the only cause. From the day of the marriage, Giddi's face wore an inscrutable mask. To all his words and gestures of endearment her response was listless. She had a vacant gaze, and her replies were perfunctory. Perhaps she resented his looks and his age, Thimma thought; but he took care not to show his disappoiniment in his wooing. Nights made Giddi even more passive and morose. Within a week of her coming to his house she complained of pain and fever and nausea and put off going to him. Thimma thought it might be the evil eye of the villagers. The village gossip might have hurt her, Karia suggested. Marriage had only increased Thimma's misery. Inside the house he found no love, and outside he met with hostility that was not even veiled.

A month went by. Thimma felt cheated in body and mind. The only one who sympathised with him was Karia, who felt he owed a duty to Thimma for it was on his assurance that he had married. Thimma told him one day: "I am not bothered what they speak. My worry is for her. Something is wrong with her."

At the end ot the month Giddi pleaded with her husband to allow her to go to her mother's house for a few days. But Thimma would not hear of it. If she was ill he would get her drugs. He brought quite a heap of herbs home. A few more days passed and Giddi's anxiety grew. She could not bear to be near Thimma. She steeled her heart and told herself that she would take what joys and sorrows came to her lot. But it was as though life was all sorrow and no joy. What Kempi had said and the villagers had repeated had frightened her. She could not be complacent any more. She should go home and get rid of her misfortune. Thimma, simple-minded Thimma, did not believe what he heard. But not so Giddi. There was evidence in her own body.

He grieved that she did not love him. She grieved that she could not tell him of the evil that had befallen her. Each day she became more dispirited and moody. There was fear in her eyes. Thimma told Karia one day : "I wonder what ails her. She wants to go to her mother's home. But how can I live away from her ? I do not know what to do."

"Send her. It is natural at her age to feel home-sick."

"Then I shall also go. She wants to spend a month there. That means I should be there all the time. But will not the master get angry? It is the cardamom season."

"Yes, but why should you stay there ? ... Leave her there and come back. You might bring her back when she is well and happy."

Giddi had overheard the conversation, After Karia left, Thimma sank back into his despondency. He could not think of living without her. "I shall go with you. Your father will not mind my staying there ?" he asked Giddi. This unnerved her. But she did not feel bold enough to protest. As if that

was not enough, Thimma went on : "You complain of fever. It must be malaria. Yes. Your stomach also looks swollen." It was an unexpected stab. But Giddi managed to take it; she knew he had meant no malice. She could not tell her travail to a husband who loved her well. She could not show him her mind's tatters.

Two days later Thimma went upto Bhatta, told him of his wife's illness and got permission to stay away from work for a few days. He ran home to give Giddi the good news. "Your problem is solved. I have told the master and he has agreed to let me stay away. Let us start this afternoon," he announced. "What day of the week is this?" she asked. "Saturday." "Saturday is a bad day. Let us go on Monday. We have waited so long and two more days do not matter," she said. Thimma agreed. It was not because the day was inauspicious that Giddi postponed the journey; she had not yet sorted out her plans.

This was a new hurdle. She wanted to go alone. But how could she manage that ? She thought hard and decided that the only way was to seeking Karia aid. Karia was the only person who spoke to her. She knew the affection he had for her husband. Only his mercy could save her. When Karia called the next day Thimma was not at home. Giddi's heart beat fast. She was irresolute for a minute. But she collected her wits and went forward and knelt at his feet. Karia was taken aback. He could not make out what she meant. "What is it you are doing, Giddi? ... Did Thimma say anything?"

"He? He never uses harsh words. I have nothing against him. When I am the sinner what have I against others?" There were tears in her throat.

It was still a puzzle to Karia. "What is it? What is it?" he asked but Giddi sobbed the more in reply.

At last she said : "You are the headman of this place... My honour and my life are in your hands. If you take pity on me I am saved. If you do not, that is the end of me."

Karia could not unravel the knot. "What do you want me to do?"

"Promise me. I have no others to appeal to. If you think I deserve to live, assure me on oath."

Without knowing what was wanted of him, Karia gave his word. Then she asked : "Is there anybody near-by, anybody listening?" Karia went to the door and looked out. There was nobody. Giddi then told him her secret, that she was pregnant.

"But why afraid of that?" he asked artlessly.

She narrated her story. It was a story of not many days ago. But tricks of fate, dashed hope, pain and fear had made her feel as though this cursed story had been enacted long ago. "My only prayer is this: let him not come with me. I have to carry my shame to the home of my birth. How can I tell him? How can I live with him?"

"What do you want me to do?" Karia asked again, not understanding where he came in.

"Nothing more than this. Prevent him. Let him not go with me. I can fall at my mothers's feet and tell her my woe. After all she gave me my life. If I come through, I shall return. Else ..."

"If I do that, is it enough?"

"Yes."

Karia argued with Thimma, using all his persuasiveness. "Leave her there and come back. If you stay on, the whole village will laugh at you. They will say you are a woman's slave." Thimma yielded. Half of Giddi's worry was over.

But Karia was in a quandary. Should he tell Thimma, or should be not? If he did and if Thimma's trust was shattered,

that surely would not be helping Giddi? Suppose he remained silent. If she had a child, what would happen to Thimma and her? And what would not people say of him who had blessed the marriage?

The month that Giddi was away, Thimma was in stupefaction. He was in no mind to hunt or help in cardamom-picking. Karia tried to engage him in conversation, but a hundred times a day Thimma tore himself away from the others and sat in blank meditation.

A month, after all, has only thirty days. On the thirtieth, Thimma set out for the Big Hill, but Karia stopped him. It took all his guile to hold him back. Thimma retraced his steps only after Karia had said: "Thimma, let us go the day after tomorrow. I have also some work there. Meanwhile let us gather some soapnut. The master has given orders."

The master had given no such orders. But Karia wanted to give Thimma some work which would keep him busy. That day and the next they roamed the forests and dragged down many creepers and picked soapnut. The second evening Karia went in stealth to the Big Hill. Only when he saw Giddi in her father's house did he feel at rest.

"How are you?" he asked her.

"I am well now," she said, looking away from him.

"She will return next week," her mother added.

Karia did not spend much time there. He took just a betel-nut or two and hurried back. At the turn of the footpath beyond the last hut Giddi waited for him. "Brother of my life, you have saved me. This once I have managed to escape; I shall never again be deceived," she said.

Long before dawn Karia was back in his village. That day was also spent in soapnut-gathering. Thimma was fed up. In

the evening Karia told Thimma that he could go to his father-in-law's place the next day, if he wanted.

"Why, are you not coming?"

"No, my dear man. The village is already saying I am placing you two on my head."

Thimma went to the Big Hill all pit-a-pat. He stayed there four days, was feasted like a prince, and brought back Giddi. Now he found life really delectable. Giddi's face, he told Karia with a gasp of happiness, was brighter than the kitchen fire. "She is now bubbling with joy; she has overcome her homesickness," he added. Giddi's new feeling of lightness and zest for life were reflected in every syllable Thimma uttered, in every shake of his head.

CHAPTER XIII

It made little difference to Thimma whether white clouds played in the blue expanse above the hills or whether sky and earth were tied together with ropes of water. His neighbours' venom corroded him. He was probably happier unmarried. He might have been lonely but he had pride. He had hope. He was confident that some day, like any other man, he would live, love, build a home and be happy. In work, hunt and play, he had managed to forget his want. He had in a way expected too much from marriage. He had attributed to it more powers than to a miracle. His dreams had deceived him.

After his return from her mother's home, Giddi had come ready to meet him half way and to yield to him. No longer was there a fog on her face. She understood the pain at the root of his heart ; she knew that he was trying not to let her detect what he was going through. He never said a harsh word. He spoke as though his heaven was hers to give. She learnt to love him. But her love and smiles were something she could not take outside her cramped hut. They could not walk boldly in the village like other husbands and wives. All because of her first misadventure. It not only degraded her but recoiled on a good man.

Thimma managed to drown his sorrow in drudgery. But to Giddi life was more unkind. Hatreds are crueller in a woman's world. When she went to gather firewood or to bring

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water her head was bent and her eyes averted. She could have borne it if others had ignored her. The women's taunts destroyed her, though none ever said a word directly. Giddi swallowed the scorn, but how long? Why should she bother about what others said? Thimma had not rejected her, had he? And in her most dejected moments, there was Karia to say words of courage.

The chief architect of this unlucky couple's suffering was Kempi. Her tongue itched to say something against Giddi every time, and her mind invented novelties everyday. She chose to forget what the people had at one time spoken about herself. Why did she so hate Giddi, so ridicule Thimma? She knew that if he only opened his mouth her name would not be worth a rag, but she had imagined that her beauty excused everything. Had she not conquered Bhatta himself, a man who had tasted the best of the town and still had fallen for her? And did she not wear bits of gold, what no other Kudia women did? Was it not because of her that Tukra fell and Booda rose? She was the queen of the hills and where was her rival?

But now a rival had come, come as the wife of a man whom she had treated as a yellow leaf. And the lad who had grown under her husband's roof, with the food she had given, Karia, had stood behind them. He was Headman. She could not say anything against him but she was confident that by working through her husband she could isolate Karia from Thimma.

Giddi and she being the daughters of old enemies, Kempi always had a fresh supply of arrows from home for her quiver. Because Giddi had run away with a man of strange caste, it was almost the right thing to do to criticise her, but in her

heart Kempi knew why she disliked her. Anybody with eyes could see it : Giddi was far more winsome than Kempi and several years younger. Kempi might have once been the girl the Kudias dreamed about. Even now she was a beauty. But she was no longer in the first burst of youth. Time, after all, had not stood still with her. Her gait was heavier. She was fairer, it is true, but Giddi had youth on her side. Kempi knew that when Giddi first came to the Little Hill, even those who were ready to scoff at her had been struck by her grace. That a girl who had grown up before her eyes should challenge her pre-eminence was most galling.

When she saw Giddi it was not her sense of righteousness, not even simple envy, that was provoked. She was jealous of the signs of motherhood that she saw in Giddi. When Giddi returned without the burden and with hopes of building a home, Kempi noticed the change at once. On their way to the stream they crossed each other. "Oh you have returned so soon? You look greatly pulled down and lean. Why, what happened?" she asked, knowing but not waiting to watch the effect of her words. Giddi realised the price she had to pay for all that had happened.

At home Kempi told Booda : "Karia does not seem to remember we are still alive. His headmanship has made him vain. Without you, street dogs would not have sniffed at him. Look at his cheek in visiting Thimma and Giddi." Booda had spoken about this to Karia once, with no effect. After Kempi's prodding he again broached the question with Karia. Not that he should give up speaking with Thimma. But the people would not accept everything he did even though he was headman. They had already begun saying things.

Karia was surprised, even angry. "What is this, Uncle ?

You too say this? What have they done? If the entire village treats them like lepers, how can they live?''

''Karia, you are Headman; nobody criticises you to your face. But behind your back they speak, and we have to listen.''

''What do they say? What can they say?''

''You want to know? Then listen—that Giddi was already pregnant when she came and that she went to her mother's house to get rid of it. That does not perturb me. If Thimma is content with such a woman, it is his business. You visit them so often, and do you expect me to hear all that they are saying about you?''

''About me! Tell me whatever it is. Let me know what they accuse me of.''

''Should I say? Can you not guess it?''

''I am asking you because I cannot.''

''Well then, that you are after Giddi. Why should we invite such things?''

''Oho, Oho, is that so? I best know my mind. If anybody is man enough let him come and confront me. Let them call a clan meeting. People have tongues and they speak. Whom have they spared?''

With that Karia went away. It was a shock to him. Was it wrong to have sympathy? Were all people as innocent as they posed? So righteous as to condemn others? Was not the very woman who gave him his daily rice once the object of reproach? Giddi had once or twice confided in him what Kempi had called her. He now knew who was behind Booda's talk. He could not take Booda to task. Or Kempi, for she had brought him up. But how could he swallow all they said? It occurred to him that he should no longer share their roof. That night he did not go to Booda's house for food, as he had done ever

since his grandfather's death. Instead he went to Thimma's hut. He pretended he was not hungry and lay down. Giddi, seeing his sallow face, knew that something was wrong and tried her best to make him take some gruel. But he would not.

Early next morning he went to Booda. While Booda was still asking him why he had not come for food or sleep in the night, Kempi said : "Evidently he was out hunting. Come, Karia, the gruel is still waiting for you. I have even kept your share of the rabbit my man brought yesterday." She was very motherly. But Karia had no time for make-believe. "From now on you need not wait for me. I am a bad man, I should at least spare you a bad name," he retorted. Collecting his couple of clothes, mat and knife he prepared to leave. Booda said to him : "What is this? Just because I spoke a few words of advice, should you get angry?"

"People have spoken all they want to. What have I to fear? They might say that their headman is a villain. Let them. I am obliged to nobody."

Kempi then said something she should not have : "Why will he listen to what we say? Giddi must have kept a place warm for him."

"Giddi? Yes, Giddi! I know who made Giddi a sinner. I know it well. I had thought I need go to nobody's house and would build a hut of my own and cook my own curry. But now that you have said it, I will go to Giddi's house. I will. You can then loudly say that Giddi does not have one husband but two," Karia shouted at the top of his voice.

There were sparks in his eyes. It was the most violent speech he had uttered in his life. As he strode away the tears ran down his cheeks.

Booda was aghast. "What have you done, Kempi? Is that

the way to speak ? And you said it all to his face ? Who would not get angry?''

But Kempi was in form. ''You men are all alike. All you do is right and all we do is wrong. Yes, yes, we should seal our eyes and ears and bind our tongues.''

Karia went to Thimma's hut. He threw his clothes and his mat there, and rushed out into the forest without saying a word. In the evening he brought a big load of bamboos on his head. Thimma rose to greet him. Not allowing him to speak, Karia asked : ''Thimma, will you give me food for four or five days ?'' His voice sounded quaint. Thimma wanted to know what had happened. ''Giddi said you were here in the morning but went away without even exchanging a word. Have you had any quarrel ?''

''Nothing, Thimma. Until now only you two had been disowned by the village. And now I join you,'' he said in reply. ''I thought it was time I ceased to be dependent on others for food. By giving food one earns the right to say anything.''

For a week more Karia's time was completely taken up with building his hut. Twice a day he went to Thimma's house and stayed there just long enough to have his food.

The Kudias' hamlet was not a city. It was a mere couple of acres of land claimed from the forest. Where Grandfather's hut had stood there was still the foundation. Upon it Karia raised his own hut of bamboos. Thimma helped him. And Booda's nephew, childhood colleague of Karia, lent a hand. He was headman after all, and many others in the village did a thing or two for him. A home was ready.

He chose a good day and called all the village for the moving in dinner. Neighbours came forward to do the cooking.

The only people who were absent from the feast were Kempi and Giddi. The latter was too timid, the former too offended. Even Thimma felt reluctant to be there but Karia would not hear of his staying away. The surprise was that nobody seemed to take offence at his presence.

Karia, of course, did not cut down visits to Thimma's house. Why should he be afraid, he argued, of people who said what he had not done? At the worst they might take the headmanship away from him. He was not enamoured of being headman. It had given him nothing but worry.

Months passed. It was now two years since Giddi had come to Thimma's house. There were signs again that she would be a mother. She looked more fetching than ever. Thimma felt expansive. But as in all joys there was a touch of anxiety, the bitter in the sweet.

In the year Karia had set up separate house, Bhatta came to the hill as usual after Navaratri. But he stayed longer. That was because he too had built another house for himself. Now that he had control of the Big Hill as well, Bhatta wanted a bigger house, which was no bamboo-and-rope affair. He brought carpenters and brick-layers from Mangalore. In four months a bungalow was ready. It was not a small job, and all the men and women of the Little Hill had to give their labour for it — carrying stones, earth and planks, helping in digging or in laying bricks. None could plead exemption. The women carried baskets of sand or helped in polishing the floor. Giddi was there too, and like her husband she did her work silently among women who were hostile. Only one person was not there - Kempi, who was busy with the house-work of Bhatta. But every now and then she came out to see what

went on. Whenever she found time she stood there watching which way Bhatta's eyes would wander. When Bhatta sat on a bench in front of the old house shouting orders and instructions, Kempi kept an eye on him. Giddi was easily the most attractive as well as the quietest of the women working there. Bhatta's eye followed her. His orders to the workers were indirectly addressed to her. Giddi sensed it, but did her work without appearing to have taken notice. Whenever Kempi saw this covert battle her heart burned and she told herself that unless she drove this rival away from the village she could not live in peace.

During the days in the month when custom forced her to keep away from work and when once she had had fever, it was Giddi who took her turn at work in Bhatta's house. Kempi could not contain herself. She realised that all her peevishness would not prevent Bhatta from seeking Giddi. She chalked out new tactics. She suddenly befriended Giddi and showed her all the courtesy and affection she did not feel. She began visiting Giddi and Thimma in their house, and taking their side in village disputes. On the day Bhatta gave a meal to all the villagers after the house was completed, everybody was surprised to see Kempi and Giddi sitting side by side in the women's line, whispering to each other and giggling like two sisters.

While the house was being built Thimma noticed a change in Bhatta's tone towards him. It was less curt. He knew Bhatta well and could guess what he was after. He kept a watchful eye on Giddi and many times warned her of the danger.

Bhatta went back to his town after two months. It was only at the time of the fair at the Corner Village that he retur-

ned. All the Kudias were there. It was Thimma's second fair after his marriage. To the first he had gone alone. Giddi had refused to be persuaded. But this time she relented. When Bhatta distributed clothes, not only Booda and Tukra but Thimma also got a costlier dhoti. That pleased him. But when Giddi was given the same type of expensive sari as Kempi there was a shadow on his face. Kempi and Giddi in their new bright clothes were all over the fair. They went arm-in-arm, and exchanged the eatables they bought. Giddi was in high spirits. She chatted merrily with her father and mother who had come from the Big Hill, and with other relations and childhood playmates. After a meagre night meal all the Kudias stretched themselves on mats. At a distance the village music makers played drums and pipes. The older people who did not get sleep passed time recounting anecdotes of their childhood for the hundredth time. Boys lit bonfires out of hay and twigs and sat around them cross-legged. Giddi's happy drowsiness was suddenly cut short. The smile fled from her face and she had a spasm of pain. It increased every second and she writhed. The moans became screams and her mother was alarmed. When Giddi began to vomit, the village doctor brought herbs and leaves and administered them to her. The vomiting decreased but the pain persisted. Thimma sought out Karia. "Karia, if she has to die let her die in the home she has made for me," he pleaded. There was no use consoling Thimma. Finally four friends made a litter of bamboos and carried her up the Little Hill. All the way the unhappy girl squirmed with pain. Soon after dawn a little creature was born, but it died before seeing sunlight. The mother survived but the castle that Thimma had built crumbled.

One by one the people returned from the fair. About

midday Kempi scurried into Giddi's house and asked in a tone of great concern: "What happened, little sister? What is this?" She could see from Giddi's face that the bud of expected happiness had been plucked. Kempi made a show of grief "Let us be thankful that at least you are alive," she said.

Thimma had his own doubts. Ten times during the day he questioned Giddi about what she had eaten. When Giddi said she had eaten some dates that Kempi had given, his mind drew its own conclusion. In the night he went to the Big Hill and consulted the priest. The priest uttered some chant, closed his eyes and meditated, and pronounced it was black magic.

They had another shock a few days later. One evening Giddi had kept some broken rice on the boil and gone out to bring water. Kempi met her at the stream and exchanged a few words. Returning home a while later, Giddi lifted the lid of the rice vessel to see if it had been cooked but was surprised to see something dark floating on the surface. How could anything have fallen when the lid had remained as it was? When she took the wick-lamp near the oven she found a small chameleon. Had it fallen even when she had poured the rice in the boiling water? Not likely. She cooked supper all over again. When Thimma came home, the meal was not ready Giddi told him the reason. It confirmed his belief that there was somebody in the village who was intent on killing them or at least making them run away. In a wild mood he ran to Karia with the pot. Karia was also puzzled. How could a chameleon get into the house? A lizard, he could understand, but not a chameleon. The whole incident was too mysterious for any action to be taken. "If it happens again let us pursue it. For the present tell your wife to keep an eye on those who come and go," he told Thimma and sent him away.

CHAPTER XIV

To onlookers Thimma and his wife lived happily, but to them, in the grip of fear, each day was a trial. They sat up with a start when they heard foot-steps outside their hut. They peered closely at the food they cooked before eating it. To their dread of a new poison attempt was added another worry. When Bhatta returned to his new house after the rains, he wanted two maidservants for work. One was not enough; the house was so much bigger. Kempi would be there, of course, and Bhatta wanted Giddi. Thimma refused. He did not send her but went there himself. He told Bhatta that his wife had not been well for some time, and because she was with child it wouid be dlfficult for her to manage work both at home and there. Kempi, who was listening to the conversation, butted in : "Why do you need two people? Am I not doing the work all right? I am strong enough to look after ten such houses." That was what Thimma had wanted. Bhatta could not compel him but nursed a grudge. Thimma knew he had to be more watchful then ever. That gave his face a permanent mask of sullenness.

The incident irked Kempi also, because it was proof that Bhatta fancied Giddi. She took greater pains to please Bhatta, loaded herself with flowers, and walked about like a royal mare. But all this did not quell her disquiet on account of her rival. What Thimma had said made her even more resentful.

Giddi was not only about to oust her in Bhatta's affections but had beaten her at another game. She took care to hide her feelings and pretended to be ever more friendly with Giddi. She even asked Giddi whether it was true about the child, and when Giddi confessed, she flashed a smile which was as warm as her heart was full of hate.

The innocent Giddi did not for a moment distrust Kempi, despite all her husband's theories. After spending unbearable months of loneliness and despair, she now had a friend who loved her and helped her. Her present affection, in Giddi's estimate, more than compensated for the harm she had done in the past. If Kempi had accepted her, might not the others also relent in course of time? That was why Giddi was not enthusiastic about Thimma's plan to quit the hill. Often she appealed to Karia to prevent her husband from going away to some unknown, unpeopled forest.

Soon came an event which left them no choice. Though Giddi did not go to work in Bhatta's house, she could not remain at home all the while. She had, in her daily round of work, to go to the stream to bring water, and to the thickets to collect firewood. She had go to out to dig roots for food and catch crabs and fish, like all the Kudia housewives. Also, how could a woman so young as she stay indoors like an invalid? Unlike other women, however, she had mostly to go alone on her errands. But she found that twice when she was near the stream, Bhatta hovered there for no reason at all. He had even sought to chit-chat with her. She had cut him short and hurried home. A day or two later she told Thimma what had happened, not as a complaint but just as a casual report. "The brute! I do not know what he eats that makes him so," he said. The gruffness of his reply surprised Giddi.

mma in his own mind decided to keep a vigil over Giddi as had once done over Kempi. Would she also go that way? thought tormented him. From that day, whenever Giddi nt out, Thimma also went out on some pretext or other, for nt or for collecting rattan stock, and was always within shot of her.

One day Giddi took a spade and a basket and went to the rest. She saw a tapioca patch at the food of a big tree and e set to digging it. All of a sudden she heard somebody ll her name. She turned round to see Bhatta almost standing bove her. She was alarmed and sprang aside, throwing her pade and her basket. Whether Bhatta felt embarrassed, she id not know; without wasting a moment she hurried home-vard. Bhatta would not let go of his prey so easily. He ollowed her and soon overtook her. Giddi screamed in terror when Bhatta held her. Thimma had been waiting for just such a thing to happen. He had known his master well. From where he stood he took aim and hurled the mallet that he always carried to drive pegs for his traps. Giddi did not see what happened for she was already running home. The mallet went straight to its target and hit Bhatta on his forehead. He reeled down and Thimma sprang forward, wanting to strangle him. But when he saw that there was blood where Bhatta had fallen and that he was stiff and motionless he was terrified and fled. In an instant he was in his hut. He caught Giddi by the hand and said in a hoarse whisper: "It is all over, all over. Our link with the hill is at an end. Delay will be ruin. We must go away. This place will give us no peace."

Giddi did not know what had happened but she could make out that it was something terrible. Asking would be no

use. She still trembled from the panic she had felt when those strange and lustful fingers had pressed into her body. Without a word more they went away, making a bundle of a couple of pots and pans and the few clothes they possessed. They did not know where they were headed, and did not care to look back at the hut which had given them so much pain.

Tukra, who has returning from the Big Hill, was aghast to see Bhatta sprawling unconscious across the forest path. He dipped his neck-cloth in a spring and wrapped it round Bhatta's forehead. He brought some water in a leaf cup and poured it down his parted lips. Slowly Bhatta came to. Tukra wanted to know what had happened. But Bhatta did not answer. Watching his tongue-tied master, Tukra believed some evil spirit had seized him. He ran to the village and brought a handful of people. They made a hammock and carried him home. The villagers who crowded round him asked him once again what had happened. Bhatta said something had hit him on his cheek when he was out on a walk in the morning. The villagers were convinced it was the handiwork of their familiar evil spirit, Guliga. Bhatta knew better, but he did not open his mouth.

The next day Kempi did a sleuth's work. She had noticed that there was no light or sound in Thimma's house the previous night. Their door was ajar and there was no trace of them anywhere. Their flight, she surmised, had to do with Bhatta. It did not take her long to guess what must have happened. She had known all the three principal actors in the drama. She remembered how Thimma had sought to intervene in a similar incident earlier on. Kempi was delighted. What she had wanted to do the fates had done : her rival had been removed from the scene.

Kempi spread the news. A few thought at first that Thimma might have gone to Giddi's house on the Big Hill. But Tukra had been there that very day and had not seen them. The village did not lament thier departure. Karia alone took it to heart. Thimma had often told him that he could never expect to be happy in that place, but Karia had not imagined he would run away without even telling him. Not till now had Karia realised how much he was attached to Thimma and his wife. She used to confide in him many of her sorrows which she could not tell her husband. They were now gone. Karia felt anxious for them, concerned about the perils unknown that they might run into. He spent the first few days scouring the hills in and around his home in the hope that he might sight them. When a week of search yielded no result, his hope receded and gloom settled on him, which he had to hide from others.

One day Bhatta sent word to him. When he was at the master's place, Bhatta began : ''Karia, you are the Headman of all the inhabitants of this hill. If anything untoward happens, are you not the person who should find out the culprits?''

''What has happened, master, so untoward?''

''I have been wanting to tell you this for more than a week. Listen, some days ago I kept a gold chain somewhere in my home. It is the one I used to wear round my neck. It is not to be seen. The day I lost it coincides with the day on which your Thimma and his outcaste wife ran away. I am not making any baseless charge. I searched the house a dozen times, and I am convinced it is their work. Otherwise, what reason had they to run away?''

Karia felt as though a nail had been driven through his

heart. He could not believe that Thimma, of all people, would steal a piece of gold. Theft in the blaze of noon? They had fled in terror. But a petty crime would not have caused such terror? He told Bhatta that he could not brand them as criminals so readily.

"If I had seen them do it, there would be no need for me to tell you. I am only pointing out that they ran away the same day that my chain vanished. I have been looking after all of you as my own children. In return, that man treats me worse than a withered stalk of rice.....As headman it is your duty to produce them before me. Whether they have stolen or not, we must find them out wherever they are. You are so thick with them and you can do it easily."

Karia could not deny that he was friendly with Thimma. That was in fact his sorrow, that they had not told even him. He recounted to Bhatta the two poison attempts and how the persecuted couple lived in constant fear of their neighbours. Their flight, he said, might have something to do with this. But Bhatta was too much a man of the world to yield to the reasoning of a mountain lad. He called all the men of the village and in Karia's presence gave orders that Thimma must be brought back, alive or dead.

This gave Tukra and Booda some work to do, and they went about it with gusto. Karia joined them, for his plan was to save Thimma if possible. Work in the cardamom gardens was at a standstill for nearly a week, while the men probed cave and thicket for the missing man and his wife. Karia snatched some time to visit the Big Hill. It was news to Giddi's parents. Karia and they went to the priest's house and asked him questions. The first was: Who had stolen the chain from Bhatta's house? The next was: What had

happened to Thimma and Giddi? The priest rolled out four cowries, gazed at them, made some calculations, took a thick needle and scratched the ground, closed his eyes, muttered something inaudible, and then announced that if the chain had been stolen at all, the thief was not from among the Kudias. Karia felt relieved. In answer to the second question the priest told Karia that his friends were alive, they were in fear, they were in the east and they would come one day. East? The east was a vast place, Karia pondered. How to search such a huge area? He could not believe that Thimma would leave the hills which had cradled him and cross the Ghats and live on the plains. And there was a child growing in Giddi's womb. How many months could they afford to spend without friend or help in inhospitable mountains? Who would go to their rescue if something happened to them? All these worries made Karia search for them even more earnestly. Giddi's parents did not keep quiet either.

Every day Bhatta asked him what progress he had made. The other men had long ago given up the chase as useless. Booda's nephew had visited every cave he knew, without result. Bhatta kept saying: "Let us catch him. Then I will skin him alive." Karia could not understand the reason for such vehemence. So much rage over a little theft, why?

Life lost savour for Karia. To forget his blankness he did the work of four oxen on the field and returned home in the evening every joint of his body creaking. Even then sleep eluded him. Booda went to him four or five times and asked: "Why should you go on cooking your own gruel? Stay in your own hut if you want, but come to us for food. Both Kempi and I want you to do this at least till you get a wife

for yourself.'' Karia was silent. ''Is it a wife you want? Is that why you are so moody? Tell me, I shall find you a bride,'' Booda continued. Karia cut him short. Nobody need bother about a wife for him. He would marry when he felt like it. One evening, Kempi came herself to speak to him. Karia was looking more than ever melancholy. ''How depressed and weak you look, Karia! You should not pine for Giddi so much,'' said Kempi, the snake-tongued. It provoked him and he knew she had meant to provoke.

''Aunt of mine, Giddi has a husband who has taken her in troth. Speak what you want about me, as long as you say it to my face. Do not speak ill of a person who is away,'' he said in a low, firm voice.

''Yes, my good man, even if they are thieves they are your angels. And we are dust.''

''Let their tongue rot at the root of those who say they are thieves.''

He had never spoken in that manner to Kempi or to anyone else. The blood rushed to her face and she went away without another word. Karia now knew how much he hated her. He avoided any further encounter with her. That did not prevent Kempi from telling her husband : ''If he had not been carrying on with Giddi, why should he feel so forlorn?''

One day it occurred to Karia that he had not taken the priest's word seriously and searched the eastern region with thoroughness. For miles and miles to the east there were hills and beyond them the plateau. Where in this expanse could he spot two specks that were his friends? It would be a mad man's chance; still he would take it. The next morning he left for Maleraya's cave. For a moment he felt like calling Booda's nephew, but he thought it would not be right.

Booda might come to know and from him Kempi and from her the whole world. He went alone and in two or three hours he reached the cave. He sat in a corner and poked a few pieces of charred wood and ashes that he saw near him. Among them he found a piece of wild potato. He took it in his hand and pressed it open. It was not moist inside but it was not too dry either. Somebody must have cooked it a week ago or at the most ten days. If they were not in this cave, they could not be far off. He went along the ridge of the hill, and turning southwards jumped down a cluster of rocks. It was from here that as a child he and Booda's nephew had run away after seeing the shining eyes of a bear. He continued to walk along the sloping edge of the rocks for two hundred yards more, till he stepped on to a meadow. Grass grew there to the height of a young cow. Karia fancied he saw some footprints and examined the marks. They were footsteps all right; grass-stalks had been broken under someone's tread. He walked onward, till he came to the foot of another hill. That hill rose high, turned inward and joined the main range of the Ghats. It was unlikely that anybody would live in so forbidding a place. Karia was tired. He sat down and let his eye wander idly. Right ahead of him, he saw another fold of the hill going down to where it met the far-away plain of Sisila. This slope was covered with young forest. At a great distance, almost near the horizon, the cattle of Sisila could be seen grazing. Beyond them were paddy fields looking as though they were tiny tamarind leaves arranged on a plank. Karia sat gazing at this distant view for a long time. The breeze blew now from this side and now from that, because there was a horse-shoe of hills around the place he sat. The wind brought the sound of dried leaves; and now it was the

ripple of a distant stream that he heard. The wind rubbed the trunks and branches of trees and broke into many whistles. Karia's ears caught all these sounds, and suddenly he heard murmurs of human voices. He pricked his ears, and stood up in the hope of hearing better. There was no doubt that he had heard voices. The sound was more distinct when the breeze blew from the north. Karia resolved he would put it to test and gave a "kook, kook"—the familiar call of the Kudias—above the noise of the forest. There was no reply. Not only that; the voices stopped abruptly. That made him more inquisitive. He walked north. The short grass showed marks that were unmistakably those of human feet. In ten minutes he came to the foot of a huge rock which completely shut off his view. He looked up and found that the top of the rock jutted forward like the cap of a toadstool. He searched for a path to go up the rock and found that the track on the grass he had followed led upwards. He scaled the place. But there was nobody. When he was about to get down as one gets down a ladder, with fingers clutching the grass roots and the toes feeling for a hold, he suddenly heard a voice: "Who is that? Karianna?" It was Thimma. Karia looked over his shoulders; yes, it was Thimma. A miracle that Karia did not lose his grip and roll down the slope into the creek below. He found a foothold, and edged sideways where he found the entrance of a cave. Like a monkey he sprang forward and embraced Thimma. Karia had never seen so unusual a cave. It was like a cavity in a mushroom where the stalk spreads out into the umbrella. Thimma and his wife hid in that hollow determined to defy the world. All three were too overcome with emotion to speak. Giddi's tear-filled eyes were more eloquent than words. Karia broke the silence. "What made

you run away?'' he asked. It was a question he had wanted to ask for days. ''But that later,'' Thimma said, and he dragged Karia inside the cave to give him a burnt piece of sweet potato. From Thimma, Karia came to know many things for the first time. Bhatta, for whom he had regard and even devotion, was he such a lurid, lecherous man? Karia told himself that in a similar situation he would have acted no differently from Thimma. Yes, Karia thought, he too might have to leave one day.

He spent the night there. Taking leave of them in the morning he said : ''Do not vanish from here before I come again. This is no spot to pass the rainy season, I know. It is too open to the wind. But do wait for me. I shall be here within a week. Tell me if you need anything ; I shall bring it when I come.''

No, they had all they needed. But Giddi made a request : that he should tell her parents that they were alive.

Back home, Karia laboured in the fields with the others. Bhatta many times interrogated him : ''Any news of Thimma? You must be in the know ; that is why you are so silent.'' In other circumstances Karia would have spoken back, but now the responsibility of guarding Thimma's secret was his. He pretended not to have been offended.

Not till Bhatta left was he at ease. The very next morning he tied some paddy in a bundle and hurried to Thimma's place. On the way he asked himself why he should not throw in his lot with Thimma and go away from the harrowing life of the village. From childhood he had wanted to be a carefree hunter and a tamer of elephants, but here he was, required to play the Headman of his village.

CHAPTER XV

Karia spent days and nights finding a new hide-out for Thimma. When people in the village asked him where he had been all night, he had a ready answer—that he had spent the night on a palm-tree catching hedgehogs. The Kudias are as fond of hedgehog meat as hedgehogs are of sharing the Kudias' toddy. As the hedgehogs creep up the palms to raid the toddy-pots tied at the top, the Kudias lie in wait for them among the fronds and push them into the toddy pots. Karia was not particularly enamoured of either toddy or hedgehog meat but they were a good alibi.

After spending one such night in the woods, Karia, instead of going homewards, pushed further on. He walked a long time until he came to the base of the main hill range. Along the side of the hill he saw a patch clearly marked out from jungle shrubbery. Evidently it was an elephant walk. At a good distance a small hill branched off from the range. It looked inviting and Karia was there in a couple of hours. He climbed to its top, and found that on the other side there was a sheer drop of almost five hundred feet. The rim was bare and craggy. Scanning the landscape from there, Karia detected at a distance the rock in whose belly Thimma lived. Right below where he stood was a plain six to eight acres in area, protected by tall rocks. Karia got down to the place and found a number of caves in the rocks. One of them

contained a spring, whose water was cool and clear. The cave was screened from fierce winds by tall trees. That, Karia decided, was the place he had been looking for. It had many advantages. On three sides the hill sloped downwards. That meant it was safe from the ravages of elephants and bison. The plain was large enough to grow paddy. They could live there by themselves, without anybody's fear or favour. But could a man be so totally independent of his fellow beings? Suppose something unforeseen occurred and others' help was needed, where could he go? Who would come there? If for nothing else at least for salt and cloth they had to be dependent on the outside world. Turning over all these in his mind, Karia spent the night in the place he had discovered. The hight convinced him that the place was at least safe from wind.

When he woke up, the sun had already risen. He washed his face in the spring, dug up a few tubers of sweet potato, made a fire with the flints he carried in his belt, burnt the potato, ate some of it, tied the rest in a parcel for the way and set out again. He had to go through another thick jungle. The monkeys cried 'booo-booo.' The descent became steeper. When he was half way down, trees hid everything else from view. Not knowing where he was, he climbed a tree to get his bearings. The tree was well over the height of two coconut palms. What he saw pleased him. Quite nearby was a line of stone-heaps marking some boundary. He slid down the tree and followed the course marked by the stones. The place teemed with cardamom plants, fragrant and untouched. This was evidence that no person had gone there to claim the produce. Two or three miles further on, he

came to a clearning in the forest. It was a ribbon of gras cut amidst the forest, running east-west. "Aha," Karia tol himself, "this again is a boundary. It means there must be village near at hand." He had guessed rightly, for he soon came upon a track which could have been only made by the feet of cattle. Following it he reached a small hamlet. Men were at work, who told him the village was called Kukkaralli. Three miles from there, he learnt from them, was the cart track which led to Shirali. He begged some gruel from them and hastened back to the place he had fixed up for Thimma. He just made it by nightfall.

The next day Karia set out for Thimma's place and gave him a short account of his doings during the preceding two or three days. After a meal of sweet potato and berries, Karia took Thimma to the place he had discovered. Thimma liked it immensely. It was not as big as he would have wished and the climb was a little too steep, but it had many advantages. It was free from the inroads of beasts. And what Karia said about the cardamom which grew in wild excess all around was true. They could collect and dry it and sell it to Kukkaralli in return for all the salt and cloth they needed.

Karia returned to the Little Hill after nearly a week's absence. A few days more and he could leave the place, may be forever. He was eager to go back and help Thimma to begin paddy planting in his new home. The parting did not prove simple. The village elders had fixed a feast for Kulkuda fifteen days from then. As headman he had to be there. That would be the last time he would officiate. It was a duty he need not shirk before freeing himself from its shackles.

Bhatta did not attend the feast that year. People of the two hills, as their wont, brought roosters and hogs and even

sheep. Karia took a large hog, telling himself that this was probably his last sacrament with Kalkuda. As required by custom they bathed and stood in rows in front of the little shrine. As soon as the spirit came upon the priest, the headmen of both the villages stepped forward and offered swords and flowers. The priest heaved and convulsed, and shouted above the roar of the drums. Screaming at the top of his voice he poured out a long list of grievances, as the deity always did: "Injustice has grown in my realm; jealousy has increased. People have begun practising black magic. I know who wrap treachery in soft words, who mix poison in rice. I know them all and let them beware." Each man present averted his gaze from the other but tried by glances to find out who wore a guilty look. This was the first time Kalkuda had ever mentioned black magic and it obviously referred, the Kudias thought, to what had taken place in Thimma's house some time ago. Karia was sure of it. But nobody went forward to own up. If they did how could they live in the village any longer? There were many who had other questions to ask of Kalkuda. Booda had long ago rehearsed his. Before he could open his mouth, Karia began: "There is one thing, deity, that you will have to solve. There is an accusation on our head. We are told that gold has been stolen from our master's house. Tell us who are the thieves, punish them without mercy and save our honour. Until you point out the thieves, I am placing my headmanship at your foot. I do not want it."

Kalkuda yelled: "What did you say? What is it?" Karia repeated what he had said and Booda explained Karia's words.

The demon roared: "Theft, did you say? Gold has been stolen? And from your master's house? Who is it that says

so ? Let the loser come and tell me. I will answer him. Is the diety of the hill too small for your master ? None of my children has done it.''

There was an animated murmur in the crowd. But neither Karia nor Booda seemed satisfied. Booda took his master's part and expostulated : ''Forbear, Kalkuda. Do not be displeased with master. When has he failed to render you the due honours ? Invariably he bears the expenses of the worship. If he is not present now it is only because of work. You should be forgiving.''

''I am glad to hear that he will continue to obey me. But if he has really lost the gold, I shall give it to his hand.''

At which Karia asked the question he had wanted to ask : ''Lord, do not get angry that I am asking you. There are reports in the entire village that Giddi and Thimma have stolen this gold. Most people believe it. Is it true ?''

Giddi's father Choma made more bold and said : ''God of our forefathers, you have always looked after us. It is your duty to protect my daughter and her husband. If they have sinned, ruin seize them. But if they have been forced to run away unable to bear other people's injustice, it is your duty to comfort them.''

They waited for an answer. After a few minutes of incomprehensible muttering Kalkuda burst out : ''Who says Thimma and his wife are thieves ? I know who wronged them and who drove them out of the village. I shall punish their tormentors.''

Then in the customary manner Kalkuda sang more praises of his own prowess and, without naming any names, condemned wrongdoers. The oration ended up in a rumble. The rest was for the villagers to do. Whoever wanted to

confess could come forward and do so. If they did not, the terror in their own hearts would be their undoing.

Karia was overjoyed that Thimma had been exonerated. His thoughts turned to what he should do next. He toyed with the idea of leaving the same night. But to go away without giving reasons would not bring honour. The man who absconds is suspect. The better way was boldly to renounce his headmanship in the presence of all the villagers. Once he decided on the course, his heart was at rest. Meanwhile he joined in the fun with enthusiasm and chatted away animatedly with everyone, particularly with Choma of the Big Hill. After the sun went down, the Kudias lit bonfires and sat in rings around them for dinner. Before singing and dancing could follow, Karia drew everybody's attention to himself by standing up to say something. He was halting at the start, but, as he went on, his voice gathered force and emotion. He said he had been born on the Little Hill and had obeyed the clan rules. They had made him headman though he was young. He had tried his best to do his duty. When he had decided many a dispute they had stood by him. But he no longer wanted that position and the responsibility that went with it. They had heard Kalkuda's words that afternoon. There were many amongst them who could not view with equanimity Thimma's and Giddi's happiness. They had even tried to mix poison in their food, because of which that hapless couple had fled. Not because they stole, but because they were afraid to live in the place. He, Karia, was not afraid to speak out. He could say boldly what he felt about one man, the master, who had falsely accused Thimma of theft because he wanted to punish him for reasons not all the Kudias knew. Kalkuda would take care of Thimma, but as long as unscrupulous

masters ruled over the hill, he, Karia, did not wish to be headman. He could afford to be afraid of nobody, of nothing. He knew Thimma's whereabouts, as Booda had alleged. He certainly did, and he was going to Thimma, who had run away because that was the only way of escaping from the designs of the master. The deity had at last brought out the truth. Things had been said about himself too. But he did not care. He was going.

He left the place abruptly and in tears. The group was too stunned to realise what had happened. Booda, who loved Karia more than a son, and who had promised the old Headman on his deathbed that he would stand by his grandson, was the first to grasp the truth. He sprang up and ran in the direction Karia had disappeared into the night. A few others joined the search, but Karia was not to be found. There was no merry-making that night. People went back to their huts in silence and bewilderment.

When Karia did not come back even after a week, the clan realised how earnest and upright the young headman had been. They could not remain leaderless for long, however, and a successor had to be chosen. It was not an easy task, for they could not displease either Kalkuda or the master. Tukra's old ambition revived and he hurried to Vitla. In four days he brought the master to the hill.

The villagers came out in trickles of twos and threes and gathered in front of Bhatta's house. Bhatta was less assertive this time. If he nominated someone whom the villagers disliked, that would be further food for Kalkuda's anger. In a circumspect way he said: "You know what happened last time when a Headman had to to be chosen. I am not interested in getting entangled in your quarrels. I am not as free as

efore – I have the burden of two hills on my shoulders. For ny work let the present arrangements continue, Tukra looking fter the Big Hill and Booda this Hill. As for your clan customs, it is your look-out. Choose anybody you like. It is all the same to me, provided you choose an elderly man who is intelligent."

"And," he added unexpectedly, "When Karia chooses to return, the headmanship must be given back to him."

Booda was unenthusiastic and Tukra had done some canvassing. So Tukra was elected headman without another name being mentioned. The new position put verve into him and he now repeated openly what he had told Bhatta on the way back from Vitla : "Master, you should have come to the feast. Kalkuda said he would have given you satisfaction if you had been there in person. The deity even asserted that Thimma had nothing to do with the theft."

Bhatta, who was chewing betel, thoughtfully got down from the stone bench in front of his house, went to the edge of the yard, placed two fingers across his mouth, squirted out the blood-red betel juice, wiped his lips, returned to his seat, smiled, and said : "Ah! I had quite forgotten to tell you. It is true I was very sore at losing the gold chain last time I was here. But when I went back to Vitla and was unpacking my boxes, there it was. Whatever that be still Thimma, who had eaten my salt, had no right to run away. And now your Karia has done it. What respect will a master have if such things take place? Have I ever said anything against Karia? Thimma, I admit, had some rough treatment at my hands, but Karia ?"

Bhatta had easily dismissed the affair of the gold chain, but the others thought about it for long. Some were glad that a blot on the name of the clan had been removed. Many

commented on how true Kalkuda's words had been. Booda was not thinking of the gold chain at all, but of what Bhatta had said about Karia. "Master, after all he is a boy. He has run away, but he may return one day. You should not be upset by what he has done. I assure you his heart is gold," he interceded. But Tukra said: "Boy, what boy? Boy or no boy he was the headman and it was his duty to weigh his words before he spilt them. He has maligned our master in everybody's presence and that is not a trifling matter."

With the formalities of electing a new headman over, Bhatta went back to his town. This visit had given him not the least pleasure. For some reason or other Kempi had stayed away from him and did not go to work at his house.

Kempi had been late in going to Kalkuda's feast. She had not heard what Kalkuda had said, but learnt it from her people. The demon's imprecation ruffled her. Thimma and Giddi had been absolved and Kalkuda's anger had turned on her. He had known her guilt, and he had declared that he would claim the head of the miscreant. Terror took hold of her. If she could have confessed in the presence of others she would have done so. But with what face could she own that she had mixed poison in food and put a chameleon in the rice pot? There was only one person other than Kalkuda to whom she could own it: the headman, the repository of the honour and the clemency of the clan. From him she could have claimed pardon for her grievous guilt. But even that she could not now do, for Karia had gone away. Now Tukra, her inveterate foe, was headman. Death was far better than to crave his pardon.

With each day Kempi felt more terrified, and was soon unable to eat. A strange speechlessness overtook her. Booda

asked her what ailed her. She could only say that every part of her body seemed to burn. She promptly brought out whatever food was forced down her throat. Her eyes were a picture of fear.

Kempi's nameless ailment daily grew worse. She lived in a never-ending nightmare. She saw pictures of strange devils, and she described in an eerie voice the torments they put her to. Now and then she burst into screams as though some invisible hand was striking her, and she called for Karia. Not knowing what to do, Booda ran to the Big Hill and brought her father and mother. They were aghast at their daughter's state. She could not recognise them, did not answer their questions and made meaningless gestures. They sent for the priest who sat by her side and muttered all kinds of chants and tried all the tricks of the witch-doctor's trade. He made dolls from the core of plantain stalks and built arches from coconut leaves and poured vermilion water and turmeric on her. He even killed a rooster to guard against present and future evils. To give hope to her people, whom hope had forsaken, he tied a power-invoked talisman around her neck. Whatever could be done was done, but the talisman proved ineffective. The same evening her fever rose and for two days she tossed about as on a bed of fire. There was the look of death on her face. The tongue rolled in her mouth but made no speech. It looked as though she expected somebody's arrival.

From the feast Karia went straight to Thimma's cave. From there they moved to their new home. They cut some trees and the three of them set to work levelling the field that was their own. The field was ready, but what of seed? Karia took a circuitous path and went to Choma's house on the Big Hill to bring some paddy. Giddi's parents did not let him go soon. They made him stay for food. He told them about

their new life and they spoke of the affairs of the Little Hill. When he was about to leave, in walked the priest. Karia's plan of slipping away as secretly as he had come was foiled. Giddi's father, who had not seen the priest for two days, asked him where he had been. The priest told them Kempi's story. Karia was shaken. She was no angel, but she had been his foster-mother. The custom of the tribe demanded that he go and see her in her last days. He waited until nightfall and went to the Little Hill. The dying woman's husband heard footsteps at the door and peeped out to see who it was. Karia stepped in noiselessly but Booda burst out into a sob he had long suppressed. "My son, it is all over with me now," he wept, hugging Karia. Weak, fitful flames in the fire-place at the corner lit up the haggard Kempi's face. Booda took Karia to her and whispered in her ear: "You were asking for Karia. He has come." Karia sank on his knees, clutched her elbow and with a tear-choked voice asked her: "Aunt of mine, what has happened to you?" In the tricky shadows Kempi could not catch his face but she could not mistake his voice. There was a flash of recognition in her eyes and with a desperate effort she lisped: "Headman, headman, I am wicked. I have done evil." They were the first words she had spoken in days and they were her last. There were tears in her eyes which would not flow. Karia's only consolation was that he had at least sat by the deathbed of one who had given him food and shelter.

When dawn broke the woman's body was burning at the far edge of the forest clearing. Though not the headman, Karia like a headman prayed to the spirits of the elders to accept her in their midst. Compelled by Booda he stayed there for a week, conducted the last rites as though he had been Kempi's son, and vanished again.

CHAPTER XVI

In the first months of their new life, no obstacle seemed insurmountable to Karia, Thimma and Giddi. Giddi worked as hard as the two men. With sickle and hatchet they cut down an acre of forest and cleared it of shrubs. They levelled the ground, set fire to twigs and stumps and sowed the seeds that Karia had brought from Choma. Small though their field, it had still to be protected from the forest animals. Herds of elephant and bison could not come there but they had to be on guard against hogs and all varieties of deer. By the time they built a makeshift fence, the rains had set in. True to tradition they had to have a monsoon hut apart from their cave. Karia undertook to be watchman.

The Kudias had been supposedly free men for generations. Where they built a hut, that place became theirs. They raised a crop where they willed. In law, however, all the region belonged to some landlord or other. The Kudias were hereditary servants of these masters. They had to give four months of their year for the master's work without wage or reward. In return they got a few bits of cloth, salt, and a couple of coins for the toddy they tapped. They coveted no money, for their way of life had little need of it, but there were times when they felt an intangible sense of dependence. But as long as they had strength left in their shoulders they had little worry.

Although life was strenuous for the fugitives, they experienced the joy of freedom and of being their own masters. Now and then, of course, they felt their loneliness. There was nobody to sit back and chat with, to pour out their hearts to, or to share the small happinesses with. Most keenly did they feel the absence of company when the time approached for Giddi to have her child. There was no woman near, who knew how to help a woman at such a moment. Thimma, remembering the first misfortune, felt lost. But Karia was determined that something should be done. Though the skies showed no mercy, he got down the hill and almost crawled to Kukkaralli, the nearest place where other humans lived. He told the story to an elderly couple who promised to help, provided the young woman was brought to the village. He and Thimma tied a blanket to a pole and made a hammock in which they somehow carried Giddi down the hill. It was a feat only the foolhardy Kudias would have attempted in such weather and such a terrain. They did it because it was a matter of life and death. Thimma stayed on to await the arrival of the child but Karia returned to the hill, for the fruit of a year's labour had to be saved from hogs. If he wanted to be king of the forest he had also to be watchman.

Giddi gave birth to a boy. Fortunately there had not been much trouble. From where he lived Karia guessed all had gone well. Otherwise Thimma would have run to him. Karia had his hands full with work. Apart from looking after the paddy on their field, he identified every one of the cardamom plants in the vicinity, cleared the weeds and creepers around their roots, pared a tree or two to make the place less unapproachable. He did not mind donating some of his blood to leeches when he had work to do. Only one thing bothered

him: did the place have any master unknown to him, who might suddenly descend on them and snatch what was theirs by labour? In reality, on the map, even this area was Bhatta's property. But he had never fully seen the many square miles that belonged to him. Without either Karia or he knowing it, they had thus still something to do with each other.

A couple of months after the birth of the child, taking advantage of a break in the rains, Thimma hurried up the hill to give Karia the news. The Kudias' rules for nursing mothers enjoined total rest for three months. Thimma was worried that for a month more he would not be able to bring his wife and son home. Another of his problems was how to repay the help given by Gowda of Kukkaralli who had looked after them and fed them. "Why do you rack your brain unnecessarily? Go back to the village and return after the rains stop. And tell Gowda there that we have cardamom on the hill and we can give him that," Karia suggested.

Karia had many things to do while Thimma was away. But there were moments of relative leisure which he spent loitering in the forest. As a son of the woods he had trained his ear to catch the slightest rustling anywhere, and he was rewarded often with the sight of herds of deer or bison roaming unconcerned. At such moments he ceased to be hunter and became something of an artist. He so forgot himself on occasions that he walked right behind such herds for miles. He even caught glimpses of tigers and leopards from his tree-top perch and felt a thrill watching their graceful movements. Once he caught a young deer in a trap. It had a golden brown hide marked by rows of white spots. It reminded him of Thimma's child and he took it home and fed it with leaves and shoots. He beamed like a young father

when it followed him about. There were moments when he wondered about raising a family himself. But how could a man who had disowned his clan get a bride?

One afternoon, at the end of the monsoon, a little procession reached the cave. Thimma brought back his wife and child. The journey tired her but she was proud and happy to be back. She and Thimma had one ardent wish now — to show the child to its grandparents. But they had already been too long away from their farm and it was unwise to leave when harvest-time was at hand.

Giddi, the young mother, appeared even more radiant than she had as bride. Gone was the look of mute defeat. Thimma and Karia had a good deal of work to do on their field. A farm is a farm even if it is only a span's width. All the monkeys of the forest seemed bent on ruining their rice stalks. Then there were squirrels, hard to chase away. Parrots and sparrows thought the paddy had been grown for them. Karia and Thimma ached their shoulders scaring away the birds with the help of sling-shots. Their vigil enabled them to gather at least half of what they had grown. Near the entrance to their cave there was a pit which had been made by the dripping of water. Into this they poured handfuls of paddy and pounded it with sticks they had cut from the forest. On the day Giddi cooked the rice they had themselves grown, Karia and Thimma could not contain their pride. An old temptation suddenly returned. Karia declared that now that they were their own kings, they should catch an elephant— at least a baby elephant.

"You are mad, Karia," Thimma said, "I thought you had outgrown that childish whim. You seem to think it is easy. Why, Gowda below the hills told me that last year a herd of

rowdy elephants raided his betel garden and ruined it. I asked him why they had not caught one or two of the animals. Gowda was afraid the Government would take him to task. He said he was afraid even to fire at them."

"Thimma, listen. Call me a fool if you want to, but before I die I will catch an elephant and ride on its back. There are so many in our hills that it cannot be all that difficult to catch one."

They had work to think of: after the toil on the paddy field, the wild cardamom had to be picked and dried. They guessed they had nearly five maunds. If they gave it all to Gowda in the valley, not only would it be a return for his kindness but would also pay for their cloth and salt through the year. They built a long oven, and burnt twigs and fuel to heat its surface on which they dried the cardamom.

The chilly season that followed was an invitation to new activity. With the stock of rice they had, not much of hunting was required for three people's food. Even though Thimma preferred to spend his time playing with his son, Karia dragged him out. In a couple of trips to Kukkaralli they carried most of the cardamom they had grown. Gowda knew that what they brought him was worth more than the help he had rendered. By temperament he was not grasping. The place where he lived was bounteous the year round. His main worry was about the wild animals which damaged his crops and lifted cattle. The village had also one want—lack of men to work on the fields. Of the twenty grown men in the village, two or three were always down with fever. Gowda had been happy to help Thimma, not from any expectation of profit but because he knew that here were two who would willingly give any help asked in the work of the farm and in beating back the menace of wild animals.

Whenever Thimma and Karia visited them, they took something they had hunted—flying squirrels or deer or mountain sheep, all of which Gowda was particularly fond of. When, during one of his visits, Karia had pointed out to Gowda the distant hill where they lived and the crag where their cave was, Gowda was astonished. For in the opinion of the people of Kukkaralli that crag was the devil's rock. There were many in the village who had heard the jingle of bells and the screaming of spirits from the direction of the rock on new-moon nights. That these three people lived there all by themselves was enough to make them a symbol of courage in Kukkaralli. Like their courage, their simplicity also endeared them to Gowda and his people. Gowda visited them in their cave-home, and in six months they became more than friends. Gowda learnt from Karia many new points in laying snares. He even held bow and arrow and shot down birds. However, he could not wander as nonchalantly in the forests as Karia. If they saw a tiger or a bison at a distance Gowda hesitated to move forward. But Karia invariably dragged him onward, remarking : "If we do not harm them, they will not harm us." His recklessness astonished Gowda. How could danger be treated so lightly? Whether he had to come up to the cave-home or return to his village, he always needed Karia or Thimma as escort. He had no faith in the goodness of the creatures of the forest. How many times had not elephants and bison attacked and ruined his sugarcane fields and his betelnut gardens? Right then a tiger had been visiting the village and lifting cattle, even in broad daylight. He had bought a gun, though he had not used it on anything bigger than deer and partridges.

When Karia heard about the tiger, he made up his mind to

a's gun to use. He told Gowda that the next time
a cow or a bullock he should be sent for. Thimma
encourage him in these designs. He had his own
about tigers and their ways. In the lore of the Kudias,
e deities of the forests that took on the form of tigers
med about. That was why the Kudias so admired
nd were afraid of them. Thimma even said he had it
s father-in-law that the priest of the Big Hill, a master
ery, became a tiger and spent nights on the prowl.
id not reject such stories but he believed that the godly
were different from the usual tigers which menaced
s. Would Gods and magicians harass innocent cattle ?
was nothing wrong in killing tigers which were wicked.
actised on Gowda's gun and waited for the day when
ew accomplishment could be put to test.

Another Sankranthi flitted by. Sankranthi is the herald of
hot season, and its advent is marked by forest fires that
n down the man-high grass and swallow up whole sides
ills. Karia had always been fascinated by the dance of fire.
s year he saw a rare sight. Late one afternoon the air
ked with the smell of smoke. He sniffed it and concluded
at there was a fire somewhere, although it was invisible as
t. When in the evening he looked westward he saw that the
re raged in the place where Thimma had first lived. Beneath
ne black billows of smoke, the tongues of flame were a pale
amber. With the fading of daylight the flames took on an
orange brilliance and shot up taller than the trees. Thimma, as
a home-maker, was afraid that the blaze would spread to
where they lived, but Karia's mind was so gripped by fascina-
tion that there was no place in it for fear. He looked wide-

eyed at every new bush and tree that broke into flames. H
ears were aware only of the "Sirrrrr" of the grass sizzling a
the "chatil, chatil" of live trees exploding in burning fra
ments. The forest had become a huge kiln and never befo
had Karia seen it in such awesome majesty. There was
steady wind blowing and, within an hour or two, a vast tra
of forest on the hills was on fire, the flames showing in reli
the charred trunks of trees. Sheet by sheet the fire rose a
when the last of the layers of flame seized the top of the h
and disappeared in a sudden gloom Karia experienced t
melancholy that follows the end of any grand spectacle. B
the gloom passed and a mood of pious rapture came over hi
At midnight, still awake, he remembered with clarity a sou
he had heard when the conflagration was at its height. It w
a sound he had never heard before, as though rocks sudden
slid down a mountain, as though a swift forest stream ha
swerved from its course and jumped down a precipice carryi
trees and rocks with it. He had concluded rightly that it wa
a herd of bison on the run, escaping from the pursuing flame

Ten days later, Gowda arrived at Karia's cave with tw
men. The climb had tired the farmer but his face showe
anxiety more than weariness. "The tigers have now come t
the plains. Two of my cattle vanished last week They wer
barren cows and I did not greatly mind the loss, but yesterda
a tiger came at midday and killed one of my plough bullocks
It is as bad as losing a son." Gowda had come there to coax
Karia to go with them and hunt the tiger. Thimma implored
Gowda to leave Karia alone. But not all the appeals of Thimma
held Karia back. His moment had come.

Karia had no experience of hunting tigers. But he was not
afraid of them, and was sure of himself. On the way to

Kukkaralli he discussed with Gowda the best way to lure the beast to its doom. For every doubt of Gowda he had an answer ready. But not till they had seen the place where the bullock lay dead could he make his plans. Less than a hundred yards behind Gowda's house there was a little meadow. A dozen trees stood there, none of them tall. Karia saw the dead bullock and wondered how deft and strong the tiger should be to bring down such a hefty animal with just a tug of the neck. He tried to figure out how high it would reach if it sprang. It was disappointing that there was no tree there tall enough for him safely to shoot from. Gowda's gun had a limited range. Beyond a distance the shot would be too weak to kill a tiger.

Karia thought hard. A new approach occured to him. He drove a peg into the ground near the bullock and fastened the animal to it with a strong twisted cord. He asked the men of the village to dig a square pit twenty yards from there. They had to do it quickly, for the sun was already on the decline. The pit was to be six feet deep. The digging over, Karia made them strew some branches and bushes outside the pit as camouflage. He then asked them to bring the wooden bench they used for threshing grain. The bench was larger in size than a cot and was strong. Karia had it covered up with twigs and leaves and made it lean outside the pit on the side facing the dead bullock. If he got down into the pit he could watch the bullock though the strips in the bench, himself unseen. The light was fading fast and if they had any more qualms, they had to abandon them. There was only one gun in the village and only one marksman. What should the others do? Gowda insisted on keeping company with Karia. They must live together or die together. They had a hurried meal

and while traces of daylight still lingered, they got into the pit. Karia loaded the gun and kept a few spare bullets ready. Having greater faith in the weapons inherited from their fathers, they also had with them a sword and a couple of stout sticks. It was not the occasion to exchange many words and they chewed betel to pass the time. How long they had to wait they did not know. Suppose the tiger did not show up at all? They had banked entirely on the theory that the beast would return to its kill. But before Gowda could elaborate his doubts Karia's sharp ears caught the sound of monkeys' chattering. He made sign to Gowda to be silent. He knew that quicker than other animals, monkeys saw a passing tiger or leopard. Their jabbering now had only one meaning. He spat out the betel he had been chewing, thrust the sword into Gowda's hand and giving him a look which meant the moment was approaching, riveted his eyes to the spot where the dead bullock lay. There was still some faint trace of twilight and a half moon hung half way up the sky. It was too early for tigers to move out, unless they were very sure of themselves. From a bush opposite out strode a stocky beast with majestic steps. It went straight to its victim. Karia was all eyes. He watched every shimmer on its striped skin. He drew up his gun, took aim and waited. Gowda crouched behind him. He had not known that the tiger had come, but was as frightened as if he had seen it. The tiger stood still, then craned its neck, shook its head, lay alongside the bullock, seized its hump in its teeth and gave a jerk which uprooted the peg and snapped the cord.

Karia never had such direct evidence of a tigers's strength. If he now hesitated, the beast might carry away the bullock and all their preparations would be in vain. Now or never. If

first shot failed there would be no time to refill the gun, bably no need also. Karia said a short silent prayer to leraya, took in a quick breath and pulled the trigger. He d aimed at the tiger's forehead.

For a few interminable moments he did not know what d happened. Hit in the head, the tiger leapt forward. It nded with a crash on the bench that Karia had used as mouflage for the pit. The villagers who huddled in their huts hundred yards away heard the gunshot and the tiger's roar. etween its yells they could hear the screaming of a man in rror. But none of the men was bold enough, even on mpulse, to fling caution aside and rush to the scene. Without nowing who had won and who had lost, it was too great a sk.

In the pit a different story was being enacted. When the iger landed on it the bench turned over, with its legs in the ir, and became a sort of lid to the pit, covering it completly. The ground around so trembled that Karia fell on Gowda. They were now trapped. Gowda swooned, but Karia, though stunned, quickly recovered enough to see what had happened. The tiger's belly was flat on the upturned bench, and Karia could hazily make out its legs caught in the slits of the bench. The tiger did not give up battle. With every effort it made to pull its legs out the whole bench shook. The tiger drove its teeth into the wood, bent its back to do a roll which would expose its victims. But the bench was too strong and heavy with the tiger's own weight. Karia realised that at the worst the tiger's nails could scratch his head and shoulders, for the pit was deep, and that the bench had saved them from death, at least for the time. On the bench and around the struggling tiger were the branches and leaves they had used as cover and

these shut off the moonlight. But in the thin evanescent pencils of light which passed through the leaves Karia saw how near the tiger's forelegs were to his head. He took a sword and chopped them off. The warm blood of the animal fell on his shoulder and its pungent odour filled the pit. He then managed to pierce the tiger's stomach with the sword. The tiger gave a giant heave so violent that Karia thought that the bench would give way, and the tiger and Gowda and himself would all have a single grave. The beast struggled and its hind paws pierced Karia's skin in the neck. But its shaking grew less violent and its growl had softened into a gasp. "It is dying," Karia thought, and found hope and strength returning to him in a flush. He shouted at the top of his voice for help, calling out to one or two of the villagers by name. He jabbed the frightened Gowda in the ribs and assured him the beast had died and he need not cower in fear. But Gowda would not believe him. With no response to his screams, Karia felt his eyes go dark. There was a drumming in his ears and he leaned on the side of the pit worn out, waiting for help.

The villagers did not know what had happened. Even when they heard only the shouts of Karia and no new roar from the tiger they were not convinced that he had had the better of the encounter. When even his shouts ceased, they were in a fright. Was he dead? Karia, recovered from fatigue, called out again to them. Ten or twelve men now took courage, lit some torches and moved forward step by step, carrying sticks and knives. "Quick, men" Karia shouted. But still they had their doubts. "The tiger may still be hovering about," one said. "The big cat must have died," said another. "Suppose the tiger's mate is somewhere near at hand." a third specu-

lated. Though the hunt had been over by nightfall, not for two hours more were the victors rescued. The villagers finally came to the pit, holding torches, brandishing sticks and making a din to chase any hiding animal away. The sight of the tiger's body sent them into a new spasm of fear, even when Karia assured them that the animal was dead and that he and Gowda were unhurt. In a few more minutes they were convinced that the miracle had indeed taken place. It was not easy to extricate the tiger from the bench. To lift the bench with its dead load proved even more trying. More men arrived and they tied ropes to the edge of the bench and heaved it up. It was only then that Gowda came out of his daze and realised he was not just alive but had become a hero. Karia was exultant. In his very first try he had claimed a tiger. In the pale moonlight the villagers took him on their shoulder and marched back in procession to the village square. Only after he sat down on the floor of Gowda's home did Karia remember that he had some bad scratches in his neck. An old man who knew medicine brought herbs and leaves, boiled them in oil which he then smeared on the wound. Men, women and children sat in a ring round Karia and spent the night asking him again and again to narrate the whole story. Even the women touched the tiger's neck and the children twisted its tail. The praises they sang of Karia pleased him well. But already he was thinking of new conquests. His ears echoed with an elephant's trumpeting rather than a tiger's roar.

CHAPTER XVII

For Karia and Thimma, the second year in their new home was happier than the first. They grew more grain and more animals strayed into their snares. Karia carried Thimma's son around and taught him to clutch his finger and smile when whistled to. The constant company of a couple greatly in love sometimes made him aware of a gentle knocking at the door of his heart. He did not know how to handle such yearnings. What he knew was the use of bow and arrow, gun and bullet. He began spending more time in the woods. Whenever a water buffalo was killed or a calf vanished from Kukkaralli, Karia got a summons and off he went. In a year he had killed three leopards. And once it was just luck that saved him. The leopard had noticed him and turned tail. Karia did not like it to escape. He rushed headlong into the bush and fired. The shot merely grazed the leopard's shoulder, and the animal disappeared into the jungle. Karia gathered a group and gave chase. When the men surrounded the bush, the leopard found a gap and tried to escape. Three or four men, with Karia at their head, pursued it. The leopard changed its mind and suddenly turned on them. Karia saw the leopard leap. He had no time to use his gun again, and flashed his dagger in defence. The blade did its work, but both the leopard and Karia fell down. The next moment they were locked in combat. The gun and the sword had already decided the outcome and all

its feline guile did not help the animal. But Karia had not come out unscathed. His skin was badly cut and the flesh showed out in large gashes. Only after three weeks of resting and nursing in Gowda's house was he able to move out again. The misadventure only made him a more determined and careful hunter. It strengthened his desire to catch an elephant, for an elephant would make a secure mount and he could hunt boldly. Little had he imagined that this childhood whim would be fulfilled in a wholly unexpected way.

It was a monsoon among monsoons that broke out in the third year of their independent existence. It rained for weeks without respite. The sky was in a frenzy. There was not an hour when rain did not beat down on the earth, not a tree that was not bruised in the storm. The seed that Karia and Thimma had sown was washed away even before sprouting. That meant a grainless year for them. Water, which raced down the hills, stripped the cardamom roots bare of bunches, and so another source of income was gone. If the days were cold and damp, the nights were worse. But there was no firewood to light for warmth or even to cook by. They would not have minded even the worst rain, but the wind forced them to crouch in the cave. To Giddi it was a particularly trying time, for she had to keep the child warm. She waited for a break in the rains so that she could persuade the men to move to Kukkaralli. The rains had ruined their farming for the year, and they could at least help Gowda and get a few measures of paddy in return.

After six weeks of continuous downpour, the clouds unexpectedly lifted one morning. Sunlight bounced from hill to hill and the trees seemed to burst out in joy. Karia and Thimma wandered aimlessly over their hill, for the love of the sun and

the joy of its warmth. But they also became aware of the destruction that the rains had wrought and realised that had they lived in a mud-and-tile house instead of a rock cave their home would have been carried away in the wind. Streams had become roaring torrents. Little hesitant cascades had turned into insolent waterfalls. Mango, peepul, jack, teak and trees of many other varieties sprawled on the earth, their branches broken and their roots in the sky. Where Karia and Thimma were accustomed to see green fields and great rocks there were now dark brown walls newly hewn by landslides. The sides of many hillocks had been washed away, and their tops battered. It was as if a giant had pounded the mountains with his club. Karia wanted to have a closer look at the landslips. Thimma disuaded him. The nearest was more than three miles away. It would take at least half a day to visit it and return, with so many streams to cross and innumerable toppled trees to climb. Karia was insistent. Thimma could stay but he would go.

But even Karia was careful. It was already afternoon. He was also afraid the rains might start as abruptly as they had stopped. The next day was again a bright day. There was not even a fluff or feather of a cloud anywhere. So, Karia set out early, filling his lungs with air that had been washed of dust, and delighting in the play of sunshine on the green mantle of the hills. He had a dagger at his waist and a staff in hand. Crossing woods, scaling fallen trees and clearing streams by leaping from a rock on one bank to a rock on the other, he took well over three hours to cover the three miles to the nearest landslip. He forgot the thorns, the leeches and the knocks on his knee-cap in gazing at the rain's ravage. To the south of Kukkaralli there was a hill which had stood like a

protective wall. It enclosed a huge crescent-shaped valley where it clutched another spur of the Ghats. Standing on a little plain on one of the hills, Karia paused for breath. He noticed that a stream which ran on the side of the hill opposite now jumped down a newly-made precipice more than eight trees high. Evidently the earth had collapsed there, washing away hundreds of acres of land. Where the hill had given way, he could see the red earth which formed the belly of the hill. The upper layers were red but below them were lighter strata of clay. This meant that enormous quantities of earth had been pushed towards Kukkaralli. He walked carefully down the edge to have a view of the waterfall from below. The descent was slippery, and he soon came into a forest. The tops of trees on the land that had collapsed did not come up to where he now stood. The path he took led to the plain at the farther end of which lay Kukkaralli. But he suddenly came across a muddy flood. He remembered that a little stream used to flow there. Trees which had withstood many onslaughts of wind and water had overturned. This maze of branches was not easy going. There were many cracks in the earth from which muddy water oozed. Rocks which had rolled down the hills were caught in the branches of trees. That made the going more dangerous. Where the earth was too weak to bear his weight, he jumped from branch to branch. But that was no play either, for he had to be careful not to dislodge the stones caught in the tree-tops. He finally came to a spot where the trees were too far apart and the ground too slushy to go forward. To be checked thus was a disappointment, but Karia climbed a tree, curious to know what lay further on. What he saw was an astonishing spectacle. There was a wide river of mud in which trees floated, pushing

forward rocks and masses of dead leaves and grass. By getting down the tree and retracing his steps up the incline, Karia managed to have a closer look at the flow of mud. A couple of streams jumped down the edge along which the earth had sunk, bringing with them a load of soil and vegetation. After so much rain, there was no water in the place. It was all a paste of clay. Karia suddenly spotted a dark mass in the stream which seemed like a rock but was unlike a rock. He looked more intently and discovered it was not a rock at all but an elephant caught in the mire. A young one evidently, but was it alive or dead? Suppose it was alive. Could he let it find its grave there? He ran to Kukkaralli in excitement. When he arrived there, it was late afternoon. Nobody in the village appeared interested in the elephant. They did not even seem glad to see him. Who wanted to hear about an elephant? They had their own troubles. Karia was puzzled at the lukewarm reception till he heard their story. Because of the landslide a stream which ran south of the village had now changed its course and had overrun a good part of their fields. They were busy reclaiming the ruined land. That was certainly more important than saving an elephant that had caught Karia's fancy. By now Karia had regained enough of his assurance to humour them and persuade them to go with him. "Your job is not a day or two's. It will take months. Why should you not come and pull out that elephant? That will not take you you half a day. And it will be such fun." The men of Kukkaralli would gladly have seen a hundred elephants die. For elephants had never been their friends. How many sugarcane fields had they not destroyed? But they could not say no to Karia, after what he had done for them. They went with him at last. A bearded man among them narrated his tale for the

nth time. On the night on which the trees in the forest ere upturned with a rumble and a crash, they in the village, ad thought that an earthquake had struck them. For three ays the rascal river had strayed from its path and poured mud nd stones over their fields. They could hope to reclaim a art of it only if the rain held its peace for two weeks. At ast they came to the spot where the little elephant floated. The current was so thick that the animal had moved only some twenty yards in two hours. It would be no easy task to pull it out. But Karia's enthusiasm caught on. They were ready to do what he ordered. On his instructions, they cut thick branches from trees and spread them over the mud. An improvised ramp, on raft, was ready. Karia and a few others climbed on it and were relieved that it did not give way. They tiptoed close to the elephant. It was indeed a very young animal, not more than four years old. It seemed to have long ago given up battling with the mud which was sucking it in. It could not move on its own and was content to go where the stream pushed it. God himself had sent it there, Karia thought. But he was finding it difficult to take what God had given. Suddenly he had a fear : was it alive or dead ? The elephant's eyes did not look pale or hollow. They had life. Karia was even more happy when he discerned that the young animal had kept its trunk aloft and was managing to breathe. He must rescue it at whatever cost, he told himself for the hundredth time. "Be careful, Karia. We might try to save it and it might only kill us," Gowda cautioned.

They had to work fast. Time was against them ; it was already getting to be dark. Karia was most reluctant to leave. He gathered some green branches of mango and banyan and pushed them near the elephant's trunk. Having arranged its food, they turned homewards.

They were back the next morning with planks, poles, ropes and everything that might be handy. In the night the elephant had been carried fifty yards farther. They again threw some small trees and branches on the boggy expanse and stepped over them to approach the elephant. An attempt to thrust a beam under the elephant's belly and lever it up did not succeed. One or two men tried scooping out the mud around the elephant with spades, but for every pan they removed two pans of mud flowed in. As a last resort they tied all the ropes they had around the elephant's body and tugged. The ropes snapped and the elephant stayed where it was. They were at a loss what to do until Gowda said: "There is only one chance. The mud is too thick. If we turn this way the stream which is flowing on the upper slope, then the mud will be washed away and we can have our elephant." That was half a day's job. All the fifteen of them set to cutting a ditch from the stream that flowed some sixty feet above them. It was night again and they went home having done a strenuous day's work and hoping for the best.

Karia was back at the place even before dawn. As the first rays of the sun stole into the maze of mud and trees he could not believe his eyes. Gowda's plan had worked. A side of the slushy flow had been cleared, though mud pressed on the elephant from the other side. Karia ran to the village and brought Gowda and the others. Pole in hand he plunged into the chest-deep mire and leaning on it, went near the elephant. The elephant's feet were on the ground. That was how it had survived three trying days. But struggle with mud and hunger had made it too weak and dazed to walk. Karia touched its trunk. It did not shake him off. He tied together the ropes that had snapped the previous day and tied it again

to its hind leg. While the others clipped rattan stalks, rolled them into ropes, and tied them to the other hind leg, Karia cut down a young palm, slit it open, and scooped out its soft marrow for the elephant to eat. With a heave-ho they began pulling again. When the elephant's body seemed to be dislodged, the mud on the other side rushed out and the elephant sank in it once more. All their work would have been in vain, if by then the elephant had not awakened from its stupor. It found its feet again and with an effort turned its face towards where they stood. Gently and slowly they pulled at the ropes. With each jerk the elephant walked a step or two forward. At last its belly rose above the surface of the mud. It would now be easier, except that the men began to be afraid. Gowda argued that a wild elephant was a wild elephant, young or old. It was only pretending to be weak. Another man said: "Yes, we did this work to please Karia. But if the elephant charges, neither Karia nor we can escape with our lives. We ought to have let it die." But Karia boldly walked towards it and gave it the palm-marrow he had collected. Gowda and others yelled: "Do not go so near. You will get killed." Karia was deaf to their appeals. Having seen to its food, Karia twisted the rope that was round the elephant's leg. At his encouraging cries of "hoi" and "heh" the elephant tried to climb up firm ground. As it came nearer, Karia did not move from where he stood, much to the alarm of the others. To him it was a dream come true. It was his elephant and why would it harm him? He pulled the rope once more and tied the elephant to the trunk of a big tree. The animal seemed too exhausted to walk further. It rested itself against the trunk of the tree. The elephant could, if it wanted, easily shake itself free of the rope, but Karia believed

it would not. The villagers went back to their work, while Karia stayed behind, giving the elephant more leaves and more palm pith to eat, forgetting his own food. He stroked its sides and even touched its lifted trunk. By evening he led the animal to Kukkaralli. In two or three days more they seemed at ease with each other. He told himself that one day he would ride it to Subramanya.

Though engrossed with the elephant, Karia began to feel concerned that Thimma might be worried about him. The villagers had too much to do on their fields for anyone of them to run all the way to Thimma's cave and give him the news. Karia went there himself. Only when leaving did he remember to tell Gowda the plight of Thimma's own field. "We shall be here and stay with you for some days. You are in need of working hands. And we have no crop of our own this year. Give us a hut, and we shall help you with your ploughing and sowing and remain even for the reaping, if you like. We shall be back in two days. Meanwhile please take care of the elephant."

Thimma was consumed with anxiety. Had something bad happened to Karia? Unable to contain himself he went to the landslide where he knew Karia would have gone. Even if Karia had slipped and fallen into the bowl, how could Thimma find it out? He came home with a heavy heart. For two days he and Giddi ate no food. The rains had now completely stopped, and still there was no sign of Karia. How could they exist without Karia, who had stood by them when all others had forsaken them? On the fourth day, Thimma was wandering aimlessly across his ruined field, weighed down by worry, when he heard Karia calling out his name. His heart seemed to burst with joy. The five minutes before Karia emerged

m the bushes appeared to him like an hour. "What ppened to you? Where did you go? Are you alive or are u dead?" and a hundred such questions did Thimma fling Karia. Karia's incoherent replies had nothing to do with hat Thimma asked. They were all about an elephant. imma wondered what this man was raving about. On their ay to the cave, Karia narrated his four-day adventure—the ndslide, his journey to Kukkaralli, the capture of the elephant nd its easy taming. He rounded it off by saying : "Thimma, ok here, whatever you might do in the coming four months, have decided to stay in Kukkaralli. It will need at least four nonths to teach the elephant to obey me and to be able to ring it here. What work do we have here when all the seed ve sowed has been washed away? Let us go down to the illage, where there is plenty of work for us. It might even ake a year to clear their fields of silt and to raise a crop. Gowda says he will give us all that we want if we help him. t is better there than here."

Thimma had already decided on such a course. At home Giddi was overjoyed to see Karia again. She sent a prayer to all the Gods she knew and repeated their names over and over again. Karia lifted Giddi's two-year-old son to his shoulder and told him : "Baby, from now on you and I need not walk at all. We have an elephant to ride. Years ago when our master caught an elephant I asked him to make me its keeper, but he gave the rob to Tukra. And do you know what happened? The elephant ran away!" The little boy naturally did not understand the joke. But Thimma said : "Karia, do not be too sure. What you have caught is also a wild elephant. You could catch it because it was helpless. If it sees its herd

tomorrow, it will run away." Karia knew that this was a clear possibility. Still he would not admit it. "Oh, no. This is a very young animal. It has not yet learnt the wiles of its elders. I can easily teach it to love me. Do you know how affectionately it took the palm-stalk from my hand? It will never leave me."

They spent a joyous day together, though Karia's thoughts were with the elephant. What should he call it, he asked himself, and after much pondering decided to call it after his dead grandfather. They left early next day for Kukkaralli and were in Gowda's house before noon. Thimma was scared when Karia took the child near the elephant. Karia ignored his pleadings and went forward to introduce one nephew to another.

CHAPTER XVIII

Even in his most hopeful moments Karia had not thought that he would really have an elephant of his own. He had now spent a month in Kukkaralli, showering more affection on the elephant than a young mother does on her first-born. He took it every morning to the stream for a wade and then to the forest for a breakfast of leaves. The elephant was in turn greatly attached to him and followed him wherever he went. But Gowda had remained a sceptic. He dug up some argument or other against trusting elephants. It was after all a child of the forest and it would sooner or later go on its own in search of food. Tame elephants there were, of course, like the elephants of the Dharmasthala temple, but they remained docile because they were fed on millet, dough and juggery. How did Karia expect to give his elephant such things? Where did he have the money? Four measures of rice a day would not fill half its belly. In short, Gowda's advice to Karia was to sell Grandfather (as Karia had begun to call it) or take it to Subramanya and offer it to the priests. They might even give him a hundred rupees.

At other moments he said: "It is all right now, Karia; your elephant is a baby. But it is a male and when it grows up and gets into rut, not even ten chains can hold it. How do you hope to keep it in check with your rattan rope?" Karia was not too sure that Gowda was not right on this last point.

Since giving it away was out of the question, he had to have a chain. He thought for a whole month and finally arranged with the blacksmith of a neighbouring village to forge a chain. In return he gave him all the paddy he had earned in a month. If for a few iron links he had to strave for a month, what about the millet and jaggery the elephant would need? Gowda had an ally in Thimma who harped on the same tune. In exasperation Karia one day declared : "It is my life. Do not ask me to part with it. We can grow millet and rice on our hill and if it means I should work four more hours a day I am ready."

"What! You will bring this even there? It is bad enough here," Thimma grumbled.

The result of their stay in Kukkaralli was that Thimma and his wife, who had made many friends there, shuddered at the prospect of having to return to their bleak hill haunt. Giddi was particularly reluctant. Whom did she have there? Friends? Relations? Kind neighbours? They had quit their home because of hatred and fear of the man who was their master but that did not mean that they should shun all human beings. She argued many times with Karia that they should stay on in Kukkaralli. Everybody would like them for it. Work was so much easier. Gowda had given them a hut. With his help it would not be hard for them to get a bit of land which nobody else claimed. They could grow rice and millet. The forest was not far and Karia could hunt to his heart's content. Yes, it was so easy for men. They could spend their time somehow. It was a woman who knew the burden of loneliness. How long did he expect her to huddle at home like a mongoose? She told him how happy she was here, with people to speak to, people who were ready to help her in trouble and bless her

in happiness. At times she advised Karia to marry and steady up. "How long do you want to be single? Last year when father visited us he was speaking about a bridegroom for my sister. She is a good girl and pretty to look at. You can marry her and bring her here and we can all live happily." Karia was not against marrying. But he had other things to think of at the moment. The elephant, for example.

It took the people of Kukkaralli more than two months' toil to push the stream that had strayed to their village back to its bed. Clay had to be dug and piled in the shape of embankments, which in turn had to be strengthened by driving planks and logs into the ground. There would be work to do even if they worked for six more months. The wayward river had spread silt more than knee high over many acres of paddy fields. The man hardest hit was Gowda. His household had given up hope of two square meals a day until the next harvest. But the village did not let him down. He had always been helpful and now he found help returned to him. People from five or six houses gave several days of labour to Gowda, besides the three Kudias, removing basketfuls of mud from morning to evening. Had they demanded wages Gowda would have had to sell himself. He hoped that at least by the time of the fair at the Corner Village things would be looking up.

But Karia and Thimma had a new problem. Karia's fame became a millstone round his neck. Word went round that a Kudia had caught and tamed an elephant. Was it not a sensation! The elephant in reality had almost delivered itself into his hands, but rumour had changed the baby animal into a fierce tusker. For a month people came from all the surrounding villages to see it. Some were unimpressed. "Pshaw!

what elephant is this! It is not bigger than a buffalo," they had exclaimed and gone back. But rumours have legs that keep growing. Whatever the reaction of those who saw it, to those who had only heard of it an elephant was an elephant and the man who had caught it a mighty mahout. The news travelled from Kukkaralli to the Corner Village and from there to the Little Hill and the Big Hill. Though nobody knew the elephant-capturer's identity they were proud that a Kudia had done something so notable.

The news reached the ears of the master of the Big and Little Hill. The master now was not Bhatta but his son. Bhatta had had a paralytic stroke the year after the flight of Thimma and Karia and was now an invalid. His son, a young man of twenty-five and as different from his father as father and son can be, managed the cardamom estates. He had been city-educated, but after beginning to visit the hills, he had acquired a passion for big game. His hope was that with the help of Tukra and Booda he might even bag a tiger some day. When he heard the tale of the elephant's capture, he remarked: "Are there such Kudias? My father used to say that Kudias are the dullest and docilest of men. I want to see this hero of yours." He called Tukra one day and said to him: "When will you go with me to Kukkaralli? It is more than three months since we heard of the elephant. Go and find out if it is alive or dead. If it is still around, I want to see it."

Tukra kept putting off the expedition. Bhatta's son had other work to do, such as taking the cardamom crop to Mangalore for the annual auction. He gave two instructions to Tukra while departing: one, to find out about the elephant and, two, to spot the cave of bears, where he was keen to go with his gun after the Corner Village fair.

Tukra could no longer postpone the first of the two errands. Nobody gave him proper directions. Some said the elephant had been caught in Shirali. In Sisila, said others. After more inquiries he was at last in Kukkaralli after full ten hours of walking. The first thing he saw as he approached the village was the elephant itself. "So it is not a mere rumour but a fact. The young master will not be disappointed," he told himself.

He had now to find out who had caught it. When he went towards the nearest hut, someone who was in the yard in front of the house ducked and ran inside. It was Thimma. He had seen Tukra and concluded that Bhatta had at last won.

Before Tukra knocked at the door, Gowda appeared from behind the house. With him was Karia. "You do not want us to live in peace even here, Tukra? Must you dog our footsteps though we have said goodbye to your hill? Do your worst, I am ready," Karia said gruffly. Tukra was taken aback at the sight of Karia. All that had happened in the last few years rushed into his memory in a moment. He had everything to gain—the headmanship would remain his—if Karia stayed on in Kukkaralli and continued to avoid the Little Hill. He managed a smile and said: "Why do you jump at me, Karia? I heard somebody had caught an elephant. And I came to find out. I hope you are happy here. Hill or plain, if one is happy that is all that matters." Karia was silent. Tukra continued: "Do not bother about bygones. These are different days. The master is bed-ridden. He no longer comes to the hill. His son looks after everything now. Fine man. Quite young, and very fond of us Kudias."

Karia felt he need not have been so harsh. "I thought the master had sent you to take us. Forget it. I hope you will

not refuse our hospitality, poor as it as. And do you know? Thimma is also here.'' Then he guilelessly played host to Tukra and told him the story of the elephant. Tukra behaved excellently. The only thing he failed to do was to invite them back to the hill when he took leave of them next morning.

As he strode farther and farther away from Karia and his elephant and the green fields of Kukkaralli, Tukra again recapitulated the events of the last few months. He remembered the tussle for headmanship between him and Karia; how the clan had sided with Karia, how Kalkuda had swept his dreams aside; and now where were they? It had not been written on Karia's forehead to be headman. Otherwise who would be so mad as to throw away an office that had come to him? Tukra decided to keep his discovery to himself. If he spoke about it, Booda and others would go to Kukkaralli, cringe and cry and drag Karia back, which would rake up the question of headmanship again. That should be prevented. The best way to achieve it was to keep his lips sealed. He envied Karia's courage. From childhood the lad had been crazy about bears and elephants. Probably he was a man born to be a mahout. How else could he be so audacious? He remembered the anecdotes that Gowda had told him the previous night. He could not believe that at such a young age Karia had killed a tiger with a gun and a leopard with a mere knife. Tukra was too good a hunter himself not to admire Karia. Karia was reckless, crude, short-tempered, but with all that he was a very worthy fellow. And he could survive wherever he was cast. He could not be an ordinary man to live for three years in the heart of the jungle without anybody's aid or obligation, without even others' knowledge. A sudden fancy seized Tukra. He had seven or eight children from his two wives. He was on the threshold

age. How much longer could a man nearing sixty expect
? Today's sturdy man is tomorrow's corpse. His eldest
ıter was twenty. As the headman of a clan he could not
his daughter in marriage to any pauper or passer-by.
should he not inveigle Karia back to the Little Hill, make
his son-in-law, and forget the old sore on his neck? That
ld meet his elder wife's approval also. Even if Karia should
become the headman, he had nothing to lose or fear.
more Tukra thought of it, the more reasonable his plan
eared. He even felt like going straight to the Big Hill and
king Choma's mediation. But he remembered Choma him-
f had a daughter. "No. he is not the right man. Better to
k Booda. After all, with Kempi dead what has he against
e?" By the time he reached this decision Tukra was in the
orner Village. He thought of the fair which was some weeks
way, and of the young master who would come again this
ear to distribute clothes. The thought of his young master
brought to his memory his passion for hunting. "There is a snag
in my plan," Tukra thought, "If Karia comes to the hill and
teams up with the young master, they will spend days and
nights like mad men in the forest. Who is to check them? He
is a good boy and a fearless boy, no doubt. But even after
marriage if he should go after tigers and bears and come to a
bad end, what about his wife? A hunter is all right if he is
somebody other than the husband of one's own daughter."
His plan to entice Karia back to the village did not seem as
wonderful as before. But what should he tell Bhatta's son if
he asked him about the elephant? Suppose he took the young
master to Kukkaralli or Bhatta's son came to know that the
elephant-tamer was once a lad of his own Little Hill, he would
surely persuade him to return? And then the whole thing

would begin all over again. By the time he returned home Tukra had decided not to tell anyone about his meeting with Karia.

He might seal his lips, but he could not prevent the report blowing about. After the rains passed and work on the cardamom garden ended, the Kudias' visiting season began. Many of them went to the Corner Village and other settlements. The story of a Kudia having tamed an elephant travelled from ear to ear. The man who confirmed that it was Karia who had done this fate was Giddi's father Choma. Ever since the ferocious rains of the year set in, Choma had worried about his daugater. He waited for the rains to weaken for paying her a visit. When he went to Thimma's cave just before Navaratri, he was aghast to see the place deserted. There were a few pieces of firewood in a corner, an old cloth or two and barely a dozen pots and pans. He then went to their paddy field only to find that no crop had been raised and that birds and squirrels were all over the place. The grass showed no sickle mark. That made him more anxious. It could only mean that one of the four was dead. For who would run away from a place if not because of death? Who could it be that had died? If a death in the home had forced them to find a new dwelling, they should at least be cultivating their land. But there was no sign of it. The only inference was that they had gone away from the hill to some near-by village. But Choma had no means of investigating. There was no clue for him to search further. He went back with a leaden heart to a grieving wife.

The story of the Kudia who had caught an elephant reached the Big Hill a few weeks later. Choma at once concluded it must be Karia. He caught the rumour by its tail

and set out again to make enquiries. In the Corner Village he learnt that the elephant had been caught in Kukkaralli. In fact he passed the Corner Village the same day as Tukra did on his way back from Kukkaralli. It was evening when Choma reached Gowda's place. "Did Tukra send you? He was here yesterday and left only this morning," Karia asked him. But Choma had no time for answers. He was happy that his fears had been falsified and that he was seeing his daughter, son-in-law and grandson once again. He approved of their leaving the hill and settling down in Kukkaralli. "What you did is good. How could you live there all by yourselves and with the little one to take care of? How many sleepless nights have I and my woman not spent thinking of your foolhardiness?" he told his daughter. "What is there to fear? If Karia is there, it is enough; alone he could build a town," Thimma commented. At which, to tease him, Karia said: "Is that so, Thimma? Then immediately after the fair we are going back to my hill. This year we shall have to have two fields: paddy for us and millet for the elephant!" Thimma's face shrank to half its size. "Of course we are going. If I say no, would you listen?" Karia knew Thimma had said it half-heartedly, only to please him.

The next morning, as they took gruel with pickles from Gowda's house to add to the taste, Karia said: "Choma, you have been here since yesterday and still not seen my elephant. One of these days your grandson and I will sit on it and go as far as Subramanya." They went out to have a look at the elephant which was concentrating its attention on some green branches. "God bless your elephant," Choma said. "It is because of him that I came to hear about you and trace you. I knew that if any Kudia had caught an elephant it could only be you. Your elephant has already done me a service."

On the way back to the hut Choma said to Karia : "Well, I have now seen your elephant. Tell me, when are you coming back to our hamlet? What are your plans? I hope you are not going back to that haunted cave. My daughter tells me that she cannot suffer it any more. At least for my sake do not drag Thimma there." And turning to Gowda, who was his own age and from whom he could expect support, he said : "You at least bring these boys to their senses. Do not allow them to go back to that hill. This Karia is not a child any more. It is time he married. I would be glad to give my second daughter to him if you will make him stay here. Giddi might have told you about it all ; it is up to you to persuade him." Gowda readily seconded Choma and said : "You must listen to your elders at least for a change."

Karia smiled and said : "Oho ! Gowda, I am finding it difficult to manage one elephant ; you want me to keep another ?"

"Who asked you to ?"

"Then what is it that you are saying about my marrying ? Where shall I get food for two ?"

Gowda burst out into a guffaw. "That is what you are, eh ? Unable to feed a wife ? Then I shall see how long you can keep that elephant !"

The shaft went home. True, Karia thought, it was time he found a wife. Probably he had seen the last of the hill he had adopted for his home for nearly three years. He had no right to drag an unwilling Thimma and his wife there. When Gowda was more than a relation, why should he not remain in Kukkaralli ?

A couple of days later, having spent his time chatting and joking, Choma went back to the Big Hill taking Giddi and her

child. Thimma agreed that she needed a change. When leaving, Choma summed up what he had been saying all through his stay: "Karia, do not growl at me for saying it again. The old master is not visiting the hill any more. Why should you not return? Whatever you do, at least come to the fair at the Corner Village. If God so wills, you can also marry, like Thimma."

The days that followed were uneventful but busy and full. Karia and Thimma helped Gowda to reclaim his fields and also raised their own crop. The use of a plough appeared to them a miracle of simplification. On the hills they dug the fields with mere pickaxes. Kukkaralli had no dearth of water. Instead of burning shrubs and bushes for manure they used cow dung and soaked leaves. To keep off rabbits they built a fence round their field. As the millet sprouted and grew and put out ears, Karia was happy that he now had something special to give his elephant. In work and play days passed like hours and the fair drew near. Thimma was on tenterhooks. He had lived away from his wife. He wanted to parade her round the fair. He wanted to discuss plans with Choma. He wanted to meet the priest, his old friend. This time he would be getting no dhoti from the master of the hill. If he wanted one, he had to buy it. That meant money; where did he have any? How good if Gowda, for whom they had worked, gave him a few rupees! But he did not dare to ask him. Karia's thoughts were less complex. He had only one desire, to ride on his elephant's back and show off. He had only one fear: lest the old master, Bhatta, should recover sufficiently to turn up at the Corner Village. Thimma acted as his scout on the day before the fair. He came back in the evening and reported: "No, it is the son. And do you know what a fine man he is?

I saw him and he said : You are Thimma, are you ? I hear you ran away from us for a reason only you know : Whatever it is, forget it and come back. He asked me about the elephant. I told him about you and have offered to take you to him tomorrow. He is so keen on seeing you.'' Tukra had kept his own counsel and it was only from Thimma that Bhatta's son had learnt the truth.

They set out early next morning, Thimma excited about the prospect of meeting his wife and Karia excited about displaying his elephant. He spread a ragged blanket on its back and hung a garland made of coconut leaves and hibiscus flowers round its neck. The elephant made a meal of a couple of the garlands but Karia was not cross. It was a picturesque procession. The elephant with Karia and Thimma on either side led the way and a long line of farmers, their wives and children from Kukkaralli followed. Urchins joined in on the way and it looked a regular marriage party. By the time they came to the temple at the Corner Village, Karia was on the back of the elephant. He prodded its trunk with a stick and made it salute the deity. He then led it to the house of the young master. Kudia clans from various settlements collected round him. They admired the elephant's gentleness and Karia's courage. Tukra went in to give the news to Bhatta's son. Both appeared on the threshold. Tukra was all honey in speech. ''Master, this is our own lad ; he is the grandson of our old headman and was himself headman for a few days.'' Bhatta's son made Karia recite the story of the elephant's capture. The tale and the teller pleased him. He ordered bananas and sugarcane and jaggery cubes to be brought for the elephant.

It was really Karia's fair that year. Without the elephant

the show would have been routine. Karia's only trouble was that he could not leave his charge even for a minute. There would be trouble if it got frightened of the crowds which pressed round. The result was that all his acquaintances had to come to him and greet him. Giddi brought her sister on the pretext of showing her the elephant. Karia picked up Giddi's son and placed him in front of him on the elephant's back.

Bhatt's son visited him in the evening. "Karia, forget the past. I want you to return to the Little Hill," he said with genuine affection. And when he pressed on him a dhoti and a cotton shawl, all the loyalty he had disowned came back. Still he did not give way. "I shall return if God so wills," he said.

By midnight he was back in Kukkaralli. Gowda had heard what Bhatta's son had said and felt unwilling to let him go. "Why should you go back ? Why should you not stay with us forever ?" he argued with him on the way.

CHAPTER XIX

Spring breeze blew over the Little Hill. Spring at the Corner Village or down in the coastal strip between the Ghats and the Arabian Sea is no gentle season because the sun beats down with vehemence. But up above, in the hills, spring is friendly, pleasant and fragrant with the scent of mountain flowers.

The Kudias, who had returned from the fair, had selected the field where the coming crop was to be raised. They had not yet begun to clear the forest. That work was due to begin in a week.

With them from the Corner Village came Bhatta's son. He was determined to spend the season in hunt and had bought Bantrappa, a marksman from Vitla. Bhatta's son spent the first day showing Bantrappa the beauties of his estate. Bantrappa had come with plans to stay for a week, but the mountain weather was so agreeable that he stayed longer. Bhatta's son had not yet shot any wild animal worth the name, not even a boar. He knew how to shoulder a gun and take aim, but, being a vegetarian, he did not have the urging of the palate to make him go even after small game. As for Bantrappa, his hobby back home in Vitla was to shoot partridges and rabbits. He had had luck with a leopard once and that had emboldened him to set his sights higher. Like Bhatta he was in his twenties. As the saying goes, who can restrain a man whose moustache is not yet ten years old ?

Soon after his arrival, Bhatta's son called Tukra to inquire whether he had fulfilled the assigned task of spotting the bear cave. Tukra was hesitant. Not till Bhatta's son had held forth for half an hour on the expertness of Bantrappa and the prowess of his own new gun did Tukra yield.

They left early the next day—Bhatta's son, Bantrappa and seven or eight Kudias. Booda was there, too, but it was his nephew who led the way. As they went up and down boulders and made their way through bushes, Bantrappa had trouble with his courage. This, he realised, was not like the hillock near Vitla which had been the scene of his triumphs over rabbits and wild fowl. Even his leopard had come to him easily. But he could not see beyond ten yards in this vegetation. There was not even half an acre of level ground. They reached a row of caves fifty feet above them, along the edge of a heap of massive rocks. Booda placed a restraining hand on his nephew's shoulder. They lowered their voices. Bantrappa's heart beat faster. Tukra discussed the plan of hunt with Bhatta's son in low tones. Tukra, Bantrappa and the young master were to go nearer the caves and the others were to spread themselves round the place with swords drawn and spears ready. Bhatta's son and Bantrappa could not keep pace with Tukra who, though nearing sixty, jumped from rock to rock like a mountain goat. After they scaled the rocks and came on a level with the caves, their lurking fear left them as if by magic. They peeped into the caves one by one, and Tukra's hand was outstretched to lug the other two back if they stepped too far into the caves. Outside the fourth cave they saw footprints and marks of nails in the sand. "Bear's", said Tukra in a whisper. "May be a leopard's," Bantrappa answered.

It was not a deep cave, and by the dim light they could see it was empty. Bantrappa jumped down a rock to go to the next cave which was on a lower level. The thud made a bear peep out. Tukra saw it at once. He dragged back the two men and by signs told them what he had seen. Their excitement rose. Should they go nearer or stay back? Tukra was eager to find out whether there was only one bear or two. They waited for five minutes. Bantrappa was impatient. With gun pointing he slouched forward. The cave was too dark for him to make out anything. How to lure the bear out? Tukra picked up some stones the size of mangoes and hurled them in. No result. "You must have imagined," Bantrappa said, almost aloud. Tukra was cut up, but said nothing. They moved on, but sideways, with one eye on the cave. The bear which had disappeared in the cave had come out of another opening twenty yards ahead and was about to flee. But Bantrappa was too quick for it. Swiftly but calmly he took aim and fired. The bear rolled to the ground groaning. Bhatta's son ran there with his gun, and one more shot settled its fate. The three waited for the dying bear's spasms to end and then gathered round it. Bantrappa was in ecstasy. He turned round the bear's head and saw the light patch under its neck. Tukra gave a shout for the others who echoed his call. They had heard the gun go off and Tukra's yell made it certain that there had been some quick killing. Booda's nephew raced forward two leaps at a time. The noise disturbed a leopard from its reverie. As the group of Kudias watched, it sprang and got lost in the thickets. Booda felt nervous. "There were two of them, then. They have shot one and the other has escaped." But when they went near the cave it was a bear they saw sprawling on the gravel. "Then how is it a leopard

ran away?'' Booda asked. His nephew described how its black spots shimmered on its golden hide. The young master was thrilled. ''On with the hunt. Let us get that leopard,'' he said. But Bantrappa was not enthusiastic. He was reluctant to put his luck to further strain. A bear was enough for the day. He did not have the nerve to take on a leopard in terrain in which the beast had always an advantage over man. Even the Kudias agreed that it was not easy to spot a leopard in this jungle. ''This is not how we should kill it. We must tie a kid or a lamb as bait, surround it and surprise it,'' Bantrappa declared. Booda's son, who knew the forest better than the others, said that was no place to kill a tiger or leopard. He knew their haunts, and he would show them. The rest of the morning was spent in carrying the bear to the Little Hill. Bhatta's son was in high spirits. Tukra on the way home had work for his tongue describing how he had once grappled with a bear as large as this with his bare hands all alone.

After a hasty afternoon meal the hunters set out again, but they were only four this time. They went up the hills and came down the glens, left the Little Hill miles behind them and reached the periphery of one of the out-thrusts of the Ghats. A stream flowed there, which was almost dry though summer had barely begun. There were more rocks and pebbles in it than water, and what water there was seeped through cracks between the stones and collected in small pools here and there. Even the forest was sparse. The trees were dwarfish and the grass had been charred in a recent fire. ''This is the place for shooting a tiger. You cannot miss from any distance,'' said Bantrappa. Booda's nephew took them to one of the pools in the stream and showed them the hoof-marks of deer and bison. They needed no more proof. But Booda's nephew

did not leave it at that. He moved about the place examining the ground and showed them a clump or two of tiger's droppings. Their task now was to find out where they could take cover. They climbed a tree and crouched amidst the branches hoping some animal would appear. "They do not come so early in the evening. They prefer night or daybreak," Booda's nephew explained. It was getting dark. Too tired for a night's vigil, they trudged back.

The group started from the Little Hill before dawn the next day. Just as they emerged from the jungle and entered the meadow they saw three or four deer at the stream. The slanting morning rays gilded their spotted skins and their noses shone in the light.

Bantrappa signed to the others to stay where they were and moved forward noiselessly, taking cover behind some low bushes. The deer did not see him, but they saw the others and broke into a canter. The path they took ran right across the one Bantrappa had taken. He waited and, as soon as the deer were sufficiently near, fired. The rocks echoed with the sound but the deer had been too swift. Bantrappa wrung his hands, but even the failure proved that the place was ideal for game. The ruse that Booda's nephew had suggested appeared to him to be best. They pulled out some bushes and heaped them near the stream. In the afternoon they brought help from the village and arranged the heap in such a way that even from close quarters it looked like a normal thicket. For bait they brought a weakling of a calf which would have died anyway. Booda's son did not have a gun, but he had brought his bow and arrows. By the evening the bait was ready, and the calf had been tethered to a peg driven in the ground. The men who had come from the Little Hill to help chose not to stay back.

Nor were they welcome. Bhatta's son, Bantrappa and ooda's nephew began their wait. The moon, they reckoned, ould be up in an hour and its light would be enough to hunt . The day faded fast. The calf began to low piteously, nding itself all alone. Night descended swiftly upon them. hey munched some pounded rice with jaggery and coconut ieces. Their work was to wait till the great moment came. The alf had kept up its plaintive refrain. Now and again the men ehind the thicket cast their glances at the vague outline of he doomed animal. At the slightest rustle they pricked their ears. Soon the moon rose from behind the hill-tops to the east. About the same time Booda's nephew sniffed the air. "I know what it is ; a tiger is very near here. I can smell it," he whispered. The calf must also have smelt the beast of prey. It tried desperately to break from its tether. But all of a sudden its lowing was silenced. It was as abrupt as the going out of a lamp. "It has caught it, it has caught it," whispered Booda's nephew. Before Bantrappa could ask what had caught what, Booda's nephew pulled him by the arm and pointed out to him a dark shadow near the water. They thought it was risky to shoot before the moon lit up the place. They had not long to wait, for a dark cloud slid and the moon shone over the tree clumps. Bantrappa's pulse beat faster. Every second delayed was a second lost for ever. He fired. There was an angry roar. They could not tell whether it was a tiger or leopard. Something leaped and seemed to disappear. Until the moon was brighter they dared not to move. Half an hour later they edged forward step by step, looking cautiously round them before measuring the next pace. The water shone like bits of a broken mirror in the moonlight. But there was no beast sprawling there. All they saw was the calf, with its

neck broken. With a sigh they returned to the thicket they had built.

They were awake the whole night. Towards daybreak, Bantrappa and the young master began to doze off. Booda's nephew shook them from their drowsiness to point out a row of stags that had come to the stream in the filmy light of dawn. But before Bantrappa could shake off his sleep, the stags fled. The clank of their hoofs on the stones was all that Bantrappa could get of them. As soon as it was bright enough they went again to the bank of the stream. Next to where the calf lay dead they saw pug marks distinctly in the mud. Booda's nephew even pointed out the spots where the beast's dark blood had stained the earth. They noticed a streak of the blood on dry grass along the ground. They followed the stains up to the edge of the forest but beyond that the pursuit was unavailing. They hurried back to the village, swallowed their food in haste, collected a group of Kudias and returned to the place. Their plan was to raise a din and drive the tiger (as they had taken it to be) from the bush it might be hiding in.

The whole afternoon they created a good deal of noise. But there was no sign of the wounded animal. The next day they continued the work, again without result. The injured animal was too careful to venture out. The beast's circumspection saved its life but Bantrappa was disappointed. For two or three days after that Bantrappa got some small game which did not flatter his vanity. On the third night after the unsuccessful tiger hunt, a servant came from Vitla bearing bad news. Bhatta had had a second stroke and there was no hope of his recovery. His son left in a hurry.

The Kudias had now to turn all their attention to the fields.

They had to hew down the trees, level the ground and build a fence. Then they had to make preparations against the monsoon, toiling from morning till night. Only the very old and the very young were exempt from the back-breaking labour.

One of those who stayed back was Booda's mother, who was well past seventy. Though she was no longer a help in sowing or reaping she was still a useful hand at home. She cooked and brought water from the stream. A week after the young master hurried home, the old woman left one morning for the stream with her pitcher. When Booda returned in the evening his mother was not at home. He searched for her everywhere, and asked neighbours, who told him that they had not seen her the whole day. He went to the stream to see if by chance she was there. He found only a pitcher, which he recognised as his own. He called out his mother's name but there was no response. That meant some harm had befallen her. They lit rushes and searched the thickets and slopes near about. By daylight they found her half-eaten body in a small bush not even a hundred yards from the stream. Never in their memory had a human being been carried away on the Little Hill or the Big Hill. This was the result, it dawned on them, of the unfinished sport of their young master the previous week. What would not a wounded beast do? Here was a new scourge and the Kudias were terror-striken. No more could they move alone, even in daytime, or leave children and old people at home when they went out to the fields. The day was spent in grieving. In the afternoon they again went into the woods with swords and spears and raised a noise. But work on the field had to go on. Mothers and fathers, uncles and aunts were instruc-

ted to be careful. Children too. Before clearing each bush and cutting each tree they looked twice. They returned home in the evening in large groups.

The next evening a boy was missing. The whole clan carried out a search, even though it was night, and their worst fears were confirmed. On his way back from the field the lad had gone in search of toddy. He had climbed a palm and brought down the pot but it was not given to him to drink it. He had not noticed the animal which was lying in wait for him. They found his towel and the pot, and no more trace of him.

With this second death, the Kudias' fear burst its bounds. The best way, they decided, was to flee. Their headman, Tukra, had gone to Vitla, accompanying the young master. But they could not wait for his return. Delay might mean more deaths. They had heard that a tiger that had tasted human blood was worse than the very devil. The only guidance they could seek was from the people of the Big Hill. They thought of asking the priest to use his witchcraft and counter the havoc of the tiger. Booda, his nephew and another man went there to tell their kinsmen of what had overtaken them. The priest was well-versed in witchcraft. He went into contemplation, turned over his cowries, waved his wand and declared that this was the deity's anger which had to be appeased. "Then please come and sprinkle your magic ash over our village and tie a pumpkin. Till then we are not safe," the men from the Little Hill implored. The priest's reputation was at stake and he could not refuse, especially when the headman of the Big Hill offered to accompany them with his gun, the only one on the two hills. The headman had faith in the efficacy of witchcraft but believed in supplementing it. They got down

the Big Hill and came to Kalkuda's creek and to the stream. While Booda and his nephew slaked their thirst at the stream, the priest went behind the bushes to ease himself.

The others waited for him. But he did not return. They shouted for him; no reply. Could it be...? They did not have courage to tell themselves that it could be possible. They went in the direction the priest had gone and found his turban. But how could a tiger carry away such a large man without a struggle? They raised a cry and threw stones at the bushes. A few yeards above them there was a rustle in the thicket and they saw something rush by in a flash. They hurried there, only to find the torn, bitten, gaping body of the priest. Their first impulse was to run away and they did not even think of carrying the dead man's body to the Little Hill. The people of the Little Hill packed up and hurried to the Big Hill by a roundabout route. There was no returning home or going to work on their field until the tiger had been killed.

From the Big Hill Booda's nephew and another Kudia set out for Vitla to give the news to their master. Two days before they reached Vitla, Bhatta had died. The young master and other members of the mourning family were surprised at the Kudias' coming. Their tale only added to the grief. The young master, already sorrowing, now felt contrite. "We are to blame. Without knowing what it was to hunt a tiger we wounded it and it is now taking revenge. God knows how many more lives will be lost before it is killed," he lamented.

He sent a man to bring Bantrappa and sat thinking out what he should do. His folly had claimed three lives and that preyed on his mind. He was also worried on Tukra's account, for Tukra had left for the Little Hill unaware of what

had happened. But during the eleven days of mourning he himself was not permitted to stir out. Even later, his mother and wife were sure to forbid him to go after a man-eater. Whatever his plans, he was tied to Vitla for two weeks. "Bantrappa, go there and do your best. Take a couple of more men with guns if you like," he said. But Bantrappa was unwilling. The Kudias had to return, not with help but with a promise from the young master that if they waited at the Corner Village, he would send some men in a day or two. Booda's nephew and his two kinsmen spent that night at Vitla and left the next morning. It was night when they reached the Corner Village. The old owner, who was landlord over the cardamom estates before he sold it to Bhatta, had by then heard of the peril. He also came to know the Kudias had drawn blank at Vitla. He was scared too, not so much on the Kudias' behalf as on his own. The Corner Village was not too far from the Little Hill. Booda's nephew spent a sleepless night. Help from the master was uncertain. Then there was anxiety about Tukra. At midnight he also remembered the cattle that had been left back in the master's shed on the Little Hill when all the people had hastened to the Big Hill. What must be their fate? The poor creatures must be starving, if the tiger had not seized them. He thought of rushing to the Little Hill, but he could not persuade anybody else to join him. In desperation he appealed to the old owner.

Something passed in the old owner's mind. "By the way, young man, is not one of your lads in Kukkaralli, the lad who has caught an elephant? You must know him; he had come to the fair here with his elephant. I hear he has killed some tigers also. Stay here. I shall send word to him. If he is willing I shall get him a good gun and send a handful of my

men to the Hill. I cannot come myself, of course. But I have a couple of plucky tenants. My interest is also involved, you know. If the tiger does not find anything to eat at your place, it will be here in a few days. Unless it is shot, there is danger."

Booda's nephew was not listening to this rambling talk. The mention of Karia and the elephant had set in motion a new train of thought. Hope came back to him. Karia, he was sure, could do anything. He took a servant of the old owner to show the way and ran to Kukkaralli, not resting for even a moment until he saw Karia. If Karia joined, they could perhaps kill the tiger with the help the old owner had promised, even before the young master's men arrived. Karia was at work in his field when Booda's nephew saw him from a distance. He ran to him and clasped him in a fond embrace. There was little time to waste on affection, however, because of the news of sorrow that Booda's nephew had brought. When Karia heard of the events in the place of his birth, he was seized by a sense of personal responsibility. Gowda, the elder of the village, would not let him go to an encounter with a tiger that had human blood on its tongue. Thimma backed him up. "It is not a girl's game to pursue a man-eater in the jungle," he told Booda's nephew. "Three people have died. Why should we sacrifice one more life? Let your master send his man."

Karia was in no mood to listen such counsel. His people had died; though he had cut his links with the Little Hill they were his people, his blood, his flesh. Booda's mother was his kinswoman; the priest was of his clan. Tukra had gone there unaware of the death-trap. Then there were cattle. Men and women could speak out their woes, but what about cattle?

Karia borrowed Gowda's gun and bullets, shook off Thimma and started with Booda's nephew. He would have taken his elephant with him had not Gowda maintained that the elephant was too young and might get frightened facing the tiger.

Karia and his childhood playmate, Booda's nephew, took four of the old owner's men and marched towards the hill. They were six young men with three guns. Chatting excitedly they reached the Little Hill before they knew they had done so. The first thing Karia and Booda's nephew did was to open the shed of Bhatta's house. The door and the bamboo-mesh walls were intact, but six days' hunger had left the cattle nearly lifeless. There was a smell of dung and a look of doom about the place. The cows and the oxen were too weak even to show joy at seeing people around them. Karia took them grass and Booda's nephew a pail of water. Booda's nephew then searched every house for Tukra while Karia sat wondering whether they should seek out the tiger right away or take the cattle to the Big Hill first. The old owner's men were not very enthusiastic about the first course. They had come there out of compulsion and they argued that six men were too few to take on a tiger. "Then my kinsman and I will stay here," Karia told them. "Leave us two guns. Keep the third for yourself and lead these cattle to the Big Hill." They were not ready for that either. Karia could not afford to antagonise them. They spent the night on the Little Hill with three or four fires lit around their hut and in the morning led the cattle to safety. Karia was disappointed. Not having anything else to do, he went back to the Corner Village. They had at least saved the cattle.

The same evening two men came to the Corner Village who had been sent by Bhatta's son. Bantrappa had stayed

behind feigning illness. Bhatta's son had sent word that if they held out for four or five days he would also be there. He had sent two double-barrelled guns and enough ammunition. That put spirit into Karia. He was too impatient to wait for anybody else. "With you and me and these two Vitla men, why should we need anybody else? Let us get going," he told Booda's nephew. The four men left early next day for the Little Hill. The only one who was a stranger to the ways of guns was Booda's nephew. But he had a stout heart.

CHAPTER XX

The two shikaris whom the young master had sent from Vitla were men who had been used to small woods but had no experience of deep forest or of the ways of man-eaters. Man-eaters made their appearance but rarely, once in ten or fifteen years, and out of necessity, when they could not hunt in their accustomed way. The tiger of the Little Hill, for example, would not have carried away human beings if it had not been wounded and forced to shrink like a coward. Fit and strong, it would not have gone in for human victims who, unlike the so-called lower creatures, are unable to pick up scent and take cover. But after its three kills, even human meat had become scarce. The result was that Karia and his friends had to deal with a starving animal. It had visited the hamlet every day and had even entered one or two huts. It had stayed outside the cowshed of Bhatta's house and scraped the walls and doors, but they had been too securely fastened.

The sound of human voices rekindled its hopes. Four or five times it slipped out of the bushes and peeped at the newcomers. But every time it saw them, it found them together, and four men would be too many to take on. Some time or other they had to be alone, and the tiger waited. The four, however, knew that to be alone was to invite danger, and never went singly to the stream, and were never parted from their guns.

On the day of their arrival they had poked at the bushes and beaten the ground with sticks in the hope of driving the tiger from its hide-out. But the tiger was too wary. The hunters stayed in Booda's hut, which was the strongest in the hamlet. They slept indoors. Karia and Booda's nephew thought they had caught the pungent odour of the beast even in daytime. Booda's nephew worked out a stratagem. Knowing that man-eaters take chances, they moved a cot to the verandah, placed a rolled mat and pillow on it and covered it with a blanket to give the impression of a man asleep. In the morning the blanket had been pulled down and the pillow torn. So the tiger was very much on the Hill.

Experience had taught Karia that open combat always gave the beast the advantage and the better bet was to wait for it to return to its kill. That was how he had succeeded in Kukkaralli. But what should they use to lure the tiger? Booda's nephew said, "Karia, they say that a tiger which has once known the taste of human blood does not care for anything else. I do not know how true that is. But we are four. What about one of us sitting in a cage as bait, with the others lying in wait? We have three guns." The plan appealed to Karia by its very audacity. But the other two were shocked. No, it must not be. It was senseless to throw their lives away. Suppose the tiger entered the cage; the man inside was finished, whether the tiger was ultimately shot or not.

"Aha, you are mistaken," Karia said, defending the plan. "It does not mean that the tiger should get at the man. It is enough if he is seen by the tiger. We can build a strong cage which the tiger cannot shake, and three of us can guard it carefully."

"Then let us see what sort of cage you build. If we feel the

man inside will come to no harm, then we will join in," one of the newcomers said. The other added: "In our town also we set traps for leopards. We tie a goat in the trap. The leopard walks in and pat falls the door. The leopard is caught, but the goat is also dead."

Karia explained again that they were not thinking of a trap but a cage. They went to the jungle and cut a great quantity of branches, twines and creepers. They then got four strong, straight poles, tied sticks and branches to them and fashioned a cage. It had no side door but a lid on top. Four posts were driven into the ground near the stream and the cage was fastened firmly to the posts. Booda's nephew was to get into it, after which the top was to be fastened with branches and twine. Working without a break for food, they had taken until evening to do this. The tiger must come to the stream, and since it was the bright half of the month, they would be able to see it clearly by moonlight They climbed trees and sat hidden in the foliage. The night's vigil was in vain. The tiger did not turn up. The lid was untied aed Booda's nephew let out.

The next day they tried another trick. If wait they must, why should it be in trees? It would be better to try it out right in the midst of the hamlet. If the three of them waited in the houses around the clearing they could easily spot the tiger and one or the other gun would surely get it. They carried the cage and fixed it in the clearing at the centre of the hamlet, fastening it, like the previous night, to four sturdy poles. There were houses on all the four sides, about fifty yards apart. For an hour after dusk they sat chatting desultorily. Then Booda's nephew got into the cage. Karia placed the lid on and secured it well. Booda's nephew spread

a mat inside the cage and stretched himself on it. Each of the three others got into a house on three sides of the cage, fastened the door from inside and began his watch. It was a second sleepless night and they had to guard against drowsiness. Even ten winks might mean that the game was lost. It was a still night, and there was no breeze. After half an hour Booda's nephew got restless. He sat up and began to pat the sword he had brought with him. He had faith in Karia's marksmanship, but a sword provided added security. He hummed a tune. Fearful lest the others should have dozed off, he gave an owl's hoot. That was the code that he and Karia had used since childhood. Karia promptly hooted back. They kept up the duet for some time, before the enveloping hush subdued them.

The tiger had been hungry for four days. Suspicion had held it back the previous night when it walked along the stream. But it had continued to hear human voices and had not given up hope that its patience would be rewarded. It was the night before the full moon and the hamlet and the forest and hills were bathed in moonlight. The night's stillness and the long wait had numbed the man in the cage and the three men around. Near midnight the tiger emerged and with steady steps came into the centre of the hamlet. When it passed the hut in which Karia hid, Karia's nostrils made no mistake and his back straightened. He rubbed his eyes with his palms and peeped out of a crevice in the bamboo door. In the liquid light of the moon, his burning eyes did not see clearly. With the muzzle of his gun next to his cheek Karia cautiously pulled back the door and peeped out. He dared not crane his neck too far. "It is bound to come right in front of me," he

told himself. He felt he should put the others on the alert, but the tiger would run away if he made any noise. He held his peace.

Feeling the approach of the animal he drew back. The tiger went round his hut and into the clearing where the cage stood. Karia could not bear its strong odour and was also fidgeting for action. But he could not take aim from between the bamboos. "Should have made a wide enough peephole," he thought, but it was too late. "Come what may, I shall go out," he told himself, and pulling the door wider, he knelt at the doorstep and waited, gun in hand. The tiger went forward with careful footsteps. It smelt human flesh, but it was puzzled. The scent came from the cage in the centre and from the houses all around. Where should it go? Undecided for a moment, it quickly made up its mind. Turning away from the cage it went to the house to the left of Karia's. Karia too turned left. In the moonlight he saw the tiger's strong, supple body right in front of his eyes. He did not know whether the others had seen the animal or Booda's nephew had noticed it. But he knew that he would not have another moment so favourable. Aiming at its belly he fired. The tiger roared and sprang on the wall opposite. It was a wall made of bamboo sheet and constituted no obstacle to a wounded and angry tiger, which succeeded in tearing two large holes in it. The Vitla man inside was frightened. The gun report and the tiger's roar had shaken Booda's nephew from the torpor which the stuffiness of the night had induced. He felt a twinge of fear. The man in the third house, the one to the right of Karia's, would have fired at the tiger from where he was, if the cage had not come between him and the tiger. Daunted by nothing, Karia stepped out into the open, reloading his gun.

He hesitated to fire from where he stood for fear that the man inside the house might be wounded. He edged sideways, making no noise, came in line with the tiger and pulled the rigger. The animal, which stood on its hind legs and was about to thrust its neck into the hole it had made in the wall of the hut, collapsed. "It has fallen," Karia shouted, at which the Vitla hunter in the house on the right came out with his gun. The man inside the house which the tiger had been attacking was not yet convinced. In his terror, he had given up hope of relief. From the cage Booda's nephew shouted : "Did it die? Did it die? Let me out." They released him and the three men stood round the beast whose death throes had ceased. The fourth of the group also came out. They clasped hands, thankful to heaven that they had succeeded. The beast had fallen with its head turned sideways. Its black stripes looked darker in the moonlight. Tension having abruptly ended, the men squatted a few yards from the tiger and chatted animatedly. There was no question of trying to snatch sleep in what remained of the night. They told each other of the doubts and fears they had experienced and soon they were talking of their childhood days.

In the morning they had a closer look at the beast. One of its hind legs had been broken badly. The wound was old and was probably the result of Bantrappa's bullet and the cause of so much of sorrow on the Little Hill. Karia's first bullet had got it in the belly and the second had passed right across its chest.

His mission achieved, Karia did not feel like spending a minute more on the Little Hill. He wanted to run back to Grandfather. "Go to the Big Hill and give them the tidings," he told Booda's nephew. "Let them all return. I am going

with these men to the Corner Village and then to Kukkaralli. My work is done." Booda's nephew begged him to stay until their kinsmen returned from the Big Hill. But Karia would have none of it. He had already stayed away too long from his elephant.

Exultation shortened the distance to Kukkaralli. Even before seeing Thimma or Gowda he ran to the elephant and said: "I have come, old man. Do not be angry I was away. I did not waste my time; I killed a tiger." He rested his cheek on the elephant's trunk.

Alone, Booda's nephew felt forlorn. It was after a long time that he had spent some days with Karia. They had grown up together and shared boyhood dreams, planning a future that would never separate them. And then Karia had gone away. For three years Booda's nephew had heard nothing of him and the rhythm of work in the hills had taken his mind away from Karia though he could never forget him. For a fleeting few hours he had seen Karia and his elephant at the Corner Village. But Karia had been busy with the people around his elephant. In the throng he looked as though he had no time to chat with him, which had put off Booda's nephew somewhat. So, though he felt like running behind Karia and his elephant to Kukkaralli, he had controlled himself. And now he had sought out Karia in the hour of the clan's distress and Karia had done more than what anybody else could have done. He now knew what he missed. With heavy feet he went to the Big Hill and gave the news of the tiger to a group which included Booda. And in a faltering voice, he added: "Karia shot it.....We drove him away, but it was he who saved our Little Hill." He knew his words would hurt, but he could not contain his emotion. The news went round and people gathered. Booda's nephew was

surprised to find Tukra there. "How did you come here? We had given you up for lost," he said to the older man. It was simply that from Vitla he had gone straight to the Big Hill first, on some errand of the master, and hearing the news, he had stayed on.

The same afternoon the migrants returned to the Little Hill. Uppermost in their minds was not relief that their homes were safe again, but grief for the dead and worry that work on the field had fallen in arrears. They wanted to hold a feast of propitiation for Kalkuda without delay. If they put it off, they were afraid there might be some new visitation. The priest had died, meeting not a normal end but a bad one. They had left his corpse in the forest, too scared even to carry it to the village. The last rites had been performed without the body. That was a most inauspicious thing to do and they had to make amends. They had to ask the deity's pardon. The dead priest had a son, who was just out of his teens, and he must follow the father's profession. Before the Little Hill people left homeward, a date for Kalkuda's feast had been fixed.

After Karia returned to Kukkaralli, Thimma longed to go to the Big Hill to visit his people. The master was now dead and Thimma had none to fear. He went with his wife and child. Karia refused to quit the village of his adoption. He was now alone, cooking his own gruel. He doubted if Thimma would ever return. Thimma was a great worker, and the Little Hill and the Big Hill were sure to compete for him. Time hung heavily on Karia's hands, and he thought he might as well fulfil an old wish, which was as good as a vow. With Gowda and the elephant he set out on a pilgrimage to Subramanya. All along the way, memories of his grandfather came back to him and of the journey he had made to the

same place fifteen years earlier. He stayed two days at the pilgrime centre, bathed in the river and gazed at the idol to his heart's content. Amidst the other elephants there he rode his own round the temple. "Is it yours?" people asked him in curiosity and disbelief. "Yes, mine," he said, and then added with the wisdom that comes from forefathers: "It is a creature of the Hills. How can I call it mine? It is God Subramanya's. He gave it. I shall keep it as long as I can and then bring it here. It is still very young; and when it grows up it must naturally belong here."

The pilgrimage had evoked in him a feeling of detachment and humility. Gowda noted it. "You spoke with great wisdom, Karia. What is there in this world that is ours? He gives it and He takes it. We are His playthings," he said. The two days there passed swiftly and on the third they returned with the weight of worry washed away.

One more week passed but Thimma did not return. Karia worked on his own plot of land and helped Gowda in his work. Whatever free time he could snatch he gave to the elephant. It was like a child; it returned the love it received and it ate the food it was given.

Karia was scrubbing its hide in the stream one day when he heard his name called. He turned round to find Booda and Tukra. Booda began: "My dear son, how long do you want to live away from us?" There was love in his eyes, and there were tears. Karia remembered that it was the second time he had seen that exact expression on Booda's face. The first was at the deathbed of his grandfather. "Listen to me," Booda began, "the days of the old master are gone. The young master has come to the hill. We have fixed Kalkuda's feast three days from now. The master wants you there. He

wants to greet the man who killed the tiger. Please do not say no." Booda looked like a man who would take no refusal. Tukra, who had been silent, added: "You must not refuse. If it is the elephant you are worried about, come, let it be the child of all of us. If we till an acre or two more of land, that will take care of the elephant's need." There was no trace of the old resentment in his voice.

"They want me back," Karia thought. It pleased him but he could not still venture a reply. He took the visitors to his hut and boiled some gruel for them. "We will not touch it till you promise to come. Or we will go hungry," Booda declared. Karia was in a dilemma. "Well, let it be so. I shall go with you but you shall not insist that I stay there. I need no invitation to attend the deity's worship. Without Kalkuda's grace could I have killed the tiger?" He yielded. They sipped the gruel and he went with them, followed by his elephant.

People flocked round them when they reached the Little Hill. Bhatta's son sent men to take Karia to his house. He gave him betelnut and leaves and spoke to him like an old friend. The talk was about the tiger and the young master repented his and Bantrappa's foolishness. And then, giving a deft twist to the conversation, he asked: "Should you leave the home of your elders for some small misunderstanding? Whose do you think are these hills? They are yours. From ancient times you have lived here. We landlords are like traders, like men who squeeze the beehive for its honey. We are here for three months and gone for nine. But how can you think of leaving? Your grandfather was born here and he died here. So did his grandfather before him. Should you not be true to their memory?"

To the hills darkened by death and sorrow, Kalkuda's feast brought life and light. The Kudias were in a celebrating mood, all except Karia who sat morose. In the morning, like the others, he had gone to Kulkuda's shrine, but he was the only one to go empty-handed. He had no house and no hearth and what could he take as offering? When the drums boomed he stood among others at a distance, arms crossed.

The priest's son was now the priest. He wore a silk sheet and had a silver thread round his waist. His hair was undone and his eyes had an unearthly look. The headman of the two hills offered him flowers. When the drums played, his frame shivered, as his father's used to. He too roared, but the usual phrases of Kalkuda did not roll off his tongue with his father's fluency. He needed prompting from the elders and in that art the Headman of the Big Hill was adept. He praised the might of Kalkuda. Describing vividly the plight that had overtaken the hills, he asked, "Why did you grow so angry? Wherefore did you take the lives of your children? Your duty is to protect them." To which Kalkuda only replied: "I shall see, I shall see." It was then Tukra's turn to speak. He stepped forward, bowed to the deity and began: "Command me as you will. For three years I have looked after the affairs of my hill. I did not seek the burden myself; it came to me because Karia gave up the headmanship. I find I am not fit to carry the burden. Our old master is dead. It is now the time of younger men. You in your anger came as a tiger and claimed your sacrifice. I have placed my headmanship in your hands. Its true claimant has come. He is standing before you. Advise him, convince him, retain him. It is up to you to do so."

Karia woke up from his reverie with a start at these unex-

pected words, He looked at Tukra and noticed that his face glowed with unmistakable humility.

Kalkuda also addressed him through his medium : "Karia, have you heard what Tukra said? Is it right of you to forsake your own men? They are yours in joy as yours in sorrow. What have you to say?"

"My king, what shall I say? I am not bigger than you. It is mine to obey you and do your bidding, not to oppose you. If you ask me to stay I stay; if you order me to go I go."

Kalkuda replied : "I am pleased, I am pleased," and at that signal the drums began to beat faster and louder. The priest swayed and convulsed and, sword in hand, he ran in the traditional manner up the hill and around the hamlet and back. Some thought he ran faster and more nimbly than his father. Booda and others said : "We have chosen well. Our new priest speaks neither a word more than necessary nor one fewer." When the rite drew to a close Tukra led Karia forward and made him accept the flowers of Kalkuda's benediction from the hands of the priest. People of the Little Hill were happy to have their young headman back.

At dinner Booda and his nephew remembered the similar night three years ago when Karia had laid down the mantle and walked into the night. But Karia was too excited to sit among the others. He took a large bowl of rice and ran to the elephant whom he had named after his grandfather.

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