Thayyaal

They want nothing. No jewels. No gold. Nothing. They won’t ask you to spend a single paisa on your girl’s marriage. What do you say?”

The coffee he had just poured into his mouth spilled on to his bare chest, but does Muthiah care? He looked at the old woman, stared at her, forgetting to swallow the coffee in his mouth.

A toothless grin spread over the old woman’s face. She is seated, her old legs stretched out, back resting against the wall. Her long heavy gold earrings, the andalatti, dangle. They catch the fire of the sun.

Children scream and play somewhere inside the house. Alongside the wall of the open courtyard lie many bags of grain, stacked in three rows, each as tall as two men one atop the other. Like gold dust, grain lies scattered on the floor. Everywhere you look, signs of prosperity.

Just that morning, Muthiah had seriously started the search for a groom for his daughter. She had reached marriageable age. He would not be able to keep her at home much longer without tongues wagging.... Learning that Ponnambugh was looking for a bride for his son who worked in Karaikudi, he had hastened to his house, not even passing to eat a full breakfast. Ponnambugh had not been home. Muthiah had found him in the auction house, leaning on the wheel of a sugarcane cart, and, what did he want?

“Thirty sovereigns of gold....”

Muthiah wiped his face and neck with his towel...

“Thousand rupees in hand....”

Muthiah, as if his legs could bear his weight no more, had leaned against the cart too....

“Dowry items should be worth not less than ten thousand rupees....”

Without a by-your-leave, Muthiah had moved away...

“Appu... Appu!” called Ponnambugh, but Muthiah had slung his towel on his bare shoulders and just walked on.

Muthiah’s first son was in the army, living with his family in some distant corner of North India. The result of his marriage—a mortgaged house. The second son was a fitter in a city company. Muthiah had borrowed against his lands for this son’s marriage. The sons, of course, quite religiously paid back the interest every month. But, the principal? When Muthiah had gone to the bank again, thinking he could take one more loan with the same surety, he found out that he would be able to raise no more than two thousand rupees. Of what use was that?

The income from his field was enough for the repayments of loans on his field and for feeding the three mouths at home. Their two, three cows of local breed yielded enough money under his wife’s persistent coaxing for her to join a monthly chit fund in order to buy some stainless steel utensils for their daughter’s dowry. This also, when the need arose, took care of small expenses, unexpected emergencies.

Muthiah lay down in the garden house in the park. The evening sun shone brightly, the night-blooming arali, the light of a girl, etched upon his mind’s eye. Gradually, his anguish dimmed....

When he reached home, his wife Kunjaram was getting ready to milk the cows. She had tied the hind legs of the first one tightly together. She had got the salva-dribbling calf away from the swollen teats of its mother and had tied it up too....

She saw Muthiah. “Oh, you have come! Where were you all this while?”

What had he achieved to offer as an answer?

“After you left, the old mother from the Big House sent for you. Aatha’s man has been sent back and forth, back and forth, three times already.”

Sprays of milk hit the vessel sharply.

“What does she want? I can’t think why.... Well, let me go see.”

“Wait. I’ll make you some coffee first.”

This month’s story is by a writer about whom nothing is known or available. We also do not know if she wrote anything else. Though published long ago, the story brings alive life in rural Tamil Nadu as it continues to be even today.

The happiness that had started spreading through the whole village.

Daily, at dusk, she would collect the cow-dropping, leaves and grass from the cow-pen and take them to the fields. It was something all the young women of the village did and no great burden for her anyway.

She changed hands to support the basket on her head. The movement made the saree slide off her right bosom. It fell into the valley between her breasts.

A cool breeze to ward a distant flirtation with it. Bold in the knowledge that there was no one around, she did not think it necessary to cover herself.

He had reached the spot before Thayyaal got there.... Waiting for her to walk swiftly along the path that abuts on the village, and then slinking under the spreading tamarind tree, to watch, to look, to listen.

As she came, closer... closer....

Descending into the gentle slope to hide....

Buying himself into the lush undergrowth that sprawled onto the slender pathway.

Staring, staring, Chandiyar Vellaisami watched her beauty, his eyes ready to fall out of their sockets, his mouth hanging open....

What is this, Ayyah? I have been asking you for the past few minutes and you just sit there, not saying anything?

Muthiah quickly swallows his coffee.

“Oh, nothing, Ayyah,” he begins to say, hesitantly.

“When someone says he wants no dowry when asking for the hand of a girl in marriage, I wonder if something is wrong with the boy and....”

“Wait. I’ll make you some coffee first.”

“Here, Chegappi, bring those things.”

As soon as your wife Kunjaram gave birth to a girl, I had decided that she would come to our house as a bride.”

“Does your brother agree?”

“He was here this morning. Waited for you till now.”

He just left....

To Muthiah’s heart a fullness grows, a happiness dances within.

“Here, Chegappi, bring those things.”

The old woman’s daughter-in-law, who has come into the inner courtyard on some work, now withdraws into a
She pulled at the saree. Slowly, deliberately, enjoying every moment, he gathered her saree, pulling her along with it. There was nothing she could do. He pulled apart bushes, his hands unsteady, shaking with anger. A thorn pricked. His anger spilled over.

"Atha! Atha! Sister, sister!" he snarled. "I am a drunkard, am I? You won’t marry me, will you? Well, we’ll see, we’ll see. We have to decide one way or the other today, on my name is not Vellaisami...."

Fingering his handsome moustache, he proceeded to examine each and every bush. He pulled apart bushes, his hands unsteady, shaking with anger. A thorn pricked. His anger spilled over.

"Oh God... God... please, please..." He was searching in the bush opposite hers. She froze.

She called on every god she knew. Tears welled. They dripped from the sides of her eyes. Some seconds.... Thayyaal emerged hastily, tucking her head where, till now, it had served as a support for the floor. She wiped her neck and face and the sweat that dribbled between her breasts.

"Aaa...ha!"

Clicking fingers, he jumped. He trembled and twitched with impatience.

Arranging her saree to cover her modesty again, Thayyaal picked the basket in her hands.

"Ayyooouu!" A cry of alarm rose from here. Startled, she pushed herself away from him. Her eyes filled with fear, the numbing fright of animals. Her basket fell. It tumbled over with love.

"Chee! You drunken dog! Let go!"

"What do I care what happens after now, dee? Now, I warn you... let go! When my father comes to know, I shall skin you alive!"

Panting, one hand covering her breasts, Thayyaal pushed aside the need to cry that welled up against the floor, the old woman gets up, leaning on her one hand to pull her saree towards her. With three yards of the saree in his hands, the other hand to pull her saree off her head where, till now, it had served as a support for the basket. She wiped her neck and face and the sweat that dribbled between her breasts.

"I am here!"

From a bush, an arm appeared. It took the saree. Some seconds.... Thayyaal emerged hastily, tucking the saree at her waist.

She could not believe her eyes. Before her stood a tassel-headed, naked, eight-year-old.

Tears welled. They dripped from the sides of her eyes. She bent down, took his hands in hers, raised them to her eyes... to press them reverently in thanksgiving. "I can never forget this, Aatha," says Muthiah.

Words slide into each other, their edges touched with emotion. The old woman frees her hands. Taking the bag that her daughter-in-law holds, she takes all the things from the tray and puts them in.

When she picks the paper currency, Muthiah is astonished once again. How much money! At least five thousand rupees there! The silk would have cost not a paisa less than a thousand. Is the old woman mad?

"If your brother is going to be spending on everything for the wedding, then why this saree, this money..."

"The smile fades from the old woman’s face. Her mind seems to wander: ‘Do you not remember that day, many years ago?’ she asks. ‘Of course, then you were a small boy, curly-haired, eight years old...’"

"What could Muthiah say?" She could not believe her eyes. Before her stood a tassel-headed, naked, eight-year-old.

"The very next month I got married. He was rich. I told my husband then that I wanted to give my fair share of the family money to you. A young lad may not know what to do with it, he said and, taking the money, he went that same day and put it in the bank. Let him marry, have a daughter, you can give it to him then, she said. That money has also grown and branched, like me,” says the old woman, Thayyaal.